Urban growth Challenges in Nigeria: Implications for Environmental Sustainability

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Abstract

In recent time, one of the critical developmental issues of concern world over is the need to stem the tide of growth in the cities in other to ensure sustainability of the urban environment. Considering the spontaneous nature of urban growth accompanied by diverse socio-economic, cultural and environmental challenges which exist in the form of congestion, squalors, pollutions, loss of bio-diversity, insanitation and various deplorable situations within the general urban fabric in most parts of the world – particularly in the developing countries; the pervasiveness of this urban situation constitutes serious challenge to urban growth and environmental sustainability in Nigeria. Since the world is now a global village, and the threat of environmental degradation to the entire ecosystem is real and very much on the increase, this paper examines this issue in relation to its implications on the sustainability of the urban environment in Nigeria. The paper therefore focuses on five major areas; it examines the challenges of urban growth; and specifically underscores the causes and consequences of environmental degradation in Nigeria. The paper considers the interplay between the concept of sustainable development and the environment; in other justify the need for environmental sustainability. While acknowledging the fact that growth in the urban centres is inevitable considering the current realities of globalization, industrialization and other related growth agents, the paper premised that such growth must be sustainable. Based on this premise, the paper recommends the use of appropriate policy and strategies that will make sustainable development thrive in other to secure an environment that is adequate and conducive for the well-being of the urban residents in Nigeria.

Keywords: urban growth, challenges, sustainability, environment, development.

Introduction

The new Millennium has no doubt witnessed diverse developmental challenges across the globe; as indicated by recent events in most metropolitan cities of the world where the growth rate of the urban areas has been unprecedented. In its Report on “State of the World Cities” the United Nations-Habitat (2007) notes that “for the first time in history, the majority of the world’s people will live in cities”. The Report indicates that almost a billion people already live in slum conditions around the world and that slums are growing dramatically within the world’s poorest cities, particularly, in Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia. Previous Report by the United Nations (1996) had put the global urban population growth at 60 million. Between 2001 and 2002, the world’s urban population had increased by nearly one-half percent of the total population. This growth occurred largely in the East Asia and Pacific region. In Sub –Sahara Africa, which is largely rural – with only 32 percent of the population living in the urban areas, there is a very high urban growth rate of up to four percent (Ogunleye, 2005).

Although, the Africa continent is presently ranked among the least–urbanized regions of the world, it is however noted for its highest rates of urbanization. For instance, between 1990 and 1992, Africa and
Asia recorded urban growth of 4.9% and 4.2%, respectively, whereas, urban growth rate in Europe and North America in this period was only 0.7% and 1.0%, respectively (UN, 1995). By a United Nation’s projection, it is expected that 61% of the world population will be urban by 2030 and over half the population in Africa will be urban by 2020 (UN, 2004; Ajala, 2005; Orimogunje et al, 2009: 53). This phenomenal growth anticipated for the cities has been attributed to the incidence of globalization, industrialization and population explosion (Jiboye, 2005; Osasona et al, 2007).

With the increasing population explosions and massive rural-urban migration accompanying the urbanization process in the developing countries, global economic integration, increased international trade, capital flows, telecommunication, new waves of technologies, and shifts in the comparative advantage of production continue to play a central role in integrating major urban centers and shaping the spatial organization of the cities (Jiboye, 2005). The reality and consequence of this scenario is congestion resulting from overpopulation and proliferation of slums in the cities (Ravalin, 2007; Jiboye, 2009). In Africa, the rapid rate of uncontrolled and unplanned urbanization has brought about severe environmental problems such as pollution, congestion, squalor, homelessness and a generally poor and degrading situation.

Like any other developing nations, Nigeria, with a current population figure above 140 million people – the highest in Sub-Saharan Africa, is also experiencing rapid urbanization (Ajanlekoko, 2001; NPC, 2006). The country has one of the highest urban growth rates in the world, with its cities ranking among the fastest growing in the world. Growing at the rate of around 5.5 percent annually from 1980 to 1993, and more recently, has increased to the rate of 5.8 percent which has resulted in a total urban population of 62.66 million people (or, 43 percent of the national population). By projection, this proportion is expected to increase to more than 60 percent by 2025 (UN, 2007). This rapid growth constitutes major problem to the urban residents whose quality of life and living conditions have deteriorated considerably (Ajala, 2005; Jiboye, 2009). However, it has been established that the degrading condition of the cities’ environment in most developing nations affects both economic and national development (Ogunleye, 2005). Therefore, a major developmental challenge facing the nations – particularly those within the developing world, is how to cope with the increasing urbanization and minimize its adverse consequences on the cities’ environment in order to achieve sustainability and the overall wellbeing of the city dwellers.

