The right to the city in an era of modernization: Exploring Lagos’ restrictive informal transportation policy through a political settlements lens.

Long Abstract

Urban growth and transportation are strongly related issues. On the one hand, transport infrastructure attracts economic activities, while spatial growth of urban areas reflect increase in travel demand and need to expand transport infrastructure requirements.

Historically, Lagos infrastructural development can be traced to its function as a transportation hub; its role as a connection to Nigeria's hinterlands (e.g., …) through its internal waterways network, and to the international community through its coast. This locational advantage was capitalised upon since Lagos became the colonial seat of power and Nigeria’s former capital territory. However, Lagos has since sustained its de-facto position as the seat of commercial and economic power of Nigeria. It is estimated that over 3000 people come into Lagos daily, although records are not kept to ascertain who stays (Lagos Resilience Office 2020). Economic migrants come into the city from all parts of Nigeria, including the troubled Northern states, the neighbouring Southern and Eastern states.

Lagos development policies seek to position transportation as a visible sign of modernity. Over the past years, transportation policies has tended towards the expansion of road networks, introduction of intra-city rail and elimination of transportation impediments. One of these impediments according to Lagos state government is Okada riders. Okada riding is an informal transportation option that is very visible in African cities as alternatives to buses, taxis, rails and other vehicular means of travelling. In Lagos and other African cities notably Kampala and Nairobi, they are commercial motorcycles carrying one or two passengers (or even more) across the city. Because they are able to move from one point to the other outside of traffic congestion (and regulations) they have become a veritable alternative to other modes, especially in hard to reach areas, and are essential to cover the last mile of transportation from bus stops to homes and offices. However, their removal from the transport sector in Lagos since return to democratic rule in 1999 has been fraught with tensions with vagaries of resolutions and crisis.

This study utilises the political settlement framework to examine the interplay of power and trade-offs between the state government as an elite group and okada riders as informal actors in what has become the conflicting mission of government’s modernising the city and okada rider’s right to the city. Political settlement (which we define in relation to our context shortly) can be identified at the urban scale through imageries of modernisation, which are associated with city development such as creating smart cities, complex infrastructure, constructions of urban citizenry and structure design such as in housing (Mitlin, 2020). It has also been utilised to contextualise conflict, clientelism and power actors role in specific sectors of African cities. For example, Goodfellow uses the political lens to reflect on urban development in Kigali, Rwanda et al. (2019) wrote on the clientelist motivations of power actors in modernising Africa. Mitlin (2020) justifies the adoption of political settlement in urban settings based on the significance of the city to national politics expressed in her study of Nairobi's (Kenya) and Hawasa (Ethiopia) housing sector.

Specific to our context, this study draws on the differing conceptualisation, but what we argue to be congruent, political settlement frames in Khan (2017) and Kelsall (2018). Kelsall promotes the ‘common sense’ notion of political settlement as representing a settling down, resolution or aversion of conflict, most likely as a result of a (formal or informal) agreement between the parties to conflict, that creates a fixity in who has political power, the institutions of government and distributional issues. This was what Khan (2017) referred to as the Elite Pact Framework of PS. Khan (2017) had gone beyond this, providing an alternate reading of political settlement as one that recognises and incorporates informal power networks more strongly in maintaining peace. This approach, referred to as the organisational pact sees political settlement as the distribution of power across organizations that are relevant for analysing a specific institutional or policy problem (Khan 2017:641). In relation to changing policy, Khan recognizes that the ability of organisations to extract changes in a system is based on their organisational capabilities, the capacity of their leadership to mobilise and enthuse and their skill in identifying and rewarding the right people through formal or informal networks. On the other hand, Kelsall proposes an elaboration of the reaction of the dominant power to the disruptive forces of organisations, and contends that the broadness and deepness of the disruptive potential of the opposing views, leads to the decision to “co-opt, repress or include’’ these groups in policy formulation and implementation. We utilise both view points in this article to understand the positioning of the two main actors (i.e. policymakers and okada operators?), and the impact of these, on transport policy implementation in Lagos.

The study focusses on the dynamics of power relations influencing informal economic policies at the city level. Key actors in this study are policy-makers, and operators of okada in Lagos, Nigeria’s economic capital. The relationship between these actors intricately lies between tensions and opportunities. Operators of okada motorcycles provide much needed flexible transportation options in a city bedevilled by long hours of traffic congestion and unmotorable, physically hard to reach communities. The demand for okada services in Lagos is their source of power and is sustained by residents themselves, who often ignore the precarious meandering of its operators on busy highways. On the other hand, policy makers allude to this inherent lack of safety and additionally, security risks to maintain a policy of restriction and then, total ban on operators much to outcry from operators and the public. The government’s past actions in ignoring its own restrictive policies ostensibly to win popular votes provides an impetus for understanding the political settlement processes at play in this sector. The political settlements framework therefore presents a strong analytical opportunity to understand the negotiations, trade-offs and power shifting that underscore inclusive policy for the informal transportation sector in Lagos. It recognises the power wielded by the policy actors as elected officials and by the okada riders as powerful service operators whose services supplants options in formal transportation sector for many residents. It also shows the growing power of okada riders to negotiate their existence not just as service providers in the city, but as an ethnic movement. The vision of governments modernist agenda shapes the continued illegalisation of the essential services Okada providers, but this is also buoyed by road safety and security threats attributed to these riders by the state security apparatus. This study traces the complexities of these processes through media analysis, interviews and surveys with government officials, okada riders and the public, seeking to present a balance between the realities of governing a mega city, the rights of okada-riders to legitimately seek employment in the city and the responsibility of both government and people to make their city work for all. Specific research questions include (i) Who are the power actors in the Lagos transportation policy of okada bans and where do they draw their power from? (ii) How does the Lagos transportation policy of banning okada riders unsettle the distribution of power between influential actors? (iii)How has peace and stability been maintained in the aftermath of unsettlement? Theoretically, we argue that political settlements framework can equally be applied to not only elitist interest as promoted by Kelsall (2018), but other interests that are founded on political gains, especially in the informal sector, as Khan highlights. Although focussed on the Lagos informal sector, the study provides pathways for inclusive policy in other, similar contexts.

References

Côté-Roy, L. and Moser, S. (2019). ‘"Does Africa not deserve shiny new cities?" The power of seductive rhetoric around new cities in Africa’. Urban Studies, 56(12): 2391-2407.

Croese, S. (2016). ‘State-led housing delivery as an instrument of developmental patrimonialism: The case of post-war Angola’. African Affairs, 116: 80-100.

Goodfellow, T. (2014). ‘Rwanda’s political settlement and the urban transition: Expropriation, construction and taxation in Kigali’. Journal of Eastern African Studies, 8(2): 311-329.

Kelsall, T. (2018). ‘Debate: Towards a universal political settlement concept: A response To Mushtaq Khan’. *African Affairs*, 117: 656-669. doi: 10.1093/afraf/ady018

Khan, M. H. (2017). ‘Debate: Political settlements and the analysis of institutions’. African Affairs, 117: 656-669. doi: 10.1093/afraf/adx044

Mitlin, D. (2020). ‘The politics of shelter: Understanding outcomes in three African cities’. ESID Working Paper No. 145. Manchester, UK: The University of Manchester. Available at www.effective-states.org