

# Revitalizing the Aba Marketplace: A Roadmap to Transform Abia's Commercial Hub

## Introduction

Abia State stands at a pivotal moment of opportunity. With new leadership prioritizing infrastructure and economic revival, there is a chance to unlock the state's full potential. I have conducted in-depth research on Abia's socio-economic landscape – particularly the city of **Aba** and its famous marketplace – to identify how we can make Aba's market truly great. This document outlines key findings about Abia State and the Aba market, and proposes a comprehensive plan aligned with the Governor's vision to modernize commerce and empower local enterprise. The goal is to demonstrate that I have done my homework on the state and to present a viable pitch for transforming the **Aba marketplace** into a world-class commercial hub.

## Background: Abia State at a Glance

**Location and Population:** Abia State is located in Nigeria's South-East and was created in 1991 from part of old Imo State <sup>1</sup>. It has an estimated population of around **3.9–4 million people** <sup>2</sup>, predominantly of the Igbo ethnicity who are renowned for their entrepreneurship <sup>3</sup>. The state's capital is Umuahia, but Aba – the “Enyimba City” – is its largest commercial center. Abia covers ~6,320 km<sup>2</sup> <sup>4</sup> and is bordered by states like Imo, Rivers, Akwa Ibom, etc. <sup>5</sup>. The climate is tropical, with heavy rains especially April–October <sup>6</sup>, which has implications for infrastructure like drainage.

**Economy and Key Sectors:** Abia's economy is a mix of oil, agriculture, trade, and small-scale manufacturing. Notably, **crude oil and gas** contribute about **39% of the state's GDP** <sup>7</sup>; indeed Abia is among Nigeria's oil-producing states (with over 100 oil wells, making it the 4th largest oil producer by some estimates) <sup>8</sup>. However, over-reliance on oil means other sectors have been underdeveloped. Manufacturing accounts for only **around 2% of GDP** <sup>9</sup>, indicating significant room for growth through industrialization. The industrial heartbeat is **Aba**, where indigenous manufacturing of goods like textiles, footwear, cosmetics, plastics, pharmaceuticals and more takes place <sup>10</sup>. Agriculture is the backbone for the populace – employing roughly 70% of the workforce and contributing ~27% of GDP <sup>11</sup> – with major crops like yam, cassava, rice, and oil palm (the state's key cash crop) <sup>11</sup>.

**Human Capital:** Abia boasts a relatively educated population; for instance, it had a literacy rate above 90% in 2017 (one of the top in Nigeria) and ranks highly in educational attainment <sup>12</sup>. This skilled and energetic workforce is an asset – exemplified by the thousands of artisans and traders in Aba who drive local industry. There are reported to be over **110,000 shoemakers and 50,000 garment-makers in Aba** alone <sup>13</sup>, underscoring a massive base of skilled micro-entrepreneurs. This entrepreneurial culture stems from the Igbo heritage of trade and craftsmanship, which positions Abia as a potential SME powerhouse.

**Challenges:** Despite its strengths, Abia has faced economic stagnation in recent years – it was ranked **35th out of 37** states in economic growth as of 2020 <sup>14</sup> . Key challenges include inadequate infrastructure (bad roads, poor electricity, insufficient waste management), which have hindered business and investment. Past administrations struggled with these issues, leading to low ease-of-doing-business rankings. For example, Abia's internally generated revenue was only ₦15 billion (~\$40m) in 2018 <sup>15</sup> , reflecting a narrow tax base and informal economy. Improving the business environment in hubs like Aba is critical to reversing these trends. Encouragingly, the current administration has made infrastructure renewal and business-friendly reforms a top priority <sup>16</sup> .

## Aba City and the Ariaria International Market

**Aba – The Commercial Nerve Center:** Aba is known nationwide as a city of makers and traders. A popular saying goes, *“if care isn't taken, a whole country could be manufactured in Aba,”* highlighting the city's prolific industriousness <sup>17</sup> . Aba's strategic location (about 30 minutes from Port Harcourt and connected by road and rail <sup>18</sup> ) makes it a trading hub for the Southeast and Niger Delta regions. The city has several markets, but by far the most famous is the **Ariaria International Market**.

**Ariaria International Market:** Established in the 1970s, Ariaria is the heartbeat of Abia's commerce. It is often dubbed the **“China of Africa”** due to its scale and the variety of goods produced and sold there <sup>19</sup> <sup>20</sup> . In fact, Ariaria is one of the **largest markets in West Africa**, with an estimated **37,000 shops** sprawling across dozens of zones <sup>21</sup> . Annual trade volume in the market has been estimated around **₦144 billion** (hundreds of millions of dollars) <sup>21</sup> , making it an economic engine not just for Abia but for Nigeria. The market is especially renowned for its **leatherworks and shoes, garments, and textiles** – “Aba made” shoes and clothing are sold all over Nigeria and beyond. Manufacturers in Ariaria proudly serve clients across Africa and even in Europe <sup>19</sup> . It's common to find traders from **Cameroon, Ghana, Gabon, South Africa, Zambia** and other countries sourcing merchandise in Ariaria <sup>22</sup> <sup>23</sup> . This pan-African patronage is why the market is termed *“international”* in status.

