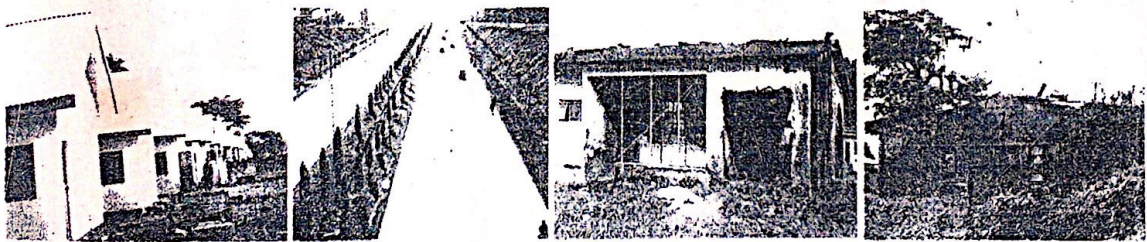


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**URBAN DECAY AND THE IMPERATIVES OF URBAN
REVITALIZATION IN NIGERIA:
ISSUES AND STRATEGIES**

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Abstract

Urban decay is a serious environmental problem that threatens the serviceability, livability and sustainability of urban centres in the 21st Century. This paper considers the problem of urban decay in Nigeria and the main objective is to examine the causes and effects of urban decay with a view to suggesting some strategies for addressing the problem. The paper relied mainly on secondary information from both empirical and non-empirical researches documented in the literature. Amongst others, it reemphasizes the fact that urban decay is a major problem in most of the Nigerian cities and that high rate of urbanization, absence of periodic maintenance, poor building construction and use of substandard materials, poor application and non compliance with town planning regulations as well as the absence of specific legal instrument for maintenance obligation are among the factors causing urban decay. The paper identified and recommended urban revitalization, partnerships in Urban Basic Services delivery, public participation, financial assistance, liberalization of the mortgage finance system, poverty reduction well as land and residential tenure security as measures for addressing the problem of urban decay in Nigeria.

1. Introduction

One of the development dilemmas of the 21st century is the rapid urban growth with cities all over the world becoming a complex, and sometimes, chaotic physical expressions of human civilization. It is estimated that more than half of the world's 3.3 billion population live in urban areas and that 98 per cent of future population growth will occur in developing countries. The implication of this growth trend is that more infrastructures will be needed to service the urban areas. With respect to housing, the implication of the growth trend in the developing countries is that, 39, 000 new dwelling units will be required each and every day to cater for the population growth in the next two decades (UN- Habitat, 2002).

As urban population grows, infrastructure deficiency becomes a major problem in cities of developing countries. According to Arimah (2002), at least 220 million urban dwellers do not have access to drinking water, more that 420 million do not have access to the simplest form of sanitation and between one third and two third of solid wastes generated remained uncollected. As it were, the problems of rapid urbanization and the consequent infrastructure deficiency have combined with those of economic downturn and poor infrastructure maintenance to create and promote the phenomenon of urban decay in our cities.

Urban decay is a global phenomenon which is experienced in cities of developed and the

developing countries. It is found in different degrees in the central and the inner parts as well as the suburbs of cities of the world. The history of urban decay dates back to the early period of human existence in many cities. However, the problem featured prominently in the 1970s and 1980s in the developed countries as a result of change in global economies and the development of transportation which promoted suburban living. Today, urban decay is a major problem that threatens the sustainability of urban basic services and hampers the efficient functioning of the 21st century cities. The urban landscape in most developing countries is characterized by precarious housing condition, poverty, overcrowding, crime, deplorable sanitation, inadequate water supply and low health status (Verhasselt, 1985 as cited in Iyun, 1993). In Nigeria, urban decay is a major feature of the city centres and squatter settlements at the suburb. Abumere (1987) observed that 51.8 per cent of slums are found within 0.5 kilometer radius of city centres while as high as 68 per cent are found within one kilometer radius of city centres in Nigeria. There is no doubt that the Nigerian cities are facing the crisis of urban decay. Documented facts and visible evidences abound in all settlements. In his analysis of urban decay in forty settlements in Nigeria, Abumere (1987) found out that urban decay is a feature of both small and big cities and that irrespective of size, Nigerian cities have decay problem of varying degrees. The seriousness of the problem is vividly expressed in the writings of Tom Paulson (2001) who observed that, flying into Lagos, Nigeria the biggest city in Africa's most populous country "the first indications that all is not well are . . . , and further, signs of chaos and urban decay come flying at visitors like paper swaps in a windstorm." The enormity of the problem of urban decay calls for urgent solution to ensure the livability and functionality of our cities. This paper examines the issue of urban decay in Nigeria. The objective is to identify the causes and problems of urban decay with a view to proffering workable solutions. The paper provides a background to the understanding of some conceptual issues in section two before it considered the causes, effects and solutions to the problem of urban decay in our cities.

2. Urban Decay and Revitalization: Definitional and Conceptual Clarifications

The concept of urban decay has often been viewed for the physical deterioration perspective and many authors have dimensioned it the context of the condition of the physical environment. According to Abumere (1987), urban decay is the state of urban squalidness and overcrowdiness characterized by decrepit structures, poor sanitation conditions, overcrowding, under provision of amenities and general deterioration of the urban environment. Within the context of this definition, urban decay is characterized by

slum housing, dilapidated and poorly maintained buildings, dereliction, environmental pollution and degradation. In this case, we could interpret urban decay as a situation in which parts of the city are run down and become undesirable to live in.

The above physical dimensioning of urban decay provides a correct but incomplete perspective of the subject. In a more holistic view, urban decay refers to a decline or deterioration in all that urbanism stands for. This conceptual view introduces further dimensions to the meaning of urban decay. In economic terms, urban decay refers to a decline in the productivity of an area of the city, leading to economic disinvestment, downturn, unemployment problem and poverty. This type of decay is characteristic of the post Industrial Revolution period in Europe and America with some industrial areas in the inner city experiencing decline in manufacturing and physical decay of the environment. The entire situation of economic decline is captured in the concept of 'Brownfields' as coined by the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). According to US EPA (1996), Brownfields are abandoned, idled or underutilized industrial and commercial facilities where expansion of redevelopment is complicated by real or perceived environmental contamination. Thus the Brownfields are manifestations of adverse land use decisions, housing discrimination, residential segregation, commercial disinvestment, infrastructure decay, lack of employment opportunities amongst others.

The social dimension of urban decay covers the socio-cultural aspects of decay often associated with physical and economic deterioration of parts of cities. Thus an important aspect of the manifestations of urban decay is social deficiencies characterized by racial discriminations, population outmigration, crime and social vices. The totality of the physical, economic and social decline in our cities present a comprehensive and more acceptable meaning of urban decay. Thus the Wikipedia Encyclopedia (2008 On-line Version) define urban decay as "a process by which a city, or a part of a city, falls into a state of disrepair. It is characterized by depopulation, economic restructuring, property abandonment, high unemployment, fragmented families, political disenfranchisement, crime, and desolate and unfriendly urban landscapes".

Urban revitalization is a concept that addresses the problem of urban decay. It is synonymous with the idea of urban regeneration which seeks to renovate the existing housing and improve the environment and economy of an area. Revitalization is built on the concept of citizen participation and community vision and it advances the view of communities as asset rather than an assortment of problems. Thus, according to US EPA (1996), urban revitalization is a bottom-up process that proceeds from a community-based

vision of its needs and aspirations and it seeks to build capacity, build partnerships and mobilize the resources to make the vision a reality. Unlike the concept of redevelopment, it centres on community involvement in the regeneration of their neighbourhoods without population displacement. Revitalization as a method and process of city regeneration is a widely acceptable alternative to redevelopment and it provides the anchor for the solutions proffered in this paper.

