

## URBANIZATION AND SECURITY CHALLENGES IN LAFIA, NASARAWA STATE SINCE 1996

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### Abstract:

This study examines the intricate relationship between rapid urbanization and evolving security challenges in Lafia, Nasarawa State, Nigeria, since its emergence as the state capital in 1996. Lafia has experienced significant population growth and spatial expansion, driven by rural-urban migration and state creation. This paper analyzes how this growth has intersected with pre-existing and emerging security threats, including communal conflicts, herder-farmer clashes, and urban crime. The study draws its rich sources from both primary and secondary materials which were used qualitatively. Findings suggest that unplanned urbanization has exacerbated these challenges by straining resources, altering land-use patterns, and creating socio-economic vulnerabilities. The study further explores the implications of these dynamics on sustainable development and human security, highlighting the urgent need for integrated urban planning, effective security governance, and community-based solutions to mitigate the adverse consequences of rapid urbanization in Lafia.

**Keywords:** Urbanization; Security Challenges, **Lafia**, Urban Crime; Conflict Resolution.

### Introduction

Urbanization, the increasing concentration of populations in urban centers, is a defining trend of the 21st century. While cities offer economic opportunities and cultural dynamism, rapid and often unplanned urbanization also creates significant security challenges.<sup>1</sup> This trend is not an exclusive reserve of only developing or underdeveloped countries but also developed countries of the world as well. For example, rapid urbanization in Latin American megacities has led to the proliferation of informal settlements, creating a breeding ground for organized crime, drug trafficking, and gang violence.<sup>2</sup> In Sub-Saharan Africa, rapid growth outpaces infrastructure development, leading to overcrowded slums and high unemployment. Social unrest and political instability in cities like Cairo and Tunis have been fueled by urban youth, poverty, and lack of political participation. Cities in South Asia have experienced ethnic and religious tensions due to competition for resources and political power. Cities in Southeast Asia are highly vulnerable to natural disasters and climate change, with dense populations at risk of flooding and displacement. Public health crises in cities with informal settlements, lack of sanitation, and limited access to clean water create ideal conditions for the spread of infectious diseases.<sup>3</sup> