

LABOUR MIGRATION AND SLUM DEVELOPMENT IN ANAMBRA STATE: A POSTCOLONIAL URBAN ANALYSIS OF THE OKPOKO-ONITSHA LANDSCAPE

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between labour migration and slum development in Anambra State, Nigeria, with particular focus on Okpoko within the Onitsha urban corridor. Moving beyond descriptive accounts, the study situates the proliferation of slums within the theoretical frameworks of postcolonial urbanism and the social production of space. Employing qualitative research methods, including interviews, participant observation, and visual documentation, the study demonstrates that the growth of Okpoko is not merely a demographic consequence of rural–urban migration but a spatial expression of structural inequality, weak urban governance, and uneven development. Drawing on the theoretical insights of Henri Lefebvre and Manuel Castells, the paper argues that urban space in Onitsha is socially produced through power relations that marginalize migrant populations and constrain their access to urban resources. The findings reveal the dual character of migration as both a catalyst for economic opportunity and a driver of urban precarity. The study concludes by advocating inclusive urban planning policies that prioritize spatial justice, infrastructural development, and rural revitalization as essential strategies for addressing the underlying conditions that sustain slum formation.

Keywords: Labour Migration, Slum Development, Postcolonial Urbanism, Okpoko, Onitsha, Spatial Inequality

Introduction

Urbanization in Nigeria has accelerated significantly in recent decades, positioning cities such as Onitsha in Anambra State as pivotal hubs of commercial activity and demographic concentration. This rapid urban expansion has been largely propelled by labour migration, as individuals relocate from rural areas in pursuit of economic opportunities, improved livelihoods, and access to social infrastructure. While such migration contributes to urban economic dynamism, it simultaneously exposes the structural limitations of Nigerian cities in accommodating growing populations.

Within the Onitsha metropolitan region, Okpoko emerges as a critical site for examining the contradictions of urban growth. Characterized by dense population, informal housing, and inadequate infrastructure, Okpoko exemplifies the proliferation of slum settlements that often accompany unregulated urbanization. Existing studies (e.g., Madu, 2013; Okoye, 2017; Obi-Ani, 2020) have largely attributed the expansion of such settlements to rural–urban migration and population pressure. However, such explanations risk reducing a complex socio-spatial phenomenon to demographic determinism, thereby overlooking the structural forces that shape urban inequality. To move beyond this limitation, this study draws on Henri Lefebvre’s theory (2014) of the production of space, which conceptualizes urban space not as a neutral container but as a socially produced and politically contested construct. From this perspective, the Okpoko–Onitsha landscape can be understood as a space shaped by the interaction of state policies, economic forces, and everyday practices of urban inhabitants. Informal settlements such as Okpoko are thus not accidental developments but are actively produced through processes of exclusion, marginalization, and uneven access to urban resources.

Complementing this, Manuel Castell et al. (1977) observed that urban political economy framework provides insight into how capitalist urbanization structures spatial inequality. Castells emphasizes the role of economic systems, state institutions, and power relations in determining the distribution of resources within cities.

In the context of Onitsha, the growth of slum settlements reflects the failure of urban governance to equitably allocate housing and infrastructure, as well as the prioritization of commercial and elite urban interests over the needs of low-income migrant populations. Consequently, slum development in Okpoko can be interpreted as a manifestation of systemic inequalities embedded within Nigeria’s urbanization process.

This study therefore argues that slum development in Okpoko–Onitsha must be understood not merely as a byproduct of migration, but as a structural outcome of uneven urbanization shaped by historical, political, and economic forces. Colonial legacies of spatial segregation, combined with contemporary governance failures, have produced a fragmented urban landscape in which marginalized populations are relegated to informal settlements. The absence of effective urban planning frameworks, unreliable demographic data, and limited state capacity

further exacerbate the proliferation of unregulated housing, often in ecologically vulnerable areas such as waterways.

