

Release date: 9<sup>th</sup> November 2020.

# CITIZENS' CENTERED REBUILDING IN LAGOS

## OPEN LETTER TO LAGOS STATE GOVERNMENT EXECUTIVE, LEGISLATURE AND JUDICIARY

For almost two weeks, the world watched with bated breath and admiration the emergence of a creative and assertive youth movement in Lagos in October. Once again, it was not the glittering front of a high-rise office tower or luxury hotel which caught the international attention but the innovative and forceful spirit of the city's residents. Not only that, whilst violence and carnage was raging in certain quarters and streets of the city after peaceful protesters were shot at, residents came together, no matter the age, class, religion or ethnic group, to protect each other's lives and properties because they love their neighborhood, they love their community and they love their city. Their tenacity in the demand for a safe city to work and live in without fear, for accountability by those who govern, for jobs and development, reflect a collective vision of a city that works for all.

We take this opportunity to commiserate with all citizens of Lagos over the loss of lives, and destruction of both public and private assets. We believe it is time to pause and to reflect on the structural shortcomings in the way the city has been governed. These shortcomings have quenched its citizens resolve and determination to strive for the best as individuals and as communities. The backlash against public buildings (police stations, local governments, courts) is a sign of the growing disaffection between these symbols of state power and ordinary citizens.

**Future backlash can be avoided if Lagos State Government embarks on a careful, citizens' driven rebuilding agenda and if the Lagos Rebuild Trust Fund ensures that**

- The rebuilding reflects the principles of neighborhood inclusion and diversity and avoids a monotonous approach to the use of public buildings.
- The rebuilding process is driven by trusted and committed community members and not by party members and private sector contractors.
- Every citizen has the chance to access any executive or administrative position in the Lagos State Government apparatus based on merit, dedication and professional qualification; but independent of age, origin, wealth or party affiliation
- Government – citizens' relationship are in future driven by preventive and corrective strategies which will prevail over punitive measures

As such, the rebuilding period has to be used as an opportunity to focus on holistic and long term transformation of governance, institutional set-up, service delivery methodologies, approaches to engagements among the stakeholders and the processes of implementing the larger vision of Lagos. Reforms in the following areas are therefore indispensable:

### **1. Law enforcement agencies:**

While SARS was focused on upper middle-class young people for profiling and extortion, other police formations also target informal workers doing their work on the streets and public spaces for harassment and extortion. All levels of government in Lagos parade an array of punishment focused law enforcement agencies like “Kick against Indiscipline”, “Environmental Sanitation Unit”. They arrest and punish law-abiding citizens waiting at bus stops or doing business in public spaces, extorting money before the victims can regain freedom. The ambitious vision to create a utopian version of modernist urbanism in an African setting has led to direct hostility – expressed by numerous laws and regulations - towards urban informality, which is the dominant system of production and social reproduction of the majority. In addition to violent evictions and forced displacements, artisans, market women and mobile vendors are often displaced from their places of work without alternative arrangements. Often their phones are smashed so that they cannot call for help and they are sentenced on the spot by mobile courts.

- A shift in practice from the hostile bullying to a more conciliatory participatory public governance paradigm that embraces mediation and respect for citizens is necessary.
- This can be achieved by revisiting the enforcement procedures and manuals, (re)training of enforcement officers towards serving citizens rather than punishing them, as well as improved welfare and remuneration

### **2. Access to justice and the rule of law:**

Accumulated traumatizing experiences over so many years by so many people and without the hope of redress in a cumbersome and lame duck judicial system has resulted in citizen loss of trust and confidence in state institutions and a prevailing view of government and its institutions as essentially predatory. This was particularly evident when a judgement was given by a Lagos state High Court on an eviction case that the eviction of a whole community was a violation of their human rights under the Nigerian Constitution. With impunity, the Lagos State Government disregarded and flagrantly ignored the judgement. If citizens feel powerless because their rights are violated up to the level of the courts, the credibility of a government quickly fades and this could result in anarchy.

