







## Urban governance challenges for sustainable development in Nigeria: Implications from the Owerri urban renewal policy

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### ABSTRACT

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Urban renewal is a highly prioritized agenda by both developed and developing countries globally in a bid to achieve sustainable development goals (SDGs). The renewal program aligns with the growing trend of making cities central to the rise and development of modern civilization. However, cities refer to complex entities that serve as people's living spaces. The article explores the gradual development of Owerri's urban city and provides perspectives on the challenges and potentials of its planning and management through fieldwork conducted. During the colonial era, Nigeria's semi-urban nature witnessed decades of transformation involving building roads with overhead bridges, modern residences, and commercial centers. The new renewal effort in Owerri has led to the demolition of private properties and market stalls, displaced traders, and deaths, resulting in legal disputes. The paper aims to provide a background of Owerri's urban development while exploring the sociocultural and political challenges associated with Governor Okorocha's (2011-2019) renewal effort, which falls under the fourth phase of Owerri's urban regeneration. The article adopted the Models of Urban Governance framework to explain the governance of Owerri. Findings show how public opinions, legal processes, and stakeholder cooperation have become fundamental in urban renewal policy for sustainable development.

**Contribution/Originality:** The literature reveals a significant gap in how Owerri urban renewal was influenced by a bold government's effort to transform it into a modern urban city. The study contributes by exploring socio-cultural and political challenges in Owerri's urban renewal efforts by offering valuable insights into the lack of inclusive governance of its urban stakeholders. This created a governability gap in Owerri's urban renewal agenda and its implications for developing countries in achieving sustainable development goals.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

This article discusses the history, development, and challenges associated with the Owerri urban renewal effort by the Government of Imo State. The renewal program was in line with the growing trend of making cities central in the rise and development of modern civilization. Cities refer to complex entities comprising natural, built, economic, and social components, which serve as people's living spaces (United Nations, 2020). Undoubtedly, modern cities

represent a significant shift from an earlier simple way of life to the contemporary complex social, political, and economic systems. Cities are globally known as organic entities, undergoing constant structural changes that help to signpost their importance. Research in urban renewal is largely in tandem with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), initiated to impact the global community, especially by improving local environments in developing countries to achieve the 17 SDGs by 2030 (Muluneh, 2024; Rosen, 2024).

As scholars have observed, cities are centers of economic, political, judicial, and cultural power as a symbolic and physical manifestation of state and corporate governance (Sassen, 1995). Urban renewal describes city branding, which is a tool adopted as a marketing strategy in promoting a city. This covers transformative processes targeted at restoring the city's identity (Sidiropoulos, 2024).

The aim of the article is threefold. First, it provides the historical roots of Owerri's urban development in its socio-cultural shift to modernity. Second, the study aims to demonstrate how the quest for Owerri's rapid development has led to socio-cultural and political challenges that featured under the city renewal effort of Governor Okorocha's administration (2011 to 2019). His administration provides multiple perspectives on the challenges and potentials of Owerri's city planning and management, revealed through the fieldwork we conducted. Thirdly, the study serves as a mirror to view the nature and style of urban regeneration in emerging economies, especially Nigeria. It offers explicit conceptual understanding of how urban governance has become a shared responsibility of both public and private institutions to deliver public services.

The significance of this study is unveiled through the conceptual implications of the Owerri urban renewal policy, which explains the overarching managerial style and governability gap of city renewal in most developing countries. Significantly, the study provides a lens to view a militarized (forceful) change in Nigeria's urban renewal efforts and in most developing countries. Furthermore, considering its midsize and megacities, Nigeria's level of urbanization is notably high. Globally, it is one of the fastest-growing urbanized nations, with half of its 1.8 million inhabitants currently residing in urban areas (National Population Commission (NPC), 2021; Ojo & Ojewale, 2019). Significantly, this study is consistent with the Sustainable Urbanization & Sustainable Development Goals, the 2030 Agenda. Its Goal 11 seeks to "make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable" by getting rid of slum-related environments, providing access to affordable transport systems, reducing urban sprawl, increasing participation in urban governance, preserving cultural heritage, and enhancing inclusive and equitable urban planning (United Nations, 2018).

The evolution and development of Owerri can be observed in four phases. The first phase dates back over a century, to when the town was founded. According to Onyekakeyah (2017), its history reveals that a man named Ekwem Oha, whose mother was Arugo, launched Owerri. Ekwem fled from Uratta in the present Owerri North Local Government Area on account of a family feud over the sharing of the funeral cow of their father, Oha. The escapee Ekwem arrived and settled at a hilltop called Ugwu Ekwema, a thick rainforest inhabited by lions, tigers, pythons, and other dangerous wild animals. Ekwem's family settlement here attracted other settlers, too, leading to a gradual but consistent development up till the colonial era.

Roads and other infrastructural facilities were put in place by the British. Owerri, which attracted migrants from many areas, was the capital of Owerri Province in colonial Nigeria. The most famous district commissioner for Owerri district was H. M. Douglas, immortalized in the eponymous road. Owerri grew from obscurity until 1970, when the Nigerian Civil War ended. The period from 1970 marked the beginning of the second phase in the development of Owerri. Major roads in Owerri were dilapidated due to the civil war, which left some scars in some areas, such as Ama JK, Control Post, Assumpta Cathedral, and Okigwe road.<sup>1</sup> Owerri, in the 1970s, harbored houses with mud walls and thatched roofs and was becoming of little or no significance in the region until the creation of Imo State by

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<sup>1</sup> Luke Onyekakeyah, "Owerri, yesterday, today and tomorrow" The Guardian, October 17, 2017. Available at: <https://guardian.ng/opinion/owerri-yesterday-today-and-tomorrow/> (accessed April 20, 2019).