Conceptually, while labour migration is often framed within economic discourse as the movement of individuals in search of employment, its manifestation in the Onitsha context reveals a more complex interplay of “propulsive” (push) and “magnetic” (pull) forces (Nweke, 2019). These dynamics are driven by rural deprivation, unemployment, and social insecurity on one hand, and the perceived economic opportunities and infrastructural advantages of urban centers on the other. However, the influx of migrant populations into cities with limited absorptive capacity has resulted in the expansion of informal housing, thereby exacerbating urban poverty, infrastructural decay, and socio-spatial exclusion.

Furthermore, the Okpoko landscape illustrates how informal settlements are not merely sites of deprivation but also spaces of survival and economic adaptation. Migrant labourers, often excluded from formal housing markets, resort to informal settlements as accessible alternatives despite the attendant challenges of overcrowding, inadequate sanitation, and limited access to basic services. In Lefebvrian terms, such spaces reflect the lived realities (*espaces vécus*) of marginalized populations, whose everyday practices continuously reshape urban space in ways that challenge dominant spatial orders.

Adopting a postcolonial urban analytical framework, this study interrogates how historical patterns of spatial inequality and contemporary political-economic structures intersect to shape the Okpoko–Onitsha urban landscape. Through a case study approach that integrates interviews, observational methods, and visual analysis, the research critically examines the relationship between labour migration and slum development, while highlighting its implications for urban planning and policy in Anambra State.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts an integrated theoretical framework combining spatial, socio-economic, and historical perspectives to examine labour migration and slum development in the Okpoko–Onitsha urban corridor.

Central to this analysis is Henri Lefebvre’s theory (2014) of the production of space, which conceptualizes urban space as socially constructed through the interplay of power, economic structures, and everyday practices. Lefebvre’s spatial triad, perceived, conceived, and lived space, illuminates the contradictions inherent in Okpoko as a migrant settlement. While state-driven urban planning (conceived space) often neglects or excludes informal settlements, migrants actively produce lived spaces through adaptive practices, improvisation, and localized economies that sustain their livelihoods. However, the applicability of Lefebvre’s framework in Okpoko necessitates contextual adaptation: spatial production here reflects not only capitalist structuring but also informality, weak regulatory enforcement, and the negotiation of survival strategies.

Empirical support for this approach is robust. Mwachungu et al. (2014) observed in urban Malawi that planning authorities struggle to impose formalist conceptions of space due to institutional incapacity and the perceived illegitimacy of state authority among residents. Similarly, Kudva et al. (2009) show that informality generates segregated urban spaces through “everyday resistance and creeping encroachments,” punctuated by episodic mobilizations, demonstrating the agency of residents in shaping their environment. Babere et al. (2015) explicitly argue that informal modes of spatial production must be accounted for to understand the organization of urban spaces in contexts where formal regulation is limited. Huchzermeyer et al. (2021) further underscores Lefebvre’s critique of statutory planning, highlighting its direct relevance for analyzing spontaneous urban spatial practices. Complementing Lefebvre, Manuel Castells’s concept of the network society situates labour and economic flows as critical determinants of urban form. Onitsha operates as a major commercial node attracting migrant labour, yet Okpoko manifests as a marginalized extension, a “dual city” configuration in which economic participation does not translate into infrastructural inclusion. Castells’ model is therefore extended to foreground the significance of informal economies, which underpin urban systems in the Global South but are often analytically underrepresented in mainstream urban studies.

Finally, postcolonial urban theory, particularly the work of Ananya Roy (2016), frames contemporary urban inequalities within the legacies of colonial planning and postcolonial governance structures. The spatial marginalization evident in Okpoko reflects inherited hierarchies of urban management, compounded by neoliberal urban policies and uneven state investment, producing persistent socio-spatial inequities.

By integrating Lefebvre’s spatial theory, Castells’ network analysis, and postcolonial urban perspectives, this framework positions Okpoko as a socially produced and historically conditioned space, simultaneously embedded in regional economic networks and systematically excluded from formal urban infrastructure. This synthesis enables a critical understanding of how labour migration both drives and is shaped by the dynamics of slum development in southeastern Nigeria.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative single-case study design to interrogate the relationship between labour migration and slum development in Okpoko, a peri-urban settlement within the Onitsha metropolitan region. A case study approach is adopted to facilitate an in-depth and contextually grounded analysis of socio-spatial processes, particularly the ways in which migrant labour practices intersect with informal urbanization. Okpoko is purposively selected as a critical site where rapid population influx, driven by labour migration, has produced distinctive patterns of spatial marginalization and infrastructural deficit.

