The Environment: The Greening and Cleaning.

The need for environmental health and development has been in the center-stage of discussions for some years now. It has become quite a compelling issue either in governmental, academic or business circles due to several factors that are causing environmental degradation which in turn poses serious dangers to human health and survival. Every government in sane climes then considers it of paramount importance to address and keep addressing issues arising from and challenges militating against environmental health, hence the importance of the environment to earthly inhabitants.

Environment is essentially the threshold of existence. Its definition may not yield to easy and open-and-shut proclamation but its basic components ranging from the air, water, land, waste etc, are well known. Factmonster[[1]](#footnote-1) emphasizes that:

“[T]he environment is something you are very familiar with. It's everything that makes up our surroundings and affects our ability to live on the earth—the air we breathe, the water that covers most of the earth's surface, the plants and animals around us, and much more.”

The simplicity of definitions may belie the essential nature of environment to human existence but its centrality to human survival cannot be over-emphasised. The 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria provides what may be said to encapsulate the meaning of the environment in Section 20 where it provides that *“The State shall protect and improve the environment and safeguard the water, air and land, forest and wild life of Nigeria.”*

Lagos being a mega-city with huge volume of waste being generated on a daily basis, the need to preserve the environment stared us in the face at the commencement of our administration. The population of Lagos State is estimated to be about 18 million while the growth rate is between 6-8%. We have solid waste generation of 20,790.02m3. In terms of waste generation data, Lagos State waste generation per capita is 0.5KG/person/ day while Lagos vehicle density is over 222 vehicles per kilometer. The total Nigeria vehicle density is about 11 vehicles per kilometer. The implication is that Lagos is the most populous State of the Federation accounting for the highest level of waste generation.

I was privileged to serve in the cabinet of the youthful, dogged, committed and visionary Governor, Mr. Babatunde Raji Fashola, SAN. My tenure as the Commissioner for the Environment started in 2007 and ended in 2011. Environment during that period was the flagship of our administration as a principal concern of the amiable governor, Babatunde Raji Fashola, was the need for environmental regeneration and protection. The Governor’s message to the people of Lagos state tagged *“My contract with Lagosians”* was essentially *“to create a good and comfortable environment for all inhabitants in Lagos state. My mission is to bring back as much greenery as possible to Lagos”*. While the previous administration tried tremendously to address the waste and environmental challenges of Lagos State, it was quite clear that our environmental problems could only be overcome with conscious and consistent efforts aimed at institutionalizing the process of environmental protection, preservation and re-generation

Our strategy in this regard was encapsulated in the concept of sustainable development which, according to the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987, implies an approach that *‘meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’*. Prior to this intervention, Lagos was substantially laid bare of the trees adorning the roads and streets. The flowers and shrubs that beautified the frontage of tenements in healthy competition for the best landscape were all gone. Oxygen became a luxury as more human and machines emitted carbon into the air without trees to absorb them and replace with oxygen. Respiratory diseases were on the increase. This led to the greening concept which was targeted at creating a garden city as obtainable in a country like Singapore. In fact, Singapore was our model.

It will be recalled that as at 1999, Lagos earned the derogatory appellation of ‘the dirtiest city in the world’. Although by 2007, appreciable success had been achieved in the area of cleaning as the refuse hills that dotted the landscape of Lagos State had been cleared, leaving behind the challenge of recovering the blighted zones and abused open spaces for cleaning and greening. The first mode of accomplishing this was to embark on the aggressive greening of the road verges, roundabouts and open spaces. This we embarked upon immediately across the State. The advantage in this was not only the aesthetics it brought to the State, but the protective mechanism it served against indiscriminate dumping of refuse in these areas, thereby using it as a waste management mechanism. The discovery was that once you remove refuse from an environment and green it, people hardly want to dump refuse there again. There is, therefore, a strong synergy between cleaning and greening.

