

The Role of Railway in Shaping Post-Colonial African Economies: The Case of Nigeria

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ABSTRACT: The development of railways played an important role in shaping the economic landscape of post-colonial Africa, especially in Nigeria. Emerging from the shadows of colonial exploitation, primarily as a tool for resource extraction but later the railway system became a vital tool for national integration, economic development and trade facilitation. This paper adopted a qualitative research method in tracing the historical evolution of Nigeria's railway system from colonial times to 2023, its economic significance and problems faced at post-independence. Findings indicate that while railways have the potential to drive economic growth, underinvestment, mismanagement, policy inconsistencies and competition from other transport hindered their full utilization. However, recent modernization efforts, including public-private partnerships and Chinese-funded railway projects, imply a revival that could enhance Nigeria's economic prospects. The paper concludes by recommending policy measures to optimize the sector for sustainable economic growth, including improved governance, investment in modern rail technology and integration with other transport networks. By assessing Nigeria's experience, this paper underscores the transformative potential of railways in Africa's broader economic narrative.

KEYWORDS: Railway, Nigeria, Post-colonial Economy, Infrastructure, Trade, Development

INTRODUCTION

Railways were introduced to Africa during colonial period primarily to serve the interest of European powers by facilitating resource extraction and export. In Nigeria, the first railway line was constructed in 1898 to connect Lagos to interior regions (Ibadan), aimed at transporting agricultural produce such as cocoa and palm oil to coastal ports for shipment to Europe (Okoye, 2013). The colonial infrastructure provided the foundation for Nigeria's transportation network, albeit with a focus on extractive industries. Post-independence, the railway system expanded, symbolizing a tool for national integration and economic cohesion.

The railway system was vital for connecting Nigeria's regions, enhancing trade and fostering economic activities. By linking rural and urban areas, railways facilitated the movement of goods and people, supporting agriculture, industry and commerce (Magbogunje, 1971). However, the colonial legacy of prioritizing economic extraction limited the railways' initial potential to serve Nigeria's broader developmental needs. Post-independence governments attempted to realign the railway network to national priorities but challenges persisted.

Despite its promises, the railway system faced severe underinvestment after independence. Policymakers neglected its modernization, allowing inefficiencies to grow. The emergence of road transportation further reduced its significance, as road networks became more accessible and adaptable to Nigeria's growing urban centers. Over time, the railways became increasingly unreliable, leading to a decline in patronage and economic contribution.

Today, understanding the role of railways in Nigeria's economic development requires a comprehensive evaluation of its colonial foundations, post-independence expansion and challenges, economic decline and attempts at revitalization likewise its potential as a driver of growth. A revitalized railway sector could enhance inter-regional connectivity, reduce transport cost and promote sustainable economic activities in Nigeria and across Africa. Comprising of eight sections, section one embodies the introduction, and section two analyzed the concept of development, and section three examined the colonial foundations of Nigerian railway. Similarly, the Post-independence expansion and challenges were explained in the fourth section, while the fifth section took a glance at the economic decline and attempts at revitalization of Nigeria railway sector. In section six, efforts towards modernization of railways were critically discussed. Recommendations were provided in the seventh section on the possible ways to solve the problems engendered in the railway transport system while the eight section dealt on the conclusion.

CONCEPT OF DEVELOPMENT

The issue of economic development has remained topical in Africa since post-colonial era. In analyzing the development of Africa with focus on Nigeria since independence from socio-economic dimension, this paper focuses on one of the major sectors of the Nigeria economy such as the railway (which is one of the transportation systems).

The concept of development is wide. Although no one knows when the concept originated, most people agree that development is closely bound up with the evolution of capitalism and demise of feudalism (Contreas, 1999). Generally speaking about development always refers to the problems of underdeveloped countries. Development is a multi-disciplinary, multi-sectored concept which has remained elusive. It brings about progressive changes in the socio-economic structure of any country.

Okobia (1984:12) view development as a process of economic, political and social change in a progress direction towards a better social well-being for the members of the society. Nwana (1998:5) sees it as harnessing of the resources for the realization of major objectives, solving their major problems.

This means that development from the foregoing consists of activities required in improving the attitudes and potentials of people. Probably this justifies the view of Boateng (1990) who describes development as the process aimed at improving the living conditions and circumstances of human beings both directly and indirectly.

Economic development generally refers to the sustained, concerted actions of policymakers and communities to promote the standard of living and economic health of a specific area. Such actions can involve multiple areas including development of human capital, critical infrastructure, regional competitiveness, social inclusion, safety, literacy and other initiatives. One growing understanding in economic development is the promotion of regional clusters and a thriving metropolitan economy (Abbot, 2003). In today's global landscape, location is vitally important and becomes a key in competitive economy as Nigeria is not a landlocked country but has access to the Atlantic Ocean to the South. This access positions it as a maritime hub in sub-Saharan Africa, influencing both economic development and geo-political importance (Oluwatayo & Ojo, 2020).