Data generation draws on multiple qualitative methods. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with migrant labourers, long-term residents and selected community stakeholders, allowing for the exploration of migration trajectories, livelihood strategies and housing experiences. Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling to capture a range of socio-economic positions and migratory histories within the settlement. In addition, direct observation was undertaken to document everyday spatial practices, housing conditions and environmental infrastructures, with particular attention to the material manifestations of informality. Visual documentation, including photographs and informal spatial mapping, further supported the analysis by capturing settlement density, land-use patterns and the morphology of the built environment.

These methods are combined to enable data triangulation, not merely as a tool of validation but as a strategy for revealing the layered and sometimes contradictory dynamics of migrant life and spatial production. The analysis proceeds through an iterative thematic coding process, identifying recurrent patterns across interview narratives, observational records and visual data. These themes are interpreted through the theoretical lens of Henri Lefebvre's concept (2014) of the production of space, which foregrounds the interplay between everyday practices, representations of space and structural forces in shaping urban environments. In this regard, the study examines how migrant agency, economic necessity and state neglect converge to produce the informal spatiality of Okpoko. Insights from postcolonial urbanism further inform the analysis by situating these dynamics within broader histories of uneven development, governance failure and peripheralization in African cities.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, multiple strategies were employed, including prolonged engagement in the field, thick description of socio-spatial contexts and reflexive consideration of the researcher's positionality. Together, these approaches enable a nuanced account of how labour migration contributes to the ongoing production of informal urban space in the Okpoko–Onitsha landscape.

A Postcolonial Urban Analysis of the Okpoko–Onitsha Landscape

A postcolonial analysis of the Okpoko–Onitsha urban landscape reveals the enduring imprint of colonial planning logics, post-independence economic restructuring, and ongoing socio-spatial negotiations shaping urban life in southeastern Nigeria. Within this framework, cities are understood not merely as sites of demographic growth or infrastructural deficit but as political texts where competing visions of modernity, power, and identity are contested. This perspective highlights how historical legacies intersect with contemporary socio-economic forces to produce urban form and informality. Supporting this view, Julie Ren et al. (2020) emphasize power, representation, and identity in spatial analysis; Ananya Roy et al. (2016) underscore the multiplicity of modernities embedded in urban space; and Anthony D. King et al. (2005) document the persistence of colonial spatial divisions. In the Nigerian context, Chukwuemeka Vincent Chukwuemeka et al. (2022) show how Onitsha's markets generate adaptive spatialities under conditions of uncertainty, while Nkiru Obi-Ani et al. (2020) link post-independence restructuring to land conflicts and spatial inadequacies, and Olatunji Olaniyan et al. (2022) trace the persistence of colonial segregation through contemporary socio-economic inequalities.

Postcolonial urbanism emphasizes the persistence of colonial spatial hierarchies and the production of distinctive urban patterns. Onitsha, a key riverine trading node, was historically structured to facilitate colonial extraction, integrating the hinterland into global capitalist circuits. Surrounding settlements like Okpoko functioned as labor reservoirs and peri-urban extensions, often excluded from formal investment and planning.

Scholars highlight three interlocking processes in postcolonial cities: the structural continuities of colonial spatial planning that privilege commercial centers while marginalizing peripheral neighborhoods; informality as a constitutive mode of urban production; and the everyday negotiation of identities, survival strategies, and community practices within uneven urban terrains. (Elmond Bandaoko & B. Finn, 2026; Julie Ren, 2020). Applying these lenses to Okpoko–Onitsha demonstrates how urban space is both materially and discursively constituted.