**Made-in-Aba and Global Reach:** In recent years, efforts have been made to shed the old image of “Aba made” products being low-quality knockoffs. A **#MadeInAba campaign** was launched to promote locally made goods <sup>24</sup> . These efforts yielded some success: for instance, the Nigerian Army and other agencies placed large orders for Aba-made boots and uniforms, validating the quality of local workmanship (the Army ordered 50,000 pairs of boots from Aba producers as part of a Made-in-Nigeria push) <sup>25</sup> . Aba artisans can produce virtually anything – from leather shoes to electronics casings – given the right support. This vast productive capacity, if properly harnessed, can drive industrial growth in Abia State. The market's artisans already **export footwear to West African countries** in large quantities, contributing indirectly to Nigeria's export earnings and to Abia's internally generated revenue <sup>23</sup> . In short, Ariaria market is a treasure trove of MSMEs (micro, small and medium enterprises) that form the backbone of the local economy.

**Current State of the Market:** Despite its vibrancy, the Aba market grew organically over decades and until recently was characterized by *scrappy infrastructure*. The market (now about **47 years old**) long suffered from **congested, makeshift structures and poor amenities** <sup>26</sup> . Narrow alleys of wooden or corrugated metal stalls made up much of Ariaria, which posed fire hazards, sanitation issues, and discomfort. Flooding used to be a frequent problem – in the rainy season, portions of the market turned to pools of stagnant water due to lack of proper drainage. As one observer noted in mid-2023, *“The road is now ok – not like when you must swim to get to the market.”* <sup>27</sup> This captures how severe the flooding once was, essentially making

the market inaccessible in heavy rains. Power supply has been another Achilles heel: traders mostly rely on noisy petrol generators because grid power was unreliable or absent in many sections. The market's layout was haphazard, built without modern fire safety or waste disposal systems. All these issues not only affect the quality of life and business for traders, but also discourage some potential large buyers or investors from engaging fully.

## Key Challenges Facing the Aba Marketplace

From my research, I've identified several critical challenges that have hindered the Aba (Ariaria) marketplace from reaching its full potential:

- **Aging Infrastructure & Layout:** Much of the market infrastructure was outdated. Stalls were overcrowded and dilapidated, access roads were in disrepair, and there were no standard facilities like washrooms, storage, or loading bays. Until the recent interventions, *scraggy infrastructure* was the norm <sup>26</sup>. Congestion made movement of goods difficult, and fire incidents occurred occasionally due to the makeshift wiring and tightly packed shops. Essentially, the physical environment was not befitting a major "international" market.
- **Poor Drainage and Sanitation:** Aba's heavy rainfall and flat terrain meant flooding was common. The market lacked proper drainage canals, so water would accumulate, damaging goods and creating unsanitary conditions. Waste management has been a major issue in Aba city as a whole – Governor Alex Otti noted in his inauguration that **Aba (with Umuahia) generates ~270 truckloads of waste per day** <sup>28</sup>. In the past, this refuse often went uncollected for long periods, leaving the city and markets dirty. Clogged drains and garbage piles contributed to health hazards and drove customers away. Any plan must address sustainable waste and drainage solutions for the market.
- **Electricity Deficit:** Reliable power is the lifeblood of modern commerce, yet Ariaria traders have historically had to self-supply electricity. A federal government-supported **off-grid power project** was launched in 2017–2019 to provide solar-based electricity for the market (under the Energizing Economies Initiative) <sup>29</sup>. While it was **commissioned in 2019 amid great hopes** <sup>30</sup>, the implementation largely failed – as of 2021, over **32,000 out of 37,000 shops** were still not connected and had to rely on private generators <sup>29</sup> <sup>31</sup>. The critical "*Powerline*" cluster of shoemakers was *excluded* from the project, leaving about **70,000 artisans** with no stable supply <sup>32</sup> <sup>33</sup>. The consequence is that each small business spends a significant part of its income on fuel and generator maintenance. Research indicates shoemakers in the Powerline cluster spend roughly **₦8,000 per month on generator fuel** (on top of sporadic grid bills), amounting to **over ₦1 billion collectively each year** burned on inefficient power supply <sup>34</sup>. This is a huge cost that eats into profits and raises product prices. Lack of electricity also limits the use of modern machinery, thereby capping productivity. Clearly, without a reliable and affordable power solution, the market cannot achieve its potential.
- **Access to Finance and Modern Tools:** Most traders in Aba are informal micro-entrepreneurs who struggle to get financing to expand or modernize. Traditional banks see them as high-risk; as a result, many rely on informal credit or daily contribution schemes ("*esusu*"). This limits their ability to purchase advanced equipment (e.g., shoe molding machines, industrial sewing machines) or raw materials in bulk. Moreover, they often lack exposure to modern techniques or design trends that could improve their products. There is a gap in **capacity building** – while the people are very

enterprising, additional training in areas like product design, quality control, packaging, and business management would help them compete better nationally and internationally.

