

DEMOGRAPHY, URBANISATION AND MOBILITY

The Making of African Megacities: a case of Lagos, Nigeria

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Photography: "The Ethereal Beauty", by [Obiageli Adaeze Okaro](#)

Africa is witnessing one of the most rapid stages of urbanisation in human history. By the year 2100, 13 of the world's largest megacities are projected to be in Africa, with Lagos at the top of the list. However, in Africa, the urban paradox exists as an ideological foil to conceal the society's inefficiencies and inequities, therefore exacerbating the continent's already dire situation. In Lagos, Nigeria, the state government's ambition of transforming the city into Africa's model megacity and a global commercial and financial powerhouse has paradoxically fostered ecological threats and socio-spatial repercussions that are incompatible with the city's development plan.

Using the metropolis of Lagos, Nigeria as a case study, this article examines some of the implications that urbanisation is having on megacities of this kind, as well as evaluating the policy frameworks put in place to maintain the status of a megacity. Faced with the herculean task of governing a rapidly expanding population, the administrations of Africa's

megacities must implement a comprehensive but contextual approach to policymaking to ensure a sustainable future.

Lagos – A Metropolis and Megacity

Dating back 70 years ago to its colonial-era through to its truncated status as the federal capital, Lagos was an organised metropolitan environment, in contrast to what it is today. The city was significantly smaller back then, which made city planning and management much easier. Its streets were tidy and wooded, and crime was almost non-existent.

When the British seized Lagos, it was already a cosmopolitan trade port with a long history of economic expansion and transformation. The city's oil, banking, and service industries boomed when Nigeria gained independence in 1960. By the end of the century, Lagos was responsible for about 60% of Nigeria's commercial and industrial activity, as well as 12% of the country's GDP. However, after the military seized command of Lagos and the rest of Nigeria, governance standards began to deteriorate. The once small city became absorbed by urban sprawl establishing a conurbation with neighbouring towns, such as Ikeja, Ojo, as well as suburban communities like Agege, Alimosho, Ifako-Ijaiye, Kosofe, Mushin, Oshodi and Shomolu [1].

Now a megacity, Lagos [2] contributes a disproportionately significant amount to national economic growth and indicators, generating the largest domestic income of all Nigerian states. The city continues to be the country's focal social, economic, and financial centre, as well as a national and international communications hub. With two seaports, local and international airports, and industries centred in the Apapa, Ikeja, and Ilupeju industrial estates, it is a booming industrial and commercial megacity [3].

However, as things stand, Lagos' economic development has been unable to keep up with the exponential increase in the city's population, which is estimated at 35 million with a 6% – 8% urbanisation rate [4]. Governance inadequacies like these, as in all big cities of comparable size, are felt most severely by the poor. Therein lies the urban paradox frequently cited by Olaijide and Lawanson [5]: Megacities provide wealth and employment opportunities, but they can also be hotbeds of poverty and exclusion from the labour market.

For Lagos State, these paradoxes manifest through urban reforms and redevelopment projects. For example, the Lagos State Development Plan (LSDP) for 2012-2025 was released by the Lagos State government in December 2014, following concerns about the city's economic viability in the face of population and infrastructure difficulties. The aim is to transform the metropolis into a model megacity that is productive, secure, sustainable, functional, and safe. This has been achieved through investments in housing schemes and transportation infrastructure, most recently notable are the investments in water transportation such as addition of speedboats and renovation of jetties, the commitment to rail projects and the Oshodi Transport Interchange.

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Albeit the plan's favourable externalities, the investments being made, and economic prospects, we must not overlook the unintended repercussions of these urban development projects' purported benefits on everyday citizens, particularly the impoverished. Interestingly, African governments have generally welcomed an urban neoliberalist approach to promote and implement new phases of urban development projects. They must not, however, discount the counterproductive effects of urbanisation, which pose environmental and socio-spatial challenges in megacities like Lagos [6].

Ecological Threats

Climate change, as a key driver of global urbanisation, aggravates existing environmental issues, particularly water scarcity and the progressive overshoot of the heat-health threshold. Given that the tropics already have year-round high temperatures and humidity, even minor adjustments are likely to push cities like Lagos over the heat-health threshold. According to research exploring the influence of Lagos' recent urbanisation on its urban heat island (UHI) [7] there has been a significant urbanization-driven warming of Lagos' local climate of 0.15°C decade, 25% faster than climate change, which is happening simultaneously.

The rate of warming in Lagos would certainly have a significant negative impact on the city's growing population, that are already vulnerable to excessive heat. In rural communities surrounding Lagos, significant warming and changes to atmospheric boundary layer heights were also discovered, with possible consequences such as decreasing air quality [8]. Aside from the urban thermal discomfort that Lagosians are experiencing, there is evidence that water demand in Lagos state has surpassed supply over time. Climate change (particularly the constant increase in temperature since 1999 and reduction in rainfall since 2002), population growth, and rapid urbanisation have all been cited for the widening disparity between water demand and supply in recent years [9].

