

THE POWER AND THE HEARTBEAT OF WEST AFRICA'S BIGGEST URBAN JUNGLE

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In a region where unprecedented urbanization rates have brazenly outstripped the global average, Nigeria's former capital, Lagos, remains an enigma to both visitors and those charged with the management of Africa's most populous city.

Misunderstood by many but passionately loved by its citizens, Lagos has always been the subject of extreme emotions. Some call it an 'urban jungle', others see it as an explosive place that is losing the battle to catch up with itself. But hate it or love it, stay or leave it, Lagos is the engine room driving national and regional growth, a place to which more migrants flock than any other city in the entire sub-region.

Sitting on 3577 square kilometres of coastal plain along Nigeria's south-western Atlantic seaboard, the settlement has always possessed a peculiar appeal, even from the time when it became a British colony in 1861. Over the years, it became Nigeria's earliest central business district (CBD), spreading from the Marina-Broad Street (Ehingbeti) district, taking in Lagos Harbour, the European Piers, the financial market, the seat of colonial government, and the location of major local and foreign conglomerates and transnational corporations.

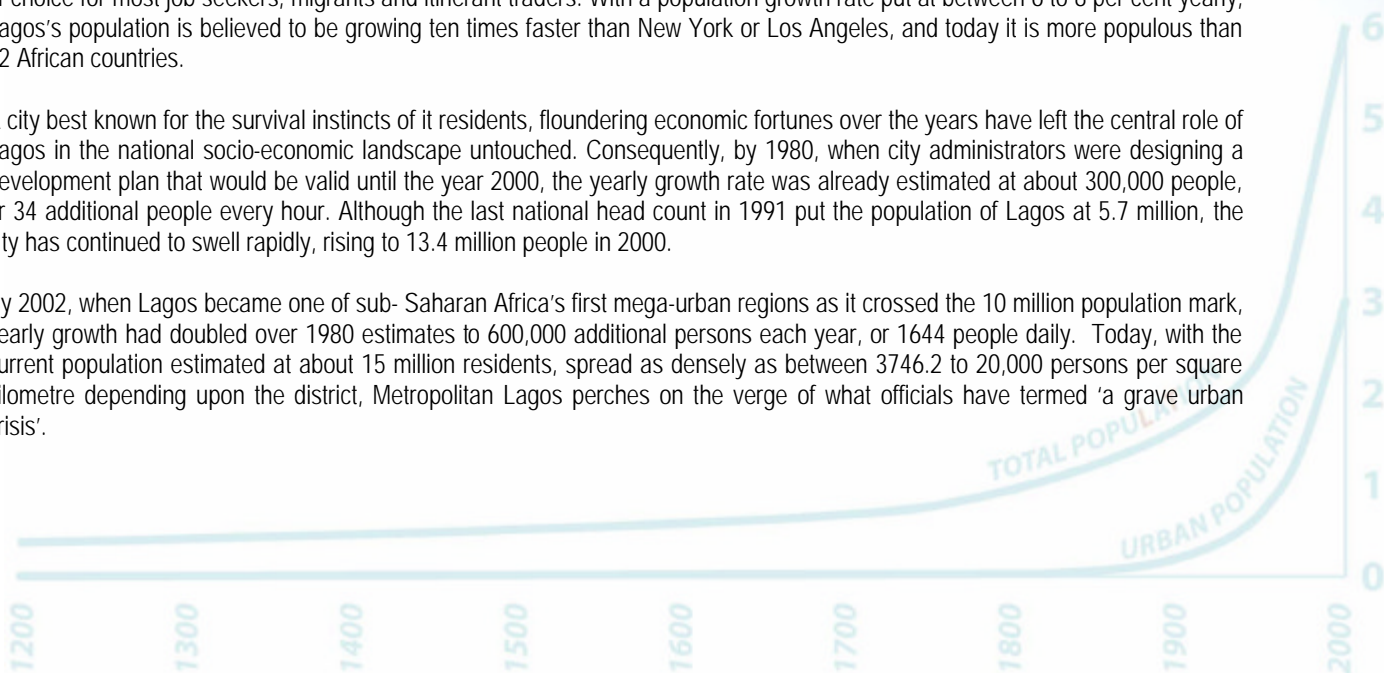
One-and-a-half centuries later, although Lagos remains the smallest of Nigeria's 36 regional administrative states, it is, at the same time, the most populous. Covering barely 5 per cent of the country's land area, the state has always been home to between 5 and 8 per cent of the total population. The metropolitan area, home to more than 75 per cent of the state's population, also accounts for more than one third (36.8 per cent) of Nigeria's urban residents.

