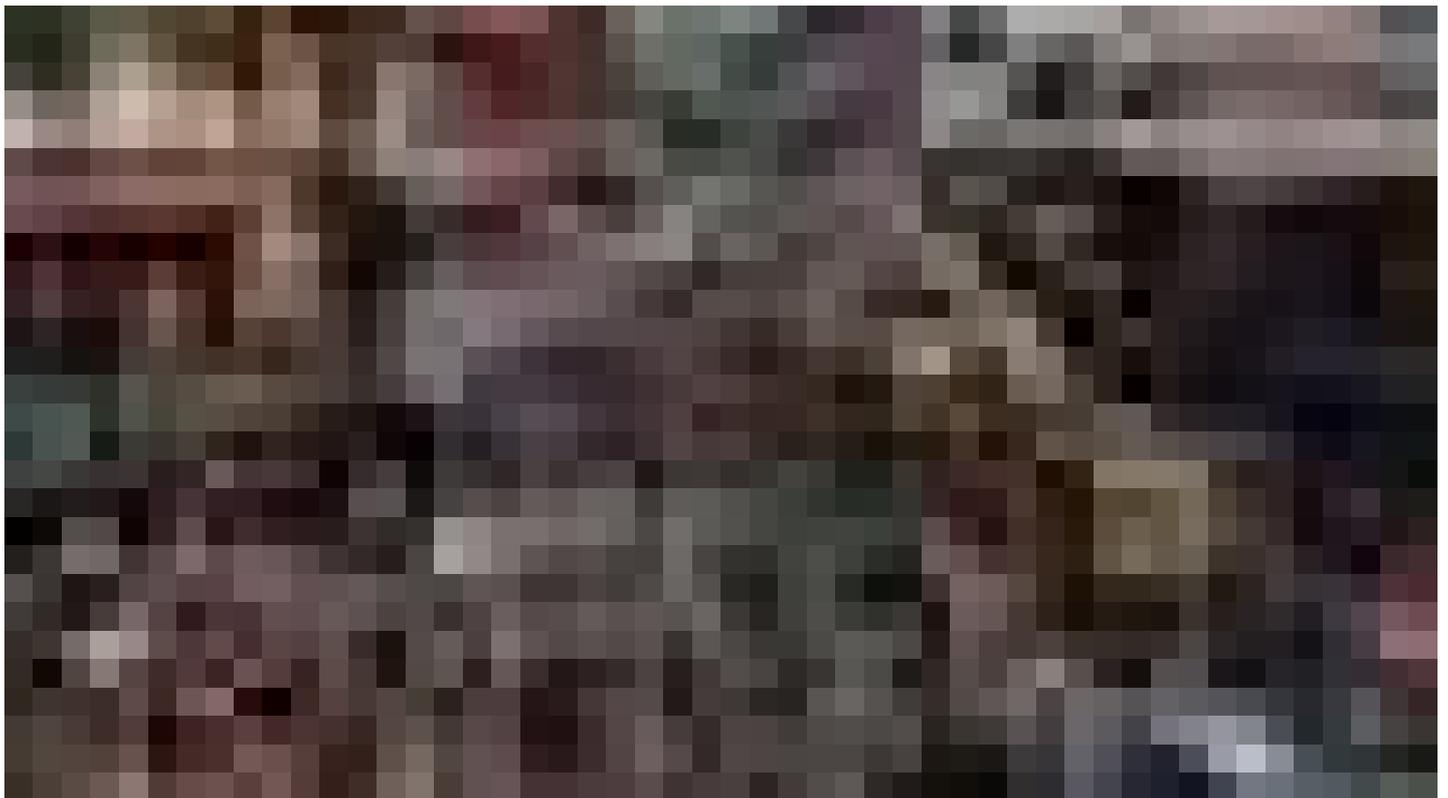


# The city that won't stop growing

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## How can Lagos cope with its spiralling population?

By Alastair Leithead  
21 August 2017



## The lagoon metropolis



A thick layer of acrid, blue smoke hovers just above the waterfront slums that skirt Lagos lagoon, filtering out sunrise and sunset.

This man-made mist that clings to the rusted shack rooftops comes from the countless fish-smoking cabins that drive the slum economy.