Gen. Murtala Muhammed in 1976, when it became the state capital. Making Owerri a capital city brought to the fore the third phase in its evolution, with changes coming to the town through Governor Samuel Onunaka Mbakwe's leadership (1979-1983) that gave it a facelift (Decker, 2008). Despite the unimpressive efforts of most subsequent Imo political leaders concerning the development of Owerri, Governor Okorocha's (2011-2019) efforts marked a shift that falls under the fourth phase in Owerri urban regeneration.<sup>2</sup> It is also important to note that this study provides a rich historical context, as seen in Kordi and Ahmed (2023), which sheds light on Al Seef and its original purpose and design as spaces historically conceived. Undoubtedly, cities are typically engines of economic growth in the current globalized economy.

According to the United Nations (2018) in 2018, cities were home to predictably 55.3 percent of the global population. By 2030, urban cities are expected to contain 60% of the global population, with one in every three people living in urban centers with not least 500,000 people. It is important to note that the world has, since the 1980s, witnessed rapid urban renewal, in which UNDESA (2015) emphasizes that 54% of the global population reside in urban centers, a number that is projected to increase to 66% by 2050. Modern world civilization is measured mainly in line with developed cities, which significantly showcase most cities transformed into metropolitan centers of power and excellence. Countries directly or indirectly compete globally in urban renewal policy with the sole aim of enhancing national prestige as well as a tourist attraction for the sustenance of national growth and development. According to Olatoye, Kalumba, Mazinyo, and Odeyemi (2023), "cities are custodians of wealth, which promote socio-economic development, attract manpower, international trade, investments, and improve the physical and human resource base for the overarching aim of consolidating achievements in output efficiency, competitiveness, and excellent service delivery. Hence, Nigeria's sustainable urban renewal policy and development have become timely in tandem with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The need for urban renewal policy has become essential globally, especially in developing economies in their effort to achieve the UN development agenda. However, while city regeneration is one of the key tools in handling national development, the need to improve and sustain renewal efforts through a good maintenance culture is lacking in Nigeria to a great extent. For example, the poor maintenance culture in the country led to the establishment of the Federal Roads Maintenance Agency (FERMA) on November 30, 2002, through Act No. 7 of 2002, assented to by then-President Olusegun Obasanjo. It is the Federal Government of Nigeria agency concerned with road construction, improvement, and connectivity between the States of Nigeria. FERMA seeks collaboration to tackle flood, road abuses (Leadership Newspaper, 2014). The Federal Government of Nigeria has recently recruited approximately 17,000 youths for road maintenance across the country (Vanguard News, 2013). Yet, poor execution of road construction, housing, and other infrastructure projects awarded by the government to the public are often carried out with fake materials or are not built to last. These corrupt practices hinder Nigeria's efforts to achieve sustainable development.

The article is organized into its introductory section, unveiling the early history of Owerri city, followed by a literature review. The research method and the explanatory theory form the third and fourth sections, which shed light on the fieldwork and the crisis of urban governance and governability gaps, respectively. Finally, the results and discussion of findings provide further insight and solutions while the study concludes.

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<sup>2</sup> We have also provided a chronology of administrators of Owerri urban city, namely, Ndubuisi Kanu Mar 1976-1977; Adekunle Lawal 1977-Jul1978; Sunday Ajibade Adnihun Jul 1978-Oct1979; Samuel Onunaka Mbakwe (NPP) Oct 1979- Dec 1983; Military: Ike Nwachukwu Jan1984-Aug1985; Alison Amakoduna Madueke Aug 1985-1986; Amadi Ikwechegh 1986-1990; Anthony Oguguo Aug 1990-Jan1992; Evan Enwerem Jan 1992-Nov 1993 (NRC); Military:James N.J. Aneke Dec 1993-Aug 1996; Tanko Zubairi Aug. 1996-May1999; Achike Udenwa May1999-May 2007 (PDP); Ikedi G. Ohakim May 2007- May2011(PPA/PDA); Owelle Rochas Anayo Okorocha May2011-May2019(APC).

## 2. URBAN RENEWAL: A LITERATURE REVIEW

It is a global trend that large portions of the world's resources are now utilized in cities with large populations. This literature review highlights three critical areas of concern to the study, namely, trends in urban renewal, strategies involved in urban renewal, and the urban renewal and governance system in Nigeria. The role of the government is central to urban planning and land use restructuring (Wong, Zheng, & Qiao, 2020). The pressure on urban centers shows an increase in human population in cities, with projections indicating that urbanization, associated with the overall growth of the world population, may reach about 2.5 billion people by 2050. Additionally, approximately 90% of this increasing population is expected to concentrate in Asia and Africa (UNDESA, 2015).

The primary objective of urban renewal is to eradicate poor-quality and inadequate housing. It has embodied other developmental strategies, including revitalizing the city center, promoting universities and hospitals, industry-related expansion, and creating new towns (Zuckerman, 1991). Urban regeneration is now a prioritized agenda for built environment professionals in emerging economies such as Nigeria, where many urban centers were designed before the era of regional town planning and urban development (Oyesiku, 2011).