3. Causes and Effects of Urban Decay

Evidence from the literature suggests that there are several factors responsible for urban decay, depending on the circumstances. However, it is important to note that decay is primarily a natural phenomenon which occurs through time. As we know, urban structures or fabrics are physical constructions which have live span. Although they are basically static, these structures are dynamic in terms of aging through time. The aging process is exacerbated by climate and natural hazards most especially in humid and warm tropical regions as well as in hazard prone areas. Thus one of the basic causes of urban decay is the natural aging of housing and infrastructure, most especially in areas of the city that witnessed first development.

Apart from the natural processes of aging of structures, there are numerous other human induced causes of urban decay. For instance, the World Bank (2005) attributed the factors of urban decay to rapid urbanization, rural urban migration, economic downturn, decay of urban infrastructure and negligence of urban house keeping. Amongst all these, urbanization is seen as a major cause which accounts for other secondary factors and accelerates the process of urban decay. As we know, high rate of urbanization with the attendant high demand for basic services and subsequent inadequacy puts a lot of pressure on urban infrastructure. The pressure brings about overcrowding, facility stress and eventual break down (most especially where there is no proper maintenance) as well as the creation of slum and squatter settlements with poor sanitation. In addition to the problem of rapid urbanization, other specific causes some of which were recognized by UNCHS (1981) include the following.

(i) The absence of or inadequacy of periodic maintenance. This is a major problem in the city centres and other low income neighbourhoods. Property neglect in these areas has been attributed to poor commitments of the landlords\property owners and poverty. Also, poor infrastructure maintenance in the low income areas is attributed to inadequate

municipal resources.

(ii) Poor building construction and the use of substandard materials. Substandard buildings are common feature of our settlements. This arises from poor building techniques and the use of substandard materials. Defects arising from the use of low quality material aid the process of decay in buildings. For instance, defects in plumbing system causes seepage of water into walls, roofs and floors to accelerate decomposition.

(iii) Poor application of development control and non compliance with building codes and town planning regulations. Poor application of development control measures in some settlements and non observance of set backs, air spaces, building codes and zoning regulations contribute to urban decay.

(iv) Unauthorized change of use. Change of use from residential to commercial or industrial use accelerates the process of decay, most especially when the building is subjected to pressure beyond its design capacity.

(v) Multiple ownership of property. This is a major problem in city centres where there is competitive demand for the use of inadequate space. Decay could be a problem in a condominium apartment with multiple flats owned by different individuals and with joint central facilities. Property neglect could happen where there is lack of cooperative feeling or community spirit and this can accelerate urban decay.

(vi) Desire to maximize rent proceed and to keep maintenance cost low. Research findings have established that profit motif determines the level of property maintenance (see EPA, 1996 and Jinadu, 2001). For instance, Jinadu (2001), in his study of private estate investment and maintenance problems in Bida, Niger State, has observed a high level of maintenance need. The problem of decay observed in the area was attributed to property neglect arising from the desire to keep maintenance cost low and to maximize rent proceeds.

(vii) Absence of specific legal instrument or provision for property maintenance. In Nigeria of today, there are no specific legal requirements for meeting specific standards for repair of old buildings. Absence of legal obligation for property maintenance has nurtured poor maintenance attitudes, promoted property neglect and the consequent urban decay. Wherever it occurs and at whatever magnitude, the problem of urban decay has far reaching negative effects on the residents and fabrics of our urban centers. First, the high level of infrastructure decay is threatening the functionality and the serviceability of most cities and the magnitude of service deprivation is better imagined than quantified. Poor access to basic facilities in decayed neighbourhoods is closely associated with environmental health problems. For instance, Ahianba et al. (2008), in their study of built

environment decay and urban health in Nigeria have established that inadequate basic infrastructural amenities, substandard housing, overcrowding and poor sanitation promote health hazards and have serious adverse effect on the health of city residents. Specifically, Baba and Jinadu (2001), in their study of spatial variation in the occurrence of housing-environment related diseases in Minna, Niger State, have established that low quality residential areas of Minna are associated with high incidences of diseases and the study concluded that 69 per cent of disease occurrence in the study area is explained by environmental quality.