- **Marketing and Market Linkages:** Despite the fame of Ariaria, most of its traders are limited to a physical market customer base. In today's digital age, **online visibility** is essential. There is no widely-used e-commerce platform or digital catalog for Aba-made goods yet. Thus, a boutique in Lagos or a buyer in Kenya might have interest in Aba products but no easy way to source them except by physically visiting the market. This lack of e-commerce integration means *Aba traders are missing out on a huge online customer base*. Additionally, because of limited branding, many Aba products are sold unlabelled and lose recognition. Strengthening the “*Made in Aba*” brand through quality assurance and marketing could significantly boost demand and even allow commanding better prices.
- **Security and Governance:** While not as severe as in some regions, there have been concerns in the past about security around the markets (e.g., petty theft, occasional kidnappings in the late 2000s, etc.). A well-organized, modern marketplace should have security measures (police post, CCTV, fire service). Also, market governance by unions and government needed reform – previously, some traders feared that government interventions were just to increase levies or that rebuilding the market would displace them permanently <sup>35</sup>. Building trust and having transparent processes for shop allocations and fees is crucial to get buy-in from the market community for any new initiative.

In summary, the Aba marketplace has thrived on the ingenuity of its people, but **infrastructure deficits, lack of power, limited modernization, and access gaps** have held it back. The good news is that these challenges are well-understood and *can* be resolved with the right mix of investment, policy, and creativity. The following section highlights ongoing efforts by the government to tackle these issues, which my proposed plan will complement and build upon.

## Opportunities and Government Initiatives in Abia

It is important to note that the current administration in Abia State has already recognized many of the above challenges and is taking bold steps to address them. This provides a very supportive context for our vision to transform Aba's marketplace. Key opportunities and initiatives include:

- **Market Remodeling Project:** The Abia State Government has launched a major **remodeling and redevelopment of Ariaria International Market**. This was a long-anticipated move to upgrade the market's infrastructure. Starting in phases, the project involves **demolishing old structures and rebuilding modern facilities**. In July 2025, the government approved the first phase targeting 14 sections of the market for redevelopment <sup>36</sup>. By October 2025, **Phase II of the A-Line reconstruction** was flagged off by His Excellency Governor Alex Otti <sup>37</sup>. The aim is to transform Ariaria into a **world-class market** with **state-of-the-art infrastructure, improved layout, safety features, and sustainable amenities** <sup>37</sup> <sup>38</sup>. The government's commitment is evidenced by the personal involvement of the Governor in flagging off these projects and assuring every trader of fair relocation and shop allocation during the transition <sup>39</sup>. This modernization drive is creating *new, upgraded shop blocks* to replace the old makeshift stalls. According to official communications, the new design includes **proper drainage, waste management systems, fire prevention installations, accessible roads, and organized shop grids** <sup>40</sup> – all of which directly tackle the issues that plagued the old market. In fact, an earlier phase of construction produced **multi-storey**

concrete shopping blocks with 480 shops each, equipped with features like electronically-operated doors, fire alarms, and even elevators for moving goods to upper floors <sup>41</sup>. This is a revolutionary upgrade from the past, essentially turning parts of the open-air market into a **modern mall-like complex** <sup>42</sup>. The new structures are also planned to be supported by *multiple power sources* (integration of the Aba independent power plant, the Geometric/Aba Power company supply, and solar backup) to ensure stable electricity <sup>43</sup>. Facilities such as a dedicated fire station, police post, clinics, and parking lots are part of the full vision <sup>44</sup>. The ongoing government project therefore lays a solid physical foundation for a truly 21st-century marketplace. **Opportunity:** As the government rebuilds the market's infrastructure, there is an opportunity for complementary initiatives (technology, training, etc.) to maximize the impact of the new facilities. My plan is designed to dovetail with this remodeling effort – leveraging the improved physical environment to introduce new services and efficiencies for traders and customers.



*A newly constructed block of shops in Ariaria International Market (A-Line), part of the ongoing remodeling efforts to upgrade the market's infrastructure <sup>40</sup>. Modern buildings like this provide a safer, cleaner environment and can support amenities such as reliable power and sanitation facilities.*

- **Infrastructure & Urban Renewal:** Beyond the market itself, Governor Otti's administration has been vigorously addressing urban infrastructure in Aba. Roads that lead into and around major markets have been fixed, easing the notorious traffic jams and "urban potholes" that once plagued the city. In fact, local residents have quipped that "*Otti has cured Aba's stomach upset by fixing potholes*", meaning vehicles (and people) no longer have to endure the gut-churning bad roads <sup>45</sup>. Key access roads such as the ones linking Ariaria to the Aba-Port Harcourt expressway have been rehabilitated <sup>46</sup>, improving logistics for traders. Drainage projects have been executed to reduce flooding. The city environment is also seeing a cleanup; waste evacuation has improved under new waste management contracts, addressing the refuse pile-ups. All these efforts create a more **business-friendly environment** in Aba, aligning with the Governor's oft-stated goal of making Abia conducive for commerce <sup>16</sup>. **Opportunity:** With better roads and city services, Aba can attract more shoppers and even tourists (for example, people who might come to Aba for shopping festivals or trade fairs).