The renewal policies in Africa require extensive interruption and considerable costs for less-privileged city dwellers, whose houses, as well as their means of survival, are regularly shattered to build new structures that are regarded as developments (Roelofs, 2021). As Pettit (2018) observes, a new concentration on local political traditions may shed light on a similar issue: while attaining global standards may encourage the government in achieving its goal, in what ways are such schemes made legitimate to benefit more city dwellers, particularly the poorest inhabitants in the city who suffer the costs? Hence, Fernandes (2004) opines that urban regeneration typifies state authority in city arrangements. The state continues to prioritize privileged forms of accumulation and enforces aesthetic norms of hygiene, order, and modernity (Ghertner, 2015). As Roelofs (2021) further asserts, the idea of city renewal is to create a suitable environment, especially for private-sector-led development, leading to market reforms in addition to transforming the environment. The regeneration of city centers is essentially a process of viewing the urban milieu as a living entity undergoing alteration. The process entails pulling down structures, relocating people, and deploying government-purchased property for public purposes. Under the law, this process converts private properties to public ownership for metropolitan development projects (Chigbu, 2012).

The urban renewal concept is the economic engine and reform mechanism that political opponents of a reformer usually regard as a means of control. It transforms the community in the process and often results in the demolition of nearby localities (Gbadegesin & Aluko, 2010). For Couch and Fraser (2003), urban renewal is focused on the re-growth of economic activity in places where it is lacking, the re-establishment of social functions in prevailing dysfunction, or social inclusion instead of ongoing exclusion, and a concerted effort towards restoring environmental quality or ecological balance where it has been lost.

### 2.1. Strategies for Urban Renewal

It should be noted that a degraded urban environment is largely linked with poor living standards, especially among the less privileged population. This trend lowers the quality of the environment and, regrettably, affects the living standards of the people. Poverty contributes to the downward spiral of ecological damage, which negatively impacts both the output and the welfare of the urban poor (Lamond et al., 2015). In other words, urban regeneration involves certain businesses being relocated to designated places, the destruction of buildings, and the relocation of people as the government engages in the legal acquisition of land and other private property in order to accomplish urban developmental goals (Chigbu, 2012). For Lehmann, "The public realm must be age-friendly and supported by inclusive processes that respond to the local community and its changing economic and social conditions."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> An Urban Manifesto in nine recommendations by Professor Steffen Lehmann. Available at: <http://www.city-futures.org.uk/pdf/UrbanManifesto.pdf> (accessed June 10, 2019).

## 2.2. Challenges of Urban Governance Dynamics: Understanding the Gains and Pains in the Socio-Cultural and Political Dimension

Municipal land management, as well as renewal schemes in Nigeria, are associated with numerous problems. The official land management arrangement is burdened with the difficulty of making adequate land available for development, especially for the relegated group typified by women as well as the underprivileged (Rakodi, 2006). In addition, most of the unutilized compulsorily acquired lands in urban areas in Nigeria are associated with problems of non-payment of total compensation to landowners. Also, the legal framework concerning land administration in urban cities takes cognizance of constitutional as well as customary rights to land. Still, certain rights of an informal nature supporting women's rights are unrecognized (Adeniyi, 2013; Deininger, Hilhorst, & Songwe, 2014). Formalization is put forward as a better means of securing informal land rights (Birner & Okumo, 2012) but it also has many challenges. First, there is still the need for clarity about the mandate exercised by many regimes' bureaucratic rules engaged in land rights formulation (Adeniyi, 2013).

Second, the inherited colonial style of the rule, which laid down a procedural structure of the government's bureaucracy, involves its agencies in disallowing urban sector stakeholders (Ogbazi, 2013). The system has seemingly failed to incorporate stakeholders, including NGOs, CBOs, and non-official persons and groups, in the planning process (Ogbazi, 2013). Third, the urban development problem is worsened by unworkable as well as preventive plans, in addition to land development prerequisites (Egbu, Hari, & Renukappa, 2007). The aforementioned issues have contributed to unfair practices, undermining the authority as well as the significance of city planning in Nigeria (Ogu, 1999). City planners are sometimes viewed as alien authorities by urban residents, although such upgrading of the urban city is being done under a modern planned arrangement for redevelopment or renewal proposals (Lamond et al., 2015). While many studies on urban regeneration in Nigeria focus on Nigeria's rapidly growing urban cities with associated infrastructure decay, this study provides insights into the challenges of urban governance for sustainable development from the Owerri urban renewal perspective. As widely reported in recent times, "Managing city density is the key future sustainability challenge for low-income countries" (United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), 2022).

## 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE RESEARCH

The challenges associated with the Owerri urban renewal effort are explained through the lens of "Models of Urban Governance: The Institutional Dimension of Urban Politics" by Pierre (2011). He has used four models to explain urban governance in contemporary times, namely, managerial, corporatist, pro-growth, and welfare. These models of urban governance demonstrate diverse opinionated views among municipalities; however, they reflect the goal of urban governance, which remains the core of urban political choice. As Pierre explained, "Each model of urban governance is described according to four variables: the composition of key participants, the overarching objectives that characterize the governance, the main instruments employed to attain these objectives, and the most common outcomes of the different models."<sup>4</sup> This framework emphasizes that urban politics helps to clarify challenges associated with governability or "governance gaps" (Pierce, 1993). This study is explained by *Progrowth Governance and Managerial Governance Models*.

