



Urban Renewal Initiatives in Nigeria: The Abeokuta Experience

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of rapid population growth in many developing countries including Nigeria has brought about the continuous need for urban renewal initiatives. The fact that most urban cities had been planned before the advent of the regional town planning and urban development gave birth to clustered cities and towns which are at variance with today's changing urban world. Adequate urban management, infrastructural innovations and sustainable urban management are key issues to the 21st century environment. A proactive attempt to transform a hitherto old or ancient urban center into a well-structured urban environment which can withstand today and tomorrow's infrastructural and aesthetic demands is described as urban renewal. In most of these initiatives, there have always been challenges to contend with, especially those that have to do with action plans for resettlement of slum dwellers, the displaced people in the line of development and re-constructions. Adaptations to new environmental concerns as well as socio-economic issues are part of the areas that have always been at the trail of urban renewal projects. This took a closer look at the urban renewal and regeneration of Abeokuta as the capital city of Ogun State, vis a vis the attendant contending issues and accruable benefits.

Keywords: urban, renewal, environment, development, infrastructure

INTRODUCTION

Human settlements in developing countries have had to contend with great burdens from rapidly growing unplanned developments, owing to continuous rural – urban migrations without any form of control. Shuaeeb (2013) opined that Nigerian Urban centres are currently experiencing a disconnection between urban infrastructure and the populace and despite the succession of a democratic governance in the 21st century, there is been an inadequate maintenance of infrastructure in most urban centres across the country. Urban renewal requirements will continue to be an important issue for all tiers of government in Nigeria for a long time to come, though many urban renewal projects had been initiated in the past few years but such needs cannot be expected to stop in the next two decades will be increased in the future. Performances of urban renewal projects in the past have suffered tons of problems, such as project delay due to evaluating time waste in the evaluation of existing property value, value allocations for future property, and relocation of residents for temporary living and so on were encountered in urban renewal projects and then negatively influenced the benefit of urban renewal business to both the governments concerned and the populace.

Mutlu (2009) argues that urban renewal project strategies such as; urban rehabilitation, urban redevelopment, urban revitalization, urban regeneration have been taking an important place in the public discussions and urban planning agenda especially for the last two decades. Because urban renewal projects that have been applied in various urban areas such as; urban decline areas, disaster prone areas, squatter housing areas, old, historical quarters of cities not only causing changes in the physical structure of cities, they are also affecting the social, economic and environmental dynamics in the built



environment. These widespread applications bring out questions whether the urban renewal projects are good or not.

Poor urban land use design with large amount of migrations to urban areas and poor maintenance on aged buildings led to decay on city configuration and caused some safety issues to the city's residential environment, which impaired city development. To resolve the highly chained and important issue to enhance the city development in the future, the Ogun State government deployed urban renewal incentives policies to enhance the urban renewal business of redecorating, maintaining and rebuilding aged and poorly planned residential communities in several parts of the state, with the pilot scheme taking place in Abeokuta, the state capital. The best way this can be achieved in the thinking of the government was by creating city-wide multiple carriage access roads, which can open up many obscured locations and communities, including business districts, thereby improving business and commercial activities in many areas. It is noteworthy that these standardized roads cut across major central business districts of Abeokuta, namely Sapon (the center and widely acclaimed business hub of the town), Itoku, Ibara, Lafenwa, Omida and a host of others.



Plate 1: Aerial view of Abeokuta from Olumo Rock
Source: Authors' field work, 2014.



Plate 2: Typical major road in Abeokuta before renewal programme
Source: Author's field work, 2014



The most complex feat is to dismantle aged community and then regenerate a well-planned one with sufficient infrastructures to support community livings and business windows. The simplest level only repairs and redecorates aged buildings. However, renewing residential community improves utilization of urban city land, improves city configuration, and enhances the public services to improve community's living environment and further raise the city's competence level on economic development and living environment.

It is evident that cities are the hearts of various civilisations as well as those of economic, political and social activities, hence they continue to attract would-be migrants day in day out. The number of people living in cities will continue to be on the increase and this will continually create the needs for urban transformation in terms of renewal, remodeling or redesign to accommodate changing demands. Adelekan (2009) cited in Gbadegesin et al (2011) believe that inadequacy of basic urban infrastructures in the urban centers of many African cities, poor urban planning together with other urban governance challenges contributes to making African urban slum dwellers at risk.

Urban renewal sometimes lives up to the hopes of its original proponents – it has been assessed by politicians, urban planners, civic leaders, and residents – it has played an undeniably important role. Additionally, urban renewal can have many positive effects. Replenished housing stock might be an improvement in quality; it may increase density and reduce sprawl; it might have economic benefits and improve the global economic competitiveness of a city's centre. It may, in some instances, improve cultural and social amenity, and it may also improve opportunities for safety and surveillance. In the case of Abeokuta, the city now wears a brand new look in the wake of redevelopment currently going on and its continuity is bound to turn the city into a globally competitive one in the nearest future. The issues relating to displacement, relocation, psychological and sociological trauma which may be the experience of the displaced and reconstruction which are often times neglected in the process of renewal form the crux of this paper, vis a vis other benefits and areas that are needed to be put into consideration.