Current realities in most Nigerian cities fail to justify several attempts at both local and international levels toward resolving this urban growth problem and ensuring sustainable development. Rather than improving, the urban areas continue to experience a more pathetic situation as the physical condition of the cities continues to degenerate, while investment in urban infrastructure including housing, has failed to keep pace with the growing population (Jiboye, 2009). Indeed, going by a UN-Habitat (2006) Report, housing related infrastructure has not been given much priority in most developing countries until quite recently. This developmental challenge thus calls for a reappraisal by all concerned stakeholders. It is in this light that this paper evolves in other to examine the growth challenge in Nigeria. The paper focuses on five major areas; the first examines the challenges of urban growth; the second underscores the causes and consequences of environmental degradation in Nigeria. Thirdly, the paper considers the interplay between the concept of sustainable development and the environment; while the fourth provides a justification and need for environmental sustainability. Lastly, the paper provides some policy options to aid in realizing Sustainable growth in Nigerian cities.

**Urban growth Challenges in Nigeria**

Urbanization is not a new phenomenon in Africa, as city centres such as Lagos, Kano, Ibadan, Cairo, Johannesburg and Addis Ababa, have grown to become large metropolitan urban areas. However, a significant feature peculiar to urbanization in Africa is in its spontaneity. In Nigeria, available report shows that urban population has been growing at an alarming rate of about 47 percent as at 2003 (UN,
2004; Ajala, 2005). Most of the major cities expand without incorporating the major element of physical planning. Until recently, Nigeria did not have any regulatory codes or standard to guide planning of building and environmental development (Adediran, 2007). The forces of urbanization and industrialization have brought about changes in production activities, thus resulting in explosive demographic changes with growth rates ranging between 6% and 12% per annum. This rate of urban growth and the relative poverty that accompanies it poses a critical challenge to development (Jiboye, 2005).

There is no doubt that Nigeria as a nation is experiencing rapid urbanization which has brought about various socio-economic problems, particularly, degradation of the physical urban environment which exists in the nature of loss of biodiversity and green-house warming, desertification, salinization of agricultural land, air and water pollution, environmental decay, slums, insanitation, overcrowding, housing congestion, crime and violence, and several other demeaning situations (Omisore, et al, 2003; Ogunleye, 2005). A report by Metz (1991) indicates that the process of urbanization in Nigeria was spurred primarily by the oil boom era of the 1970s and the massive improvements in road transportation system. Since independence, Nigeria has become an increasingly urbanized and urban-oriented society. During the 1970s, the country had possibly the fastest urbanization growth rate in the world. Also, because of the great influx of people from the rural into urban areas, the growth rate of urban population in Nigeria in 1980s was close to 6 percent per year - more than twice that of the rural population. Consequently, Nigeria had more large cities and the highest total urban population in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Also indicated by the report is a notable account of urban growth in Nigeria which occurred in Lagos – a major commercial center. The city has continued to grow in size since the 1960s; with an annual growth rate close to 14 percent during the 1970s, when the massive extent of new construction was exceeded by the influx of migrants attracted by the oil boom. Acknowledged to be the largest city in sub-Saharan Africa, Lagos has become legendary for its congestion and other associated urban problems. Essentially built on poorly drained marshlands, the city commonly has flooding during the rainy season, and there is frequent sewage back-up, especially in the poorer lowland sections. As in other Nigerian cities, there is a constant problem of garbage and waste disposal. Housing construction has boomed but rarely seemed to keep pace with demand. The city's main fame, however, comes from the scale of its traffic jams. Spanning several islands as well as a large and expanding mainland area, the city never seemed to have enough bridges or arteries. The profusion of vehicles that came with the prosperity of the 1970s seemed often to be arranged in a massive standstill, which has become the site for urban peddling of an amazing variety of goods, as well as for entertainment, exasperation, innovation, and occasionally crime (Abiodun, 1997). By 1990, Lagos had made some progress in managing its traffic problems both through road and bridge construction and traffic control regulations. This progress was aided by the economic downturn of the late 1980s, which ironically, facilitated urban – rural migration (Metz, 1991).