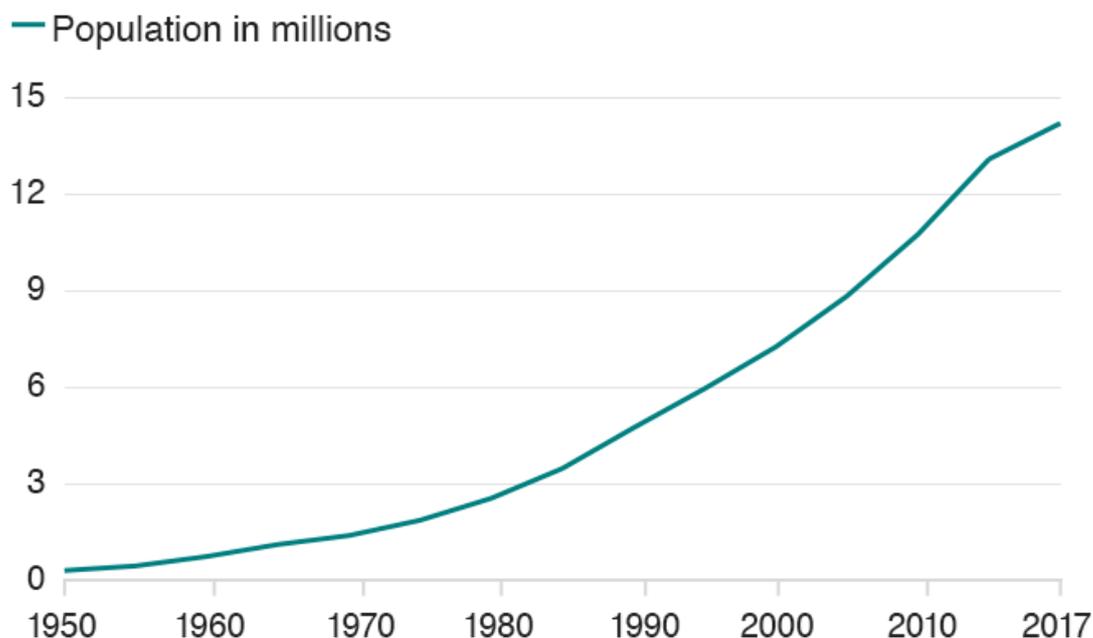
There's an uninterrupted view of the city's dramatic sprawl of poverty from the road bridges that carry daily commuters between the islands and the mainland.

Fishing and sand-dredging boats drift to work, heading deep into the lagoon.

Many of the slums' wooden huts are on stilts, others are just basic shacks shoddily built on the unstable ground of trodden-down rubbish dumps.

Nobody knows exactly how many people live in Lagos, but they all agree on one thing – Nigeria's biggest city is growing at a terrifying rate.

## Lagos population



Source: World Population Review

BBC

The UN says 14 million. The Lagos State government thinks it's nearer 21 million, as rural Nigerians are drawn by the hope of a better life to one of Africa's few mega-cities.

By 2050 Nigeria will have twice the population it has today, more than half will live in cities, and about 60% of them will be under 25.

In an overcrowded neighbourhood on mainland Lagos, Muktar Abdulhamid, 36, is pressing shirts with a heavy, old-fashioned iron filled with charcoals.

Abdulhamid is from a rural village in the northern state of Kano, and he's left his wife and one-year-old child at home and come here to try to make money.



Muktar Abdulhamid: Just one of many rural Nigerians drawn to Lagos

“This isn’t what I intended to be doing. I want to do business – to buy and sell,” he says. “It’s not easy to leave your wife, your child, it’s lonely, but I have no choice – it’s for the future of the family.”

There are few good jobs and housing is in high demand, but at least there are opportunities.

Every week tens of thousands of people arrive in Lagos, heading to neighbourhoods where friends and relatives have come before – many end up in the slums.



But Lagos State is planning tower blocks and transformation, reclaiming land from the sea for ambitious new developments.

In a rush to transform the city, the waterfront slums are being cleared, court rulings are being ignored, and luxury apartment blocks are springing up.



Can Lagos persuade wealthy investors to buy into a futuristic vision, while helping pull the poorest people out of poverty?



In about 30 years Nigeria will overtake the US to become the world's third most populated country behind China and India.

It vies with South Africa for the status of the continent's biggest economy, but it's now in recession - beset by a drop in oil prices, and having to fund the fight against both Boko Haram Islamists and separatists targeting oil pipelines in the Niger Delta.