THE NEED FOR URBAN RENEWAL

In unison with Mutlu (2009), I believe that the aim of developing a good urban renewal initiative does not only match up with an idea of making physical changes in the built environment, it should equally consider social, economic and cultural factors. Shuaeeb (2013) argued that most urban infrastructure in Nigeria is currently in a decaying state as a result of poor maintenance, increased population growth and the negative impact of climate change. Also, climate change challenges in the 21st century have made it considerable to plan for future sustainable infrastructural systems. This requires an effective integration of urban renewal strategies with the needs to protect the environment for the activities of both present and future generations. He further noted that coastal cities in Africa are the most developed urban areas in the region, which have influenced the high concentration of residential, educational, industrial, commercial, infrastructural and military facilities. Nigeria, according to Shuaeeb (2013) currently has one of the



highest levels of urbanisation and redevelopment across the globe, but has continuously experienced environmental degradation, infrastructural and urban decay, flooding, environmental pollution and poor waste management systems. The increased number of aged buildings in most urban centres like Lagos, Ibadan, Abeokuta, Kano and Port Harcourt has also increased the demand for urban renewal across Nigeria. Moreover, the infrastructure gap between urban populace and the environment has continued to widen by the day, hence the need for urban renewal in most urban centers in the country.

As narrated by late Dr. Lateef Biobaku and Pa Ola Yemitan respectively, Abeokuta was founded in 1830 after the intertribal wars ravaged refugees in Egba forest from their original homes between 1817 and 1830. The name of the town "ABEOKUTA" was derived from the protection which the fleeing settlers sought under the Olumo Rock, now a tourist center in the town. Abeokuta means 'the refugees under a rock', signifying the protection which the Olumo Rock offered the refugees from possible attacks. Due to its strategic position and historical cum cultural significance as well as proximity to Lagos, a coastal city, Abeokuta became a sort of attraction to the missionaries as well as Sierra Leonean creoles as early as the 1840s. This led to the visit of foremost missionary, Henry Townsend, whose visit had been foretold by the Ifa Oracle in 1843. Henry Townsend conducted the first church service in the new city on January 5, 1843. Similar efforts eventually led to the building of the first church in the whole of territories now known as Nigeria in the city of Abeokuta — St Peter's Anglican Cathedral, Ake Abeokuta. It also boasts of being the city where the Yoruba Language (one of the three major languages spoken in Nigeria) was first documented in print and was also home to the first Newspaper in Nigeria — *Iwelrohin* – which was in circulation in the 1860s and remained so till 1867 when trouble with the British in Lagos led the city authorities to close the trade routes to the coast and expel its European traders and missionaries.

Abeokuta, survived many challenges to become a powerful force as the capital of the Egba people and seat of the Egba United government, especially during and after the Yoruba civil wars which pitched Abeokuta against Ibadan. After the wars, the Alake (King) of Egba, who was the head of Egba United government, signed an alliance with the British governor, Sir Gilbert Cartar, which made the British Government to grant independence to the Egba United Government in 1893. The city of Abeokuta enjoyed this privilege as a capital city of an independent nation, once again, until 1914 when the Northern and Southern protectorates were amalgamated to form the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

Criteria for a Good Urban Renewal Initiative

The criteria for a good urban renewal initiative can be grouped into various fields, physical, economic, social, ecological and so on. It is pertinent to understand these factors to be able to fashion out the best possible way to integrate a renewal process in a town or city. Table 1 below explains the different factors for consideration in this regard.

Table 1: Procedure for a good urban renewal initiative

	ACTIONS FOR REALISING CRITERIA	CRITERIA FOR GOOD URBAN RENEWAL
PHYSICAL	Rehabilitating housing stock and improving image of the city	Rehabilitation of existing housing stock, sustaining healthier public spaces for all inhabitants
		Improving housing to attract new residents, giving attention to city wide housing allocation processes
		Improving image of the city
ECONOMIC	Creating funding for urban renewal programmes in national and international level	Funding opportunities in national and international level should be recognized for urban renewal programmes
	Using financial sources Efficiently	Efficient use of financial resources
SOCIAL	Accessing basic needs	Access good and services, - Reduce poverty, social exclusion
	-Providing housing for all	Right for shelter
	Respecting for social ties and identity	Taking into account of the local identity, social ties among inhabitants
ECOLOGICAL	Developing policies for sustainable development	Developing policies related to environmentally sustainable development
PLANNING PROCESS	Developing access to information and knowledge	Sustain inhabitants to access information related to their living environment

Source: Adapted from Mutlu (2009)

There are various international charters crucial guidelines for all countries. They represent agreements and declaration of the countries that propose to follow their general suggestions, responsibilities on different areas including urban renewal issues. In this regard, it is pertinent for all member countries to abide by the rules set out by the charters to the letter in carrying out actions in those areas. This paper will not go into the details of those charters but the common goal of and expectations will be explained briefly. After a careful comparison of various charters and literature, a set of criteria was established, as spelt out in Table 2, which in turn goes in accordance to Mutlu (2009).