### 3.1. Progrowth Governance Model

This study adopts the "Progrowth Governance Model" and the "Managerial Governance Model" Pierre (2011). The two models explain the government's choice of action in its urban renewal policy and the managerial style, which is also adopted to show the character of the governing officials, respectively. Pro-growth governance is known and estimated to be the most popular abstraction of urban politics in recent years in the U.S.A.'s political economy. The

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<sup>4</sup> This is consistent with section 5 of this article which looks at the dimensions and operations of Owerri urban renewal programme



degree of the city's economic management provides room for political choice, especially by the leadership. Political choice in urban governance is vital since governance is the art of making policy decisions that reflect policy choices by political leaders. It refers to the kind of growth plan to follow and the choice of interconnected associates in the project. This is important given that some individuals in authority take actions for personal ambition, which creates problems along the line. Pro-growth governance represents such arrangements for accommodating both political and economic power. Pro-growth governance has the characteristics of close public-private interaction (Savitch, 1998).

### 3.2. Managerial Governance Model

Managerial governance is first illustrated in this model by Pierre (2011) while adopting the analysis of Keating (1991) who used local government as an institutional reference to explain its two dimensions. The democratic-participatory dimension describes local government as a tool for managing political conflict. The problem, as seen in many nations of the world, is associated with widespread deviation from collective political involvement in pursuing personal gains (Dalton, 1996; Pierre, 2011). Undoubtedly, urban service delivery determines the scope of urban governance. The system and procedures for managing urban cities for development are diverse and weak in responding to increasing requirements of urbanization, and the institutional framework is fairly complex with overlapping roles and responsibilities” (Pandey, 2012).

Urban governance is a set of planned actions, a focus on specific goals to achieve by a set of institutions involving both public and private sectors toward public service delivery (Hint, 2000; Stoker, 1998). The art of governance largely depends on the “blurring of boundaries and responsibilities for tackling social and economic issues” beyond the government (Stoker, 1998). According to Nickel and Clark (2024) “Discussions about what services are delivered, how roads are maintained, or why budgets are cut are not simply the view of local government but are shaped by a host of factors, from state law to local government arrangements.

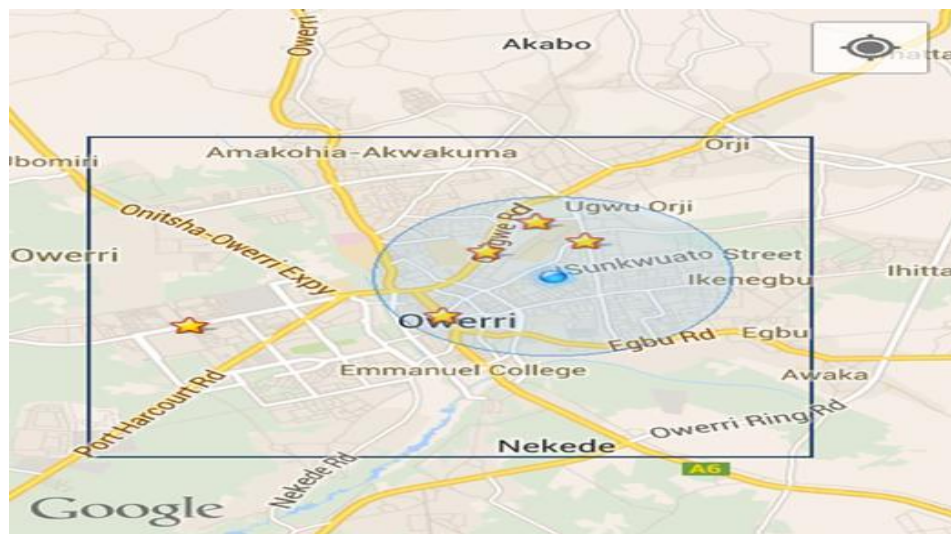


Figure 1. Map of Owerri metropolis (Study area).<sup>5</sup>

## 4. METHOD

### 4.1. Study Area

The interviews were conducted in five central districts in Owerri urban, namely, Amakohia-Akwakuma, Egbu, Nekede, Ikenegbu, and Orji axis of the metropolis, shown in Figure 1.

<sup>5</sup> The names (inbox) are sections of Owerri city covered during the field interviews (adopted from <https://www.google.com.ng/maps/place/Owerri/> Retrieved on October 15, 2019).

This study uses a qualitative research approach through the field interviews we conducted between 2018 and 2019. A qualitative research interview is a discussion in which the interviewer seeks to understand the interviewee's knowledge, viewpoints, and thought process by observing how the interviewee responds to a given research topic (Chen, Li, Weng, & Wang, 2023; Stuckey, 2013). The study adopted a data collection method involving 20 selected respondents in Owerri urban city. The reason for the choice of the number is to accommodate important views that could be analyzed within the scope of the study. The respondents, who are professionals and men and women of high social status, provided multiple perspectives on the challenges and potentials of city planning and management in Owerri urban regeneration. Other sources are secondary data collections, which include books, journals, internet sources, and official government policy documents.

#### 4.2. Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

Ethical permission was obtained from the AEFUNAI Department of Political Science's research ethics review committee (Ref.: FUNAI/Pol.Sc/D.C.E.Q.A/vol.2/No.2). All the participants in the study gave their informed consent. All methods were conducted in conformity with the Helsinki Declaration on Human Research. The primary data collected during the field study focused on 30 selected elites in Owerri, the capital city of Imo State, Nigeria. Data were collected in two phases involving the help of two research assistants who lived in Owerri and linked the researchers to the respondents. Before the interview, the researchers provided and obtained the informed consent of the respondents through written communication as follows: "Please sir, will you participate in providing comments on the research questions below on the quest for Owerri urban renewal?" The rationale behind the study was explained to the respondents as being purely academic, while the respondents agreed to participate by ticking "Yes, I will participate" or "No, I will not participate," as shown in Appendix A.