Lagos, which is characterised by water bodies and wetlands that represent more than 40% of the total land area, is renowned for yearly floods as a result of its low-lying coastal plain position, proclivity for unplanned urbanisation, and a substandard solid waste management system. While the quantity of yearly rainfall in Lagos has decreased, the distribution and intensity of rain, coupled with rising sea levels, has also heightened the city's susceptibility to flooding. The floods that wreaked havoc on the city from 2010 to 2013 prompted the government to demolish illegal buildings along drainage systems and clear sludge from the clogged channels in 2012. However, the decrease in the volume of water bodies between 2013 and 2019 demonstrates the ongoing encroachment of flood plains, indicating that the people and government are slow to internalise the lessons learned from prior disasters [10].

Additional environmental consequences of urban growth in Lagos include the danger of wetland loss (e.g., creeks, swamps, and lagoons), soil degradation and erosion, biodiversity loss of coastal vegetation, and fish population decline. These repercussions may have a detrimental impact on vegetation growth, drinking water quality, and infrastructural sustainability, while ecosystem changes may affect insect habitat and migration patterns, raising the risk of contagious human diseases. Furthermore, as a state that has extensively invested in its aquaculture sector, an unsustainable fish market would stymie both domestic and international trade [11]. Industrial pollution is also a major concern for the city that houses the vast majority of Nigeria's registered and unregistered industrial facilities, many of which have poor operational techniques and inadequate waste management – every day, the state produces around 6,000 metric tonnes of solid waste [12].

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To deal with this problem, the Lagos State Government established the Lagos State Waste Management Authority (LAWMA), which is responsible for ensuring the effective and efficient disposal of both residential and industrial waste in Lagos, as well as the management of all government disposal facilities in the city. By the mandate of the institution, several initiatives were introduced such as the LAWMA recycling initiative and the 'Operation Clean Lagos' project. Due to a lack of proper feasibility studies, underfunding, weak business models, and insufficient involvement of prospective users in the planning process, many of these initiatives failed to deliver, demonstrating little success in terms of profitability and general usability [13].

Socio-spatial Implications

Any genuine strategy of sustained industrial and commercial growth requires adequate levels of infrastructural facilities as well as sufficient accompanying social amenities. However, in Lagos, there is an infrastructure deficit since the public sector is unable to cover the infrastructure demands of a contemporary megacity and a growing population. Due to the difficulty in obtaining affordable housing, many Lagos residents have relocated to the suburbs and what used to be rural regions, resulting in the formation of new settlement belts. Indeed, the current growth of slums and rural communities in Lagos indicates that millions of people are living in deplorable housing units, utilising deteriorating roads, and without social services [14]. Slums are now ironically wedged inside Lagos' structured environment and enterprise zones, revealing a harsh reality of urban degeneration.

Another factor for the city's inadequate housing supply is urban land scarcity, which is compounded by the dual constraints of a small land area and the presence of a vast water

body. The city occupies 0.04% of Nigeria's landmass, making it the country's smallest state, yet it houses more than 10% of the country's population. Because of the current land scarcity, many large-scale initiatives to recover land from the Lagoon systems have been underway [15]. Despite the adverse effects, successive administration continue to approve land reclamation from the sea, the most notable of which is the development of the dreamscape Eko Atlantic City project.

Eko Atlantic City, a Free Trade Zone and financial centre in Lagos that will house 500,000 people, is being built on land reclaimed from the Atlantic Ocean. This contemporary, advanced new town construction promises to provide a countermeasure to rising coastal erosion and storm surge protection. However, it is debatable if a gated and privatised luxury neighbourhood is the best solution to the massive housing shortage. Foreigners and affluent Nigerian expats are perhaps more likely to be interested in the project than locals who can hardly afford to reside there. In addition, the project itself may worsen current environmental and socioeconomic problems. Due to the projected man-made climate change from the project, the landfill in the open sea is likely to increase the danger of flooding in surrounding areas and along the coast. It is also likely to exacerbate the wealth disparity, divide the city and raise crime rates [16].

Lagos' prominence as a megacity and commercial nerve centre of Nigeria has rendered it vulnerable to significant security threats

Already Lagos' prominence as a megacity and commercial nerve centre of Nigeria, if not all of West Africa, has rendered it vulnerable to significant security threats. Its growing population, driven by a never-ending quest for survival and economic migration, as well as its porous border with the Republic of Benin, make it an ideal environment for unstoppable population growth. The city's congested slums have also led to a high crime rate [17].

Governance Practices

The projects and policy reforms arising from the implementation of the Lagos State Development Plan 2012-2025 (LSDP) are not having rapid positive impacts as the government had hoped and are causing substantial changes in the spatial structure of Lagos. This trend can be found in a number of African cities, including Addis Ababa, Kigali, Nairobi, and Lagos, where governance policies aim to attract global investment opportunities in the hopes of lifting Africa out of poverty and putting the continent on a path to economic recovery and job creation via presumed trickle-down effects. Using the Cleaner Lagos Initiative (CLI) and the Lekki Free Trade Zone (LFTZ) projects as examples, it is apparent that this is seldom the case.