The second approach was to create both visual and recreational parks all over the State. As medically proven already, seeing green enhances eyesight. The park also enables people of the State to engage in meaningful relaxation which was hitherto lacking. It is needless to underscore the importance of this in terms of health improvement and general wellbeing. Family bonding is equally encouraged by this means. Tension is considerably reduced in homes and cases of hypertension were on the decline. As at the time I left the office in 2011, over 75 open spaces had been reclaimed and beautified with effigies of prominent and notable Nigerians adorning the nooks and crannies of the state. We succeeded largely with our aim of bringing back the lost glory and beauty of those old days when public facilities not only served as recreational and relaxation spots for Lagosians but also as memorial spots adorned with various ornamental trees, shrubs, green lawns and flowers.

It is important to state that the greening exercise led to the creation of several parks such as Muri Okunola Park in Victoria Island, Sam Shonibare Park, Alausa Park, Gbagada Park, Adeniji Adele Park, Ndubuisi Kanu Park, Alimoso, Badagry and Ikorodu Parks under construction. It is needless to reinstate the fact that several roundabouts and road verges were greened during the era. Greening the frontage of properties became the order of the day, particularly for corporate bodies. In fact, some bought into the programme to the extent of even donating seedlings and plants. I recall First City Monument Bank (FCMB) creating a campaign programme for greening. We put potted plants along major roads where it was impossible to plant directly on the soil.

The third aspect of our greening programme lies in the planting of trees in the state. We commenced this on the 14th of day of July, 2009 and since then, the government has declared the 14th day of July “Tree Planting Day” with over a million trees planted before my exit from government, particularly along the major corridors of Lagos-Abeokuta road, Ikorodu road, Lekki-Epe road and others. These trees serve as carbon sequestrator and erosion curtailment strategy. It also provides shades for the passersby as well as moderating the temperature of the city. Apart from several ‘area boys’, street urchins engaged in watching over the trees, numerous women were also engaged for the wetting of the trees.

Therefore, we used the greening concept to create a green economy wherein people were employed and empowered. Apart from people watering flowers planted by the government and earning a living therefrom, some became specialists in plants nursery to the extent that a road side operator of nursery sold plants worth more than twelve million naira in a year. So many horticulturists sprang up, our roadsides where they sited their workshops became more beautiful while they carried on their commercial activities. That may explain why the government could not stop the horticulturists from turning road setbacks to areas of commercial activities.

People in the ancillary services such as welders, interlocking blocks providers became gainfully employed. In fact, area boys were engaged and trained in the art of gardening and became useful to themselves. The same area boys were also used as watchers over trees planted by the government to prevent vandals from damaging or destroying them. There is also the security gain in terms of engaging these otherwise jobless individuals that had always been a menace to society. As at the time of my exit, more than 4,882 jobs had been created and I am positive that a lot more would have been achieved in that direction. This is in addition to the fact that the landscaped areas that used to hibernate these miscreants before are no more available for such notorious activities.

In addition, because the greening changed the perception of our city, foreign investment flow further boosted the opportunities available to the hitherto unemployed youths. As more investments get in, more industries are brought in with several attendant work creations. Due to the engagement of these youths, security became enhanced.

The greening exercise also led to the climate change campaign which we took to all levels and peoples; teachers, heath workers, local governments etc. The government also institutionalised an international lecture in that regard which has been a huge source of awareness and rich pot of cross-fertilisation of ideas on environmental preservation and management. Today, climate change club exists in all our secondary schools and its establishment is commemorated annually

Greening culture was introduced into schools and several programmes, such as “Me and My Tree” competition, were created to facilitate the institutionalization and acculturation of environmental protection and preservation in our younger generations. The efforts yielded tremendously when young girls and boys at their various homes do not only ensure the gardening of their surroundings, they also plant trees around their homes. Finally on greening, we made attempts at creating different nurseries for the propagation of plants for our greening programme, I must confess that not much was achieved in this regard before leaving the saddle but I believe it is worth pursuing if not already being done. To cap it all, a parks and Garden Agency was established to ensure that the greening revolution is sustained and maintained.

