Global South Conversations on COVID-19 and housing struggles

State interventions, inequalities and people as Infrastructure at times of COVID-19 in Lagos, Nigeria

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Abstract

In this conversation, three of our editors (Ana, Michele, and Samantha) came together with researchers and organizers from Lagos, Nigeria, to speak about recent changes to land and housing protocols, migration, and the criminal justice system. They also discuss organizing strategies that have emerged to address inequality divides exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, including those impacting women and migrants, as well as the government's role in COVID-19 responses.

Keywords

Housing, inequalities, COVID-19, Nigeria

RHJ: The Pandemic has changed the way in which many of us inhabit our countries, our cities and villages, our neighbourhoods and our homes. Can you see these changes in Lagos, particularly in relation to housing struggles? What was the role of the government in handling the changes that emerged, on top of already existing, persistent old inequalities?

Victoria: I think two major issues stand out for me. The first is how land laws have become obsolete over time, and are no longer able to keep pace with the level of urbanisation. Necessary reforms are not happening. Our land policies were formulated in 1978. That was over 42 years ago, and these policies remain in effect today. Every effort to reform land use policies to align or respond to current realities in the city has failed, which has really caused a huge disconnect between the present problems and the laws in place to address them. The second consequence of that disconnect is the proliferation of informal settlements, because the law didn't really envisage that massive explosion and proliferation. It doesn't really have, or propose, solutions for dealing with that kind of situation. The state actors have to devise new ways of responding to current challenges, and some of the methods that they're using have been harmful to certain groups, particularly the urban poor and those within the lower income bracket. There's a lot of advocacy for reform of current laws, and for review of the methods used by state actors to improve urban life and liveability.

Land policy reform is urgent and important, because at times of COVID-19 new social protocols are emerging. The so-called 'social distancing', or the 'stay at home'... you find these measurements unable to adhere to, or work with, current regulations which need to be urgently addressed.

Taibat: Most of the housing in Lagos is privately provided. The public housing is quite limited and issues around new builds on the part of the government, at least over the last 20 years, have been focused on lower-middle and middle income, while also facilitating opportunities for the high-income market. With regards to COVID-19, essentially, a lot of the challenges around housing have been around the inability to pay. The culture around here is for middle income people to build houses in order to secure a reliable source of income at retirement. Many had to sell their landed assets during the lockdown in order to raise funds to survive. Others had to cash in their savings to survive. When the city emerges from the lockdown, they will have to start from almost zero. Rent is not the priority list, survival and feeding is, so that's the challenge.

With regards to housing, I'm not sure there's any policy that supports the housing sector beyond providing support for the developers, whose focus is on middle- and high-income housing. With regards to evictions, there were some <u>evictions</u> that were carried out in the course of the lockdown, but as is usually the case, there were justifications used to move on with the eviction. One happened in the Agidingbi area, and the justification was that the area was being cleared ahead of the rainy season.

You're asking people to stay at home, and then going ahead and destroying the homes that they are staying in. For instance, in the case that happened around Christmas in the

Monkey Village, there was a court injunction and Lagos State Government became a party in the matter when the government apparatus was used to demolish a mechanic village.[1] There has been the issue of the people who live in precarious housing being adversely affected, but it's largely due to the social-economic impacts of the pandemic that has thrown them into a worse situation.

Deji: The crisis has shown the government is very, very distant from the reality of people that live in informal settlements. The crisis has also helped increase the poverty level within the city and the housing challenge. Homeless people have even had to seek new places to live. People go buy whole lots of abandoned buildings to make as home, because there was a lockdown and they were not meant to be on the streets. But from the cases of the first evictions that happened and the response of the government, it shows that the government is totally oblivious to this group of people, and there was no plan at all. But people showed resilience too. For some communities that we studied, they came up with some strategies to address the struggle of housing during this period. Some communities were able to arrive at a flexible payment plan and also defer payments from tenants to landlords. The summary of it is that the people living in the informal sector are doing what they can do to mitigate the crisis while the government is very far from the reality of what is going on and the impact of COVID-19 on these people.

RHJ: The Pandemic has intersected with histories of existing inequalities and violence, including gender, across geographies. Can you give us an idea of the intersections between gender, COVID-19, State responses and housing in Lagos during the pandemic?

