

THE IMPACT OF THE LAGOS EXECUTIVE DEVELOPMENT BOARD (LEDB) ON SLUM CLEARANCE IN COLONIAL LAGOS, 1928-1960

Augustine Uvu Imuoh, PhD¹ & Iwuchukwu Francis Asika, PhD²

^{1&2}Lagos State University, Ojo, Lagos State Nigeria
Email: austenimuoh@gmail.com & asikafrancis@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The British colonial administration's slum clearance policy was one of the major sources of controversy and conflict between the government and native inhabitants of the Lagos Colony. Although both the natives and foreigners in the town clamoured for a revamp of Central Lagos, however, the planned relocation of owners of affected buildings to Mainland Lagos was roundly condemned by the residents. The outbreak of the bubonic plague in 1924 had exposed the insanitary condition of Central Lagos, hence the need to clear the area of slums in order to avoid the outbreak of a new plague. The natives used various acts such as protests, demonstration and sometimes physical confrontation to demonstrate their hatred for the slum clearance exercise. Despite the threats from the residents and their sympathisers the Board continued with the implementation of the task to rid the Colony of slums throughout the colonial era and even beyond. The paper assesses the impact of the Lagos Executive Development Board (LEDB) on slum clearance in Central Lagos during the period slated for the study. It adopts historical approach of evaluating data obtained from both primary and secondary sources and does not align to any theoretical construct or model. Findings reveal that despite numerous challenges, the LEDB contributed immensely not only to the slum upgrading but also decongestion of Central Lagos as well as laid a solid foundation for the evolution of low cost housing estates in post-colonial Lagos.

Keywords: Lagos Executive Development Board (LEDB), Slum Clearance, Health and Sanitation, Colonial Administration, Lagos Colony

Introduction

Until the outbreak of the Bubonic plague in 1924, very little was done by the colonial regime to check the insanitary conditions of many parts of the colony including Central Lagos. Although the colonial administration successfully managed and controlled the tuberculosis epidemic which claimed several lives in Central Lagos in 1919, there was little or no attempt made at initiating and implementing permanent measures that would prevent the reoccurrence of such plague or epidemic in the colony in future. The outbreak of the Bubonic plague, therefore, served to remind the colonial government of the debilitating insanitary conditions in Central Lagos and of the need to formulate policies and programmes that would aim to unearth the primary causes of epidemics and other diseases such as smallpox, in the colony.

It is little wonder, therefore, that the discovery of rats and fleas as the major causes of the bubonic plague led the colonial administration to take measures that not only aimed to control the spread of the plague but also prevent the outbreak of another epidemic in the Lagos Colony. The establishment of the Lagos Executive Development Board (LEDB) in 1928 was the colonial government's response to the incessant outbreak of diseases and plagues in the Lagos Colony. The visible involvement of the LEDB in the task to clean up Central Lagos and make it more habitable for the people underlines the enviable position of the area in the successful implementation of colonial policies and programmes. It should be noted that Central Lagos accommodated about 64 percent of the entire population of the Colony.¹ Several communities in Central Lagos such as Oko- Awo, Elegushi, Elegbeta, Okolawon, Sangrouse, among others, which absorbed majority of the people were poorly planned and insanitary. Most of the buildings in these communities were constructed in swampy areas due to inadequate land to construct houses that would accommodate the teeming population of the town. Moreover, the craze to acquire more buildings was done with little or no attention paid to decency and comfort. Indeed, communities such as Oko-Awo were said to lie 'below the lagoon and difficult to drain.'²

The insanitary conditions of Lagos Island can be attributed in part to over-crowding. A Medical Officer of Health observed in 1922 that, "over fifteen persons slept in a nine-feet by 10 feet square room in Central Lagos."³ While it may be difficult to attribute the outbreak of the tuberculosis epidemic of 1919 entirely to over-crowding, yet it was stated that the outbreak of the tuberculosis disease, 'if not the only reason...is undoubtedly the result of increased over-crowding which has taken place in recent years.'⁴ It should be noted that Central Lagos for many reasons such as cheap house rents and the huge presence of social infrastructure such as water, electricity and roads in the area was the favourite place for majority of immigrants to Lagos during the period under review. Furthermore, the fact that the area was the seat of the colonial administration in Lagos underlined the struggle to make it more habitable for the African and European residents in Central Lagos.

However, the need to clean up Central Lagos can also be traced to the desire to accord the colony the status and splendor of a future capital of post-colonial Nigeria. To many Nigerians, including policy makers, Central Lagos was an embarrassment to the country and should be cleaned up. According to the then Minister of Lagos Affairs, Alhaji Musa Yar'Adua, "Lagos was a mirror through which foreigners make their initial appraisal

of Nigeria even as many regarded it as an index of the progress of prosperity of Nigeria. The condition of Central Lagos was humiliating to any person with a sense of national pride.”⁵

The Evolution and Functions of the LEDB

The LEDB was established via the Lagos Town Council (LTC) Planning Ordinance of 1928⁶ which was enacted to improve the sanitary condition of the colony. Members of the LEDB include the Deputies of the Sanitary Services and Public Health.

In line with the ordinance, the Board was empowered to undertake a comprehensive land use planning, replacing, improvement, and general development of the town. The ordinance also gave the Board the power to ‘acquire, re-develop and re-distribute the plots at 20 percent of the acquisition cost to the residents as well as ensure that houses in Central Lagos were constructed according to modern building standards. Furthermore, the ordinance gave the Board the authority to develop and improve the drainage system as well as clear the areas bordering Broad, Balogun and Victoria streets of shacks and shanties. Similarly, the LEDB was also empowered by the ordinance to provide an effective drainage system, electricity, and roads as well as rehabilitate old ones.⁷ Finally the Board was also tasked with swamp reclamation on the Island and continental offshore areas.

The Role of the LEDB in Slum Clearance in Central Lagos

Originally, the scope of the LEDB’s slum clearance scheme included the clearance and development of seventy acres of built-up land bordering Balogun, Broad and Victoria streets. The term slum clearance refers to ‘the removal for re-housing by the state of those people who previously lived in slum areas to vacate that area for demolition and rebuilding.’⁸

The LEDB was also expected to re-house about 200,000 people expected to be displaced by the exercise over a period of five to seven years. Broadly speaking, the Board was programmed to be involved in the:

clearance and development of seventy acres of built-up bounded land approximately by Broad street, Balogun street, and Victoria street. The streets were to be widened to meet the increased traffic demands and at the same time rear access, service roads to the commercial premises fronting these streets were included in the task of the LEDB. Of the total area that was to be developed, there would be available twenty net areas of residential development and twenty-two net areas of commercial development.⁹

The people who were affected by the exercise were to be relocated to Surulere pending the rehabilitation of their houses in Central Lagos. It was estimated that by 1959, (four years after the slum clearance began in central Lagos), about 6,000 people would be successfully relocated to Surulere.¹⁰ Similarly, about one thousand, three hundred and sixty-eight, six hundred and ninety-six pounds was estimated as costs of compensation to be paid to owners of demolished houses in the affected areas.

The Surulere Housing Scheme was an improvement on the old and dilapidated houses that dotted the landscape of Central Lagos in the plague era. Structurally, the Surulere Housing Scheme comprised about ‘913 low cost houses which were laid out at terraces in three storey- buildings.’¹² Each apartment which was in the form of either a room or three

bedroom flats was allocated to a family and provided with facilities namely; a bed-sitter and self-contained conveniences such as a kitchen, water closet or bath. The rent was subsidised at N1.50 per room and N14.00 for private apartments. Unlike the old-fashioned thatched and bamboo houses, the new buildings constructed by the LEDB in Surulere and Central Lagos were constructed with baked bricks, corrugated iron and concrete sheets.¹³ The relocation to the Mainland Lagos received a boost with the construction of the Carter Bridge in 1931. The bridge which linked Lagos Island with the Mainland Lagos encouraged motor transport and, thus eased the problem of transmuting between the two areas of colonial Lagos for many residents of the colony.¹⁴

In addition, the LEDB was also linked with the construction of the Apapa and Itire Housing Estates. The Apapa Housing Estate covered an area of 1,000 acres of land and was on completion expected to provide industrial as well as high and low residential land use. Also, the Itire Free-hold Residential Estate which covered about 132 acres of land was designed to provide about 750 residential building plots.¹⁵

An Assessment of the impact of the LEDB on Slum Clearance in Colonial Lagos

The role of the LEDB in the struggle to clean up the Lagos colony and improve the wellbeing of its inhabitants was a subject of controversy during the colonial period and even in the immediate post-independence years. While some public commentators praised the Board for its untiring efforts to clear the colony of shanties and shacks, some also described the LEDB years as wasteful as Central Lagos retained its uniqueness ‘as the dirtiest part of the Colony.’ Critics of the LEDB argued that although the Board was able to relocate some of the inhabitants of Central Lagos to temporary abode in Surulere, many of the inhabitants who could not make it to Surulere still maintained their shacks and bamboo houses in Central Lagos.