Waste management touches on a variety of institutional systems, policies, and sectors, making it a particularly useful lens through which to examine Lagos' urban governance practises. A clear example of the inequities caused by the neoliberalist approach to urban

governance is the privatisation and formalisation of the waste management industry under the Cleaner Lagos Initiative declared in late 2016. This private sector project supplanted pre-existing waste management programmes in four categories: dumpsite management and recycling, residential waste collection, commercial waste collection, and public waste management. Private actors, such as big waste companies, were given control of these, leaving LAWMA with only regulatory responsibilities.

The initiative ultimately triggered severe socio-economic and livelihood insecurity for low-income earners who relied on the previous structure to generate income. The private sector takeover of dumpsites rendered scavengers, scrap dealers, and garbage pickers redundant or underpaid, while earnings from valuable recyclables went primarily to the big corporations. When residential waste collection was outsourced to a private firm, the cutting back of private sector participants' (PSP) (now known as "Waste Collection Operators," or WCOs) duties to only commercial waste collection resulted in a massive workforce contraction.

In the grand scheme of the initiative, mechanising and upgrading waste management systems leaves no room for the mass of so-called informal workers such as cart pushers, cart builders, waste pickers, metal scrap collectors, and resource merchants. Long before recycling became popular, these workers had been silently working behind the scenes, often in less-than-honourable conditions, to extract value from a variety of non-biodegradable waste. They play an important but mostly invisible role in the development of the city, contributing to maintaining a cleaner environment. Some continued to operate, albeit unregistered, providing a vital service to low-income neighbourhoods, and were the last resort for middle-income households in the face of private-sector failures [18]. Fortunately, Lagos is a state governed by administrators who listen to the people. The private-sector angle infused into the waste management arrangement, that caused job and income challenges to the large population of the poor actors, was remodelled taking into account the priorities of the people.

Intricacies of large-scale land deals for megaprojects have become a typical consequence of neoliberalism across Africa. The Lekki Free Trade Zone (LFTZ), launched in 2006, is one of such megaprojects. Free Trade Zones have grown in popularity as a means of regulating urbanisation by attracting foreign capital. The goal of the project is to fully exploit Lagos' investment, business, and tourism potentials, strengthening the city's position as an economic and financial centre and fostering a space for wealth and job creation and inclusivity. However, during the first phase of this project's activities, nine coastal settlements were impacted leaving the impoverished inhabitants with deteriorated livelihood conditions due to the acquisition of their land. The Memorandum of Understanding between the Lagos State Government and representatives of the impacted communities adopted a compensation formula that devalued the farmlands, leaving locals undercompensated. Further, possible environmental dangers have already begun to negatively impact neighbouring communities as the project's subsequent phases, including a refinery project, are near completion [19].

A clear example of the inequities caused by the neoliberalist approach to urban governance is the privatisation and formalisation of the waste management industry in Lagos

The LFTZ project exemplifies an urban development paradox in which there is a misalignment between the developmental goals and the livelihood aspirations and demands of local communities. While the majority of the locals rely on agriculture for sustenance, the development plan has created a challenge regarding their source of income and dreams for economic growth.

Developing plans to construct affordable homes through people empowerment would give employment as well as the resources to do so. By improving the slums of Lagos, there may be a possibility for a shift in the city's future and sustainability, transforming the lives of its inhabitants and those relocating to the city.

Lessons for African Megacities

Megacities have the ability to alleviate poverty and improve living circumstances for a substantial percentage of the African population provided they are properly managed and exploited. Urbanization boosts productivity as a result of positive externalities and economies of scale. It encourages innovation, including green technology, and raises living standards. Due to resource management, urbanisation can also result in a smaller ecological footprint. However, new urban models are desperately needed to address the related social, economic, and environmental challenges in a sustainable manner. Nonetheless, each megacity has its peculiar circumstances, highlighting the importance of a context-sensitive and nuanced approach to policymaking.

In light of these facts, it is critical for African government actors to consider allowing more informal solutions to coexist with formal ones, in order to better serve the interests of both affluent and poor city dwellers. Using the example of waste management in Lagos, on the one hand, state-of-the-art technologies and systems from private companies are capable of solving the major problems in the sector, but on the other hand, there is much to be learnt from the responses that communities themselves have developed to their infrastructure challenges. So, although urban development projects may aim to generate employment for the poor, the informal waste industry already provides considerable job and revenue prospects for participants. External actors would be wise to collaborate with, rather than compete with, bottom-up innovations.

As it is, the current Lagos administration is working hard to address the state's housing deficit. In order to promote city-wide quality of life in an urban context, these projects must include a mixed-income housing strategy. Equal-access housing markets, as well as educational resources and employment opportunities, would reduce the habitation of low-income, informal living standards, which have detrimental effects on water quality, public

health, and biodiversity. In addition, future land use plans must be framed by strong wetland conservation policies that minimise disturbance of swamp habitat, particularly in wetland locations.

Most significantly, this article highlights the tendency of African countries to adopt undiscerning neoliberal urban development programs and megaprojects, resulting in a metropolis where the poor are both socially excluded and victims of urban growth. Governments must recognise that social elements of development are just as important as economic concerns, and all sectors of society must be engaged in the planning processes of public sector initiatives so that everyone benefits from the social and economic growth brought about by urbanisation.

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