In-depth interviews were adopted in line with qualitative field studies by Glaser and Strauss (1967), which can freely combine various data-gathering methods. The interviewees were asked questions centered on their perception of the Owerri Metropolitan Regeneration Project by the Imo State government, especially concerning their opinions, expectations, objections, and suggestions. Their responses were recorded. A social anthropological approach was adopted in the study because this essay examines multifarious social problems that involve people's beliefs and their actions that reflect their language and reasoning as areas of focus and critical information generated from open-ended questions (Granato, 2002).

The first phase of data collection lasted from 5<sup>th</sup> June to 25<sup>th</sup> November 2018. The second phase of the interview was carried out between 14<sup>th</sup> December 2018 and 10<sup>th</sup> April 2019. Some respondents who were too busy for a physical meeting were given the same structured research questions, such as, "Why has it become necessary for the government to transform Owerri urban into a modern city?" and "What understanding did Owerri urban dwellers have with the government on the urban renewal program and their expectations?" The respondents included property owners, senior government officials, businesspeople, academics, and legal officers within Owerri urban city. However, questions were raised as to whether the necessary steps involved in the Owerri urban renewal program were carefully taken. These include planning, sensitization/consultation of the citizens or public hearings, land acquisition (revocation of rights of occupancy), and payment of compensation. These issues of concern are common among most state governments in Nigeria in their inclination toward building new urban cities in the country.

However, their policies and approach to realizing their urban renewal goals ironically create problems and hardships for the exact masses the renewal is meant to benefit. The result shows that about 80% of the population interviewed welcomed the urban transformation agenda but were aghast at the government's impunity. This empirical study is similar to Hansson, Arfvidsson, and Simon (2019), which stresses the MDG experience by providing insights through an empirical study comprising reviews of policy documents in 2015, and interviews with 34 public officials in relevant departments in the City of Gothenburg, and 13 other municipalities as actors to enhance inclusivity for good urban governance. Arguably, Owerri's urban renewal policy can be seen as growth-driven, akin

to Melbourne's planning agenda, which was guided by the overarching Melbourne 2030 strategic focus on sustainable growth (McFarlane, Hurley, & Sun, 2023).

## 5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Urban development is a priority for developed and developing countries, although it is associated with challenges in all urban centers. It cannot take place outside the state, so most developments are politically motivated. This study provides multiple perspectives on the challenges and potentials of Owerri city planning and management under Governor Okorocha (2011-2019), which falls under the fourth phase in Owerri urban regeneration.

### 5.1. Public Perception About the City Renewal

The Owerri Urban City renewal program has generated public debates and different socio-cultural perceptions in the city. For example, an Owerri resident who was excited about the city's transformation recalled that major roads and some bridges that contributed to the capital's overall well-being were constructed and rehabilitated during Mbakwe's post-civil war urban program. This current program has brought about both excitement and pain.<sup>6</sup> The renewal program in Owerri impressed a civil servant in the city who observed that the program had improved some aspects of access roads the government created. However, most of the roads are still under construction. Modernizing Owerri city capital is timely, but the policy has some adverse effects on other aspects of city life. "The human costs are very high; many people have lost their lives, some are still unaccounted for, and some have permanent disabilities. Some we have seen in the clinic with severe depression and suicidal thoughts."<sup>7</sup> The transformation of Owerri came at a price. The traders were evicted from Eke Ukwu, Owerri, whereas others are counting their losses. The purported urban renewal has brought much suffering. There is a need to emphasize that the government should always consider people's economic conditions in whatever policy it is carrying out because it ought to consider people's opinions regarding policy implementation.<sup>8</sup>

### 5.2. The Expectations of Owerri City Dwellers

According to a university don, Owerri as a city was significantly backward, as it needed more of a modern city's social and economic indices. Therefore, city renewal is necessary to ensure social and economic growth.<sup>9</sup> Owerri's urban renewal has raised many questions. This is mainly because most Owerri city dwellers have yet to understand the benefits of urban transformation projects, especially when they see displaced traders roaming the streets without being taken care of or compensated for their property destroyed.<sup>10</sup> Despite challenges posed by city regeneration, the city renewal program is essential to increase the state's economic activities and to ensure the needed development. The urbanization process causes the transformation of towns, cities, and metropolitan areas while it reduces rural areas through rural-urban migration of economically active populations (Adesina, 2003).

There is a need for improved transformation of Owerri city facilities, considering the inadequate infrastructural amenities available. It is essential to understand that the transformation of Owerri into a modern city is fundamental to meeting the challenges of modern times. However, the improvement is yet to be felt by the city dwellers because

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<sup>6</sup> Anwubualiri, M (2018) "Owerri: Gains, pains of urban renewal" The Nation Available at: <http://thenationonline.ng/owerri-gains-pains-urban-renewal/>

(accessed April 10, 2019)

<sup>7</sup> Prince of the Njemanze Royal Dynasty of Owerri ancient kingdom, cultural custodians of the eke ukwu (owerri market) comments. See, "Okorocha's urban renewal scheme has negative consequences on Owerri town." Available at: <https://guardian.ng/interview/okorochasurban-renewal-scheme-has-negative-consequences-on-owerri-town/> (accessed April 12, 2019).