Aside from Lagos, other cities like Ibadan, Port Harcourt in the Niger Delta region, and Calabar, also grew very rapidly as commercial and administrative centers in Nigeria. However, a dominant urban feature common to them is the degrading state of the physical environment. Unfortunately, the uncontrolled growth pattern associated with the urbanization process has been responsible for the diverse environmental problems in these cities (Jiboye, 2005). An immediate consequence of the rapid urbanization in these cities is the increase in demand for urban services like housing, education, public health and a generally decent living environment (Ogunleye, 2005). Considering the need for sustainable development and the challenges posed by the diverse environmental problems associated with urbanization process in Nigeria, urgent effort is required to control the rate at which urban population and the spread of cities increases; effort is also required to control the decline in the quality of urban infrastructure as well as that of overall standard of living of the people in Nigeria.
The term, “environment” is conceived as a system where living organism interacts with the physical elements. This level of interaction propelled different types of human related activities which consequently translate into different environmental related problems which have some negative influences on man (Jeje and Adesina, 1996). The eventual decline in the condition and integrity of the environment arising from these processes results in “environmental degradation” (Omisore and Akande, 2003). This phenomenon, according to Ojo and Aderounmu (2003), is described as a state of overexploitation of the available environmental resources. The Encarta Dictionary (2007) summarizes it as a process of decline in the quality or performance of living conditions.

Primarily, environmental degradation is caused by several factors including rapid urbanization due to overpopulation, accelerated industrialization, unplanned and uncoordinated physical development resulting from poor urban management and ineffective control policies, insufficient urban infrastructure such as housing and efficient transportation system to cater for the population upsurge (Jiboye, 2003; Ajala, 2005; Olayode, 2005). A World Bank report indicates that technological advancement and economic development are factors which also cause environmental degradation (World Bank, 1995). The effects of this environmental problem exist in different forms such as drought, desertification, deforestation, flood and erosion, pollution, housing congestion leading to slums and unsanitary situation, loss of bio-diversity and all forms of deplorable physical conditions. The resultant effect of these problems has adverse socio-economic, cultural and environmental consequences on the wellbeing of the people and the physical development of any nation (Jiboye, 2003).

Indeed, it has been affirmed that environmental degradation does not only indicate a state of bad living conditions or a declined environmental integrity (Omisore et al., 2003), it also affects human welfare, health, family life as well as the overall quality of a community environment (Olanrewaju, 2003). At the urban level, environmental problems affect the urban poor disproportionately because of poor quality and overcrowded housing and the inadequacies in the provision of water, sanitation, drainage, health care and garbage collection. The urban poor also often live in environmentally unsafe areas, such as polluted sites near solid waste dumps, open drains and sewers, and near industrial sites (see plates 1-3). Though the impacts of climate change on the urban poor have not been fully studied, this is emerging as an area of increasing concern as they may further exacerbate the risks of negative environmental effects for the urban poor through sea level rise, warming temperatures, uncertain effects on ecosystems, and increased variability and volatility in weather patterns (Baker, 2008).

Plate 1: A typical urban slum situation in Ajegunle Lagos, Nigeria.
Sustainable development and environmental sustainability