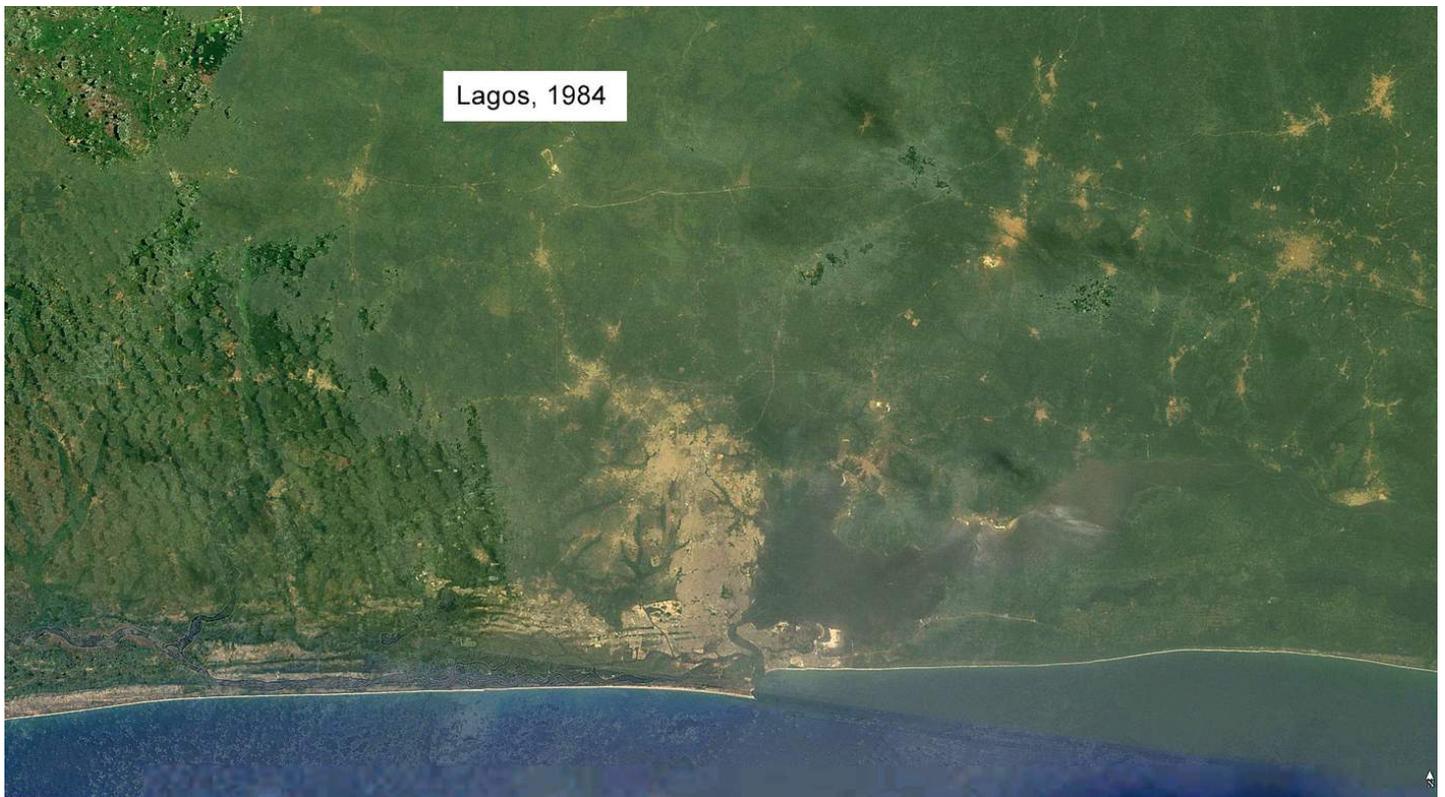


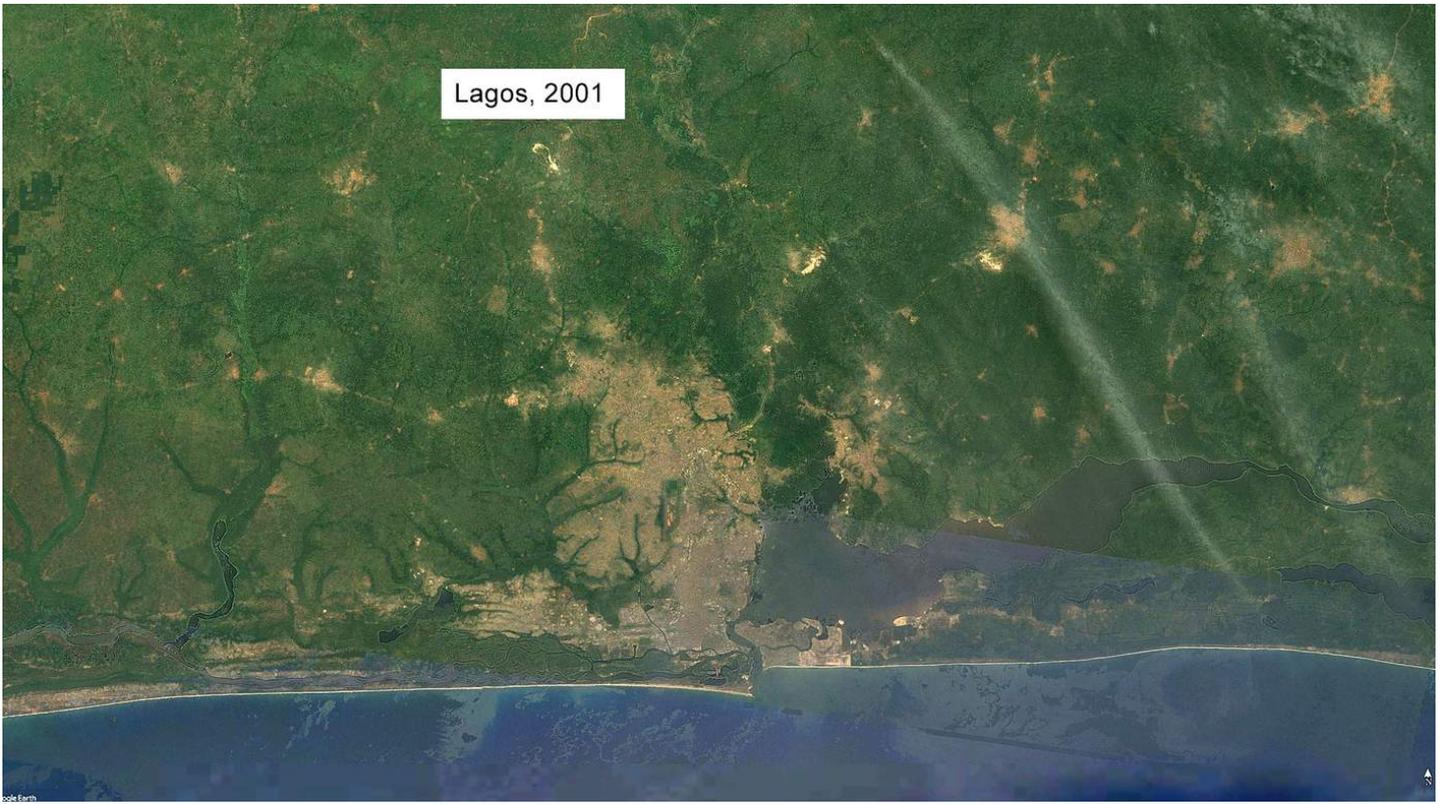
Like everywhere else in Africa trying to break out of poverty, Nigeria hopes fast population growth will bring it a "demographic dividend" – a young workforce that can drive economic growth. If they can all be put to work.