<sup>8</sup> Ndidi, "Owerri: Gain and pain of urban renewal"

<sup>9</sup> Interview with a university Don, Imo State University, Owerri, March 10, 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with a staff of Board of Internal Revenue, Owerri. July 12, 2018.



certain things that showcase the benefits of the modern city are still visibly lacking. It has, in a way, worsened the standard of living of many people who were forced back to their villages as displaced persons due to the unfortunate outcome of the renewal policy.<sup>11</sup> In recent times, urbanization has led to an increase in the environmental carrying capacity of urban areas to enhance the city's livability (Egolum & Emoh, 2017). It has been emphasized that people have desired to have an improved life under democracy; ironically, the standard of living here has remained poor due to the bad governance of the state.<sup>12</sup> Despite what people see as a life-enhancing plan by the government, there is no significant improvement yet; even the city renewal is received with mixed feelings due to the challenges it poses to Owerri urban dwellers and business people.<sup>13</sup> Expectations in this respect cannot fall short of the needs of the growing population of the Owerri metropolis. For example, Owerri is heavily populated by civil servants, accounting for 31.03%, while traders and artisans constitute 26.43% and 18.96%, respectively, as shown in Table 1. The need to create a conducive atmosphere for the teaming civil servants resident in Owerri urban city and spaces for traders and artisans has become a challenge for the urban managers. In addition, accommodating these groups, including professionals of 6.89% and a large population of retirees measuring 13.21%, as well as others, mainly students of higher institutions of learning in the Owerri capital city, as shown in Table 1, explains the diverse needs and interests (Kalu, Okoro, & Nwosu, 2024).

**Table 1.** Respondents on housing determinants in Owerri urban.

Occupation	Number of respondents	Percentage
Civil servants	54	31.03
Traders	46	26.43
Artisans	33	18.96
Professionals	12	6.89
Retirees	23	13.21
Others	6	3.44
Total	174	100

**Source:** Kalu et al. (2024) "A Model of Housing Demand Determinant in Owerri Urban, Imo State, Nigeria" *Research Square*, (Authors' field work September 2023– January 2024).

A good urban city consists of mobility, health, and harmony as components that describe smart living, which is the ability to create a decent, comfortable, and efficient living environment for the urban population (Yeh, 2017). According to Batmetan and Quido (2022), "Smart cities have become the choice in cities in developing countries. These cities use smart city initiatives as an effort to improve public services and regulate development".

### 5.3. Government Urban Renewal Style

Damage to properties belonging to Owerri urban dwellers is glaring as Figure 2 shows a private property touched and Figure 3 shows the Ekeukwu market destroyed. All these underscore the cost of the renewal agenda. The government has argued that city transformation is fraught with challenges, arguing that it is only possible to have development that is associated with inconveniences to the people. Further information revealed that the Ekeukwu demolition was taken beyond the scope it represents because the removal of the market has given the Owerri Capital City a new look as well as sanity. <sup>14</sup> The renewal program needs to be better conceived; it requires proper planning. People are unhappy because the current government needs to pay compensation to everyone, as approved

<sup>11</sup> Interview with the manager, Mobil Oil Nigeria Plc, Owerri, April 11, 2019.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with a lecturer, Imo State University Owerri, January 21, 2019.

<sup>13</sup> Interview, a lecturer, Imo Polytechnic, Umuagwu, January 20, 2019.

<sup>14</sup> George Onyejiuwa, The Sun, "Why I'm on urban renewal of Owerri – Gov Okorocha" Available at: <http://sunnewsonline.com/why-im-on-urban-renewal-of-owerri-gov-okorocha/> (accessed February 10, 2019).

by the law of the land. This is the most devastating aspect; a revisit of compensation is highly necessary.<sup>15</sup> In addition to the problem, the fees for market stall allocation are high, and the non-compensation of displaced dwellers is another threat induced by government actions.<sup>16</sup>



Figure 2. Damaged property during the renewal process.<sup>17</sup>



Figure 3. Demolished Ancient Ekeukwu market.

Source: The Nation, January 5, 2018.

In the midst of challenges associated with urban renewal, Governor Rochas noted that the program christened ‘Imo My Pride’ will showcase Owerri as a dreamland for tourism among other nice cities in the world.<sup>18</sup> Contrary to the Government's supposed good plan, its action was inherent with illegality involving the destruction of people's properties (Figure 2) without following due process, there is no temporary plan for individuals and less-privileged persons affected by the demolition of the Ancient Ekeukwu Market in Figure 2.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Staff of Partridge Sivigar Consultant, interviewed.

<sup>16</sup> Interview, Manager Mobil Oil, Owerri, Nigeria.

<sup>17</sup> *The Nation*, January 5, 2018, An urban renewal plan in Imo State has triggered cheers and groans among the residents. Available at: <https://thenationonlineng.net/owerri-gains-pain-urban-renewal/> (accessed July 10, 2019) Permission to cite image granted.

<sup>18</sup> Charles Ogugbuaja, ‘Imo urban renewal designed to attract investors’ *The Guardian* September 11, 2017 Available at: <https://guardian.ng/property/imo-urban-renewal-designed-to-attract-investors/> (accessed March 10, 2019).

<sup>19</sup> Interview, a staff of Southgate Hotel, Owerri, December 5, 2018.