CLEANING

On the issue of cleaning, the need for strategic and effective management of wastes generated in the state was not lost on the government of Mr. Babatunde Raji Fashola, SAN, and, therefore, a co ordinated approach was adopted. We set out to ensure the continuous removal of all wastes and litters in the city which policy transcends mere removal of wastes to the realm of recycling of wastes.

Our immediate beckoning was to strengthen the private sector participation operations in the State. To this end, Lagos State Waste Management Authority licensed 358 operators, creating therefrom about 15,000 jobs. The sector’s operation was re-engineered in industrial, commercial and domestic waste collection services to cover all Local Government Areas in the State. Our highways/streets were not left out as the cleaning revolution managers numbering 10,000 clean 160 routes in 6 regions regularly making the roads a good sight to behold. The Ministry also had its sanitation gangs concentrated in Ikoyi and Victoria Island.

The Administration also introduced shoreline waste management system employing 1,000 personnel to rid our shoreline of waste and make them attractive to tourists that throng the State in quest of fun and sightseeing. New compactor trucks were procured in hundreds to enhance the capacity of LAWMA, particularly on the public highways whilst private operators were compelled to re-fleet their erstwhile refuse dispersal trucks that were not better than the refuse they were collecting and were replaced with modern compactors.

The Fashola Administration was the first to introduce collection and processing of medical wastes in Nigeria. Over 850 health care institutions were registered before I left office and LAWMA serviced 4,438 industrial/medical institutions to ensure proper waste collection and disposal in order to protect the environment from health hazards.

To compliment efficiency in the evacuation process, two Transfer Loading Stations were put in place to reduce the travel time of the trucks as well as reduce the carbon emission from the vehicles. One was put at Ebute Elefun and the other at Oshodi. This is in addition to the infrastructural upgrade done at the landfill site. Beyond this, it was necessary to make use of the waste for productive purposes as nature itself does not harbor vacuum and every waste generated is capable of being recycled to serve useful purposes. In this regard, nylon buy-back programme as well as recycling facility was put in place in Alimosho. Paper bailing machine was placed at Olusosun whilst the use of vegetal waste for fertilizer progressed at a steady pace.

Plastic Recovery is another area that we made a major achievement particularly with regard to small entrepreneurs. Apart from the State Government’s involvement in the area of plastic recycling, several small-scale entrepreneurs have ventured into this area successfully. With the support of the State Government, most of these entrepreneurs have established small-scale factories wherein they recycle used plastic materials. Similarly, we have been recycling nylon and nylon products, particularly, the non-biodegradable ones that could have been a threat to the environment.

Subsequently, the use of cart pushers for refuse collection was outlawed as these illegal operators dumped collected wastes indiscriminately all over the streets including drainages. It was unimaginable to the government that in 21st century Lagos, cart pushers whose activities had been outlawed by previous legislations as far back as the 50s could still be operating in a sensitive and most essential aspect of our lives.

Due to the incineration of refuse in our schools and the effects on the heath of the pupils, staff and neighbours, we decided to initiate the school waste collection system with the provision of collection bins and collection by contracted waste collectors. Later, we introduced the sorting bins to teach pupils in schools the art of sorting of paper waste from plastic waste and others. Several advocacy programmes commenced and enforcement became strengthened.

We also re-introduced the sanitary inspectors, otherwise known as *“wole wole”*, that is, the use of environmental health officers which were hitherto in limbo and who in the past were quite useful in environmental protection at the domestic level. In fact, we grew up in the 70s with the aphorism that the fear of sanitary inspectors was the beginning of wisdom.

We also created Zero Tolerance Zones in some Local Government Areas to oversee and monitor the environment in those areas without exception. They were to see to the eradication of street trading and working on drainage clearing, street cleaning and environmental sanitation. To enforce the relevant laws and make environmental offences less attractive to prospective offenders, we created special courts for trial of environmental offenders and enforcement of environmental laws. We set out to achieve this effort in ten Local Government Areas in totality with the resolution that we would not spread to another Local Government Area until we sustained the created ones of Ikoyi and Victoria Island first. As at the time of my exit, we were only able to add Surulere, Ikeja and Apapa Local Government Areas to the areas of operation in this regard.