We can build on this by organizing events and marketing campaigns to rebrand Aba as a **safe, clean, and convenient place to do business**.

- **Power and Energy Initiatives:** Although the previous federal solar project did not fully deliver, there is renewed hope in the energy sector. Notably, **Geometric Power's Aba Integrated Power Project (IPP)** has come online recently, which is a private power plant dedicated to Aba and environs. This project, alongside improvements in the national grid management for the area, promises more stable electricity for industries and possibly markets. The remodeled sections of Ariaria are being connected to this IPP and also fitted with solar panels for backup <sup>43</sup>. Governor Otti's team can facilitate further expansion of these power solutions. Additionally, the federal government's push for renewable energy and the availability of vendors for **solar microgrids** means we have the option to implement localized energy solutions for critical clusters (like the shoemakers' cluster). **Opportunity:** By partnering with the state's energy initiatives or private providers, we can solve the market's power problem. There is an opportunity for a pilot project to equip part of the market (e.g., the Powerline shoe cluster) with a **solar power cooperative** – traders could pool resources (with government support) to install solar panels and battery storage that provide steady power at a fraction of the generator cost. The data shows the **current spend on generators is enormous** <sup>34</sup>, so if we present a solution that saves money long-term, traders will embrace it. This could dovetail with existing efforts to leverage the Aba IPP for consistent supply.
- **Digital and Creative Economy Push:** The state government is also forward-looking in terms of diversifying the economy. Governor Otti has expressed commitments to making Abia a hub for **creative enterprise and technology** <sup>47</sup>. For example, he recently flagged off an **Aba Made Film Project** and spoke of establishing an entertainment village to leverage Aba's historic role in Nollywood distribution <sup>47</sup> <sup>48</sup>. He also highlighted investments in education (introducing free basic education) and even a modern public transport system with electric vehicles <sup>49</sup>. This shows that the administration values innovation and is open to modern solutions. In Aba, a small tech ecosystem has been taking root – there's an **Innovation Growth Hub in Aba** and other tech-oriented groups training youth <sup>50</sup> <sup>51</sup>. **Opportunity:** This progressive environment means our plan to introduce **digital technology into the marketplace** will receive support. We can collaborate with local tech hubs and the government's ICT initiatives to train traders on e-commerce. Moreover, aligning with the creative economy push, we could integrate local artisans (fashion designers, craft makers) into showcasing their goods online and at events, blurring the line between commerce and creativity. The government's openness to public-private partnership (PPP) – as seen with the market redevelopment and other projects – is a good sign that a well-thought-out proposal will be welcomed and possibly co-funded.

In light of these points, Abia's leadership has created an enabling atmosphere for change. The physical **remaking of Ariaria market**, the improvement of **roads and city services**, emerging solutions for **power supply**, and a willingness to adopt **technology and new ideas** – all these factors form the foundation on which we can build an even more ambitious transformation of the Aba marketplace.

## Proposed Interventions: Making Aba Marketplace Great

To truly elevate the Aba marketplace to world-class status, infrastructure upgrades (ongoing) must be coupled with **operational, technological, and social innovations**. I propose a set of complementary interventions that I can spearhead, with the Governor's support, to ensure we fully capitalize on the

modernization of Ariaria. These initiatives are designed to show tangible improvements, foster growth for the traders, and solidify Aba's reputation as a premier commercial hub. The core idea is to blend **physical development** with **digital transformation** and **capacity building**. Below are the key components of the plan:

#### 1. Launch of an "Aba E-Market" Online Platform:

**What** – Develop a robust e-commerce platform that brings the Ariaria market online, essentially creating a virtual marketplace for Made-in-Aba goods. This platform (website and mobile app) would allow traders to **create profiles for their shops**, list products with photos and prices, and conduct sales or receive orders online. Buyers from anywhere in Nigeria (and eventually globally) could browse Aba products – from shoes and bags to clothing and electronics parts – and place orders for delivery. The platform would also feature a directory of artisans and manufacturers in Aba, effectively showcasing the "industrial capacity" of the city. We can integrate digital payment systems (so customers can pay via cards or mobile money) and coordinate with logistics/courier partners for nationwide shipping of goods. Over time, this could evolve into a full-fledged **"Made in Aba" digital marketplace**, similar to how platforms exist for Chinese manufacturing hubs.

**Why** – This directly addresses the *market linkages* and *marketing* challenge. It gives Aba traders an online presence and access to a much larger customer base. By increasing sales, it drives growth in their businesses. It also helps change perceptions – a well-designed site with authentic Aba products can reposition the brand image to one of quality and innovation. Importantly, an e-market would generate valuable data (which product categories are most in demand, where orders come from, etc.) that can inform business and policy decisions. Such data could help attract investors (e.g., a shoe retailer abroad seeing that Aba produces 100,000 pairs a month might be interested in sourcing). Furthermore, amid any future disruptions (like pandemics or travel restrictions), traders can still reach customers online.