#### 5.4. Public Sensitization and Legal Framework as Critical in Urban Renewal Policy

There appears to be a demonstration of political goodwill in transforming the Owerri capital city by the government. The renewal effort is a legitimate exercise and a laudable goal meant to lift human dignity and pleasure. However, the failure of the government to engage the citizens became an issue. The Government's negligence of proper sensitization of citizens was generally a significant problem in executing the program. The government should have given enough information and provided alternative measures to the people before displacing them. Owerri's urban renewal has inflicted more pain and hardship on the people and negatively affected their standard of living. It would have put the masses on the pedestal of glory and prosperity if it had been better conceptualized and executed.<sup>20</sup>

The welfare of city dwellers should come first. The government made some provisions for the displaced traders to embrace the transformation agenda. However, the provisions were inadequate, given the cases of displaced persons seen in and around Owerri.<sup>21</sup> The Government took care of some displaced traders, but the compensation needed to be evenly executed.<sup>22</sup> Several civil servants resident in Owerri believed that there is a need for a better understanding of the government's intentions arising from poor communication and lack of a procedural approach to reaching set goals.<sup>23</sup> There was no MOU and no proper sensitization of the people before the renewal program began. Unfortunately, the government failed to compensate people whose properties were destroyed. Some victims have taken legal action against the government.<sup>24</sup> The beauty of urban cities lies in their ability to create social infrastructure and networks that address vulnerabilities as well as meet local needs. Allowing a platform for social interaction helps to enhance community cohesion of the locality (Jabareen & Eizenberg, 2021). In other words, there appears to be a lack of a legal framework that should guide urban renewal and the limits of state powers in the process. According to Onyejiuwa (2018), the renewal policy has caused tears, agony, and pain to the people whose sources of income, homes, and businesses have been disrupted. One of the victims of the government's reckless demolition exercise decried the actions as uncivil, hence he chided:

The property I bought from the Government of Governor Ohakim, with documents issued to me by the Government, was destroyed by Governor Okorochoa's administration under the urban renewal policy. I took the Government to court. Some of us are in court today with the state government over its refusal to pay us compensation.<sup>25</sup> Constitutionally, local and municipal authorities are given the power to pull down or are mandated to order the demolition of structures, while also having the authority to improve, repair, or renovate a building. They are also responsible for paying compensation promptly, where appropriate to an individual who suffers loss or damage arising from the activities of a local authority.<sup>26</sup> The rule of law protects human rights and limits the arbitrary use of power, in which Lehmann's advice is apt: "Everyone has a right to the city. Strengthening public participation in decision-making and creating inclusive public spaces is an important goal."<sup>27</sup> The study of Owerri urban renewal has shown its historical development, current prospects, and challenges in which some findings emerged. First, people were happy with the renewal policy. They reasoned that the program would transform their environment and raise their standard of living. Second, empirical evidence has also been found that the same Owerri urban regeneration has caused city dwellers both gains and pains as displaced residents and traders groan in hardship. Third, the government

<sup>20</sup> Interview with another staff of Board of Internal Revenue Owerri, October 20, 2018.

<sup>21</sup> Interview, (anonymous) Okigwe Road Owerri, October 10, 2018.

<sup>22</sup> Interview, staff of BIR Owerri, March 10, 2019.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with a civil servant, MOHI, 9 Royce Road Owerri, February 12, 2019.

<sup>24</sup> Manger, Mobil oil, interviewed.

<sup>25</sup> An Owerri-based business man, interviewed, March 19, 2019.

<sup>26</sup> Demolition of buildings by government in Nigeria, is it legal or illegal? Available at: <https://www.naijalegaltalkng.com/article/land-and-properties-series/245-demolition-of-buildings-by-government-in-nigeria-is-it-legal-or-illegal>. (accessed May 10, 2019).

<sup>27</sup> Lehmann's notes.

was focused on transformation but seemingly insensitive towards the plight of the citizens by its failure to provide alternative accommodation and compensation for the damaged properties. Impunity reigned.

Fourthly, enough public sensitization on the overall Owerri urban renewal agenda is crucial. Fifthly, it is also found that the Government failed to produce a legal framework in executing the urban renewal program, especially on compensation to the affected city dwellers. The expectation of an enhanced living condition associated with the renewal program was not doubtful in view of the city's new look. Its new access roads and many other facilities showcase beauty. However, these findings also highlight the disappointment of a large section of Owerri city dwellers who paradoxically find the Government's aloof behavior unacceptable for compensation on properties affected by the renewal program. We argue that the value of Owerri's urban renewal is measured in terms of political leadership's behavior concerning the yearnings and aspirations of the teeming urban dwellers. Political leaders at whatever level need to sell their good ideas for the well-being of the people through acceptable political attitudes. Social interaction by the Government's urban program agencies was lacking in Owerri, thus showing unsensitized city dwellers and the Government's failure to carry professionals and stakeholders along in its urban policy agendas.

## 6. IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS

Urban renewal and its socio-political challenges have some implications for metropolitan governance. First, this requires consultation, especially with professionals who should have played advisory roles in implementing the policy. Their exclusion makes the actions of the government questionable. For example, as [Tu \(2018\)](#) observes, "Multiple other questions surrounding urban sustainability, of course, exist, such as what makes a people-centric sustainable urban development. Second, it is ironic to suppress people's opinions in democratic governance while pursuing a legitimate goal to benefit the same public. Third, the Government's compensation failure was against the rule of law. It is established that the properties destroyed were legally acquired originally and recognized by previous governments. The legal implication of the entire exercise is seen in litigation by the city dwellers who took the Government to court. The Government's failure to be civil and engage civil society in its urban policies is the missing link between its effort to improve city life and its failure to adopt due process. As scholars observe, the mindset that judges human conduct is a basic issue that controls behavior. In other words, human feeling is recognized from the thinking as well as the evaluation of an incident in an event. The human mindset has a major effect on the intent as well as actions of humans ([Alam et al., 2023](#); [Ogiemwonyi, Harun, Hossain, & Karim, 2023](#)).