Deji: In regards to women, we have witnessed an increase in sexual assaults and domestic violence. Quite a number of organizations intervened, helplines were opened, and NGOs and private initiatives were kicked off to help individuals who were affected by this. I think the reported cases of domestic violence underrepresent the actual situation. But some private initiatives actually came down to address that. Also the issue of the women that were pregnant that couldn't access medical support was there. People didn't want to go to the hospital, because now the hospital area is one place that you could get easily infected.

For informal communities, these healthcare centres are not even accessible. They're far off, and what made it worse is the fact that even if I decide that I want to go to access healthcare as a pregnant woman, I'm scared now. I can't go to the hospital. A whole lot of them had to stay back home. Healthcare delivery, particularly for women who were pregnant was very, very poor.

In terms of domestic violence for women, access to healthcare became very challenging. And telemedicine was not an option. People never really explore telemedicine. We also saw the case of people having to access healthcare through local pharmacies. And sadly

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[1] A mechanic village describes a large tract of land where various automobile repairers congregate. There may be between 10 to 100 artisans in an average mechanic village providing various services from the main mechanic services to vulcanizing (tyre repairs), auto electrical works, spray painting etc as well as the sale of car spare parts.

the local operators of these pharmacies are not professionals. And so, you also had poor health education about COVID-19 going on within those spaces.

Taibat: In addition to what Deji said, there was also this issue of childcare with women. And then we have a situation where many people are pulling their children out of school. During the lockdown, the government started these online eSchooling programs for students in public schools as well as by radio and TV. But schooling of these children fell through the cracks, because they cannot afford the high data charges. They don't have sufficient electricity in their communities to be able to access those services. Many of them simply cannot even afford the devices. That has fallen heavily on their parents, particularly the mothers, because our culture, our construct is that women take care of the children. This has affected the families with many children, not being able to go back to school after the pandemic, because of loss of income on the part of the parents. That has been another unintended consequence, as it were, that affected household dynamics. We actually have lots of unwanted pregnancies now and the implications of that are still yet to be known.

Victoria: Again, COVID-19 has exposed the disparities in access to education. A lot of schools transitioned to virtual learning, and virtual learning requires access to the internet. A lot of schools, not just in the urban informal communities, but also in the rural areas, were almost completely excluded from virtual learning platforms.

In terms of exacerbating existing inequalities, including gender, we are beginning to see many trends emerging particularly due the longevity of the pandemic. For example, a lot of people lost their livelihoods, resulting in widespread hunger and anger. There were challenges with resource distribution in some areas, particularly in the informal settlement where distribution was highly politicized. In one of the communities, palliatives[2] were shared to people that had a particular party's voter's card. That caused a lot of tension. Hunger was a big issue, but a lot of corporate and religious groups tried to support government palliatives by distributing food stuffs and some other necessaries for households.

It's also worth noting that while there was a lot of awareness about COVID-19, including possible causes and modes of transmission, there is still a lot of misleading information that also contributed to unequal experiences of the pandemic. For example, there was misinformation and widespread perception that it was an elite disease affecting mainly rich people. Another thing fuelling this perception is that people living in the informal settlements live in very overcrowded houses, and still infection spread is very low in those settlements, contributing to false ideas that COVID-19 does not affect the poor.

RHJ: The economic crisis triggered by the pandemic and fear of infection have heavily affected migration patterns and conditions of life of migrants in many countries. Has the issue of migration in any way figured in housing struggles in your local context? How did

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[2] COVID-19 Palliative refer to the various measures extended to Nigerians to cushion the negative effects of the pandemic and related lockdown. In this context, they refer to food packs and/or monetary gifts.

the changes that came with the pandemic affect everyday life of different migrant groups in Lagos?

Taibat: I'm not sure if it was COVID directly, or the issue of the conflict in the North and in Southern Nigeria. Over the last five years, we have seen a large influx of people from Northern Nigeria coming into Lagos, particularly those whose villages were destroyed by either Boko Haram insurgency or the Herdsmen-Farmer clashes. Many of them move down south in search of economic opportunities. You have these pockets of Internally Displaced Persons and homeless people all over the city. Some of these clusters are now full-fledged communities in the Ibeju-Lekki axis. Essentially they come out panhandling during the day, particularly in peak traffic, or move from house to house surviving only on the benevolence of Lagos residents. When the lockdown happened, traffic ceased. So those who beg in traffic couldn't do so anymore. Moreover, they were not to be found on the streets.