Sustainable development has occupied a place on the global agenda since the Brundtland Commission’s 1987 report “Our Common Future”. The prominence of that place has been rising, and sustainability has become a “high table” issue in international affairs, and on many regional, national, and local agendas. Though visions of sustainability vary across regions and circumstances, a broad international agreement has emerged that its goals should be to foster a transition toward development paths that meet human needs while preserving the earth’s life support systems and alleviating hunger and poverty – i.e., that integrate the three pillars of environmental, social and economic sustainability. This should be achieved through forms of governing that are empowering and also sensitive to the needs of future generations (William, et al. 2002). However, “Sustainable Development” is a concept that has been in existence even before the turn of the century. It is a socio-ecological process characterized by the fulfillment of human needs while maintaining the quality of the natural environment indefinitely. This concept came into general usage following publication of the 1987 report of the Brundtland Commission — formally, World Commission on Environment and Development. The Commission which was set up by the United Nations General Assembly coined the most often-quoted definition of sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED, 1987; Wikipedia, 2009; Jiboye, 2009).
Since then, several other definitions have been advanced to explain the concept of sustainable development. The National Affordable Housing Agency of Britain defined it as a means of ensuring a better quality life for everyone, now and for generations to come (NAHA, 2006). It is the process of building our communities so that we can live comfortably without consuming all of our resources. This implies, living in a sustainable way by conserving more of the things we all need to share - this is not just about consuming resources, but includes changing our culture to make conservation a way of life (Mediawiki, 2008). Primarily, sustainable development seeks to reduce absolute poverty of the world’s poor by providing lasting and secure livelihoods that minimize resource depletion, environmental degradation, cultural disruptions and social instability (Lawanson, 2005).

“Environmental sustainability” - a component of sustainable development is defined as the continuous and optimal functioning of the environment in the service of the people. It entails that the processes of interaction with the environment are pursued with the idea of keeping the environment as pristine as naturally possible based on ideal-seeking behavior (Wikipedia, 2009). Environmental sustainability consists of both natural and built environments; in which case, the natural environment serves the purpose of supporting human life and activities, while the built environment provides shelter and security for various human activities and also facilitates the activities - especially in towns and cities (Folarin, 2003).

Several attempts have been made in the past by both local and international communities as well as the NGOs to address the various developmental problems confronting most developing nations. At the global scene, the issue of sustainable development has been the focus of major deliberations in many Conferences and Summits such as 1992 Rio-de-Janeiro’s Conference, 1996 Istanbul Habitat II Summit, 2000, New York MDG Summit and 2002 World Summit in Johannesburg, and several others. Thus, the linkage between environment and development was first recognized globally in 1980, when the International Union for the Conservation of Nature published the World Conservation Strategy and used the term "sustainable development" (Wikipedia, 2009). The issue of environmental sustainability and sustainable development became part of major global discussions for the first time in1992, during the United Nations’ Rio de Janeiro Conference on Environment and Development (Olanrewaju, 2003). Also, the 1996 Habitat II in Istanbul brought into the fore the issue of sustainable human settlement and adequate shelter for all (UN-Habitat, 2007). It was at the 2002 World Summit in Johannesburg that member nations further reaffirmed their commitment to the principles and programs of the Rio conference on sustainable development (Jiboye & Omoniyi, 2010).

It is the realization of the need for sustainable development and the eradication of poverty that led to the United Nations Millennium Development Goals Summit in September 2000 at New York. The MDGs Declaration commits governments to addressing key development issues and sets broad goals in order to eradicate poverty by the year 2015. This encompasses key goals relating to poverty reduction, health, gender equality, education and environmental sustainability among others (UNDP, 2008). Today, climate change, terrorism and poverty have become the problems in a globalised world, and the international community is concerned and committed to ensuring sustainable development in the face of environmental degradation (Oyeshola et, al, 2009) This concern for the degraded state of the cities’ urban environment has necessitated the seventh goal Agenda of the Millennium Development Goals Summit. The goal specifically focuses on ensuring environmental sustainability in all the cities of the world, particularly, those in developing nations.

Since the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, sustainable development has emerged as a new paradigm of development, integrating economic growth, social development and environmental protection as interdependent and mutually supportive elements of long-term development. Sustainable development thus emphasizes a participatory, multi-stakeholder approach to policy making and implementation, mobilizing public and private resources for development and making use of the knowledge, skills and energy of all social groups concerned with the future of the planet and its people (Desai, 2002).
The need for sustainable urban environment in Nigeria