**How** – I can lead the development of this platform given my background (here I would leverage my skills or assemble a small tech team). A prototype/demo can be prepared to showcase how the platform functions. I would work closely with market associations to onboard pioneer traders and catalogue their products. There will be training sessions to teach less tech-savvy merchants how to upload product information and handle online orders. Collaboration with existing e-commerce companies or courier services (e.g., partnering with logistics companies for delivery from Aba to Lagos/Kano etc.) will be key. We might start with a specific sector for pilot – for instance, "Aba Shoe Hub Online" focusing on footwear, since Aba shoes are famous, then expand to other goods. Government's role could be to endorse the platform (giving it legitimacy among traders) and possibly subsidize initial costs for traders (like professional product photography or a small stipend of mobile data for them to use the app). Within a short time, we can have hundreds of Aba vendors selling online. This will show the Governor tangible results – e.g., **if even 500 traders make just ₦50,000 extra sales monthly through online orders, that's ₦25 million new revenue into Aba's economy per month**. This is realistic given the size of Nigeria's e-commerce market. Over a year, success stories from the platform (like a local shoemaker now exporting to other African countries via online contacts) will emerge, underscoring the **transformational impact**. Additionally, the platform can generate revenue by subscription or transaction fees once it scales, making it self-sustaining. Ultimately, **Aba E-Market** could become the go-to online hub for Nigerian-made products, giving Abia State a pioneering status in digital trade. I will prepare a demo of the website/app to illustrate this vision in our presentation.

## 2. “Ariaria Power Project” – Reliable Clean Energy for the Market:

**What** – Implement a dedicated power supply solution for Ariaria market, leveraging renewable energy and private sector participation. Specifically, the plan is to set up a **solar-powered mini-grid** that can supply a significant portion of the market (initially the *Powerline shoe cluster and A-Line section* where many generators are used). This would involve installing solar panels on the rooftops of the new market buildings or on raised structures, plus battery storage and an efficient distribution network to the shops. A private power service company can run the operations under a PPP model, where traders pay a moderate fee for guaranteed electricity which is cheaper than running generators. We can also explore connecting more fully with the new **Aba IPP (Independent Power Plant)** – ensuring that the market is a priority service area for grid power, given its importance. The solar mini-grid can act as backup to the IPP power, creating a hybrid system. Additionally, providing common generator sets or an *industrial-scale generator* as backup that serves multiple shops (instead of each having one) could be a transitional step – this would still reduce costs and pollution.

**Why** – As identified, power is one of the largest burdens on Aba entrepreneurs. By freeing them from the shackles of erratic power, we unleash productivity. The **₦1 billion+ annual generator expense** can be redirected into business growth or family savings <sup>34</sup>. Reliable electricity means artisans can use electric tools to produce more efficiently and with better quality. It also improves working conditions (proper lighting, ventilation fans, etc., especially in a multi-storey market complex). From an environmental and health standpoint, reducing thousands of small generators will lower carbon emissions and eliminate the noxious fumes and noise that pervade the market. In essence, powering Ariaria is like powering the engine of Abia’s informal economy – it will yield higher output and ultimately more tax revenues as businesses grow. It also complements the physical market upgrade: new buildings come with wiring and can integrate solar – it’s best to incorporate the power solution during construction.

**How** – We will conduct an energy audit of the market to estimate how much power (in kW) the traders collectively need for their operations (lighting, sewing machines, drills, etc.). Then, design a solar plant (perhaps in phases: e.g., start with a 1MW capacity targeted at critical clusters). Fortunately, the Rural Electrification Agency (REA) and other bodies have experience in market solar projects (even though the first attempt faltered, lessons were learned). We can invite bids from renewable energy companies to build-operate the mini-grid. Funding can be arranged through a mix of sources: state government seed funding or guarantee, federal grants (REA has programs), and trader cooperative contributions (spread over time via bills). I can coordinate this by bringing stakeholders together – I have contacts in the renewable energy sector and can prepare the proposal. If full implementation is beyond immediate reach, an alternative quick win is to set up a **pilot solar hub**: for example, install solar panels to power the common areas, provide phone charging stations, and power a section of say 100 shops as a demonstration. Success of the pilot will pave way for scaling up. Additionally, we ensure that **the shoemakers (Powerline cluster)** are included this time, addressing their past exclusion <sup>32</sup>. If they see commitment, their association will cooperate actively. The Governor’s endorsement will also encourage compliance (traders will know this is to help them, not to exploit them). Ultimately, within 6-12 months, our target could be to reduce generator usage by at least **50%**, saving traders tens of millions of naira monthly and greatly improving the ease of doing business in the market. This feat would be a headline accomplishment for the administration and a model for other states (imagine the positive press: “Abia’s Ariaria Market now enjoys 20 hours/day of solar electricity – traders save money and boost production”). It aligns perfectly with Nigeria’s climate goals and the drive for improved business conditions <sup>52</sup>.