The influx of migrants from the north also saw an increase in okada riders—commercial <u>motorcycle taxis</u>. Incidentally, they have been banned in most parts of the city since January 2020. This caused tensions within the informal economy as many okada riders became unemployed and were made redundant just before the lockdown.

Deji: Like Dr. Taibat rightly said, migration wasn't probably COVID-related. It was the normal migration of some people moving from the north to the south, to Lagos.

During that period, we had the case of two people who moved into a particular community and the people became wary saying, 'Hey, we need to get them tested.' We tried to talk to them to cooperate with us and get tested because they were coming from Kano, which had some high cases, although less when compared to Lagos. The case in point on the issue therein was that we tried to access a government agency to help conduct the test for these people who had migrated or just came into town. Access to that was really difficult and people's responses to the test requests was extremely tough. They never, ever got to do any tests for the people. In fact, the people actually moved from that particular location to another unknown location. What I would say is that the migrations were happening and that also caused a bit of fright within the communities that were quite enlightened, and knew about the pandemic. There was really no formidable response by the government agencies to help out, to carry out necessary tests when it was needed.

Victoria: There was a lot of COVID-19-induced return to the country where lots of people abroad, particularly in the U.K. corridor, started returning home. A lot of elite households started bringing their children back, because of the perception then that infection rates in the country were low. There was a massive influx of returnees to the country, but it also caused a lot of immigration difficulties, because those returning were required to quarantine for two weeks. The quarantine centres were filled within days. That resulted in the government not knowing what to do with large numbers of people that were coming back to the country. I think it resulted in a lot of forced detentions of people, with people even staying longer than the two-week or three weeks recommended period.

I think there were lots of tensions during the time. I remember a particular woman from Benue whose case caused an opera, because they tested her and she was positive and she declined treatment, and yet she stayed there for two months and nothing happened to her. She didn't show any symptoms. And through a court order, she was then released.

RHJ: A common thread among your answers has been the fact that the government didn't do enough. We are interested in hearing more about what kind of expectations there were from people, especially in the marginalized community you have been talking about, of the fact that the government should have done something. We are wondering if there was an expectation, or essentially COVID just amplified a way of governing that, in recent years, has been criticised both locally and internationally for its use of policing, and the accusation of embezzling funds?

Victoria: I wouldn't say the government didn't do anything at all. I think there were lots and lots of interventions, social, economic, political interventions. The problem is, the interventions were not inclusive. The access to those interventions were limited, and those limitations affected particular classes of people, which are the people we're talking about. And again, a lot of people that we heard about having COVID-19 were extremely wealthy people. People dying from COVID-19 were extremely wealthy people. That just deepened the divide, the inequality divide in the country, between the rich and the poor.

This is a 'big man's' disease. According to substantiated media reports, infected patients needing emergency care have to deposit as much as 10-million Naira ($26,000) to get a bed space in local hospitals. This means that access to treatment was limited to only the super-rich elites to the exclusion of the vast populations living on the margins and below the minimum wage.

The questions that people had were around when services would become accessible to all classes of citizens, irrespective of income or social background. Beyond COVID-19, and even before COVID-19, that has always been a question in the country. The question of equal access. Even in terms of housing, access to housing is also impeded by inequality, where you have a lot of government-provided housing that remains beyond the reach of even the middle class, let alone the people that are on the lower rung of the ladder. What COVID-19 has done is expose the underbelly of the governance systems, the deeply entrenched inequality. To your question about what are the expectations? The expectations have remained the same. COVID simply magnified the existing problems of unequal distribution of the state's resources.

