

## Perceptual Notion and Realities of Nigerian Urban Centres

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**Abstract:** Urban centres world wide are perceived as centres of excellence, centres of opportunities where aspirations and desires are met. However, unlike in the more developed countries of Europe and America, where a strong correlation exist between the rate of urbanization and most indicators of development, the situation in African in general and Nigeria in particular is a different story. Urban centres in the developing world are said to be characterized by mixed blessings revealing a cauldron of excitement, where joy and terror often intermingle. In this study, the perpetual notion for urban life and the realities of present day Nigerian urban centres are examined. The study observed that the Nigerian urban centres have within the past years witnessed in unprecedented rate of growth that cannot be divorced from the overall changing socio economic structure of the country. This in turn has led to a numerous and complex environmental, economic, political and social problems of which unemployment, environmental deterioration and circulation within the city are perhaps the most vivid ones. The study concludes that for the urban centres in Nigeria to meet the perceptual notion of people, some urgent steps are required to reverse the unpleasant context and hardships under which the phenomenon takes place.

**Key words:** Urban centres, socio economic structure, perceptual notion

### INTRODUCTION

Urban centres world-wide possess a perceived and distinctive characteristics compared with any other geographic setting. They are more populous and more complex in terms of socio economic activities and opportunities. In the developing world in particular, whereas the urban centres are characterized by a mixed blessing revealing a cauldron of excitement, where human joy and terror often intermingle; the perceptual notion about urban centres as places where all opportunities abound has perhaps accelerated the pace of rural-urban migration (Mabogunje, 1968, 1980).

Thus, the concentration of people in Nigerian urban centres is not unconnected with their erroneous belief on the attributes and opportunities of these centres. In this study therefore, the general perceptions about urban centres is examined on one hand while the realities of present day Nigerian urban centres are presented on the other hand.

Following this introduction, the level of urbanization in Nigeria is examined. This is followed by the perceptual notion of these urban centres. The problems of Nigerian

urban centres are discussed next and this is followed by the suggestions for improvement of these ailing urban centres to be able to meet up with their expected roles.

### THE NIGERIAN LEVEL OF URBANISATION

The population of Nigeria reveals a classic example of rapid growth and explosion. By estimation, in year 2002, Nigerian population was about 120 million and would be about 160 million in 2020. In other words, the nation experienced estimated increases of 33% in the decades (UNECA, 2001).

Associated with this explosion, is the increasing level of concentration of people in urban centres. As shown in Table 1, Nigeria was 4.8% urbanized in 1921. This increased to 10.2% between 1952 and 1954. It further increased to 19.2% in 1963 and jumped to 42% in 2002. Estimation also suggests further increase to about 68% by 2020.

The concentration of people in urban centres seems to be a continuous phenomenon in Nigeria which is expected to continue to happen as part of natural process of development.

**Table 1: Nigerian population 1921-2020**

Year	Total population (000s)	Urban population As % of total Population
1921	18,720	4.8
1931	20,056	6.7
1952/54	30,402	10.2
1963	55,670	19.2
1972	78,924	25.1
1991	96,684	33.0
2002	120.0	42.0
2006	140.0	*
2020	160,000	68.0

Source: Population Census of Nigeria 1952, 1963, 1991 and 2006 and projections of same based on 5% annual growth rate for urban areas

### PERCEPTUAL NOTION OF URBAN CENTRES

All over the world, the impression about urban centres can not be over emphasized. Generally, they are perceived as the economic and social lifelines for the surrounding regions. They are described as places of economic strength, power development, innovation and modern culture (Oyesiku, 1997). It is the point of concentration of socio economic facilities. In fact, for centuries, they city has been the heart, the life blood, of various civilizations, the epicenter of economic, political and artistic activities (Spates and Macionis, 1987). Thus, most people are drawn to the cities with the hope of increasing their material standard of living. This shows that in all ramifications, urban centres are perceived as centres of excellence, centres of opportunities where aspirations and desires are met. However, unlike in the more developed countries of Europe and North America. Where a strong correlation exists between the rate of urbanization and most of indicators of development-energy consumption, per capita income and the contribution of the industrial and manufacturing sectors as percentage of GNP, survival indicators (life expectancy at birth, infant and under 5 mortality) and human development index in general (Onibokun, 2004) the situation in Africa generally and Nigeria in particular portrays a different story.

Nigerian urban centres are faced with numerous problems. So complex are these problems that they (urban centres) can be described as an increasingly important stage on which all aspects of the human drama are performed; the highest learning and the grossest ignorance, unimaginable levels of wealth and the most abject poverty exists side by side (Ademiluyi and Solanke, 2006).

