

# CITIES IN AFRICA

**Interview: Babatunde Raji Fashola 52**

The governor of Lagos on harnessing the city's potential

**Urban land reforms 56**  
Overcoming the obstacles thrown up by land regulations



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# Babatunde Raji Fashola

## Governor of Lagos State

“Lagos has always been ranked not against Nigerian cities, but against African countries and global cities like New York and London”

INTERVIEW BY LANRE AKINOLA

**O**f Africa's fast growing cities, none stands out more than Lagos, the commercial capital of Nigeria, sub-Saharan Africa's second largest economy.

Varying estimates put the sprawling city's population as high as 18 million people. For many years, however, Lagos was known primarily for its poor infrastructure, slums and bad governance. Municipal leaders were synonymous with graft, while violent crime gave Lagos a reputation for being more frontier town than city of the future.

Yet it is also one of the most significant commercial centres in Africa. On its own, Lagos would be the fifth largest economy in sub-Saharan Africa, and according to research by McKinsey, the city's GDP will hit \$88bn by 2025.

Under the stewardship of its current governor, Babatunde Raji Fashola, elected in 2007, the city is beginning to harness some of this latent potential – a trend that could help it establish itself as the continent's leading commercial centre.

Mr Fashola served as chief of staff to his predecessor, Bola Tinubu, who “deserves a lot of credit for giving me the opportunity and encouraging me”, he argues. “It enabled me to see first hand what it took to run the state.” A lawyer by training, Mr Fashola recalls: “It was not that I ever set out or had any ambition to be governor. I was at the tail end of my predecessor's tenure and on my way back to my law practice.” His eventual election, he says, was akin to a “story for a fairytale”.

This personal fairytale is fast becoming

something of a dream come true for Lagos's citizens, accustomed to living in a city in which progress has long been attained despite, rather than because of, its municipal leaders.

With Mr Fashola at the helm, perhaps the most noticeable change has been the efforts to literally clean up the city. Waste management activities have been significantly scaled up. Mr Fashola has also overseen the clearing of roads running through Oshodi, a notoriously congested part of Lagos symbolic of its organised chaos.

Reforming public institutions has also been part of Mr Fashola's administration. Schools and roads have been rehabilitated, and in March 2008 Lagos's first ever rapid transit bus service was introduced.

Impressive in their own right, such steps are only part of a longer term perspective, Mr Fashola explains. “I realised that no matter how long you stay as governor you will never solve all the problems,” he says. “Most important was to return confidence to our people that all was not lost.”

A two-pronged approach is at the heart of this effort, he says, starting with compelling members of his generation to return to the world of politics.

“We had stayed away from government for too long, telling ourselves that politics was dirty. But I realised that it would need us to go in there and clean it up.

“The other thing was to bring back a belief that I knew we once

“I understood that I was responsible for 18 million people. They all needed to eat, they needed jobs, and in getting those things done they needed to move around. So transportation was very important, but I knew that I could not get transportation to be operational or efficient if there was insecurity”



had – in a sense to restore hope.”

The aim of this, he explains, is to give the reform process enough momentum that his eventual departure from office will not stop progress in Lagos.

With this vision in mind, there nevertheless remained immediate practical issues that had to be addressed. Here, Mr Fashola adopts a pragmatic approach. His electoral promises, he says, were always based on attainable goals, a philosophy that has come to set the tone for his administration.

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With concerted efforts around addressing Lagos’s reputation for violent crime, other things began to fall into place, he says.

Seizing this momentum, Mr Fashola has also sought to broaden the state’s tax base. “I went to town hall meetings with people – explaining to them that I cannot build bridges, roads – and I cannot protect them – if I don’t have money. They need to pay taxes.”

Reflecting on this step, he muses that “this was quite a climb because it was not something that anybody wanted to do at the time. Sometimes I think we just got lucky. The rest is history. People are paying taxes and I think they are happy to do so as they see what we are doing with the money.”

While his primary duty may be to the citizens of Lagos, Mr Fashola has no doubt about the city’s international role.

Arguing that “no city, state or country can develop on its own”, he stresses the importance of overseas capital to the city’s overall health.