Deji: In terms of government and in terms of expectation I think it also, it just showed the gap. There were really no expectations. The expectations in terms of what the government will do was quite low, although people challenged the government in terms of, 'How do you respond effectively to this kind of situation?' Take, for instance, the case of palliatives, the big question was, you should be able to get palliatives across to us. How is it going to be done? One major problem that was clear was the issue of data. How do we access the people? No citizen registration platform. Or should you use their banking numbers to send them money? The question was how effectively would the government have handled

palliative distribution rather than the way it was highly politicized? People had expectations, let me put it in terms of, 'Respond to us. Give us palliatives. Respond, do something.'

For us as an organization and with other NGOs, we had come up and said to the government agency that, 'If you want to distribute palliatives effectively, you can work with religious bodies, NGOs who work in different poor communities to respond effectively to this situation.' And we were part of a project by the Private Sector Initiative that distributed palliative around the country. They agreed with us that giving NGOs a good amount of palliatives to distribute to poor people was more effective than giving to government agencies.

Taibat: Well, what I wanted to say was that in the context of Lagos, I'm not sure the average Lagosian looked to the federal government or Buhari's government when the crisis happened. A lot of our attention was focused on the state government, and they started well in January. Perhaps because of the experience we had with Ebola in 2014, the state had a basic structure for responding to a health crisis. They activated that structure early, emphasizing that people need to be careful, started contact-tracing, coming out to have these public meetings and conferences, briefing the people, and all of that. They started well. We thought, 'Our state government has this thing under control.' By the time the national lockdown was announced and they started with the palliatives, then things degenerated very quickly. First, there was the use of defective data. The state government relied on the Residents Registration data, which only captures those who voluntarily go to the local government to provide that information. Hence the dataset was not an accurate reflection of the population of the city—especially not the vulnerable who often shy away from documentation. Then there were political riots as well. So, things degenerated very quickly.

RHJ: Can you say more on how people responded from below, and on the new ways the people of Lagos had to come up with in order to inhabit the pandemic changes?

Deji: I think people tried as much as possible to do what they could do, although there were also challenges from the bottom up. People, for different reasons, postulated or communicated about COVID-19 based on their own perspective. I saw religious leaders within poor communities who were more interested in having religious gatherings, settle their own people like, 'This disease is not real.' That affected some local solutions, whereas there were some community leaders who were able to come together and educate their people, and say to them that, 'This is a big crisis.' Like I said before, we had situations whereby people within communities were able to agree and say, 'You can defer payment of your house rent. You can reduce rents.' They were able to come up with local solutions. And we had situations in different places where they got support from NGOs to provide them hand washing stations, sanitizers and facemasks. Did the people really use much of it? Yeah, some did. Some did not. Interestingly we even had local solutions for hand-washing stations, just using a stick to create a water dispenser and all of that. From different communities, there were different levels of responses and their mixed

understandings. I think the people tried as much as possible to meet midway, and thankfully the outbreak was not so big in a whole lot of informal settlements.

Taibat: People came out to condemn what happened. But along the line, there was also what I call people as infrastructure. 'People as Infrastructure' is a term coined by Abdoumaliq Simone to describe the various ways people in informal communities support themselves in the absence of institutional provision. They were neighbours looking out for more indigent neighbours. There were contributions at neighbourhood, community levels, to take care of the most in need. Then in some communities you had the community leaders pulling resources to do these health messaging and the sensitization like Deji had alluded to. Lagos is a city of networks with people perpetually mobilising/organising to improve their neighbourhoods - from the informal local community groups to more structured Community Development Associations in low-income areas and resident associations in higher-income areas. People are accustomed to providing infrastructure for themselves, across low-income to high-income, and this was really activated during the COVID situation. While the government started on the right footing, and then disappointed us along the line, people just switched to what they were accustomed to, which is being their brothers' keepers.

RHJ: If we think about the next couple of years we can imagine hopefully a transition of sorts out of this COVID situation. How do you see the situation for housing and habitation in informal settlements in Lagos post-COVID? What kind of challenges are there, specific in relation to housing that were not there before? What are, in your experience, the major things communities will have to face very soon?

