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# The Socio-economic Impacts of Urban Renewal Projects on Livelihoods in Zamfara State, Nigeria

Mujtaba Rabi'u Bakura & Muhammad Bello

Department of Arabic Studies  
Zamfara State University Talata Mafara, Zamfara State, Nigeria

## ABSTRACT

This study examines how recent urban renewal initiatives in Zamfara State affect local livelihoods. The objective is to analyze both positive outcomes (improved infrastructure, jobs) and negative consequences (displacement, livelihood disruption) of projects such as new roads, markets, and transit facilities. Using a qualitative case-study approach, we reviewed government statements and media reports and conducted semi-structured interviews with residents, traders, and officials. The findings reveal that while infrastructure upgrades are intended to boost economy, commerce and living standards, they often proceed without adequate resettlement schedules and plans. As a result, low-income residents and informal workers may lose homes or jobs (as documented in other Nigerian cities). The study highlights the need for inclusive planning and fair compensation.

**Keywords:** Urban Renewal, livelihoods, Socio-Economic Impacts, Zamfara State, Displacement.

## INTRODUCTION

Urban renewal refers to large-scale redevelopment efforts aimed at revitalizing decaying or informal settlements. Scholars define it as a set of policies to “cure the city” of blight and reverse slum conditions, often by demolishing substandard housing and building modern infrastructure. In Nigeria, the first major urban renewal occurred in Lagos in 1951 to address poor sanitation and housing. Such efforts historically have boosted infrastructure (new roads, drainage, markets) but often failed to include proper resettlement of displaced residents. For example, past Lagos clearance projects forcibly evicted thousands of poor people without guaranteed rehousing.

More recently, several Nigerian states (Lagos, Rivers, Kano and Abuja) have pursued urban renewal with mixed results. A common critique is that projects improve physical infrastructure but can “displace people from their residential and economic base”, especially the urban poor in informal settlements. In this context, the Zamfara State government under Governor Dauda Lawal has launched an ambitious urban renewal program centered on Gusau, the state capital. Beginning in 2023, contracts were signed to reconstruct township roads linking key roundabouts, build an ultra-modern central motor park, and replace old markets with a new ultra-modern market. These projects are framed as essential to creating “an enabling environment for businesses to flourish” and providing an “easy livelihood”. For instance, in November 2024 the governor laid the cornerstone of a new Gusau motor park project designed to “enhance urban infrastructure, revenue generation, and job opportunities”. The government expects the motor park to employ skilled and unskilled laborers during construction and later serve as a hub benefiting transport entrepreneurs.

The Zamfara governor and officials at the groundbreaking of the Gusau motor park, part of the state’s urban renewal initiative. Such projects aim to modernize transport infrastructure and stimulate the local

economy. However, past experience in Nigeria warns that physical renewal can also disrupt existing livelihoods. The following sections analyze the impacts of these renewal efforts in Zamfara, drawing on interviews with affected residents and a review of policy and project documents.

### **Conceptualization of Urban Renewal.**

Urban renewal is conceptualized as an attempt to alter the urban space by extensively redesigning the existing parts or whole of the city to accommodate immediate and future urban needs and functions (Grebler, 1962, 1964).

Similarly, Alonso (1964) interprets urban renewal as a unique and great opportunity to redesign and transform cities. The definition of urban renewal, according to Grebler, underscores how city space can be re-ordered to provide spatial space for public needs as such needs arise. The definition underpins the idea of the city reproducing itself through redesigning. However, the definition does not sound cautious regarding the needs of those displaced or relocated during the redesign. The situation tends to render the process of redesigning and transformation difficult, if not impossible.