The world no doubt is now a global village and whatever happens to it affects every person directly or indirectly. Hence, global problems constitute a serious threat not only to humanity but also to the entire ecosystem (Oyeshola, et, al, 2009). While urban growth is rapidly increasing in some places, the urban size is becoming more enlarged and astonishing in many other parts of the developing world. Between 1950 and 1990, there was a fivefold increase to 1.5 billion in the number of urban residents in developing countries; about 37 percent of the population of the Third World Countries (TWC) now lives in cities. The United Nations has projected a further tripling of the total to 4.4 billion by 2025, during which it is expected that nearly two-thirds of the citizens of the developing world will live in cities. In the aggregate, cities in the developing world are growing by an estimated 160,000 persons per day. The number of cities with at least 1 million inhabitants has gone from 31 in 1950 to 180 in the early 1990s and is expected to rise to more than 300 by the end of the century (Gizewski and Homas-Dixon, 1995).

The effect of this phenomenal growth is that a host of intractable problems often accompanies it. A United Nation’s Millennium project report in 2005 indicated that about 900 million people are estimated to live in slum-like conditions characterized by insecure tenure, inadequate housing, and a lack of access to water or sanitation. The report also indicated that the highest share of slum dwellers is in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, and this accounted for more than 70 percent of the urban population in many cities. Both West and East Asia (excluding China) have registered a rise in the number of slum dwellers since 1990, but a slight decline in the proportion. The same phenomenon is occurring in landlocked developing countries, small island developing states, and Least Developed Countries (LDC).

Furthermore, the report revealed that all developing regions have experienced substantial environmental degradation over the past decades, which could very well worsen as a result of long-term, man-made global climate change. Many countries are adversely affected because their natural resource base - specifically the forests, fisheries, soil, and water that survival and livelihoods depend on are progressively degraded and subject to rising levels of pollution. Each year, roughly 15 million hectares of forest are cleared in developing countries, resulting in increases in vector-borne diseases, declines in the quantity and quality of water, increased flooding, landslides, and local climate changes. The report concluded that lack of good data and indicators on the environment hides the extent to which most developing regions have suffered extensive environmental degradation over the past decades and are not on track to achieving environmental sustainability (UNDP, 2005).

In Nigeria, the problems of slum formations and urban degeneration are common occurrence in major cities – particularly, in Lagos and Ibadan which are probably among the largest cities in the country (See Plates 1-3). Over the years, these problems have constituted major challenges to sustainable urban development. Official response to the situation through urban renewal, slum upgrading and outright clearance has not achieved any success in stimulating any form of sustainability. For instance, the effect of Maroko slum clearance in Lagos in the early 1990s has led to several untold hardships and consequent homelessness experienced by most of the affected victims (Jiboye et al., 1997; Abiodun, 1997). In view of these numerous challenges of urban growth, the need thus arises for a radical approach, using appropriate policy options towards sustainability of the urban environment in Nigeria.

Policy options for Environmental Sustainability

Development under the contemporary paradigm refers to a qualitative improvement in the standard of living of human beings rather than a quantitative increase in the economic indices; it is measured in terms relative to the individual’s access to economic, social and environmental factors which are necessary to improve his standard of living. Sustainable development thus espouses the intrinsic link between socio-economic, cultural and environmental development as well as the right of the individual to improved
living condition in any given society or nation. For instance, a socially, economically or an environmentally sustainable system should achieve distributional equity; provide adequate social services including health, education, housing as well as functional and livable environment among many others (Jiboye, 2009). Nevertheless, the ultimate challenge of sustainable development strategies is how to integrate all aspects of development – particularly within the socio-economic and environmental framework towards achieving “sustainability”.

The need to achieve sustainability of the cities’ urban environment is central to the achievement of a virile and sustainable nation. Existing urban realities have shown that a lot of work needs to be done if Nigeria is to achieve any sustainable development. However, it has been argued that commitment to sustainable development both for the present and future generations will be meaningless if collaborative approach is not employed (Oyeshola et, al, 2009). If such efforts are tailored along with appropriate strategies, the desired goal would be achieved.

Poverty is a major threat to urban growth and development in Nigeria. It can jeopardize the political stability, social cohesion and environmental balance of our cities, and until it is tackled decisively, sustainable development will remain a mirage (Olanrewaju, 2003). The need to ensure sustainability in our cities is imperative and this depends largely on the application of the principle of sustainable development advocated by the Commission on Environment and Development – whereby, developmental efforts should not only concentrate on solving present problems but also consider future challenges and needs. As part of its efforts, the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (UNCHS) while responding to the complex environmental problems facing the nations also launched the Sustainable Cities Programs which aimed at providing municipal planning and management capacity (Monghtin, 2003). So far, the impact of such programs on most cities in the developing nations – particularly in Nigeria is yet to be realized.