The study contributes in five main ways to the literature on urban studies in developing countries. It exposes a militarized attitude of political leadership in urban development programs; urban renewal programs in democratic governance, the Government's refusal or ignorance of civil society participation in urban service delivery; and the legal implications of the urban renewal crisis. Furthermore, the Government should have avoided the use of military-style force. Using force limits people's rights and denies civil order in democratic governance. Fourth, the participatory role of civil society should have been considered by the Government in the renewal process. Fifth, the legal backing of every government program makes it a product of the ruling law characterized by due process. The destruction of people's property by the Government under the Owerri urban regeneration program without agreed compensation to property owners is not only illegal but also unacceptable, resulting in litigation in a court of law. People perceive the urban renewal process differently; hence, [Pierre \(2011\)](#) opines in his models of urban governance that various parts of the city, including the management, tend to embrace different values. As [Pandey \(2012\)](#) further posits, the complex nature of urban service delivery takes different forms, namely: (i) Environmental Externalities and Implications, (ii) Disaster Management a new dimension of municipal functions, (iii) Magnitude of Physical and Fiscal Gap, (iv) Emerging pattern of financing and alternative institutional arrangements, and (v) Urban Poverty Alleviation and Slum Improvement. The arguments of this study are generally relevant to the SDGs because sustainability requires using indicators in decision-making to enable innovation, integration, participation, and flexibility. For example, the Gothenburg region in [Hansson et al. \(2019\)](#) cited earlier includes 13 municipalities and



has a population of almost 1 million, of which 60% live in the city of Gothenburg. Interviews were conducted with officials in the city of Gothenburg, neighboring municipalities involved in city administration. As cities grow, resources tend to increase due to several interests that rise up to regulate the city and its resources to benefit them. Tension and conflict experienced during Owerri urban renewal were also triggered by a struggle among the contending groups against the government to regulate the lucrative areas of the city: markets, shopping malls, motor parks, industrial areas, etc. Sometimes, personal interests, especially among the executive arm, directly or indirectly interfere or become intertwined with the government's decisions, which may lead to the recurrence of such problems in the future. It is observed from a theoretical perspective that the renewal policy requires the incorporation of stakeholders in strategic management and city design for beauty to enhance sustainable development.

Finally, the government seems to have done a lot in the Owerri city renewal program, but the need to put in place a strategic maintenance culture for sustainable development is lacking in Nigeria. This is crucial because, oftentimes, expensive materials used in the city renewal effort are either stolen or destroyed by hoodlums in the city without the government taking immediate steps to replace them. Hence, such a poor maintenance culture arising from the State's inconsistency can frustrate the realization of SDGs 2030. Yet, urban renewal as a complex phenomenon is being embraced by countries in Sub-Saharan Africa in different dimensions. For example, "The decision-makers in Algeria have planned to deploy solar photovoltaic and concentrated solar power (CSP) as main renewable energy systems." According to Teggat et al. (2024), "The global community is targeting to triple the renewables capacity by 2030."

## 7. CONCLUSION

As this study has historically explored, understanding the challenges of urban governance for sustainable development may portray urban administration in Nigeria, as well as other emerging economies, as an exercise of forceful change. While the fieldwork lasted, the challenges and delays encountered during the exercise were temporary limitations. However, the study has directly or indirectly highlighted some institutional problems and governance gaps in the renewal program, especially in Nigeria as a developing country.

However, one major implication from the findings suggests that the government under democratic rule can cause disaffection in the society it is bound to protect. While the government is commended for its bold effort to transform Owerri into an urban city, the inclusive governance of its urban dwellers was absent. Hence, the Progrowth and Managerial governance models as frameworks provide insights into governability gaps in the Owerri urban renewal agenda. In other words, the core focus of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development revolves around monitoring progress as well as holding policymakers accountable because the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 230 global indicators envision a double function of representing a report and a management tool too (Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), 2015). The urban renewal exercise is a legal matter that should provide adequate compensation for individuals or groups dispossessed of their properties for development by the government. While it calls for justice and equity, the government should widen its scope of engagement by accommodating the views of professionals, landlords, lawyers, and business people as stakeholders in the urban renewal program in view of the growing need for a collective effort toward sustainable development in developing countries saddled with a rapidly increasing population and diversity.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A.

#### Owerri Urban Renewal: The Quest for Modern Cities in Nigeria

Please sir, will you participate in providing comments on the research questions below on the quest for Owerri Urban renewal? It is purely academic.

Yes, I will participate ☐

No, I will not participate ☐

1.Why has it become necessary for the government to transform Owerri urban into a modern city		
2.How improved is Owerri under the urban renewal project in meeting with Nigeria's quest for modern cities?		
3.How would you evaluate Owerri urban renewal in improving the standard of living of the people?		
4.What understanding have Owerri city dwellers with the government's urban transformation project? (Or) (Is the govt. taking real care of displaced traders, and compensation for damaged properties?)		
5. Recommendations		
Respondent's Name/title:		
Occupation:	Institution	Rank:
Address:		

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