Similarly, some of the people who did not have the financial capacity to re-possess their properties after they had been rehabilitated by the LEDB remained in Central Lagos. Worse still, it was said that some of the inhabitants of the affected areas who could not raise enough capital to re-possess their properties after they had been rehabilitated by the LEDB or who failed to reconstruct their houses based on the Board’s specifications were also forced to co-habit with their friends or family members, thus worsening over-crowding in Central Lagos during the period under consideration.

A report by the Federal Medical Services in 1937 noted that;

the Slum clearance of the Lagos Executive Development Board, which is steadily going ahead, has not yet made any appreciable impact on many areas, while living conditions generally and the standards of environmental hygiene in particular remained a very low order. The array of street traders scattering litters, the lack of adequate kitchen and latrine accommodation in many of the houses, and the limited number of public dustbins-all contribute towards the existing unsatisfactory conditions and in some cases appalling state of many streets and alleys.¹⁶

While the above-mentioned report may true be in view of ‘the structural defects in the houses reconstructed or rehabilitated in Surulere, the LEDB cannot be exempted from the challenges that confronted several other government agencies or institutions involved in the social transformation of the colony. For example, the LEDB faced enormous dissention and acrimony from the victims of the Board’s demolition exercise in Central Lagos.

The first in the series of protests or demonstrations that attended the path of the Board took place in 1930(two years after it was established) when the Eleko of Eko, Sanusi Olusi and his king makers jointly opposed the presence of the Board in the colony. The Eleko of Eko did not only reject the proposed plan but also accused the colonial regime of using the outbreak of the Bubonic plague as a ploy to deny the people in Central Lagos of their properties and hence, make ‘many souls homeless.’¹⁷

Arguably, the rancour and acrimony between the inhabitants of Central Lagos and the colonial administration increased with the implementation of a portion of the LTC’s 1928 Ordinance that dealt with insanitary buildings by the Board. In that controversial section of the ordinance, ‘the Board was empowered when it deemed necessary to declare without a town planning, any building insanitary.’ The declaration was followed by a publication in the national gazette for four weeks during which house owners were given the opportunity to read through the gazette before applying to the Supreme Court.’ Specifically, this aspect of the ordinance empowered the Board to demolish any building at its own expense if the house owner was entitled to compensation.¹⁸.

The provision of the Ordinance in respect to compensation to house owners was also another source of friction between the Board and house owners as well as their sympathisers in the colony. The problem was worsened by non-payment of compensation fees to some of the residents whose houses were destroyed, which led some of the residents to describe the Board as nothing but a rip-off. Thus, despite government’s entreaties to the affected house owners to embrace peace and support the re-housing programme, majority of the property owners in the area boycotted the plan and in some cases treated the board as a plague.

The natives’ disenchantment with the slum clearance exercise of the Board witnessed more protests and open confrontation between Lagos residents and the Board’s personnel in the 1950s. For example on October 22, 1955 (a few weeks after the slum clearance began) a record twelve thousand inhabitants of the colony under the aegis of the Association of Residents of Lagos dispatched a protest letter to then Governor-General of Nigeria, Sir James Wilson Robertson challenging the execution of the slum clearance programme in Central Lagos. In the letter that was purportedly channeled to the Governor-General through the Secretary of the Federation, the Association maintained its opposition against the programme and requested its members to ‘oppose the scheme constitutionally.’¹⁹

The letter to the Governor-General would appear to be the dress rehearsal for the incidents that happened in 1956 when the residents and their sympathizers physically challenged some LEDB workers who had gathered to ‘demolish a building at Port Novo Street in Central Lagos.’ The residents were said to have hauled stones at the Board’s employees and men of the Nigerian Police Force who were sent to quell the riot. About 200 policemen were drafted to the area to restore peace and security.²⁰.

Another major challenge that confronted the LEDB was the apparent lack of job specification for the various government institutions involved in the actualisation of the scheme.²¹ The verbal utterances of some of the agencies engaged in the slum clearance project showed a high level of confusion which in no small measure exposed the poor knowledge of heads of the organisations about their assignments. This was the case with the heads of the Town's Engineering and Sanitary departments, two of the most visible agencies involved in the LEDB scheme. For example, while the Town Engineer noted that his department 'certainly does not demolish houses because they are old, but only when they have become structurally dangerous,' the head of the Sanitary Department on the other hand, argued that, 'no houses are demolished because they were old,' adding that 'people who are quite happy in dark, damp, ill-ventilated and rodent infested premises are jeopardizing not only their own health but the health of the whole community.'²² The different pronouncements from the heads of the two departments primarily associated with the implementation of the slum clearance programme increased the people's resentment against the Board.