COLONIAL FOUNDATIONS OF NIGERIAN RAILWAY

The introduction of railways in Nigeria during British colonial rule was strategically designed to extract and export raw materials. The Lagos-Ibadan railway line, completed in 1901, connected the southwestern agricultural hub to Lagos, the primary export port (Falola and Heaton, 2008). This infrastructure supported the British colonial economy by facilitating the transportation of goods such as cocoa, palm oil and rubber to international markets (Ekundare, 1973). However, the primary focus on exportation meant that internal connectivity and comprehensive economic development were neglected.

The construction of other lines, such as the Eastern Line from Port Harcourt to Kano and the Western Line from Lagos to Kano, further reinforced the colonial intent of railways (Ayeni, 1991). These lines prioritized regions rich in resources, connecting mines and agricultural zones to export ports, while neglecting areas without immediate economic value. Consequently, this system entrenched regional disparities in economic development, a legacy that persists in Nigeria's post-colonial economic structure.

Despite the limited focus on national development, the colonial railways inadvertently laid the groundwork for economic integration. By connecting previously isolated regions, they enabled the movement of goods and people, fostering inter-regional trade. Railway transport also enabled urbanization by promoting the growth of towns and cities along major railway routes (Falola and Heaton, 2008). However, the prioritization of extractive industries over human mobility and local markets limited the railway's broader developmental impact.

Colonial railways were often built with substandard materials and outdated technology, further complicating their transition into an independent Nigeria. The infrastructure's design, aimed at short-term colonial gains, lacked the flexibility and sustainability required for post-colonial development. This created significant challenges for subsequent administrations tasked with modernizing the railway system.

The colonial foundations of Nigerian railways exemplify the dual legacy of infrastructure as both an enabler of economic activity and a tool of exploitation. Understanding this history is crucial for addressing systemic issues in Nigeria's transportation sector and leveraging railways for equitable development.

POST-INDEPENDENCE EXPANSION AND CHALLENGES

After independence in 1960, Nigeria inherited a railway network designed for colonial extraction. The government recognized the potential of railways for national development and economic integration. Efforts were made to expand the network to connect more regions, including rural areas to urban centers. Railways facilitated the movement of agricultural produce, industrial goods and people, thereby enhancing national cohesion and economic activity.

However, the railway system faced significant challenges in the post-independence era. The inherited infrastructure was outdated and poorly maintained, leading to frequent breakdowns and inefficiencies (Mabogunje, 1971). Additionally, the government's focus on oil revenues during the 1970s and 1980s shifted attention away from rail transport to road infrastructure, which was perceived as more flexible and cost-effective. This neglect further exacerbated the decline of the railway sector.

Corruption and mismanagement within Nigeria Railway Corporation (NRC) also contributed to the system's decline. Funds allocated for maintenance expansion were often misappropriated, leaving the railways in a state of disrepair (Ake, 1981). By the late 20th century, passenger and freight services had become unreliable, leading to significant reduction in patronage and revenue (Mabogunje, 1971).

Competition from road transport further diminished the relevance of railways in Nigeria. The expansion of road networks, coupled with the rise of private transportation companies, provided faster and more convenient alternatives for both passengers and goods (Oni, 2009). This shift in preference highlighted the need for a comprehensive transport policy that integrated railways with other modes of transportation.

Despite these challenges, the post-independence period highlighted the potential of railways as a tool for national development. Efforts to revitalize the sector have been sporadic but demonstrate the critical role rail transport can play in Nigeria's economic transformation.

ECONOMIC DECLINE AND ATTEMPTS AT REVITALIZATION

The economic decline of Nigeria's railway system became more pronounced during the late 20th century. By the 1990s, most railway lines were dilapidated, with outdated locomotives and inadequate funding crippling operations. The NRC struggled to maintain its services, and passenger volumes dwindled due to delays, accidents and poor customer services (Coker, 2015). Freight transport which had been the backbone of railway revenue also declined sharply, further reducing the NRC's revenue and ability to reinvest in infrastructure (Federal Ministry of Transport, 2014).

In response to the sector's decline, successive governments initiated policies and projects to revitalize the railway system. For example, in 2002, Obasanjo administration launched the Nigerian Modernization Project, aimed at upgrading the existing network and introducing standard gauge lines (World Bank, 2013). However, the project faced delays due to insufficient funding and contractual disputes. Despite these challenges, it laid the foundation for future railway development.

The Goodluck Jonathan administration (2010-2015) made significant efforts to rehabilitate the railway sector. Under his leadership, the Abuja-Kaduna railway project was launched, marking a shift towards modernizing the sector with standard gauge lines. This was initiated to enhance connectivity between the northern and central regions (African Development Bank, 2015). The rehabilitation of existing narrow-gauge lines, such as the Lagos-Kano route, also began albeit with limited success. These projects demonstrated a renewed commitment to leveraging rail transport for economic growth.