The problems of economic downturn and incidence of urban poverty are also sources of worry. While the cities are regarded as engines of economic growth, decline in economic production in decayed areas limits the capacity of our cities to generate wealth. Above all, the growing incidence of unemployment in decayed neighbourhoods creates livelihood problems and increases urban poverty.

In the aggregate, the problem of decay, also have negative environmental aesthetic effects. Urban decay, as manifested in housing obsolescence, uncollected garbage, filth, pollution and general poor environmental sanitation has eroded the aesthetic values of our cities and the problem of eye-sore created is becoming an embarrassment to Nigeria as a nation.

There is the need to arrest urban decay in order to restore the serviceability, livability and the aesthetic values of our cities. This can only be achieved through a high level of political commitment and professional zeal. The next section of the paper considers the strategies for arresting urban decay in Nigeria.

4. Strategies for Urban Revitalization: Some Best Practices and Potential Benefits

Urban decay problem has attracted a plethora of public responses in form of policy intervention, programme initiatives and funding. In many countries of the world, the main planning intervention has been through the programme of urban renewal. In most African countries, the renewal strategies of complete redevelopment and settlement upgrading have been used severally without much success. In Nigeria, the history of urban renewal could be traced to the pre independence period when a 750 and 150 acres of land were cleared and renewed in northern part of Lagos Island and around the Idumagbo Lagoon respectively under the Lagos Town Planning Ordinance of 1928 (Jinadu, 2007). Since that time other renewal efforts include the Falomo Squatter Settlement Clearance Scheme, the Olaleye-Iponri, Orile Ikeja Wodo, Ebute Meta, Maroko, Badia East and the Lagos Mega City redevelopment Schemes all in Lagos; the Aba renewal scheme in Abia State, Kurna Asabe in Kano State, Mofere in Ondo State amongst others (see Jinadu, 2007).

Although several programmes of urban renewal have been carried out, the problem of urban decay is still very much with us. The problem has been that some of the projects executed were marred with problems of wrong approach, inadequate funding, human inertia and lack of resettlement accommodation for displaced people. The current situation of urban decay portends that something has to be done and perhaps differently too. Some of the strategies required to revitalize our urban centres include the conventional planning strategies and some new emerging strategies as considered below.

4.1 The Conventional Planning Strategies

The conventional strategies are the popular planning approaches that we know. These include the following.

(i) Design and Execution of Revitalization\Regeneration Schemes. The planning profession is familiar with urban regeneration programme. What is required here is that more projects should be initiated and executed within the context of the principles of revitalization as considered in section two of this paper. Urban regeneration has to do with renovation of existing housing, infrastructure and general improvement of the environment. It takes the form of renovation, repair and introduction of new infrastructure, environmental cleaning and landscaping and introduction of new businesses. In this case, projects should be designed and executed in partnership with the affected communities based on the vision of their needs, aspirations and resources. Also, the revitalization projects should be based on 'Area Approach'. This approach requires the categorization of the project areas on the basis of whether they are:

(a) Economically active and viable, with employment opportunities and high land values, but with infrastructure decay. Here, the solution is to identify and address the constraints that prevent the existing financial resources from being directed to the maintenance of housing stock and infrastructure.

(b) Depressed areas (slums) with total lack of economic opportunities, social disintegration and poor infrastructural facilities. Here, the solution is to devise economic recovery measures that will result in the gradual upgrading of the built environment. This categorization will enable the planners to devise appropriate planning strategies to apply based on the needs of each project area.