### THE PROBLEMS OF URBAN CENTRES IN NIGERIA

The Nigerian urban centres have within the past years witnessed an unprecedented rate of growth that cannot

be divorced from the overall changing socio economic structure of the country and which have led to the creating of a number of problems that have been categorized for the purpose of this article, categorized under four headings: Unemployment, services manageability and liveability.

**Unemployment:** The problem of urban unemployment can be appreciated from official figures of Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN, 2002) which put unemployment rate in Nigeria at 3.8% in 2001. However, a common knowledge and other studies suggest a much higher percentage. For instance, in Abuja, unemployment rate was put conservatively at 8.9% in 1995, while that of Lagos was put at 10.9%. Most of these (about 70%) unemployed people are primary and secondary school leavers with little or no skill (Onibokun, 2004) and yet are in search of employment. It is also a common knowledge and as confirmed by CBN (2002) that a high proportion of the graduates from Nigerian higher institutions are unemployed, yet very rapid expansion of educational institutions in Nigeria continue unabated and without corresponding programme to absorb the products into the productive economy.

The cause of this unmanageable urban unemployment problem is a consequence of many factors, notably the educational system which not only discourages agriculture as a noble profession but also trains potential employees for non existent white collar jobs in urban centres. In addition, there is the fact that urbanization in Nigeria, as in most developing countries, is not a direct consequence of industrialization. The migrant in search of urban employment is, in most cases a frustrated man and is usually forced into some apprenticeship training for employment in the large and growing urban informal sector.

- The Problem of serviceability is reflected in the failure of the Nigerian urban centre to provide adequate housing, health, education, recreation and other social services for its population and those of its tributary area, in addition to its inability to stimulate raw material production in the hinterland. For instance, over 50% of urban residents live in slums that is, living in squalid environment that are devoid of the basic infrastructure, amenities and facilities such as access to safe water and adequate shelter (Onibokun, 2004). They have no hope for a better life, as they are trapped in a vicious circle of urban poverty, social exclusion, deprivation, disenfranchisement and lack of self esteem (Onibokun, 2004).

Table 2: Access to improved water sources and sanitations in Nigeria and selected countries in percentage for year 2000

Countries	Access to improved water (Urban)	Access to improved sanitation (Urban)
Nigeria	78	66
Ghana	91	74
Kenya	88	96
South Africa	99	93
Africa	86	80

Source: Computed from UN-HABITAT, 2003

Table 3: Types of Toilets used in Urban Households in Nigeria – 2003 (in percentage)

Type of toilet	Nigeria	Urban sector
Pit latrine	67.3	60.5
Water closet	21.1	36.2
Bush/streams/others	11.6	4.0

Source: CASSAD, (2003)

The situation of municipal services and urban infrastructure in Nigeria calls for a greater concern, especially when compared with some other countries in Africa like Ghana, Kenya and South Africa. As shown in Table 2, while only 78% of the urban population in Nigeria was said to have access to improve water sources as at 2000; comparative figures for Ghana, Kenya and South Africa were 91, 88 and 99%, respectively. Access to improve sanitation is to not any way different. In Nigeria, 66% of urban population enjoyed improved sanitation, as compared with over 80% for other countries as shown in Table 2.

Table 3 shows the types of toilets used in households in Nigeria. Over 60% of the urban population depended on pit latrines, while less than 40% used water closet. Four percent of urban population had neither pit nor water closet. They relied on nearby bush, streams and other indecent means. Some of the pit latrines in urban centres were poorly located and poorly maintained; thus, reducing the sanitary quality of urban environment.

The inability of Nigerian urban centres to provide adequate services is not unrelated to the rapid rate of growth of these urban centres as well as the urban centres', inability to generate income to meet the required expenses (Ademiluyi and Solanke, 2006).

- The Management Problems of the Nigerian Urban centres dated back to the colonization era. Prior to colonization, the upkeep of the urban centres, maintenance of the roads, market and other systems were firmly in the hands of traditional rulers who delegated authority appropriately. The impact of colonization was to erode the existing modus operandi by creating townships and new towns adjacent to old urban centres but outside the jurisdictions of the traditional rulers of the ruling class. The Emir of Kano was reported to have written

a letter of protest to Lord Lugard, the then Governor of Nigeria, complaining about the Social and management problems of this arrangement (Ayeni, 1983). As a consequence, in the course of the evolution of modern urban management in the country, part of one and the same city came to be treated separately in terms of taxation, planning and general urban development. Furthermore, in later years, modern urban management was in the hands of indigenous dwellers of the cities (or sons of the soil' as they are popularly called) who would do everything to prevent redevelopment of the old city in the name of protecting rights and properties, while at the same time ensuring harsh and discriminating laws against the migrant areas of the city. This has no doubt robbed many urban centres of some tabulated leadership. Nonetheless, urban management problems are made more complicated by the general poverty of the urban centres, especially of the old centres, where most of the residents belong to either the informal sector or are farmers and where houses are of such low quality that they could not command any economic rents and hence property taxes.