Private sector involvement in the railway sector also increased during this period. Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) were introduced to attract investment and expertise, particularly in railway infrastructure development and service delivery (World Bank, 2013). However, these efforts were often hindered by bureaucratic inefficiencies and regulatory challenges, limiting their impact.

The period from 1990-2015 highlighted both the challenges and opportunities in Nigeria's railway sector. While the decline of rail transport underscored the need for urgent reforms, the revitalization efforts demonstrated the potential for railways to contribute economic transformation.

MODERNIZATION OF RAILWAYS

A significant turning point in the modernization of Nigeria railway sector was witnessed in the administration of President Muhammadu Buhari (2015-2023). Recognizing the critical role of transportation in economic development, the Buhari government prioritized railway projects as part of its infrastructure development agenda (Federal Ministry of Transport, 2022). The Lagos-Ibadan railway, completed in 2021, became a flagship project, representing Nigeria's first modern standard gauge railway.

Under Buhari's leadership, partnership with Chinese firms and financial institutions played a crucial role in funding and constructing railway projects. The Chinese Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (CCECC) spearheaded several projects, including the Lagos-Ibadan and Abuja-Kaduna standard-gauge lines (NRC, 2022). These projects were financed through loans from the Export-Import Bank of China, demonstrating the growing importance of international collaboration in Nigeria's railway modernization (African Development Bank, 2021).

The Buhari administration focused on enhancing freight transport to boost trade and industrialization. The development of railway lines connecting ports, such as the Lagos-Calabar coastal line and Kano-Maradi railway, were prioritized to facilitate the movement of goods (World Bank, 2022). This initiative aimed to reduce the reliance on road transport, which had suffered from overuse and poor maintenance, thereby increasing efficiency and reducing transportation costs.

Despite these achievements, challenges persisted. The high cost of railway projects and reliance on foreign loans raised concerns about debt sustainability. Additionally, insecurity, particularly along the Abuja-Kaduna line, posed significant risks to railway operations. Kidnappings and attacks on railway infrastructure highlighted the need for enhanced security measures to ensure the safety of passengers and goods (Federal Ministry of Transport, 2022).

The Buhari administration's efforts underscore the potential of railways to drive Nigeria's economic transformation. By investing in modern infrastructure and leveraging international partnerships, the government made significant strides in revitalizing the sector. However, sustaining these gains requires addressing challenges related to funding, security and operational efficiency.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To maximize the potential of Nigeria's railway system as a driver of economic growth, several strategic steps are recommended. First, the government should prioritize sustained investment in railway infrastructure. This includes; expanding the standard gauge network, modernizing existing narrow-gauge lines and constructing rail links to undeserved regions. Investment in modern rolling stock and digitalized operational systems will also enhance efficiency and reliability.

Second, addressing insecurity along railway corridors is critical to ensuring the safety of passengers, goods and infrastructure. This requires deploying advanced surveillance systems, increasing the presence of security personnel and collaborating with local communities to prevent vandalism and attacks. Ensuring security will restore public confidence and increased railway patronage.

Third, railways should be integrated into Nigeria's broader transportation network. Developing intermodal transportation hubs where railways connect seamlessly with roads, ports and airports will enhance logistics efficiency and promote trade. Such integration can reduce transportation costs and create more competitive economy.

Fourth, government should encourage public-private partnerships to address funding challenges. By partnering with private investors, the railway sector can benefit from additional capital, technical expertise and improved management practices. Regulatory frameworks should be streamlined to attract private sector participation while ensuring transparency and accountability.

Finally, policies should be designed to make railways environmentally sustainable. Encouraging the use of railways for freight transport can significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions compared to road transport. Furthermore, incorporating renewable energy sources into railway operations will align the sector with global sustainability goals.

CONCLUSION

Nigeria's railway sector has played a pivotal role in shaping the country's post-colonial economic landscape. From its colonial foundations as a tool for resource extraction to its potential as a catalyst for national integration and industrialization, rail transport remains integral to Nigeria's development narrative. However, the sector's decline due to mismanagement, underinvestment and competition from road transport has limited its contributions to economic growth.

The revitalization efforts undertaken by successive administrations, particularly during the Buhari administration, demonstrate the possibility for transforming the railway system into a modern, efficient and reliable mode of transportation. Projects like the Lagos-Ibadan and Abuja-Kaduna lines highlighted the benefits of infrastructure investment and international collaboration. However, challenges such as insecurity, funding constraints and operational inefficiencies must be addressed to sustain progress.

The integration of railways into Nigeria's broader economic and transportation policies is essential for unlocking their full potential. Rail transport can significantly reduce logistics costs, enhance inter-regional trade and promote industrialization. Additionally, the environmental benefits of rail transport make it a sustainable alternative to road transport.

Ultimately, the railway sector represents a key pillar of Nigeria's economic transformation agenda. By addressing existing challenges and implementing the recommended strategies, the government can ensure that railways play a central role in achieving sustainable economic growth and national development.

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