Nevertheless, the Board also suffered from inadequate funding. Although it is unclear the total sum of money budgeted for the slum clearance programme, the LEDB lacked the financial capacity to successfully implement the scheme. The poor financial state of the Board was worsened by the haphazard execution of the Colonial Welfare Acts of 1945 and 1957 which made no specific allocation to the slum clearance project despite the enormous interest attached to the exercise by colonial officials. During the period under review, expenses far outstripped expenditure. For example only about 3,346,688 pounds out of 9,340, 000 pounds provided for the implementation of social services in the so called Ten Year Development and Welfare Acts was actually released to the colonial administration in Nigeria. Similarly, out of 7, 570, 500 pounds contained in the 1951 Development and Welfare Act, only 5, 326, 278 pounds was made available to the colonial authority in Lagos.²³ Thus, like many other agencies involved in the social and economic transformation of Nigeria and Lagos particularly, the Board also lacked the funds needed to execute the slum clearance programme.

Historically, the Ten Year Development Act was one of the direct outcomes of the failure of the 1945 Act which was initiated by the colonial administration towards the provision of social and economic infrastructure in Nigeria and other British colonies in Africa. The Plan was presented to the Nigerian Legislative Council on December 13, 1945 and approved on February 7, 1945.²⁴

However, the lackluster attitude of post-independent Nigerian leadership towards the implementation of colonial policies also affected the successful execution of the scheme. This was evident in the Board's botched programme to re-settle some of the people displaced in Central Lagos at the eastern-most part of the colony(Ikoyi) via a new scheme in 1958.²⁵ Not long after the scheme was announced the Nigerian government began to allocate the area to some of its top administrative officials. This area is one of the high-brow areas in Lagos which are mostly occupied by the privileged class in the Nigerian society, wealthy and diplomatic staff as well as local and international business organisations, etc.

Despite this, it can be argued that the LEDB successfully executed the slum clearance programme. Indeed, by 1937, the Board had cleared about thirty-three acres of slum areas in Lagos of shanties and shacks. Also about 400 acres of low-lying land was filled during the period²⁶ Similarly the LEDB successfully reclaimed Elegbeta, Idumagbo, Isalegangan and Oko-Awo communities as well as cleared the swamp at Ijora. Indeed by 1940, the LEDB had reclaimed the lagoon inlets and swamps for human settlement and business expansion.²⁷

Similarly, a total of 1,040 acres of slum areas were drained in 1946 alone at the cost of 43,000²⁸ with much of the funds sourced from the Colonial Welfare Act. The LEDB slum clearance programme also contributed to the present status of Lagos Island as the commercial nerve centre of not only Lagos but Nigeria as a whole. The scheme laid the foundation of modern day Lagos Central Business Districts of Marina, Broad Street and Nnamdi Azikiwe Street.²⁹

‘We owe the present development in Lagos Island to the slum clearance scheme. Perhaps, if they had not reclaimed the slum areas, can we talk of business districts today? Despite the dislocation of people from their ancestral homes in Central Lagos, which accompanied the execution of the policy, I think it is worth the effort.’³⁰

Conclusion

The paper assessed the impact of the Lagos Executive Development Board on slum clearance in Central Lagos and several other parts of the colony with dumpsites. It identified the lackluster attitude of some house owners in the Colony and inadequate funds as some of the major challenges that affected the smooth execution of the exercise. Furthermore, the study noted that the programme was also hampered by the use of physical assaults on the Board’s employees by the Lagos residents and their supporters in the latter part of the project.

Despite this and other forms of intimidation, the LEDB successfully relocated about two thousand residents of Central Lagos to the Surulere Housing Estate as well as cleared dump sites at Idumagbo, Oko-Awo, Ijora and Elegbeta. The relocation to Mainland Lagos was helped by the availability of a bus service which effectively facilitated the swift movement of people between the two major areas of the Colony. Nevertheless, the transformation of Lagos from a ‘fishing settlement’ into a state and later Nigeria’s capital in the post independent years was also accompanied by the emergence of new slum communities such as Badia Makoko, Maroko, Ajegunle, Bariga and Iwaya, among others, with dire consequences for Lagos inhabitants..

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