- The Problem of Liveability could be said to be a consequence of many of the problems already discussed. Liveability in this context, is to mean not only the creation and maintenance of a decent environment but also the ease with which people and goods move within the urban system. The problem of environmental deterioration arises either from the inadequacy of existing urban facilities and hence their over utilization or the inability of the urban centres to cope with these needs at current rates of urbanization. The consequence for instance includes rapid rate of garbage accumulation, coupled with a low rate of removal. In almost all the urban centres of Nigeria, the arrangements for waste disposal are very inefficient; as less than 50% of the waste generated is collected (CASSAD, 1998). Regrettably, not a single city in Nigeria has modern sanitary landfills. The common practice is the use of Burrow pits, open plots of land, street kerbs, streams and rivers where they pollute surface and soils leading to foul air and bad smells within the city. Added to this is the unwitting utilization of delicate areas for home building and other construction purposes. Such desecrations have occurred on the slopes of streams and river courses and have led to flooding and destruction of life and property.

The problem of circulation within the city is perhaps

the most vivid problem of the urban centres. Within the past few years, there had been large increases in the number of motor vehicles on the generally narrow and little improved roads and streets. Consequently, there is much congestion, traffic hold-ups and frustration in intra-urban movement. Mass transit systems have not yield positive results because they are run either inefficiently, or without a policy that discourages the use of private automobiles.

There is no doubt that the expectations from Nigerian urban centres are numerous and great. However, due to numerous challenges facing the urban centres what they (urban centres) can offer is far from the perceptual notions about them. Thus, while urban centres are perceived as the economic and social lifelines for the surrounding regions, the Nigerian urban situation as noted above, reveals a cauldrons or excitement, where human joy and terror often intermingle. In reality, the characteristic feature of Nigerian urban setting manifest in a host of environmental, economic, political and social problems; all of which have impacted negatively on the development of the nation.

The situation has made the urban area breeding places for crimes and defiant behaviours, thus, (in contrast to perception of the people) making the urban centres unsafe for people, unattractive to investors, unconducive to economic activities and inimical to good governance. In reality, the urban centres, the so-called epicenter of economic, political and artistic activities are faced with so much problems capable of fragmenting them.

It must however, be emphasized that urbanization, if well planned for, stimulates and enhances growth and development. This is because of the inherent attributes of urban centres as being the national and regional engines of growth. Unless these engines of growth are properly oiled by giving them the attention, the management capacity, the legal and the legislative framework as well as the resource mobilization powers they deserve, they can not be expected to meet the perceptions and aspirations of the people for sustained growth and development (Tibaijuka, 2003). For the urban centres in Nigeria, to meet the perceptual notion of people, urgent steps are required to reverse the unpleasant context and hardships under which the phenomenon takes places.

Perhaps for the Nigerian urban centres to be healthy and sustainable, we must treat it as a cross cutting issue, the rapid urban growth is linked with the following among others: population pressure in the urban centres, declining productivity in agriculture, endemic poverty and environmental pollution in the urban areas; decay of urban centres, the spread of squatter settlements in all the

major towns, increasing wave of crime etc in different parts of the country (Onibokun, 2004). A focus on urban development therefore will have positive ramifications on all other sectors. For instance, the high rate of unemployment and marginal employment prevalent in urban centres in Nigeria are related to failure in the agricultural sector, decline in the relative appeal of the rural area, low productivity in the agricultural sector, which hinders the sectors ability to feed the nation and supply the needed raw materials for agro-allied industries and absence of an effective linkage between agricultural virtue and industries.

In addition to the above, for the reason of inefficient method of farming, lack of access to intermediate technology by farmers, drudgery and poor infrastructure and amenities in the rural areas, rural areas and their economy agriculture have become unappealing to the youths, thereby leaving very young, the very old women and the uneducated to till the land. The immediate implication of this is the gradual collapse and ineffective base for much desired industrialization and employment creation and generation.

In this circumstance, a holistic approach to development will be required where agricultural and urban development integration becomes the central focus of development at national level.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, while urban centres have crucial role to perform in national socio-economic development, the context or circumstances under which Nigerian urban population is growing contradicts the perceptual notion of people about these urban centres and thus wiped out most of the gains associated with urbanization. Nigerian urban centres are growing in atmosphere of chaos which are quite often beyond the managerial capacity of the municipal authority. The present predicament of most of our urban centres will need to be reversed in an urgent manner in order to achieve the basic objective of urban centres as practicable in the much advanced parts of the world.

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