“Interestingly Lagos has always been ranked not against Nigerian cities, but against African countries and global cities like New York and London.”

To compete for international human and financial capital “what we did was to seek to understand what made those cities what they are”. The result was a focus on law and order, governance and infrastructure; an approach that, he says, is paying dividends. We received the kind of responses that we expect and overseas capital is moving in.”

It is on the question of Lagos’s international competitiveness that Mr Fashola has embarked on his most ambitious project yet – Eko Atlantic City.

Constructed on land reclaimed from Lagos’s Atlantic coast, on completion this new district will house up to 400,000 people, equipped with state of the art infrastructure. The stated aim is to turn Lagos into the financial capital of Africa.

With close to four years remaining of his term, Mr Fashola is bullish about the city’s prospects.

“When you look at the competition on the continent today, Lagos is remarkably opportuned,” he observes, but tempers his enthusiasm with a dose of realism that characterises his style of government.

“When you begin to see the finish line before you have run the race, you might lose the race. It is really a good time to be a Lagosian, but there is still a lot of work to do.”

PHOTO: GETTY

# Urban land reform gathers pace

Opaque urban land markets pose a challenge to African municipal leaders looking to leverage fast urbanisation rates for growth, leading planners to explore new rules on property

BY ADAM ROBERT GREEN

**A**s informal settlements emerged in Africa's post-independence cities, urban planners hoped economic development would make them a temporary blight. Yet today, with rising migration from the countryside, slums look to be a stubborn feature of urban landscapes. In 2010, an estimated 72 percent of all urban dwellers in sub-Saharan Africa lived in slums.

Over the next decade, West African cities will host an additional 58 million people. Some of Africa's cities – Lagos, Cairo, Kinshasa and Alexandria – come under a new mantle: the megalopolis. But African cities of all sizes are growing at “warp speed” according to Billy Cobbett, manager of the Cities Alliance. Many will double in size over the next 15 years.

Some migrants are drawn in by old fashioned rumours of opportunity quickened by new-fangled communications technology. Others are pushed. Abidjan's population swelled dramatically during Côte d'Ivoire's conflict, and some fled to cities in neighbouring Ghana, notably Accra, which also attracts northern Ghanaians seeking relief from near-Saharan dryness according to Su-

san Blaustein, co-director at the Earth Institute's Millennium Cities Initiative at Columbia University.

Urbanisation is a sign of dynamism. Economic growth is typically uneven, with poles of urban growth usually proving catalytic. But there are dangers if public policy does not keep pace. Health is compromised by poor water and sewage systems, and most African countries are unlikely to reach the Millennium Development Goals for sanitation. Crime rates are often high, and land is dangerous and rocky, with frequent accidents. In September, a lethal oil pipe explosion in Nairobi killed 100 people.

Political response has been inadequate. “Most governments express a wish to prevent, divert or slow down urbanisation,” according to Mr Cobbett. Rural investment programmes are one method to stem urban growth; the government of Côte d'Ivoire is the latest to try it. “But there is no historical precedent for this strategy to have ever been successful.”

Other governments have tried simply taking slums down. In 2009, Kenyan authorities began deconstructing Nairobi's million-strong Kibera settlement. Some evictees took to the courts while others just relocated to



**ABOVE:** Street vendors at Ojodu Motor Park in Lagos, Nigeria



other urban fringes. Even where residents are given alternative housing, it is often impractical for their needs. In Rwanda's resettlement scheme, many complained they were too far from the city centre and now spending a much larger portion of their income on travel. And Rwanda's programme is one of the better administered. In Zimbabwe, nearly 100,000 homes were demolished with few alternatives offered, while Nigeria's deconstruction of slums in Port Harcourt put nearly a quarter of a million people at risk of homelessness, according to Amnesty International.

"There is a growing trend of litigation by the poor against such evictions, but only in countries where you have a confluence of forces, especially a sufficiently robust civil society and a reasonably enabling legal framework," says Stephen Berrisford, an urban planning lawyer based in southern Africa, who cites South Africa, Ghana, Kenya

and Nigeria as fitting the description. Few practitioners see slum clearance as viable.