### 3. Aba Traders Business Support & Innovation Center:

**What** – Establish a one-stop center (physical and virtual) to **support the capacity building and business needs** of market traders and young entrepreneurs in Aba. This center would have multiple functions: training workshops, advisory services, and possibly a microfinance facilitation desk. For instance, the center can host regular training sessions on modern production techniques (like new shoe designs, use of machinery, quality control), basic bookkeeping and financial literacy classes, and how to use technology (for those engaging with the Aba e-market platform). We can partner with agencies like the **Small and Medium Enterprises Development Agency of Nigeria (SMEDAN)** or Bank of Industry to provide some of these trainings. The center can also invite successful manufacturers or buyers to give talks – e.g., a well-known fashion designer could educate local tailors on emerging trends, or an exporter could teach how to meet export standards. Another arm of the center can serve as an **SME helpdesk**: helping traders register their businesses, get info on loans or grants, and even organizing cooperatives to bulk-purchase raw materials at discount. This will essentially be a mini **“business incubator”** for the market community. We can name it something like “Enyimba Business Hub” to resonate with local pride.

**Why** – Building infrastructure is one leg, but building people is equally important. Many of the traders have enormous skill but limited formal exposure. With additional knowledge and support, they can scale from subsistence businesses to small industries. For example, training 100 shoemakers on how to improve finishing and packaging could enable them to sell at higher prices or enter new markets. Workshops on export requirements could lead some Aba businesses to start exporting formally (earning forex for the state). By facilitating business formalization (like registering enterprises with CAC), more of them can access loans and also contribute to the formal economy. This has a side benefit of increasing Abia’s IGR in the long run through taxes from growing businesses. The youth in Aba will also see a path to prosperity through skill – instead of solely trading the same way, they can innovate. We have seen tech and entrepreneurship hubs sprout in other cities; there is already an **Innovation Growth Hub in Aba** focusing on tech startups <sup>53</sup>. Our proposed center can collaborate with such hubs to extend innovation into the traditional trade sector. It also signals that the government cares about the traders’ welfare beyond just collecting market fees. By institutionalizing training and support, we help ensure that the physical improvements in the market translate to **real income gains and job creation**.

**How** – We would start by securing a space for the center, ideally located near the market (perhaps an office in the new market complex or a nearby building). The facility need not be huge initially – even a hall or two classrooms can suffice for training sessions. I can reach out to organizations for partnerships: e.g., **the German Agency GIZ and similar** have been known to support SME trainings in Nigeria; NGOs can be invited to run workshops on product quality, and large companies might sponsor events (for CSR). The Abia State Ministry of Trade and Commerce would naturally be a key partner, potentially providing personnel or materials. We’d create a schedule of events (weekly or bi-weekly sessions). Topics could include: *“Leveraging Social Media for Business”*, *“Bookkeeping 101 for Market Traders”*, *“Standards and Packaging for Exports”*, etc. Local successful entrepreneurs (some Aba traders have grown into large businesses) can be mentors. We also implement a monitoring system – e.g., track participants and see if their revenues improve after applying new skills, to measure impact. Additionally, the center’s helpdesk could coordinate with financial institutions to design tailor-made micro-loan schemes for traders (perhaps the state can guarantee a portion to encourage banks). If the Governor provides a small seed fund, we could start a **revolving loan program** for cooperative groups in the market, enabling them to buy new equipment or expand shops. The center will effectively be **“homework in action”** – proving that we have not only studied global best practices in market development but are applying them in Abia. Over time, this hub can expand and even link with the planned **Entertainment Village** (creative economy) to support artisans who are

into arts and crafts. It aligns with Governor Otti's vision of harnessing creativity and enterprise together <sup>48</sup> <sup>54</sup> .

#### 4. Marketing and Branding Initiatives ("Made in Aba" 2.0):

**What** – A series of initiatives to aggressively promote Aba and its products on the regional, national, and international stage. This includes organizing periodic **Aba Trade Fairs/Expos**, running marketing campaigns, and establishing a recognizable **quality seal for Made-in-Aba goods**. For example, Abia State (in collaboration with trade associations) can host an annual **"Enyimba International Trade Fair"** in Aba, inviting businesses and buyers from all over Nigeria and neighboring countries to come see the best of Aba products. This could coincide with the completion of a phase of the new market buildings, serving as a grand re-opening of Ariaria. At such events, our local manufacturers can showcase their wares, negotiate deals, and even sign distribution contracts. In terms of branding, we develop a *"Made in Aba, Abia – Quality Guaranteed"* seal or hologram that certified top-grade products can carry, to build customer trust. We also leverage media – success stories of Aba entrepreneurs will be publicized on social media, and possibly a documentary (the mentioned film project "Chronicles of Enyimba City" is doing something similar from a creative angle <sup>55</sup> ). We could organize a competition for young designers or inventors in Aba, further shining a spotlight on local talent. Additionally, engaging influencers – for instance, getting popular Nigerian figures to wear Aba-made fashion or talk about Aba – can change perceptions positively.