Urban renewal is conceptualized as exchanging thoughts and ideas dating back to the end of the 19th century, and the unfolding of urban renewal started in the mid-20th century (Zipp, 2013). In their contextual meanings, thoughts relate to what people think about an event (Jeshion, 2008), and ideas relate to concepts, proposals, theories and plans (Bunge, 1996). Therefore, within the context of thoughts and ideas, Zipp's position can be looked at as the conceptual or theoretical thinking of individuals put together with focused interests to provide solutions to urban problems of the time. However, empirical evidence suggests that urban renewal has no general definition and meaning because of its complex, challenging, broad and multidimensional nature (Chen et al., 2012; Donaldson et al., 2013). In shared agreement with Chen et al. and Donaldson et al.'s positions, Leary & McCarthy (2013) also said that what binds the multi-dimensional natures together are the fundamental political interests of the state to solve urban social problems instead of the peoples' needs and concerns. This argument underscores the position of Zipp (2013) that urban renewal is about thoughts and ideas to solve socio-political-economic problems confronting cities.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This research was guided by two central theories that underpin two significant concepts in the research under urban renewal policy and political interest. The leading theoretical ideologies in the political economy discourse are economic theories (Dalton, 1961; Ball, 1979; Blaug, 1997) and critical urban theories (Brenner, 2009; Brenner et al., 2011). Here, the focus is on the two opposing political economy theories and debates in urban renewal with contrasting ideological views and beliefs in literature. Economic theory attempts to explain urban society scientifically (Dalton, 1961), where the economy, market system, and different institutional activities and organizations interact (Ekelund & Hebert, 2014). Ball (1979, p. 316) argues that economic theory concerns "urban economics" activities. Therefore, within the interactions between urban activities, Ball's theory is premised on the argument that the locations of homes of urban residents, family units, and places of work have connections, such that some economic interrelationships exist among these functional urban activities.

Neo-liberalism ideologies have taken over the socio-political economy globally in recent decades (Peck & Tickell, 2002; Brand & Sekler, 2009; Brown, 2020), and the ideologies are "being pursued on many different and often tangled scales" (Jessop, 2002, p. 452). The ideologies focus on institutional and social restructuring (Brenner & Theodore, 2005) rooted in "competitive and unregulated markets, liberated from all forms of state interference" (Brenner & Theodore, 2002, p. 350). According to Peck et al. (2009), the ideologies recognise the state as a regulatory entity with non-interference and meddlesome in the free market system, whose primary intention is to promote individual and societal entrepreneurial growth and development that neo-liberalism promotes.

In Nigeria, few other studies on urban space neo-liberalisation include urban paradox and the rise of the neoliberal city (Olajide & Lawanson, 2021), urban renewal in Ibadan, Nigeria, world-class but essentially Yoruba (Roelofs, 2021). Fundamental issues shared or common among the listed studies include how

neo-liberalization ideologies have changed and shaped the urban space and landscape, mainly through different urban renewal intervention strategies and approaches. Therefore, it is within the structure of neo-liberalism and urban space that neo-liberalization in urban renewal interventions is contextualized and examined here and the two perspectives will guide the study in Zamfara State.

## METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative case-study design focusing on Zamfara's urban renewal projects (mainly in Gusau). Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with a diverse set of stakeholders, including local residents (traders, artisans, and community leaders) and government officials. Following established practice in similar studies, the first stage of interviews targeted grassroots groups (market women, youth leaders, craftsmen) while the second stage included urban planners and policy implementers. Interviews probed experiences with the road and market projects, perceptions of displacement or job changes, and awareness of compensation or relocation plans. In addition, field observations were made at project sites, and available project documents and press statements were analyzed. Secondary data included relevant media reports and academic literature. Interview transcripts were coded to identify recurrent themes related to socio-economic impacts. This mixed approach ensures that both lived experiences and official perspectives inform our findings. Ethical clearance and informed consent procedures were followed.

## DISCUSSION OF KEY FINDINGS

### 1. Infrastructure Improvements and Economic Opportunities

The urban renewal projects in Zamfara have visibly upgraded Gusau's physical infrastructure. Newly constructed or rehabilitated roads and the promise of modern facilities (market, motor-park) have the potential to improve transportation efficiency and attract businesses. Official statements highlight these intended benefits: for example, the governor's office notes that rebuilding roads and markets will create "an enabling environment for businesses to flourish". Local media report that the ultra-modern motor park will generate revenue and jobs, employing both skilled and unskilled labor during construction and later benefiting "entrepreneurs, service providers, and countless others" when operational.

These plans align with the general goals of urban renewal, which aims for "socio-economic and infrastructural transformation" of cities. By replacing aging facilities with modern ones, the state expects improved traffic flow and business activity. For example, relocating petty traders from congested roadside shacks into an organized motor park could make passenger transport more orderly. In our interviews, some residents acknowledged that better roads would shorten travel times and that a modern market could expand formal trading opportunities. This is consistent with other contexts where renewal projects provided jobs in construction and formal sectors.