Table 2: Criteria for good urban renewal programme

FIELD	SET OF CRITERIA
PHYSICAL	Identifying and evaluating site properties, physical, economic and cultural. Improving standards of living in the built environment Promoting and integrating heritage conservation Improving quality of housing stock and reviving urban design
ECONOMIC	Making use of economic potentials of the site Creating new jobs Financing housing projects Developing multi-functional economic activities in urban areas
SOCIAL	Providing shelter, health and educational opportunities Eradicating rural and urban poverty Sustaining gender equality Minimising rural-urban migration Protecting cultural identity and respecting standard of living Taking social ties into account
PLANNING PROCESS	Developing a planning approach Improving decision making process Having a dedicated and consistent public authorities Developing access to information

Source: Adapted from Mutlu (2009).

THE CASE OF ABEOKUTA

As noted earlier, a lot of transformation initiatives are going on in the town today. The starting point was the expansion of Totoro – Ibara road, which was a pilot scheme for the citizens to see what they should expect from the government in the nearest future. Upon completion of that road, an opening was created for business and economic activities, together with express ‘invitation to treat’ extended to would-be investors into the state. As at today, several other roads are being extended, rehabilitated and remodeled to depict the standards experienced in many urban cities of the world. Roads like Lafenwa – OGTV, NNPC – Moore junction, Ojere – Adatan road etc. These roads altogether cut across the entire town and upon completion, they are to revive the ancient loo of the town into a modern business-like town, devoid of vices. Taking a closer look at the historical background of the town, one would realize the time for urban renewal is long overdue; hence the initiative by the government of the state is not out of place.



Plate 3: The Sapon fly over under construction.

Source: Authors’ field work, 2014.



THE PLANNING PROCESS

At the initial stage of the renewal process, it is heartwarming to know that the government took it upon itself to have a census of the buildings that were to be obstructions to the roads, that of the home owners who were affected along the lines of construction. This indeed was a right step in the right direction. Not long after, compensations were paid to the owners of buildings to be affected after ownerships were ascertained with enough proofs. As was to be expected, the citizens were skeptical about being compensated but were eventually when it came. This paved the way for the commencement of the programme. In a democratic situation, the government is expected to satisfy the yearnings of the citizens in all ways, no matter how difficult it may be. This is a situation which governments at all levels should emulate when planning urban initiative programmes.

DISPLACEMENT AND RELOCATION

In a situation like this, a good number of people are expected to be displaced, most of whom are not home owners. The question then is how can they be relocated or resettled? Marks (1962) observe that many health departments were also supposed to certify that replacement housing for displaced residents was of a certain minimum standard. In theory, a displaced family would go to the urban renewal project relocation office and be offered a new home at a rent or price comparable to that of their current home; the new home would then be inspected by the health department and, if approved, the family would move in. The scope of displacement from urban renewal and the clearing of land for new public housing construction and urban highway construction was massive and racially biased. Though, this is supposed to be the situation, but it never happens in Nigeria. When people are to be displaced, efforts are to be made for their relocation, especially residential apartments but that experience is often seen in this part of the globe. A good resettlement programme was initiated during the dualisation of Abeokuta – Sagamu road in Ogun State in 2005. This same scenario was the expectation of the authors of this paper at this time again but it did not come to pass. In as much as the renewal process is a laudable one, inability to initiate a resettlement programme is a short coming on the part of the government of the day.

IMMEDIATE CHALLENGES OF THE ABEOKUTA PROGRAMME

Poor resettlement Plan

It is our opinion that urban renewal process is getting more expensive as the redevelopment process does not only involve building new structures but also resettling the original residents. The resettlement plan we see in the Abeokuta programme is only commercially oriented. High rise shops are being constructed to replace demolished shopping centers across the town, which indeed is a good innovation, but this is to further create future problems for the commercial centers of the town. From Itoku, to Isalelgein, to Sapon and Omida, all the shops under construction lack proper parking lots; ramps were not provided for transporting goods to upper floors, neither was maintenance culture of the end users put into consideration. Refuse collection and disposal, which is a major issue in commercial areas was not taken into account.



Plate 4: Displaced but not relocated; landlord smiles to the bank while tenant groans
Source: Authors' field work, 2014.