- Rulings, especially on land matters, have to prioritize the peaceful and inclusive development of all citizens and not the interest of the private individual. Where laws are made in such a way that they do not have the common good in mind, judgements should serve as a guidance for lawmakers who often do not have a legal education in reviewing such laws so that they reflect the interest of the citizens.

### **3. Local Governments**

Local governments are the drivers of development at the local, municipal levels and are charged under the constitution to provide critical social services in the area of primary healthcare, children immunization, sanitation, elementary education, establishment of markets and abattoirs, among others. Unfortunately, most of these functions are usurped by the state government, often imposing its decisions on local residents. Hence the local government system is severely incapacitated to perform

her statutory functions of addressing the urban service delivery and governance needs of communities and neighborhoods – and/or engaging with civil society for same. Elected local government officials on the other hand impose arbitrary taxes and levies while they simply ignore invitations to discuss and to embrace new initiatives emanating from their neighborhoods. As their complaints are largely ignored, citizens perceive local government premises more of fine payment centers rather than service delivery locations. Lacking capacities and denied of statutory financing, local governments have proved incapable of driving grassroots development. As such, new infrastructure and new investments will also remain white elephants as long as local governments are not given back their capabilities.

- The rebuilding of local government infrastructures destroyed during the last popular uprising, therefore has to be intentionally driven by the communities.
- Rather than rebuilding the local government structures which were destroyed in the mayhem immediately, all involved politicians and civil servants should spend time inside their communities to take stock of their needs to rebuild trust and confidence which are sine qua non for a participatory democratic process
- Offices should only gradually be rebuilt within the limits of their financial sources considering other priority needs, especially education and health. In the meantime, citizens can regain trust if local government reach out to them via innovative e-governance formats and pop-up offices located in public schools, health centers or other appropriate spaces.
- All future development initiatives at local government level have to happen in a gradual process through contextual pilot cases that stimulate local economic development and have clear benchmarks; implemented through community endorsed approaches.

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#### **4. Transparency and accountability**

Contracts for the delivery of public infrastructure and services are often shrouded in secrecy, fueling speculation and distrust among citizens. The 2017/2018 Visionscape debacle was only one of the most visible manifestation of questionable contracting practices in the sector. The true figures of the debts the next generation of Lagos citizens will have to repay to secretly kept private owner are not known. Meanwhile, good strides had been made in waste management in the city in recent decades, much more could have been achieved if the welfare of citizens and workers in the value chain, rather than the political interests of a few, had determined the allocation of state resources. Similarly, the contract awarded to a private company to collect toll gate fee in lieu of the construction and maintenance of the express way has never been made public. Neither are the figures for the bail out of the company by government funds available to those who are paying the bill. Even within the public-private partnership setup favoured by many, the culture of rents is so entrenched that it quashes any incentive for contractors to deliver true value for the money being spent by the state government. To increase transparency and accountability in the sector

- Lagos State Executive Council and House of Assembly has to reinstate the legal status of the PPP office as an independent vehicle for delivering development projects in a transparent and sustainable manner on behalf of citizens.
- Citizens have to be involved in budgeting for municipal services and associated infrastructure, especially at the local/community level
- Citizens have to be involved in the monitoring and evaluating the performance of contractors against key indicators determined in conjunction with citizens

**We encourage Lagos State Government and Lagos residents to join us in embracing a different vision of the city of Lagos which will prevent future anarchy and increase the trust of the citizens in their government:**

Lagos is a city driven by its biggest resource – the people with their enterprise, creativity, determination and their intelligence to negotiate urban space in the most efficient ways. Their self-organizational strategies are refined by a government, which learns from the local processes and systems, integrates them into her institutions and policies; and supports her citizens by constantly improving service delivery for their well-being and peaceful co-existence. The complex interactions in the city are managed in such a way that everybody’s needs and rights are respected at any given time and everybody can live without fear or oppression. The city will proudly define itself through its cultural heritage and history, the socio-economic diversity and potentials of its residents as well as its local biodiversity and green spaces.

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