But well beyond its demographic characteristics, Lagos has remained the country's economic powerhouse, accounting for some 65 per cent of Nigeria's industrial infrastructure and contributing more than half of national economic development.

While urbanization in sub-Saharan Africa has generally occurred without a commensurate industrial and economic growth, the dominant role of Lagos as the heartbeat of both the Nigerian and regional economy has established its position as the destination of choice for most job seekers, migrants and itinerant traders. With a population growth rate put at between 6 to 8 per cent yearly, Lagos's population is believed to be growing ten times faster than New York or Los Angeles, and today it is more populous than 32 African countries.

A city best known for the survival instincts of its residents, floundering economic fortunes over the years have left the central role of Lagos in the national socio-economic landscape untouched. Consequently, by 1980, when city administrators were designing a development plan that would be valid until the year 2000, the yearly growth rate was already estimated at about 300,000 people, or 34 additional people every hour. Although the last national head count in 1991 put the population of Lagos at 5.7 million, the city has continued to swell rapidly, rising to 13.4 million people in 2000.

By 2002, when Lagos became one of sub-Saharan Africa's first mega-urban regions as it crossed the 10 million population mark, yearly growth had doubled over 1980 estimates to 600,000 additional persons each year, or 1644 people daily. Today, with the current population estimated at about 15 million residents, spread as densely as between 3746.2 to 20,000 persons per square kilometre depending upon the district, Metropolitan Lagos perches on the verge of what officials have termed 'a grave urban crisis'.



The basis for concern is visibly etched on the city's streets. Unsightly heaps of waste are testimony to the logistical nightmare of clearing over 10,000 tonnes of refuse generated daily in an urban area that enjoys only 40 per cent sanitation coverage. Endless traffic snarls expose the challenge of managing a vehicular density of 222 automobiles per kilometre against the national average of only 11 per kilometre.

To most residents, the consequences of a 40 per cent access rate to potable water are particularly critical. The most prevalent diseases – malaria and diarrhoea – could be curbed by better sanitation. Also lurking in the background, an HIV/AIDS prevalence rate of 6.6 per cent, higher than the national average of 5.4 per cent, portends a looming danger to Lagos residents.

Daily, city managers confront the challenge of slashing maternal and infant mortality rates estimated at 8 per 1000 and 84.6 per 1000, respectively. The infant mortality rate, though lower than the national average of 107 per 1000, remains higher than that for any other region in the world, and considerably exceeds the global average of 57 per 1000. In the schools, administrators are compelled to cope with the challenge of an average pupil-to teacher ratio of 150:1, which falls far short of both the government target of 50: 1 and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) target of 25:1.

Despite its relatively more buoyant economy, and although Lagos boasts of more than 10,000 commercial concerns with over 250 financial institutions and some 29 industrial estates, one major challenge is how to precipitate the creation of some 250,000 new jobs each year over the next five years. This, according to experts, must also happen at a sustained economic growth rate of at least 12 per cent yearly if the state is to halt and reverse prevailing poverty levels which show that today, two out of every three Lagos residents are officially classified as living beneath the poverty line.