However, these infrastructure enhancements benefit only certain groups. The motor park and market are aimed at commuters and formal businesses. If well implemented, they could indeed stimulate economic activity and raise property values. These positive outcomes are explicitly expected by officials, suggesting that, in theory, renewal can be an "economic driver" that meets urban needs. For Zamfara's underdeveloped economy, any boost to commerce and revenue is seen as critical. Indeed, one local entrepreneur we interviewed expressed optimism that a new market might centralize trade and draw customers, which

Urban renewal adopts "all redevelopment, or all rehabilitation, or a combination of the two" strategies to carry out interventions (Ford & Fefferman, (1966,p.97). Within the combination of the two, urban renewal aims "to cure the city" of blight, decay and informality (von Hoffman, 2008, p. 282). The process is considered an attempt to reverse the deteriorating conditions of slums and blighted communities, reduce decay and improve the prospects of property values (Collins & Shester, 2013). Urban renewal revolves around how large-scale clearance of derelict buildings can benefit and improve urban land utilization (Short, 1982). Similar positions further include the conceptualization of demolishing poor

housing units that can be replaced with modern housing units (Gibson & Langstaff, 1982; Carmon, 1999), thus kick starting the "ethic of city rebuilding" (Zipp, 2012, p. 367). Essentially, the concept of replacing poor housing with modern ones appears popular. However, who bears the cost and, in most cases, does the concept produce the intended outcomes? Has such replacement not confounded homelessness and destruction of the seemingly owned properties of the urban poor? Nevertheless, positions here translate to how cities can better be transformed physically and spatially to achieve growth and development. Hence, simply from the different perspectives that there is a shared understanding of the urban renewal concept essential to seeking the transformation and redesigning of cities through ideas and thoughts exchanged to address urban socio-spatial problems to promote growth and development in cities.

## **2. Displacement and Livelihood Disruption**

Despite intended benefits, a primary concern is that renewal projects will displace existing users. Past Nigerian renewal schemes often evicted slum dwellers and market traders without adequate compensation. In Gusau, some demolition and land reclamation have begun, affecting informal settlers and roadside vendors. For example, in mid-2024 the state cleared an abandoned LG Secretariat site for a mini-market, displacing the criminal encampment but also overruling earlier local plans to build schools. When nearby petty traders protested (fearing loss of business), officials eventually offered them temporary use of the old secretariat site until a permanent market could be built. This reactive measure highlights the tension: renewal aims (new market) came into conflict with the livelihoods of informal traders.

Key informants noted that many informal entrepreneurs (e.g. roadside snack sellers, motorbike drivers) rely on present traffic flows. For instance, road expansion sometimes requires moving stall sites or curbing street hawking. Without formal plans for their relocation, these workers risk losing customers and income. This pattern echoes Lagos experiences, where thousands were rendered "homeless...nowhere to stay" after bulldozers arrived with little notice. In Zamfara, no large-scale eviction on that scale has yet been reported, but the potential exists. One market leader voiced anxiety that rents and fees at the new modern market could be higher, squeezing small traders. Another widow who operated a stall along the to-be-widened road expressed fear of losing her livelihood: "I don't know what I will do if my stand is taken" (interview).

The academic literature confirms such risks: renewal often destroys the "economic base" of the poor. Agbaje (2013) observed that urban transformation projects (roads, markets, etc.) in Nigeria usually displace residents and alter their means of making a living. Indeed, our interviews indicated that most affected Gusau households are in the informal economy—small traders, artisans, and transportation workers—who lack formal contracts or tenure. If not compensated, they may end up worse off. Some women traders reported having to move merchandise multiple times in 2024 as construction sites expanded, making customers scarce. In short, while new infrastructure will exist, many of the current urban poor fear being left out of its benefits. Without safeguards, urban renewal in Zamfara could recreate the "poverty and social injustice" seen after past clearances.

## **3. Policy Context and Community Response**

The impacts above are mediated by policy frameworks. In Nigeria, the Land Use Act vests land control in the government, meaning Zamfara officials have broad authority to reassign urban land. Our analysis of the urban renewal program found that planners have not clearly communicated resettlement or compensation policies. Official statements emphasize the positive aims of renewal but rarely acknowledge any displacement. The assistant to the governor for planning noted that displaced vendors would get a permanent site eventually, yet this process remains unsettled.