Already there's migration north to Libya and on to Europe, and the young who are left idle and without much hope are easily radicalised by Boko Haram.

It's going to take great management, smart politics and increasing security and stability to turn rapid population growth into a positive and avoid the potential for disaster.





Source: Google/ Landsat / Copernicus





## The bulldozers



“Africa’s Model Megacity” flashes up in the glitzy video of beautiful sunsets and impressive artists’ impressions of the big Lagos city development plan.

Soaring luxury skyscrapers sit alongside a port, enterprise parks and a new city-wide transport system of train

lines, ferries and bus lanes.

But in the waterfront slums circling the lagoon, this vision is a threat to livelihoods, not a hope for the future.

Elebiomayo Folashade was a relatively well-off woman living in a sand-slum – but now she’s angry.

Pulling up her elegant blue dress, she leans down to inspect the damage done to one of her boats by security forces, and begins to cry.

“They destroyed my boats and my husband’s boats and now I cannot pay the school fees, so the children have been withdrawn from school,” she says. “I am old – what am I going to do now?”

Many boats with huge holes in their hulls have been hauled up and abandoned on a beach that just a year ago was busy with work.





Ebute Ilaje is a place that has lived off sand-dredging for decades.

Wooden boats with food-sack sails would bring sand from deep in the lagoon to sell as building material, employing thousands of people.



But then the government “taskforce” came – smashing holes in their boats and threatening to burn down the slum if they continued to work.

Now Folashade’s livelihood has gone – as has that of many in a community that depended on the sand-dredgers

to keep the economy afloat.



Many believe what's labelled a security crackdown against crime is an excuse to drive them out.

"The state government is interested in the land in all these waterfront communities... so the rich can benefit from it," says former dredger Oladipupo Aireomiye.

His fears stem from the recent clearance of Otodo Gbame slum, which went ahead despite a court order halting its destruction.



## Otodo Gbame, after the bulldozers went in

The bulldozers came in with the taskforce, smashing tin shacks, burning anything wooden to the ground.

“The police seized our documents and fired tear gas... some people fled, others were shot,” says Maxwell Hunga, who lived in Otodo Gbame.

*The moment you demolish a slum, naturally two or three more slums will spring up because people need somewhere to sleep*

Samuel Akinrolabu, Nigerian Slum and Informal Settlement Federation

“The most challenging thing we are facing is the threat of eviction that is hanging around the community’s neck,” says Samuel Akinrolabu from the Nigerian Slum and Informal Settlement Federation.

“Over 40 communities are under the threat of eviction and 300,000 people would be rendered homeless eventually if this action is carried out,” he says.

“But forced eviction will not make slums disappear. Rather the moment you demolish a slum, naturally two or three more slums will spring up because people need somewhere to sleep.”

“When we leave to catch fish, we are afraid something will happen to our wives and children at home”

*Klote Kakini, fisherman*



They have the same fears in Ago Egun, the next slum along, where the men catch fish and the women smoke them on circular wire grills.

Their shacks are built on a floating rubbish dump - trodden down and compacted over the years, its paths wobble disconcertingly underfoot.

Klote Kakini is an old fisherman whose father lived here before him. He is worried his family will be evicted while

he's in the boat.

“When we leave to catch fish, we are afraid something will happen to our wives and children at home,” he says. “Maybe the government will send agents to demolish everything or scatter our families.”

But Steve Ayorinde, the Lagos State and governor’s spokesman, says these fears are unfounded: “This is a government with a human face, this is a government that won’t just descend on helpless citizens and just bulldoze them away.”

He denies they have been heavy-handed by driving people from land they have lived on for many years.

“I’m not aware that there has been any community that has been living within the waterfront for generations. It’s always a convenient lie for people to tell just to demonise the government,” he says.





“All over the world there will always be the need for regeneration of certain areas. It’s happened in New York, in London... and Lagos is not an exception.”

He gives two examples where people were resettled and compensation was paid.

“Of course at some point there will be mild resistance, but this government believes in dialogue – in engaging with people so they can see the bigger picture of what the benefits would be.”

But Samuel Akinrolabu describes a different reality:

“The basic reason is land-grabbing, to be honest. Lagos government has seen that the waterfront communities are prime land where they can build the five-star hotels... and people can wake up and see the ocean view.”

He believes the answer to redevelopment is to leave people where they are, improve their lives in situ and create new space to house them.