(ii) Effective Land use Control. Land use zoning and development control are effective means of addressing the problem of urban decay. Zoning is meant to control density, prevent overcrowding, ensure good property use and maintenance as well as to regulate competing business uses. What is required here is the strict enforcement of the existing zoning laws, building codes and development control regulations in blighted areas of the

city. (ii) Open Space Creation and Environmental Beautification. The identification and maintenance of existing open spaces and the creation of new ones is an important strategy of urban revitalization in decaying parts of the city. These open spaces should be well landscaped and organized into active and passive recreation areas. They will create aesthetic beauty and enhance the value of the problem areas.

4.2 Public Private Partnership Strategies

Partnership among the stakeholders is an emerging, but effective means of managing our settlements. The problem of decay in urban centres could be arrested through cooperation in several fronts. Some of the areas of possible partnership are discussed as follows.

(i) Partnership in Urban Basic Services Delivery. Infrastructure deficiency and poor maintenance is recognized as a major cause of urban decay. Experience from all parts of the world has also shown and proved that adequate facility provision and maintenance is beyond the capacity of the Municipal Governments. In this case, the engagement of private service providers will ensure adequate provision and management and sustenance of urban infrastructure. Thus, the financial muscle, entrepreneurial skills and managerial expertise of the private sector should be exploited in the provision and maintenance of water, sanitation, transportation etc. services in blighted neighbourhoods. What is required is for the government to act as 'champions' by creating partnerships and providing the enabling legal and operating environments.

(ii) Partnership in Revitalization Projects. Partnership is an important strategy being used in the execution of revitalization projects in many parts of the world. Mullins (1998) gave a good example of University Community Partnership Programme executed in Louisville, Kentucky, USA. The University of Louisville Housing and Neighbourhood Development Strategies (HANDS) is a 2 million dollar project funded by the US Department of Education and a host of other local sponsors in 1992. The project was focused on Russelth Neighbourhood and it features community assistance in job and leadership training, design revitalization projects and sourcing of grant. The USA case study shows that educational institutions and local sponsors could partner well with the community to address the problem of decay in urban centres.

(iii) Public Participation. The government and planners have the responsibility of providing organizational platforms for community involvement in urban regeneration efforts. Blighted neighbourhoods are recognized to have stable social patterns that developed over the years, resulting into the establishment of social organization amongst

residents (UNCHS, 1982). The existing community organizations should be seen as asset and platforms for mobilizing citizen participation in the arrest of urban decay in Nigeria.

4.3 Financial Strategies

Adequate funding is central the successful fighting of urban decay in Nigeria. The different institutional and non-institutional financial avenues should be explored to make fund available for revitalization projects in the country. Some of the financial measures required are discussed below.

(i) Introduction of Financial Assistance Programmes and Liberalization of the Mortgage Financial System. In the advanced countries of the world, the problem of urban decay and blight is addressed through financial assistance and grant to properly owners or Municipal Governments to upgrade property or renovate neighbourhoods. In the United States of America, for instance, there are various assistance programmes like the Comprehensive Grant Programme (Cgp), Hope VI, Comprehensive Improvement Assistance Programme and the Major Reconstruction of Obsolete Projects (Mrop). These programmes provide fund for housing authorities for physical improvement of public housing units, most especially for revitalization of severely distressed public housing. In Nigeria, however, the present mortgage finance system does not give specific consideration for grants to housing authorities or loans for property upkeep or community facility upgrading. There is therefore the need to adapt the existing mortgage facility to accommodate revitalization projects in low income neighbourhoods as done in some advanced countries. While Local Governments should be financially empowered and encouraged to provide financial assistance for neighbourhood upgrading, the National Housing Fund should be liberalized to accommodate loans to poor landlords and property owners for the purpose of housing and facility maintenance.