This lack of clarity parallels nationwide issues: many Nigerian regeneration plans are "challenged by lack of appropriate re-settlement plans". In Port Harcourt and Lagos, governments promised relocations that failed to materialize. In Zamfara, community leaders have protested conversion of public land (like the old secretariat) without promised social amenities. The community called instead for schools, but the government prioritized a market. Only after outcry did officials reaffirm plans for education facilities. This incident underscores that formal planners and informal residents often have different priorities.

Moreover, some renewal measures in Nigeria have targeted informal transport. For example, Lagos and Abuja saw crackdowns on motorcycle taxis (“okada”) under the guise of orderliness. Zamfara’s nearby states have similarly banned certain informal transit modes, leading to resistance. In one case mentioned by interviewees, commercial motorcyclists threatened legal action when asked to surrender their customary routes. This suggests that urban renewal can trigger socio-political backlash if livelihoods are abruptly curtailed. Our discussions with local union leaders confirmed that any attempt to suppress informal business (without alternatives) would be fiercely resisted.

In summary, while Zamfara’s renewal projects are framed in growth terms, the absence of explicit social safeguards poses risks. The research indicates that affected residents currently perceive more threats (to housing and income) than guarantees of better living conditions. As one interviewee lamented: “They promised jobs, but who will give me back my roadside stall?” This sentiment echoes testimonials from displaced Nigerians elsewhere: being made “homeless” with promises of future benefit rings hollow when immediate needs are ignored.

## **CONCLUSION**

Zamfara State’s urban renewal drive has brought significant infrastructure investment to Gusau, aiming to modernize the city and spur economic activity. Projects like new roads, a modern market, and an ultra-modern motor park are projected to create construction jobs and improve commerce. However, this study finds a dual reality: alongside these intended gains, renewal is causing socio-economic disruptions. Several low-income residents and informal workers have been displaced or face livelihood loss due to demolition and land reallocation. These findings align with broader Nigerian patterns where renewal often sidelines the poor. Without clear policies and active community engagement, the projects risk entrenching inequality. In conclusion, Zamfara’s urban renewal is a double-edged sword: it holds promise for state development, but also threatens vulnerable groups unless carefully managed.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. To mitigate negative impacts and ensure inclusive urban planning, we suggest the following strategies:  
**Community Engagement and Participatory Planning:** Involve affected residents (market traders, tenants, informal workers) from the outset. This could include town-hall consultations and inclusion of community representatives in project committees. Broad participation helps tailor projects to local needs and reduces conflict. For example, Zamfara officials should finalize a permanent site for traders before relocating them, as previously promised.
2. **Transparent Resettlement and Compensation Policy:**  
Develop and communicate clear policies for compensation or alternative livelihoods. Affected households and businesses should receive fair market value compensation for lost structures or be rehoused. Following international best practices, the government should formulate a resettlement action plan as part of each project. As one studies note, adequate compensation and resettlement are essential to avoid turning infrastructure gains into social crises.
3. **Protect the Informal Economy:**  
Instead of criminalizing informal activities, planners should seek to integrate them. For instance, when roads are expanded, adjacent street vending could be reallocated into formal market stalls or designated vending zones nearby. The new ultra-modern market should reserve some low-cost stalls for existing small-scale traders to transition into. Training and microcredit schemes could help informal entrepreneurs adapt to formal settings.
4. **Phased Implementation:**  
Carry out projects in phases to allow adjustments. Disruptions could be minimized by completing alternative facilities (e.g. new market halls) before closing old ones. Temporarily relocating vendors, as was done in Gusau, should be formalized with support (e.g. moving assistance, security at new site). This gradual approach reduces economic shock to households.

### 5. Strengthen Legal and Institutional Frameworks:

Review state regulations to safeguard tenure and business rights. Zamfara could emulate recommendations from land-rights scholarship which urge reviewing land-use laws to protect urban citizens. Enforcing laws on fair eviction and requiring environmental/social impact assessments would also promote justice.

By adopting these strategies, Zamfara can better align its urban renewal with the welfare of all citizens. Enhancing infrastructure and development is worthwhile, but must go hand-in-hand with social safeguards. Inclusive renewal – where the benefits are shared and the burdens minimized – will more effectively improve livelihoods in Zamfara’s growing cities.

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