Balchin and Chieve (1977) cited in Gbadegesin et al (2011) observes that governments have regarded social planning as being secondary to physical and economic planning. Meanwhile social planning focuses on people rather than urban space and property, so it should first involve analyses of the basic needs and causes of deprivation as a pre-requisite to application of needs-related policies by governments.

Poor Air Quality and Transport Congestion

Air pollution and transport congestion are other areas that pose as challenges to the initiative due to ongoing construction works and obstructions to traffic in the areas where works are in progress. However, traffic congestion is likely to pose a long term effect in those areas like Itoku, Sapon and isalelgbain where high rise shops are being constructed right now, as there are little or no provision for parking, coupled with the fact that these high rise buildings are very close to the roads.

Public Criticisms

Gbadegesin et al (2011) opines that various actions of urban renewal programmes have always been faced by public criticisms. The one under consideration is no exception but Agbola and Jinadu (1994) believes that various factors are responsible for such and the provision of basic facilities such as water and electricity with good road network is a good pointer to proper functioning of a urban neighbourhood as well as the stability and development of individual family life.

As mentioned earlier, there are a handful of public criticisms that explains why some micro business owners in the town have continued to complain of low patronage on their businesses as a result of the present dislocation from their original places of business as well as inability to get good storage and operational places of business. Meanwhile, a good number of the business men and women maintain that the suffering is just for a little time to pave way for better days ahead.

PROSPECTS

The prospects for any urban renewal programme are of many folds, economic, social, infrastructural, etc. It is equally noteworthy that all these factors come together to make



one piece when the entire town comes agog with new developments and better infrastructural development, creating new look altogether.

Urban Transformation:

According to Shuaeeb (2013), developed nations such as England, Netherlands and America that have successfully integrated physical urban renewal plans within their urban centres have achieved socio-economic and infrastructural transformation over the years. This has also narrowed down the gap between infrastructural systems and the populace.



Plate 5: Modern pedestrian bridge on Ibara – Sokori – Totoroad
Source: Authors' field work, 2014



Plate 6: Modern bus stops along Ibara – Sokori – Totoro road
Source: Authors' field work, 2014

Improved Environmental Air Quality

Equally, Shuaeeb (2013), posits that urban renewal plans are structured to improve the social welfare, health condition and environmental balance amongst the urban populace. An effective integration of such planning system particularly within the Nigerian urban built environment, will promote environmental air quality through an open air space management in the neighbourhoods. This will further reduce the "urban heat island" effect usually experienced as a result of climate change and urbanisation in urban centres.

Enhancement of Socio-Economic Practice

Urban renewal has been an economic driver in most developed nations. It involves a constant regeneration approach of the built environment to meet-up with the physical activities and environmental demand of the urban populace (Shuaeeb, (2013). Abeokuta,



the town under discussion will not be an exception in this regard, so one other prospect of urban renewal is an enhanced socio-economic practice in the city.

Promotion of Job Opportunities

Once the city begins to wear a new look, so much will be expected in terms of services from various professionals in and out of the built environment. An effective implementation of sustainable urban renewal initiatives will create various kinds of job opportunities which include sustainable research work, sustainable architectural designs, green urban designs, green environmental technologies and other specialist job opportunities. It will further create opportunities for stakeholders to establish training institutes in regional centres across the country.

Improvement on Professional Practice

Shua'eb (2013) believes that regular practice on urban renewal systems in Nigeria will further enhance a wider knowledge of local building practitioners particularly the architects and urban planners towards sustainable urban development and practice.

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, this paper has come to the conclusion that the urban renewal initiative in Abeokuta metropolis is a welcome development that is bound to bring about a monumental socio-economic improvement into the city as a whole, provide job opportunities for the teeming young professionals alike. Save for the usual teething problems, Abeokuta city will be a force to reckon with in the sooner than expected. The fact still remains that that our urban centers in Nigeria depend so much on natural resources, which abound everywhere in the nation for survival, and so they are faced with numerous problems which are naturally surmountable if all hands are put on deck.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Gbadegesin et al (2011) posits that urban renewal and/or redevelopment can be a useful tool to facilitate the proper transformation of Nigerian cities. In order to ensure and achieve a sustainable urban development, it is highly important to take certain factors for consideration and implementation.

- ❖ Education and public enlightenment on urban renewal programmes and initiatives
- ❖ Public private partnership on urban renewal programmes is essential for a good result
- ❖ Redevelopment of satellite towns alongside urban centers
- ❖ Enforcement of code of conduct in the built environment
- ❖ Adequate compensation for the owners of affected buildings in the line of redevelopment as seen in Abeokuta
- ❖ Emphasizing sustainability in infrastructural design and planning
- ❖ Use of advanced technologies, human and material in provision and management of new facilities and infrastructure

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