To achieve sustainable growth requires that all stakeholders have to be actively mobilized towards ensuring that the following strategies; some of which have been outlined in the UN Millennium Project (2005), are realizable.

- First, there is a need for effective and good governance in order to overcome the scourge of urban homelessness and poor living conditions. This is central to ensuring sustainability as it will facilitate increased access to land and credit facilities required for the provision of affordable housing and economically sound and serviced human settlements. Perhaps the most important change needed in managing cities is to foster a collaborative partnership between local authorities and communities, with strong support from the national government. Local authorities are the city planners, financiers, and providers of infrastructure services. Their performance depends on good governance at city level—involving civil society, including communities living in informal settlements, and working with the urban poor as partners in making cities work, not seeing them as obstacles, as is too often the case today.

- Also, government on its part should ensure that adequate funds are disposed for shelter provision for the vulnerable group of the urban population. Housing finance policies should integrate the lower-income group by providing easy access to long-term housing loans with sustainable interest. Disbursement of such loans should be done through recognized Cooperative Unions or community groups in order to encourage self-help housing delivery.

- Furthermore, existing policies relating to housing and urban development should be reviewed and reinvigorated. It should be people oriented in order to minimize all possible restrictions on security of tenure, access to land and cost of construction materials. Efficient land market and sustainable land policies are indispensable; therefore, existing land-use decree should be changed to facilitate easy access to land, while the urban and regional planning laws of the country should also be reviewed to allow for effective slum upgrading and urban renewal.
- Urban renewal scheme should embrace a participatory approach when considering such as the only possible option to slum clearance and rehabilitation. In this regard, the stakeholders should be involved in decision and implementation processes. The involvement of community groups’ leaders is very essential in this regard. Community organizations can provide a voice for the urban poor and ensure that their interests are met in slum upgrading and urban planning. Federations of slum dwellers have access to unique information on informal settlements—information central to successful upgrading. They should be involved as equal partners from the beginning of the planning processes.

- Lastly, the improvement of rural communities should be integrated into the developmental process. This will help in stemming the rate of rural-urban migration as well as reducing the level of rural poverty. Above all, there is the need for government and its agencies to imbibe the right political will and commitment while formulating and implementing its programs. Essentially, planning strategy for housing, infrastructural provision and urban management must make the people its focus. To complement the upgrading of individual informal settlements, citywide infrastructure and services need to be extended and upgraded. In addition, effective regulation of industrial water and air pollution must complement an urban development strategy to ensure a safe urban environment. Solid waste disposal using well designed landfills and, in some cases, wastewater and sewage treatment also need to be provided.

Conclusion

This paper has examined urban growth challenges and its implications on the sustainability of the urban environment in Nigeria. The paper notes that the features and occurrence of globalization, industrialization and population explosion are key factors responsible for spontaneous urban growth rate in major cities of the developing nations. The implications of such growth are degrading environment, congestion, homelessness, slum formation, and poor living conditions among most poor urban residents. The city has been identified as the engine of growth to propel national economic development (Akhat & Bochum, 2010); however, such growth within the context of urbanization should be guided towards improving the environment rather than harming it (Newman, 2002; Jiboye, 2009).

This growth according to the concept of “sustainable development” must be sustainable in order to take care of the present needs without compromising the ability of future generation to meet its own needs. To achieve this requires a collaborative effort by all those concerned with development. Thus, a participatory, multi-stakeholders’ approach to policy-making and implementation is required in this regard (Desai, 2002).

Government on its own part should take a holistic approach by embracing and incorporating the development of rural communities into the sustainable plan agenda in order to reduce the rate of rural-urban migration as well as the poverty and inequality bedeviling the nations socially, culturally, and economically. These strategies if put in place, will inevitably stimulate sustainable growth and secure a qualitative environment that is conducive for the well-being of all.

Authors’ Bio-Profile

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