For the politicians, administrators and community leaders who have to manage this complex, heaving mass of urban humanity, therefore, the quantum of decaying infrastructure, widespread urban poverty, massive unemployment, pervasive security inadequacies, emerging slums, and, overwhelming, environmental decay have become the major characteristics that progressively define the city's fortunes. These, the authorities say, have become an even more critical challenge of urban governance. Estimates project that by 2015, Lagos would become the third largest city on Earth with up to 24.3 million residents.

'There is a remarkably intense network of urban rumours about Lagos, about the dangers it represents. They begin at the airport, continue along the highway, the bridges, the buses, into every neighbourhood', said the Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas in a 2001 lecture after a six-year study of the city.

Culturally, Lagos has always been well known for its unique cosmopolitan tendency, ever since its emergence as seat of the British colonial administration for the amalgamated union of Nigeria's Northern and Southern Protectorates in 1914.

Lagos became the regional administrative centre for the colonial administration in 1914. By 1967, seven years after the nation's independence, Lagos assumed the additional status of a regional administrative centre when it was carved out as one of the then 12 states in the federation. Coming at a time when the country was moving from a predominantly agriculture-based economy into one that derived its revenue essentially from crude oil, Lagos easily became the destination of choice for the emerging generation of school leavers and unemployed. Many migrants also came from across the West African coast, particularly Ghana, and from across Nigeria's northern borders with Niger and Chad.

Some experts have noted that from available data, the population of Lagos doubled twice within two decades: first between 1965 and 1975, and again between 1975 and 1985. However, the numerous layers of culturally diverse ethnic templates have on no fewer than three occasions during the past five years formed a deadly mix with the high population densities to precipitate severe inter-racial conflicts that have resulted in significant loss of lives. A police-citizens' ratio of 1:1000 against the United Nations recommended target of 1:100 has not helped the situation.

Administratively, as with most mega-urban regions in sub-Saharan Africa, Lagos is run by a multiplicity of administrative units or local government areas, each headed by an independent council under the overall coordination of a state governor. Traditionally made up of five divisions –Lagos, Ikeja, Ikorodu, Epe and Badagry – the state structure comprised 20 local council areas, of which 17 were located within the metropolitan area. In 2002 it was further subdivided into 57 local council areas. This implies that, technically, although the federal constitution makes provision for one state governor, there could be as many different political programmes in operation for the 57 council areas as there are political parties elected into office.

However, the state government, going by constitutional provisions, retains the responsibility for providing oversight functions for running the state. The mobilization of revenue to meet the huge shortfalls in service provision is one hurdle that city administrators are yet to scale. The situation is further compounded by the influx of refugees from war-ravaged neighbouring West African countries and persons displaced locally from regions of ethnic strife. These hordes of daily migrants consist largely of young school leavers, employed artisans and graduates. To survive, therefore, the safety net for most has become the informal economy, which already accounts for up to 70 per cent of all productive activity in the state.

But the drawback is that much of the resources required to finance infrastructure provision, housing and other social services are shut outside the formal economy, thereby limiting access to needed resources from shortfalls in tax revenue that would have been available to public institutions. In Lagos state, for instance, barely one third of anticipated internally generated revenue for the year 2000 was realized, although improved collection mechanisms may have been responsible for an increase in the proportion to just over half by 2001. Hence, while Johannesburg, for instance, South Africa's largest city, has only one sixth (2.5 million) of the population of Lagos (15 million), it operates a yearly budget of US\$1.2 billion, which is four times that of US\$300 million for Lagos.

'Lagos seemed to be a city of burning edges. Hills, entire roads were paralleled with burning embankments. At first sight, the city had an aura of apocalyptic violence; entire sections of it seemed to be smouldering, as if it were one gigantic rubbish dump', said architect Mr Koolhaas:

What was stunning, and only visible from above the city, was that those processes were taking place at scales that were almost unimaginable in any other city. What seemed, on ground level, an accumulation of dysfunctional movements, seemed from above an impressive performance, evidence of how well Lagos might perform if it were the third largest city in the world.

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