**Why** – In business, perception is reality. For too long, *"Aba made"* had a mixed reputation (affordable but sometimes seen as imitation products). We have an opportunity to **rebrand** that in line with improvements. As infrastructure and quality improve, we must broadcast it. Increasing recognition will lead to higher demand. A trade fair brings immediate commerce (sales during the fair) and longer-term partnerships. It could attract wholesale buyers who start sourcing regularly from Aba (some might even set up buying offices in the city, which is additional investment). The influx of visitors for fairs or expos also boosts local hospitality (hotels, transport) – spreading economic benefit. A quality seal program will encourage manufacturers to maintain standards to earn the seal, thus improving overall product quality. This virtuous cycle means Aba could become synonymous with *"reliable, value-for-money products"* across West Africa. There's precedent: places like **Taiwan** and **South Korea** decades ago had to overcome a "cheap goods" stigma by improving quality and branding – Aba can follow that trajectory on a micro-scale. The Governor's backing of such promotions will carry weight; it shows the government is proud of local producers and willing to invest in their success. This also ties in with the federal government's push for local production and diversification away from imports – Abia can position itself as the poster child of **Made-in-Nigeria success**.

**How** – Planning an expo will require coordination with chambers of commerce and possibly international partners (maybe ECOWAS trade organizations). I have begun outlining a concept for an **"Aba International SME Expo"** which I can present in detail. We would need to secure a venue (the new market itself or a stadium could be used with booths). With a lead time of a few months, we can mobilize participants. The state can invite delegations from other states and neighboring countries. We should also tie it into the online platform – for example, livestream parts of the fair and allow online orders for those who cannot attend physically. For branding, I would work with a team of marketing professionals to design the logo/seal for Made in Aba and set criteria (e.g., products that meet certain durability tests, etc., get the seal). We might collaborate with standards organizations like SON (Standards Organization of Nigeria) to help with setting benchmarks. Furthermore, we'll leverage the media: ensure that whenever the Governor commissions new market sections or whenever traders achieve something notable, it gets press coverage. There is already momentum –

headlines about Ariaria's changing face and Otti's transformations are emerging <sup>26</sup> <sup>56</sup> . We will amplify these through both traditional media and social media. I can manage a social media page that continuously shares progress photos (before-and-after of the market, stories of a local entrepreneur who doubled his income, etc.). This consistent positive messaging will solidify confidence among stakeholders (traders, consumers, and potential investors). Essentially, this initiative ensures that as we **make Aba marketplace great in fact**, we also make sure everyone knows about it, thereby attracting even more opportunities.

Each of these interventions – digital platform, power solution, business support center, and marketing push – addresses specific gaps identified in the research. They are mutually reinforcing. For instance, training traders in digital literacy at the support center will help them succeed on the e-commerce platform; reliable power will enable them to fulfill orders timely which boosts the online market's credibility; the trade fairs will drive traffic to the online platform beyond the event, etc. I have outlined them in some detail to show that I have thought through the *what, why, and how*. Of course, these plans can be refined with input from the state government and market stakeholders to ensure practicality. Importantly, these are **scalable**: we can start small (pilot a section, run a small expo) and then expand based on learning, which makes them budget-manageable and low-risk to try out.

## Expected Impact and Benefits

If executed well, this comprehensive approach will yield significant benefits for Abia State, the Aba community, and the government's developmental goals. By making Aba marketplace a success story, we create a ripple effect of positive outcomes:

- **Economic Growth and Diversification:** Empowering the Aba market will directly boost GDP from non-oil sectors. Even a moderate increase in output per trader, multiplied by tens of thousands of traders, adds up to billions of naira in new economic activity. For example, if 20,000 active businesses in Ariaria increase their annual sales by just ₦500,000 through better infrastructure and wider market access, that's ₦10 billion added to the economy. Over time, Aba could become a manufacturing/export hub, earning foreign exchange via trade with neighboring countries. This aligns with Abia's need to improve its economic growth ranking <sup>14</sup> and reduce over-reliance on oil revenue. A flourishing SME sector in Aba also means **job creation** – both direct (hiring more apprentices, shop assistants) and indirect (logistics, packaging, etc.). Unemployment and underemployment would be mitigated, which has social stability benefits.
- **Improved Government Revenue:** A more prosperous and formalized market will translate to higher revenue for the state government in a fair manner. As businesses grow, they contribute through taxes (pay-as-you-earn for employees, VAT on increased sales, perhaps even corporate taxes for those that formalize into companies). Moreover, the government currently earns income from shop rents/levies in markets – with new modern shops and higher trader incomes, those rates can be maintained or modestly increased with less resistance. The key is, traders will be more willing to comply if they see value (lights are on, waste is cleared, customers are coming). The state's **Internally Generated Revenue (IGR)**, which was ₦15 billion in 2018 <sup>15</sup> , can be substantially improved by the expanded commerce. This gives the government more fiscal capacity to reinvest in public services.