Perhaps, the most astonishing and highly celebrated by Nigerians home and abroad was the re-invention of Oshodi which had become an albatross to transport, property value, security and environment. Prior to the recovery of Oshodi and the creation of a Recreation Park and greening of the road and rail set-backs, it was to say the least dreaded by the people whether in the day or at night. The exercise has restored sanity to Oshodi to the extent that night life has returned to the once no-go area. That such exercise was carried out without casualties in such volatile zone speaks volume about the managerial acumen of the man at the helm of affairs.

On the side of water pollution, not only did we start routine cleaning of drains and canals, major rivers and lagoons were dredged to create cavity to collect water. The Fashola administration during this period and beyond carried out massive de-silting of drainages and construction of new ones. Over 133 nos. of concrete secondary storm water collector drainage works measuring 84km, benefitting over 8.2 million people and providing employment for over 3,350 people were constructed. 54 storm water earth channel were dredged giving jobs to over 1,850 Lagosians. There was also the component of de-silting in this regard.

In general, de-flooding exercises improved the socio-economic activities of the citizenry and created about 25,000 jobs in all. Over 100 hectares of wetland was drained thereby reducing fatalities, properties destruction and economic waste. We may not have gotten to our destination but there is no doubt that we have travelled a long distance in the right direction and Lagos is better for it. This is complimented by public enlightenment towards attitudinal change which has positively impacted on the people.

Another major area of intervention was the waste water management. The long neglected waste water management was revisited. It is common knowledge that the indiscriminate disposal of various types of waste water - domestic, industrial, commercial and medical - has over time generated worldwide concern about the problems of pollution. The contamination of the atmosphere, rivers, lakes, oceans and ground water poses great threat to the environment and the health of the people.

To reverse this trend and save the environment from further abuse, the Lagos State Government under Babatunde Fashola designed a 5-year Sustainable Sewage and Sanitation Infrastructural Strategy and established a Waste Water Management Office to ensure sustainable waste water management through improved investment dynamics and implementation of environmentally sound policies, plan and programmes. The office has succeed in revamping the State-owned waste water management plants in Abesan, Oke-Afa and Iporin.

It has also constructed a new one in Alausa. It has a mandate to construct 10 new Waste Water Treatment Plants and increase waste water management capacity. Today, one can safely say that our water bodies are less polluted with the stoppage of the direct discharge of raw human waste into them.

It is to the credit of the Fashola’s administration that the greening and clearing projects changed the face of Lagos which has become the envy of other States of the Federation. It has also attracted commendation from individuals, groups and organisations both at home and abroad.

Energy Generation Plants have also been developed by the administration of Babatunde Fashola, SAN. We were not only generating some quantum of electricity from the sewage facility from the Governor’s Office Alausa, we were already also using methane at the landfill sites to generate energy as of 2011. As at the time I left government, a major project on the waste to energy was ongoing for the Odogiyan Industrial Estate in Ikorodu.

All these have not only made us number one in Nigeria when environmental issues are discussed, it has secured for us a place in the international communities where environmental protection, regeneration and conservation matters are discussed.

It is a great pleasure to be part of the administration of Governor Babatunde Raji Fashola as the opportunities provided the populace actually showcased Lagos State as a place where goodies can still be found and Nigeria is not all about crimes and the negatives. I must say that I am proud to once be part of a government that believes in building institutions that will make laudable policies and programmes outlive the implementation teams.

It is on record that Mr. Babatunde Raji Fashola, SAN, is a lover of Lagos State, nay, Nigeria, a legal luminary, a good manager of human and material resources who has shown that democracy is a government through which the largest good can be served to the largest number of people.

I congratulate him on the successful completion of his tenure. I wish him well in his endeavours outside the Lagos Government House and pray God to grant him long life and avail him more opportunities to serve humanity at a higher level of governance. With people like Mr. Babatunde Raji Fashola, SAN, Nigeria would move to claim its rightful place in the Comity of Nations at the shortest time imaginable.

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1. http://www.factmonster.com/ipka/A0775267.html [↑](#footnote-ref-1)