“We are in an urban age and people are going to keep coming, so we are just going to have to find more creative ways to accommodate more people,” says Taibat Lawanson, associate professor of urban and regional planning at the University of Lagos.

And they do keep coming - from other towns and cities, and from remote rural communities. Lagos has become Nigeria’s centre of gravity.



The towers



Lagos is crowded, chaotic, and crumbling.

In the slums of the old city the spirits of the dead appear to have returned to cleanse it of evil and pray for its peace and prosperity.

The tall men, wrapped in white, jump and crouch, sweeping their long sticks at the crowd.

Their heads are veiled and topped with brightly coloured hats, as they spin through the streets towards the palace of their “Oba” – the king of Lagos.

The Eyo Festival (pronounced Ay-oh) usually marks the death of the city’s most important or influential people, but this ceremony – the first in seven years – is celebrating the 50th anniversary of Lagos State.

The original spot where 15th Century Yoruba fishermen settled on Lagos Island is now an edgy, poor, densely packed neighbourhood.

Degraded buildings lean into each other, appearing to sag under the weight of people packing the balconies to watch the procession.

The roads are potholed, there are few schools or clinics, let alone parks or playing fields – it desperately needs a new lease of life.



“Lagos has no choice but to go up”

Lateef Shelobo, Lagos State Urban Renewal Agency



“Lagos has no choice but to go up,” says Lateef Sholebo, head of Lagos State Urban Renewal Agency.

“How are we going to accommodate all the population? There is no way we can continue to sprawl.” After 25 years as a city planner in Los Angeles, he has now returned home to put into practice the lessons of urban renewal he has learned.

Emerging from the rusty tin rooftops and towering above the Eyo parade route is a multi-storey apartment block – a gleaming, modern show home rising from the slum.

“This project is very important because it shows the people in the community how a slum area can be transformed from what it used to be to a more modern, more sustainable environment,” he says, enthusiastically.

Eleven families lived on the land – they were persuaded to combine their plots and stay elsewhere while the 48-flat tower block was built.

Now they have 11 modern apartments to move into – and 37 extra new homes for their neighbours.

“The air-space is useless – nobody is using it. Now we are able to go vertical we can reduce the overcrowding,” says Sholebo.

“If we are able to convince all the rest of the families to participate in this kind of programme I think it’s better for them, it’s better for the government – and it’s better for everybody.”

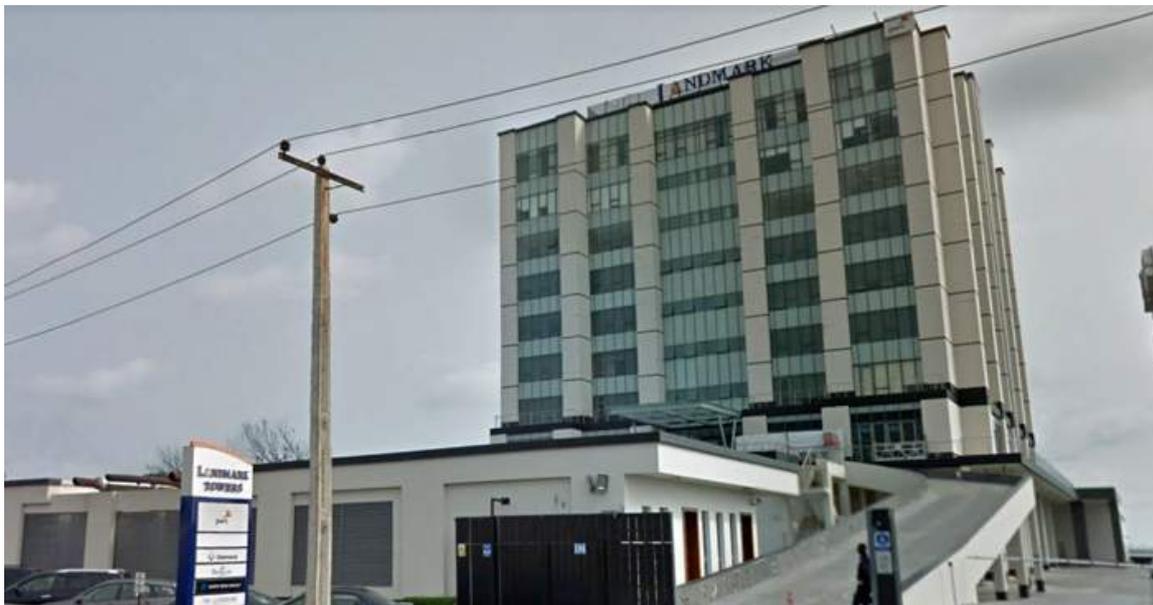
But it took years to build and was hugely expensive - too expensive for the government to roll out across Lagos.

The city needs to be rebuilt without moving whole communities out.

That’s where Sholebo’s American experience could make the difference – using imaginative tax tricks to generate finance for the infrastructure to bring in private developers.

“We have to come up with different ways, or creative ways to provide such affordable housing,” says Sholebo.

But those with the money to invest are looking for better returns elsewhere.



## Landmark Towers

From the 11th-storey penthouse of the luxury Landmark Towers there’s an amazing view of the ocean and the sprawling waterfront developments.