- **Enhanced Living Standards:** The quality of life for the traders and residents of Aba will improve. The modernization of the market means they work in a cleaner, safer environment – **no more wading through floodwaters or inhaling constant generator fumes**. With better income, families can afford better healthcare and education, reinforcing Abia's already good standings in literacy and sanitation <sup>12 57</sup>. The provision of facilities like clinics, toilets, and security in the market (as planned in the rebuild <sup>44</sup>) ensures dignity and safety in daily life. Also, when small entrepreneurs thrive, they can lift others – e.g., a successful shoe producer might support more relatives or sponsor community projects. This grassroots prosperity contributes to overall social development.
- **Putting Abia on the Map (Positive Publicity):** Successfully transforming the Aba marketplace will garner national acclaim for Abia State. Abia can become known as a state that is **SME-friendly and innovation-friendly**. This can attract further investment – both from Nigerians (industries might decide to set up factories near Aba to leverage the skilled labor pool) and from foreign partners (donor agencies or investors looking for success models to fund). We have seen examples where a thriving industrial cluster becomes a magnet – Aba can be like the “new Nnewi” or “new Onitsha” but even more diversified and modern. For Governor Otti's administration, this would be a signature achievement that aligns with the 25-year development plan's goals of sustainable growth. The narrative will shift from Abia being a state of unrealized potential to a state that **leads in enterprise**. Given that trade and commerce were one of the five pillars of the past administration's agenda <sup>58</sup> and remain crucial today, delivering on this front fulfills a core mandate. It also complements the creative and entertainment economy initiatives – together painting a picture of an Abia that celebrates both commerce and culture.
- **Regional Impact:** Aba's resurgence will benefit the broader South-East and South-South region. It's not just Abians who trade in Ariaria; many Igbo traders from other states, and businesspeople from as far as Northern Nigeria, participate in commerce here. A more efficient Aba market means lower costs for goods that eventually reach consumers across Nigeria (since Aba is a source of affordable products). It can also reduce import dependence – for example, if Aba shoemakers can produce on scale and of good quality, it might substitute some of the shoe imports from China, keeping wealth within Nigeria. Neighboring states would likely collaborate (e.g., Rivers and Akwa Ibom states would benefit if Aba becomes an export hub through Port Harcourt). This could position Abia as a regional leader in economic integration.

In summary, the **ROI (return on investment)** on making Aba marketplace great is immense. It directly tackles poverty by boosting incomes, it strengthens the state's finances, and it leaves a lasting legacy of development. These outcomes are not abstract – they will manifest in stories like: a trader who used to operate under a leaking roof now has a proper shop and triples his turnover; a group of young tailors who, after training and online exposure, are now selling fashion items to clients in Abuja via Instagram and the Aba e-market site; a scenario where the next time one walks through Ariaria, instead of generator noise, one hears the hum of business in a clean, well-lit environment with solar panels glinting on rooftops. These are the changes that make life markedly better. And they will stand as evidence that this administration delivered on its promises of *“Together, we build a modern, prosperous Abia”* <sup>59</sup>.

## Conclusion

In concluding this pitch, I want to emphasize my genuine commitment to seeing **Aba and Abia State thrive**. The research I've gathered is not just for show – it has informed a thoughtful plan of action. I have

“done my homework” on the state’s strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities, and the proposals outlined are rooted in that reality. Abia is blessed with enterprising people and a Governor who has shown the will to effect change. By focusing on the Aba marketplace, we are targeting a high-impact sector that can uplift many citizens at once.

The Governor asked what *“something I can do”* – I have responded with several concrete things I **can do and will do**, given the mandate and modest support. These include building the digital marketplace platform, coordinating the power solution pilot, setting up the trader support center, and driving marketing efforts. I have the background and network to execute these, and most importantly the passion – as an Abian (and someone connected to Aba’s entrepreneurial spirit), I truly want to make Aba marketplace great. This is not an overnight task, but it is absolutely achievable with a collaborative approach. My role would be as a project facilitator and innovator, working hand in hand with the relevant state ministries (Trade and Commerce, Energy, SMEs), the market leadership, and external partners.

It bears noting that our plan is in harmony with the Governor’s vision as encapsulated in recent initiatives and the 2025 budget proposals. We are essentially amplifying and complementing the government’s efforts, ensuring they succeed. By first delivering quick wins (like the e-market demo, a successful small trade fair, or solar powering a section in a matter of months), we will build momentum and trust. Those wins will justify further budgetary support, which I would responsibly utilize to scale up the projects for larger impact. Transparency and inclusiveness will be guiding principles – for example, traders will be kept informed and involved at each stage so they feel ownership of the improvements.

In a year’s time, if this plan is approved and implemented, I envision an Ariaria Market that is drastically transformed: **cleaner, better organized, buzzing both physically and online, with happier traders and customers**. It will be a case study of market modernization in Nigeria. The Governor will be able to point to Aba as evidence of prudent investment and innovative leadership.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this research and proposal. I am excited about the prospects for Abia State and eager to get to work. Together, let us turn Aba’s marketplace into a shining example of African enterprise – **a marketplace that is truly great** and befitting the legacy of Abia as “God’s Own State.”

**Sources Consulted:** (Detailed references have been provided throughout this document to demonstrate the factual basis for the points made, ranging from government announcements, news articles to research reports on Ariaria Market’s conditions and contributions. These sources include People of Abia news <sup>40</sup> <sup>37</sup>, Techpoint Africa feature <sup>19</sup>, ICIR investigative report <sup>34</sup>, ThisDay Live analysis <sup>41</sup>, and others. They collectively reinforce the narrative and statistics used in crafting this proposal.)

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