

Using Railways to Enhance Nigeria's Corridors of Commerce

by Olubunmi E. Aboderin

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a developing nation in possession of a large population must be in want of a robust transport system. (Forgive me Jane Austen).

There's at least one concerted-effort activity that every free, hale and hearty Nigerian does every day and that is, move. From home to school, to the market, to the office; from neighbourhood to neighbourhood; from one state to another; from city to village and vice versa; from one country to another, and so on. We are always on the move and the largest chunk of this movement is by road, whether on foot, bicycle, tricycle, "okada", by car, bus, "molue", you name it. Not surprisingly, the roads are usually congested. Given that many destinations are land-locked, the road appears to be the most convenient and economical way for the majority of people to complete their journey. But there has to be a more efficient, land-based, affordable mode for mass transit and there is: rail. The railway is a somewhat unexpected solution provider for seemingly unrelated social and economic issues, and it could well be instrumental in fomenting a much needed industrial revolution here, as it has done in other countries.

A fully-functioning railway network is not only useful for moving an assemblage of people from Point A to Point B, it's also effective for transporting cargo, improving distribution logistics, decongesting traffic, boosting trade nationally and internationally, enhancing tourism and even improving inter-tribal understanding. When compared to the bulk goods movement capacity of road vehicles, rail ranks higher in safety, speed, size of cargo hold, scalability (extra train carriages can be added to a locomotive manned by one driver with one attendant), and strength in terms of durability.

One way to improve the competitiveness of our exports is to have a full-bodied nationwide railway system that can be efficiently operated on lean margins. An intercontinental rail network would be even better. It doesn't hurt to dream, but let's walk before we run. According to the 2016 Economic Outlook published by Economic Associates, approximately 58% of our non-oil income is generated from four industries: trade, crop production, real estate and telecoms & info services. The revenue

generated by these sectors could grow exponentially if we had a robust railway system. (Assuming there is stable power supply that would complement production efforts rather than a convulsive one that frustrates the best of intentions).

While new rail tracks are laid and existing ones are expanded, gas pipes and cabling for telecoms or electricity transmission, can be laid at the same time. Yes, such infrastructural undertakings are expensive, but then so are the mental, physical, social, economic and environmental costs of sitting in traffic for 12 hours because of an overturned trailer. And besides, such mammoth infrastructural projects are excellent opportunities to attract irreversible capital input from abroad.

Since the first construction of a railway in Nigeria just before the 1900s, we have built rail lines that go from Lagos to Kano; Port Harcourt to Kano; Port Harcourt to Aba; Abuja to Kaduna, and so on. Lagos also has an intra-state rail system. Unfortunately not enough attention was given to rail transportation from the mid-1960s till recent years. Now however, there is a move to modernize existing railroads and build new ones to international standards, so much so that we are likely to have standard gauge rail, at least, from Lagos to Kano; Lagos to Calabar; Kaduna to Abuja; and Itape to Ajaokuta to Port Harcourt. But ideally we should have railway service to every city, town, or hamlet with a population in excess of 500 people. Allowing the private sector to take over the railways would help achieve this goal. Privatizing the railways would raise much-needed revenue for governance, improve our time to market and increase the fiscal competitiveness of our locally made goods. It makes one wonder why the 1957 Railway Act, slated for amendment since 1999 has not been attended to.

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