“We are trying to create West Africa’s first one-stop shop, live, work and play destination,” explains property developer Paul Onwuanibe.

The Landmark Group chief executive lives in the penthouse suite, and from the large, open terrace points out what will go where on the five-hectare, \$100m development.



There's already a Hard Rock Cafe, a fine dining restaurant, and an events centre which seats 4,000 people – hugely popular for expensive weddings.

Land has been cleared for a Marriott hotel, a small shopping mall, an IMAX cinema, two office blocks and two apartment buildings.



Here, people can avoid the Lagos chaos of overcrowding and terrible traffic congestion – the selling point is that if you can afford to live here, you never need to leave.

Onwuanibe's five hectares are dwarfed by the massive Eko Atlantic project next door.



### **The Eko Atlantic development**

Earthmovers are landscaping this vast spur of land reclaimed from the sea, roads are being built and the first few tower blocks are beginning to take shape.

It's a stark contrast from life in the slums – a symbol of the vast inequality in Lagos.

“There will always remain the super-rich and there will always remain the people just simply below the poverty

line, but the hope is that over the next few years you will see that gap bridged as more people get more jobs,” says Onwuanibe.



“I believe in trickle-down economics – so that wealth you create actually goes through the system, so the very people that feel that they’re displaced end up getting helped.”

## Escaping the village



Rural Yanoko is a long way from the sprawl and chaos of Lagos. Most women in this village have about seven children.

That's typical for the surrounding region - the countryside overlapping northern Nigeria and southern Niger.

It's the area with the highest birth rate in the world. And this birth rate is helping put Nigeria well on its way to becoming the world's third-largest country by 2050.

More than half of women are married before they are 15 and having many children is considered a sign of good fortune – and they are a good source of farm labour.

There's a huge push to reduce the fertility rate, but the population here is expected to triple in the next 30 years.

There's little for people to do, and lack of opportunity drives them to the city.

Muktar Abdulhamid has optimism written across his chest.

The 36-year-old wears a bright Superman T-shirt while very precisely ironing shirts in the overcrowded Lagos mainland neighbourhood of Agege.

It wasn't what he intended to do when came here from Yanoko, but well-paying work is rare and it helps him get by while waiting for that big business opportunity to come along.



“When I arrived I thought it would be easy, but then I realised how much harder it was to get work, but you can’t just sit here without a job,” says Muktar.

“I want to buy and sell, to have a shop in Kano and make enough money to go back to school to get a Western education.”

Many people in this particular Lagos neighbourhood are from northern Nigeria and speak the same language, and so it feels a little more like home.

But he misses the wife and young son he left behind nine months ago when he came to make it in the big city.

Back home in Yanoko it’s the rainy season - and bright green fields jump out from the stark background of burnt orange mud buildings.

There are only six cars, electricity is something they had for about a week before the new power lines fell dormant, and since the only bridge collapsed four years ago, it's been even harder to reach the nearest health centre 27km away.

Seven thousand people live here - a two-hour ride on a rocky road from Kano, which is the biggest city in northern Nigeria.



Muktar Abdulhamid's family are sitting together to talk about the man who left it all to make his fortune in the city.

"We don't have money to eat, so we had to send the boy to go look for money," says his sister Ramatu Abdulkarim.

“He is getting a little bit every day, just enough to survive, thank God. Sometimes he sends us 40, 50, or 60,000 Naira,” Muktar’s sister says.

That’s between \$110 and \$165 (£85-£125), equivalent to two months’ worth of the annual income the family makes from farming maize, rice, soya or chillies.

“We use the money for the farm and for buying food and clothing for the children – he also sent money for [his wife] Ramatu.

“She’s not comfortable that he’s not close to her. And he’s not happy that he’s far from her.”

Ramatu Muktar, 22, nods in agreement as one-year-old Abdulhamid plays on the floor – the whole family are praying Muktar will do well and take them both to Lagos to be with him.

She’s shy and says little, but Muktar’s good friend and cousin Saidu Yahaya says it’s all about having money – to improve life and plan for the unexpected.