Taibat: Well I think that, like Vicky said, COVID just revealed what we have been grappling with along the line. In looking forward, I think it's just going to be more of the same, perhaps exacerbated because now even for the middle- and high-income, and the natural operators, the government, there's going to be more need for these resources, particularly the land resources where the poor reside. We can look forward to some of that. But on the other hand, in terms of the body language of the government, at least what they're saying is that they're leaning towards inclusive developments. They're tending towards bringing everybody, bringing people along and all of that. It's a case of saying one thing when you mean another, or sometimes the bureaucratic challenges within government. We have an urban renewal agency and a physical planning ministry that is showing interest in doing the right thing (inclusive development, planning from below, recognising the agency of the poor, according them some dignity, and providing a platform for participatory planning). But on the other hand, we have a waterfront and infrastructure ministry, that is creating these islands and enclaves for the extremely wealthy, who has their eye on the waterfront communities to convert them for economical uses. I don't see changing from what we have been accustomed to, but it's just going to become more urgent, and perhaps more violent now that the COVID-19 situation has resulted in more economic crisis for those who are higher up on the socio-economic ladder.

Victoria: I agree with what Taibat said. Apart from magnifying existing problems, COVID-19 has also created new (forms of legal) transgressions that weren't there before. For

example, people can now be arrested for not wearing a face mask. People can now be arrested for gathering in large numbers. COVID-19 has created a new excuse for law enforcers to arrest citizens almost for anything that can fit into their dragnet, opening the doors for a wide range of human rights abuses.

In some areas, disproportionate use of force has been used to enforce COVID-19 guidelines.

I don't know whether you've come across the Closing Spaces database.[3] There is a section on COVID-19. You can see how we have tracked a lot of COVID-19 abuses, ranging from people who have been shot dead just for not wearing a face mask, or transporters violating the social distancing rules where before cars that could take four passengers are now required to just carry two. Maybe just mistakenly somebody carries three passengers, maybe a woman with a child, couldn't leave the other child, they have been victims of this kind of assault. You'll see quite a litany of those types of abuses.

These types of transgressions were not there before. You didn't get arrested over such an issue. Another problem is a backlog. The justice system is taking a toll on the criminal justice system, where a lot of correctional facilities are overflowing with inmates. Because the courts were closed for a long period of time, that created quite a long backlog. Many people have overstayed their time in correctional facilities because the courts are not open to hear their cases, to secure their release. It's just like a multiplying effect with the legal political system.

RHJ: The pandemic has revived nationalisms in the response to the health emergency but at the same time it reminded us that the issues that we are dealing with are not reducible to the borders of one country. Were there any international conversations or exchanges of solidarities in the housing sector that are worth mentioning?

Taibat: I think there were so many, depending on your background, where you're coming from. I think there were lots of changes, inter-continental collaborations and questions. A lot of academic-driven encounters and exchanges. There is the Global Platform for the Right to the City, Habitat International Coalition. On the continent, we have the African Urban Research Initiative and the various Centres of Excellence of the African Research Universities Alliance. Ours (Centre for Housing and Sustainable Development at University of Lagos) focuses on urbanisation and habitable cities. We host the African Research Network on Urbanisation and Habitable Cities, with nine member universities in Africa - currently looking at issues surrounding urban inequality and informality.

I think the challenge also allowed us to come together, particularly civil society actors, to think about some ways to support the communities we work in and also finding some ways to push back. With the support of Heinrich Boell Stiftung Nigeria, which provides a platform for collaboration and networking and supports projects that engender/enhance inclusive urban development, we had to issue a couple of public advisories or press releases regarding what was happening at the time. That has allowed

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[3] www.closingspaces.org.

us to continue to think collaboratively and moving forward has opened up new opportunities for joint work at the community and policy level.

It also allowed me as a researcher to shift away from being the dominant party in a research project and actually amplify the role of the community members. They are no longer just the focus of the study; they now play active roles as citizen scientists. There was a lockdown and people couldn't move around freely, but we still had to do research and learn about what was going on and how it was impacting the communities we work with. The citizen science approach enabled the communities to engage more. They were collecting the data, they were interpreting data, and we were able to get a better understanding of what they were really going through and how they were responding to it. And so we were able to prepare and deliver the Ajegunle-Ikorodu Resilience Action Plan. Because we're not allowed to move around, we had to become more creative. In becoming more creative, we actually ended up with a situation in which the people had a louder voice and more power in determining their community's future.

Participants

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