Onitsha's spatial expansion from a colonial commercial node to a sprawling megacity reflects layered temporalities of postcolonial urbanism. Emerging initially as a strategic commercial hub under British colonial rule, the city's development was shaped by investments concentrated in trade-oriented infrastructure, which

privileged economic extraction over balanced spatial planning. This uneven colonial urbanism relegated indigenous settlements such as Okpoko to the periphery, excluding them from systematic provision of urban amenities and formal planning frameworks. As noted by Chukwuemeka Vincent Chukwuemeka et al. (2022), Onitsha has since evolved into one of Africa's largest urban agglomerations, a transformation driven largely by post-independence rural–urban migration. Obi-Ani et al. (2020) further demonstrate that this migration intensified pressure on housing and infrastructure, while weak land tenure systems and policy gaps exacerbated spatial inequalities. Mbajekwe et al. (2006) similarly trace how colonial commercialization of land fundamentally reconfigured property relations, laying the groundwork for contemporary urban fragmentation.

Within this context, informality in Okpoko emerges not as an aberration but as central to the socio-economic functioning of the urban system. Livelihood practices such as street vending, petty trade, motorcycle transportation, and artisanal services constitute primary economic strategies, reflecting both the constraints of limited formal employment and the agency of residents in navigating urban precarity. Cobbinah et al. (2023) argue that such informality is intrinsic to African urbanism, challenging binaries that frame it as merely dysfunctional. In Okpoko, this is evident in the proliferation of informal land markets, adaptive housing configurations, and self-organized communal services, all which underscore residents' active role in the production of urban space. Tunas et al. (2009) further illustrate how informal settlements generate dynamic spatial economies through flexible production systems and embedded social relations. Consequently, Okpoko's dense, pedestrian-oriented compounds, where domestic and commercial activities are deeply intertwined, reflect a form of vernacular urbanism that both sustains livelihoods and redefines the boundaries between formal and informal spatial orders. The area's socio-ecological vulnerabilities further expose the politics of urban marginality. Situated on alluvial floodplains, Okpoko experiences recurrent flooding, compounded by inadequate drainage, unregulated construction, and waste management challenges. Access to basic services is mediated through hybrid governance structures that combine formal institutions with community networks, patronage systems, and self-help initiatives. Urban space in Okpoko is also culturally and symbolically constructed. Ritual practices, marketplaces, festivals, and spatial etiquettes contribute to a collective urban subjectivity, articulating belonging and resilience alongside socio-economic precarity. Informal spatial logics frequently express vernacular identities, linking historical roots with contemporary cosmopolitan aspirations and challenging reductive portrayals of marginality.

Findings and Discussion of Labour Migration and Slum Development in Anambra State

The findings of this study reveal that labour migration is a central driver of informal spatial expansion within the Okpoko–Onitsha urban corridor. Migrants are primarily attracted by the economic opportunities associated with Onitsha, particularly its dense commercial networks and demand for low-skilled and informal labour. However, the absence of affordable housing and weak urban planning frameworks compel these migrants to settle in peripheral and underserved areas such as Okpoko. Consequently, spatial growth in Okpoko occurs largely outside formal regulatory structures, manifesting in the proliferation of makeshift dwellings, incremental housing, and the subdivision of existing buildings into overcrowded living units.

From a Lefebvrian (2014) standpoint, this pattern reflects the *production of space* as a socially constructed process shaped by necessity, exclusion, and unequal access to urban resources. Space in Okpoko is not passively occupied but actively produced by migrants through adaptive and improvisational practices. However, while these practices demonstrate spatial agency, they simultaneously reproduce conditions of marginality, as they unfold within structurally constrained environments lacking institutional support.

The study further establishes that everyday life in Okpoko is defined by layered forms of precarity, including insecure land tenure, inadequate sanitation, poor drainage systems, and limited access to potable water and electricity. Observational data indicating overcrowded pathways, open drainage, and environmentally vulnerable housing conditions underscore the material consequences of unregulated urban expansion. These conditions are not merely symptomatic of rapid urbanization but are embedded within broader political-economic structures. In line with Manuel Castells' urban political economy, the concentration of low-income migrant populations in such spaces reflects a systemic disjunction between economic productivity and infrastructural investment. Migrants contribute significantly to the urban economy yet remain excluded from the distribution of urban services and spatial benefits.