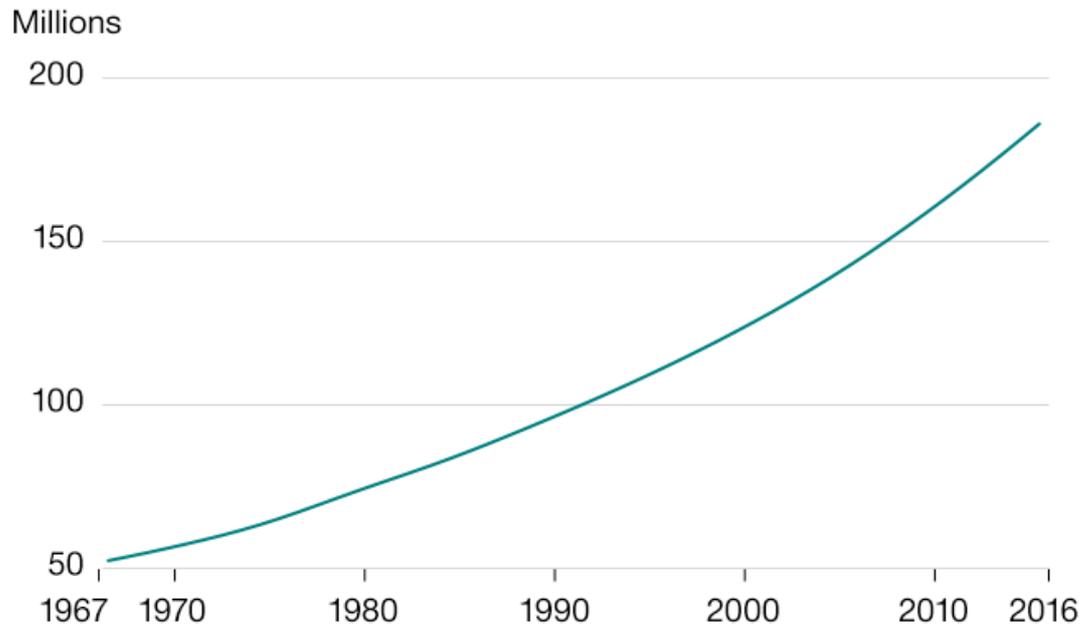
“They are making money there, but you know how things are, it’s meagre money. You have to manage the little you have for survival,” says Saidu.

About 150 young men from Yanoko are also trying to get work in Lagos – and the road to town is only going to get busier.



“Lagos has always had that mixed blessing of having to deal with an influx of people. Unfortunately for us in the last two or three years it has been a deluge,” says the Lagos State and Governor’s spokesman Steve Ayorinde.

## Nigeria's population is rising because...



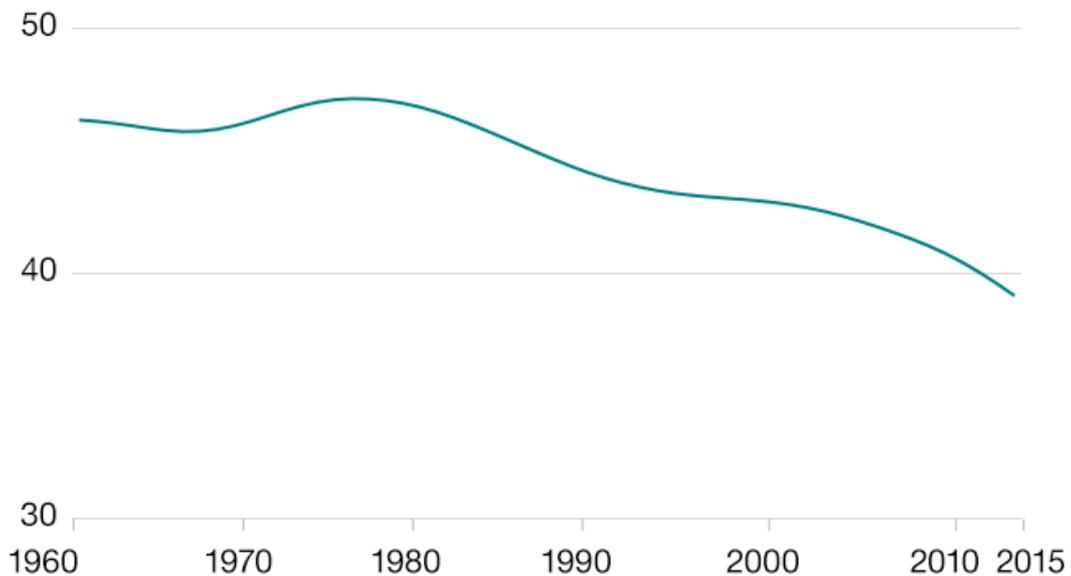
Source: World Bank

BBC

He says 27 or 28 of the 36 states in Nigeria are struggling to pay local government salaries and it's harder for people to migrate abroad.

## ...although birth rate is falling...

— Crude (per 1,000 people)