(ii) Mobilization of Pension Fund for Neighbourhood Revitalization. Pension fund provides a long-term capital for Real Estate development and investment in environmentally decayed areas. Practical examples abound in the United States where a number of Public Pension Funds, including the US Fund of New Boston Real Estate; the California Public Employers (CalPERS); the California State Teachers (CalTRS); the New York State Common and the New York City Retirement, have put policies and programmes in place for Real Estate development and urban revitalization. A study of US Public Sector Fund investment by Kendra Strauss et al. (2004) revealed that these pension Funds have invested on the revitalization of existing deteriorated and abandoned housing.

For instance, the CalPERS adopted the California Urban Real Estate Programme in 2003 with the aim of investment in low income housing, commercial and non commercial housing infill in urban areas and rehabilitation of core properties. The USA Fund of New Boston also invested in mixed-use and mixed-income infill projects in Brownfields or environmentally contaminated sites while the USA Fund (Urban Strategy America Fund) founded in 2003 partnered with Lena Park Community Development Corporation (CDC) on the Clustered Green Project that converted the former Boston State Hospital in Mattapan M.A that was vacant for 30 years.

The above case studies are Best Practices for Nigeria to copy. The existing Pension Organizations such as the IBTC SIGMA, Leadway, PENHARM, Legacy, Future Unity Glanvills (FUG) and Thrust Fund Pensions could be given statutory mandate by the Nigerian Pension Commission to invest in urban revitalization. The various Real Estate Developers in the country can serve as the intermediary or access points that link investment fund in Pension Organizations with the urban community.

4.4 Poverty Reduction Strategy. Abumere (1987) identified poverty as a major cause of urban decay. Overcrowding in houses is a function of poverty and excessive room density results in overuse of facilities and rapid deterioration of housing structures. Poverty is also responsible for the construction of shanty structures, leading to the emergence of slums. There is the need to reduce poverty as a means of empowering the residents of decaying neighbourhoods in order to enable them build standard structures, provide necessary infrastructure and to maintain their properties. According to Civis (2000), as cited in Un-Habitat (2002), the poor are currently the single largest producers of shelter and indeed, builders of cities of today. People living in poverty are increasingly becoming partners in development rather than receivers of development assistance. There is therefore the need to support this sign of hope by investing in the poor. Supporting the poor in Nigeria will entail reinvesting in the economy of poor neighbourhoods through poverty reduction programmes of skilled manpower training, micro credit and small scale industrial projects targeted to poor neighbourhoods.

4.5 Guaranteed Tenure Security Strategy. Experience in dealing with the problems of slummy neighbourhoods all over the world has shown that slum clearance is socially and economically costly; and that it is a temporary rather than permanent planning solution as it normally leads to the re-emergence of slum(s) elsewhere and nearby (Jinadu, 2004). It is

also known that provision of security of land tenure and residential stability engender positive maintenance attitudes in residents. Thus, provision of land title and absence of forced eviction will bring about confidence and high degree of certainty which will motivate investments and allow people to improve the services and living condition of their neighbourhoods.

5. Conclusion

Nigeria celebrated her independence amid filth and decay and today the problem of urban decay still overwhelms the nation. The different adverse effects of urban decay are sources of official worry in Nigeria. The presence and the continuous increase in the incidence of urban decay in Nigeria portray official insensitivity and professional failure. The fact is that the old and ineffective methods of dealing with the problems of decay are no longer fashionable. This is why Planners of the 21st century cities will have to look beyond the traditional methods of urban renewal. In order to deal with the problem of urban decay effectively, some of the strategies identified should be applied. However, it is noteworthy that the different strategies are not mutually exclusive. Nigeria may have to apply a combination of these strategies in a particular neighbourhood in order to effectively arrest the problem of urban decay.

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the whole country in any one year. Yet this is just one city in which to get the complete picture of decay you have to add 31,000 vacant lots, where the buildings have been torn down and the land on which they once stood is now either asphalted or covered in weeds and another 60,000 homes that are derelict or damaged beyond repair. The US problem was not confined to Philadelphia, as early as 1943 Chicago was already

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