Despite these structural constraints, the findings highlight the presence of agency and resilience among residents. Informal networks, collective resource-sharing, and adaptive livelihood strategies constitute critical survival mechanisms. Practices such as incremental housing development, shared utilities, and localized economic activities illustrate how residents negotiate and partially mitigate the challenges of urban marginality. These dynamics align with Castells' conception of urban informality as both a survival strategy and a functional component of capitalist urban systems. Nevertheless, such agency remains circumscribed; without formal

recognition and state intervention, these adaptive strategies are limited in their capacity to produce sustainable long-term transformation.

The study also identifies significant governance deficits as a key factor in the reproduction of Okpoko's marginality. Residents report minimal engagement with state institutions and a persistent absence of infrastructural investment. This governance vacuum reinforces patterns of exclusion characteristic of postcolonial urban contexts, where planning regimes often fail to integrate informal populations into formal urban systems. Thus, Okpoko emerges as a site of spatial contradiction, simultaneously integral to urban economic processes and systematically excluded from urban development frameworks.

An assessment of the broader Okpoko–Onitsha landscape reveals that labour migration generates both productive and adverse urban outcomes. On the one hand, it stimulates local economies, expands labour markets, and fosters cultural diversification. On the other hand, it intensifies housing shortages, environmental degradation, public health risks, and socio-spatial inequality. Importantly, these outcomes are not inherent to migration itself but are mediated by the nature and effectiveness of urban governance structures.

Critically, the original separation of “findings” and “impact assessment” in the earlier draft risks analytical fragmentation and repetition. By integrating empirical observations with theoretical interpretation, this refined discussion avoids descriptive redundancy and strengthens the explanatory coherence of the study. It foregrounds the interconnections between migration, informality, governance, and spatial inequality rather than treating them as discrete analytical categories.

Ultimately, the Okpoko case underscores the absence of what Henri Lefebvre (2014) conceptualizes as the “right to the city” - the equitable access to urban space, resources, and decision-making processes. Migrants, despite their central role in sustaining the urban economy of Onitsha, remain structurally excluded from its benefits. From a postcolonial urban perspective, this exclusion reflects enduring legacies of uneven development and spatial injustice. Addressing these challenges requires not only infrastructural investment but also a fundamental reorientation of urban policy toward inclusivity, participatory planning, and the formal recognition of informal settlements as legitimate components of the urban fabric.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that labour migration and slum development in Anambra State are not merely parallel processes, but mutually constitutive phenomena embedded within broader structures of postcolonial urban inequality. The emergence and persistence of Okpoko within the Okpoko–Onitsha urban corridor underscore the extent to which informal settlements are not accidental consequences of population growth but spatial expressions of historically entrenched neglect, uneven development, and exclusionary forms of urban governance.

Through a postcolonial urban analytical lens, the study reveals how migrant labourers are integrated into the urban economy while simultaneously marginalized in the production, organization, and allocation of urban space. Okpoko therefore embodies a fundamental urban contradiction: a space of economic opportunity and proximity to commercial activity, yet one characterized by infrastructural inadequacies and socio-spatial exclusion. This condition reflects the enduring legacy of colonial planning paradigms and their contemporary reproduction through neoliberal urban development practices.

Addressing these challenges requires a shift from fragmented and reactive interventions to structurally informed and context-sensitive urban policies. Sustainable transformation should prioritize inclusive planning frameworks that recognize informal settlements as integral components of the urban landscape, targeted infrastructural investments that address long-standing service deficiencies, rural economic revitalization to reduce distress-driven migration, and participatory governance mechanisms that incorporate the perspectives and lived experiences of migrant communities.

Ultimately, reimagining the Okpoko–Onitsha urban landscape demands an approach that moves beyond technocratic solutions to confront the historical, political, and economic forces that produce urban inequality. Only through such a reorientation can urban spaces be transformed into equitable environments that accommodate both migrant populations and long-term residents within a more just, inclusive, and sustainable spatial order.

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