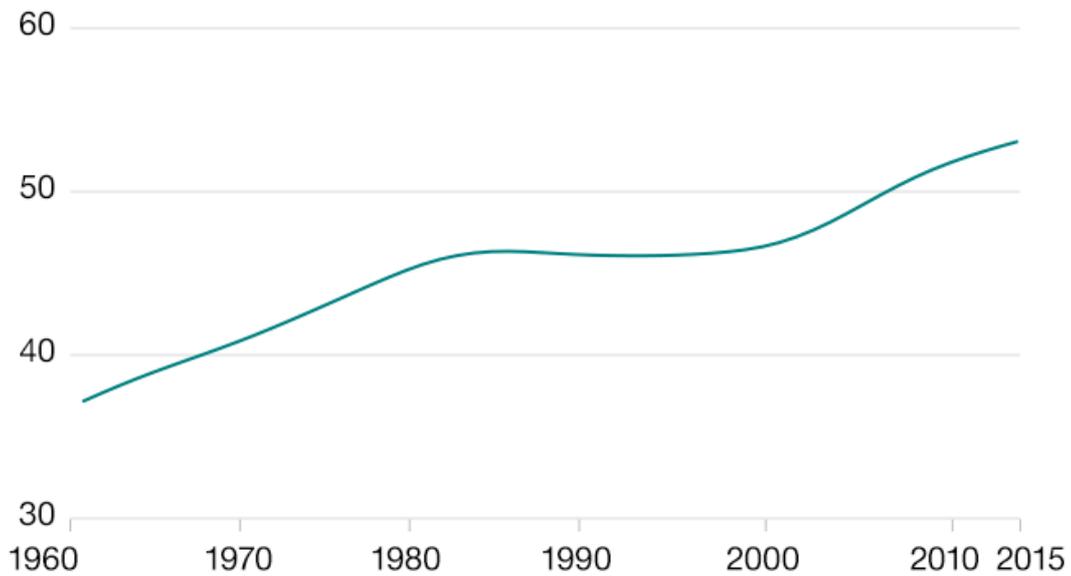
Source: World Bank

BBC

“We want other people to be here – to bring ideas, to bring values, to bring innovation, but we’re just unable to deal with it endlessly,” he says.

## ...life expectancy is rising

— Life expectancy at birth, total (years)



Source: World Bank

BBC

“The prosperity of Lagos, in a way, is also tied to how open it is... so visitors will always have a great role to play in Lagos if they play by the rules.”

More than half the population in Lagos is already under 25, and if there was work for them to do, and the birth rate was to slow down, the economy would get a welcome boost.

This is where the “demographic dividend” comes in - an opportunity to take advantage of a big and active workforce.

But if enough jobs aren’t created, the country suffers from the other side of that coin.

Too many unemployed young people provides a fertile recruiting ground for Islamists like Boko Haram or a market for the people-smugglers peddling dreams of wealth and a better life in Europe.

So if Africa's biggest challenge is everyone's problem, what's the solution?



**The jobs machine**



The newly-trained staff in the glossy new Lagos factory are carefully packing phones into boxes.

As production lines go it's small, but for “the first indigenous mobile, tablet, phone and computer assembly plant in Nigeria”, at least it's a start.

The company, Afrione, wants to tap into the big market for devices that a fast-growing young population provides, by producing cheap phones and tablets with the tagline “Made in Nigeria”.

At the moment at least 90% of the components are imported, but company director Lekan Akinjide wants to steadily decrease that by 4 or 5% a year.

“What we are actually doing fundamentally is starting the process - no-one else has really tried, no one else has really invested in a factory and the training of a skilled workforce,” he says.

“We've looked at China, we've looked at India, we've also looked at what people have done here and tried not to make the mistakes they have made.”

China had a fast growing population. It had deep and pervasive poverty, it was a rural economy and it turned itself around in a generation, mainly through manufacturing.

But the window of time to take advantage of the “demographic dividend” is short – lots of jobs are needed now – and it's perhaps worth looking a little closer to home.

There are some places in Africa where a new industrial revolution is seen as the key to putting the idle youth to work and cashing in on a growing population.

Ethiopia's economy is dwarfed by that of Nigeria, but it's the continent's fastest growing and is betting it all on massive infrastructure investment and an industrial revolution to transform a nation of farmers into makers.

There are beautiful new six-lane highways, an electric railway line to the ocean, and vast estates of social housing are being built with government-run mortgage schemes to get the poor on the housing ladder.

And Nigeria knows massive investment in infrastructure is the answer to a growing economy and to get a congested city moving.

The population is even outgrowing the supply of electricity. Generators which fill the gaps are a constant background soundtrack to the city.



“There’s a lot of new infrastructure being built, but... the effects are not felt by the common man”

Taibat Lawanson, planning expert



Stage one of Nigeria’s first electric railway line - through Lagos - is almost finished, but it can’t start moving a quarter of a million people a day from the suburbs to the city until its own power station is up and running.

“There’s a lot of new infrastructure being built, but it’s skewed and the effects are not felt by the common man,” says planning expert Taibat Lawanson.

“There’s a gap between the rich and the poor.”

She believes by just improving transport links between residential suburbs and downtown, the government is missing the point – new satellite cities have to be planned and built so people can work near their homes and avoid commuting.

“The government has got to understand that people are going to keep coming.

“The current thinking is that they need to reverse urbanisation and get people to go back to the villages and stay away, but that’s not going to work.”



The luxury waterfront developer Paul Onwuanibe says inequality is everywhere, but he believes it's “a little more acute, or visible” in Lagos.

“That’s just part and parcel of mega-cities, but one of the things the government would have to think of is some kind of social platform... some sort of welfare platform that catches people below a certain safety net.

“As this country and this city develops, you will see the gap bridged to some extent.



“There will be a lot of people that will always remain under the poverty line just because of the sheer numbers,” he says, but believes the trickle-down from a growing economy and better private sector will see more people better off.

So what does Steve Ayorinde, the Lagos Governor and State spokesman, think the city will look like in 50 years?

“The pride of the black race,” he answers quickly. “Where technology will drive practically everything.”

He talks about making Lagos a “smart city” - but millions of people living in slums just want better education and health, somewhere to live and somewhere to work.

“Just build modern houses for us - we are happy with where we are living,” says Moses Sangoloke, a long-time resident of the threatened Ago Egun fishing slum, who chairs the community development association.

The government knows it needs to build. The people will keep coming. Lagos will keep growing.