### **Improving urban land markets**

Due to the delicacy of clearance, and its failure to deal with underlying problems, emphasis among many planners and donors is on incremental improvement. The World Bank began funding "sites and service" schemes from the 1970s in the likes of Senegal, Botswana and Zambia, with basic services provided on vacant land. However, these soon ran up against land shortages. "Globally, the single biggest bottleneck to the supply of land has been, and continues to be, dysfunctional urban land markets," says Mr Cobbett of the Cities Alliance.

Secure right to land is one of the main pathways to getting people out of poverty, claims Mike Taylor, programme manager for Africa at the International Land Coalition. Those with land rights may invest more of

their savings in home improvements, and find it easier to open bank accounts once they have an address.

Urban services can be better targeted once planners have a formal map of who lives where. Yet those maps are almost non-existent. Less than 2 percent of land in West Africa has formal paper documentation, with most tenure claimed through informal channels. Comprehensive titling schemes are hampered by weak bureaucracies, restrictive legal frameworks and vested interests.

Elite interests are often misaligned with those of the wider population. Land scarcity pushes up its value, so there are few incentives among landowners – who are often also the lawmakers, or have access to influence them – to raise supply by improving regulation. Those who have secured themselves urban land often want to "pull up the drawbridge", says Mr ➡➡➡



**LEFT:** Rush hour traffic in Cairo, Egypt

### QUICK STATS:

# 1%

The increase in paved roads needed to reduce incidence of slums by between 0.32 and 0.38 percent

# 2%

Land in West Africa which has formal paper documentation

Source: UN Habitat, UN Development Programme

Berrisford. Slums are also big business for landholders who can extract rent from inhabitants, adds Mr Cobbett.

When urban voters outnumber rural voters, as they soon will, the sums will stack up in favour of politicians' dealing with tenure. The discourse is already heating up in Malawi, Kenya, Ethiopia, Burkina Faso and Ghana. Rwanda, Mozambique and Lesotho are pursuing comprehensive titling initiatives, often funded by donors. "The purpose is to roll out a whole set of individual rights, in some form of title deed, which people can then start trading and using as a market asset," says Mr Berrisford.

But such approaches are problematic. In Uganda, well-connected speculators responded to one titling scheme by bribing officials to grant them ownership of land in informal settlements which they had no rights to. "There are huge risks with formalising and bringing in a land market without adequate safeguards," says Mr Taylor at the International Land Coalition. Even when titling proceeds lawfully, those with low incomes hit by liquidity crunches often sell land to developers without realising its value. "There are big differences in their knowledge and understanding, and in their ability to see where price trends are going."

While comprehensive land titling programmes are intuitively attractive, it exceeds the capacity of most urban authorities. Mr Cobbett of the Cities Alliance advocates a graduated approach. "This can be as simple as a formal statement by the local authority saying that the people in a settlement will not be evicted; that the government recognises their rights to stay there."

Zambia has experimented with a plot allocation scheme which, while short of the cost and complexity of offering full deeds, was sufficiently stable to give people confidence to invest in their homes and bequeath them to their children. Formal papers giving an effective lease for a period is an option. Mozambique, Tanzania, Benin, and Namibia are also introducing new forms of urban land rights which are not ownership rights, says Clarissa Augustinus, chief of land, tenure and property administration in the shelter branch at UN Habitat. Across the range of interventions, optimal approaches build on reality, even down to building ambulances capable of navigating narrow alleys.

"You don't have to wipe everybody out to have development," says the Earth Institute's Ms Blaustein. "It can be done using the people as a resource, as an engine driving the development in sustainable, empowering ways."

Simple infrastructure spending remains important, of course. A 1 percent increase in paved roads reduces the incidence of slums by between 0.32 and 0.38 percent, according to Ben Arimah, a UN Habitat researcher, while transport systems enable slum dwellers to access more diverse economic opportunities. But while both physical construction and deconstruction is a tempting solution for technocrats, institutional frameworks are the platform for transforming informal dwellings into stable constituencies of African cities.

Mishandled, messy and spatially inefficient urbanisation, on the other hand, will undermine all development goals, says Mr Cobbett. "Getting African cities right, in terms of land markets, governance and institutions, is essential to supporting the kind of growth that will reduce both urban and rural poverty."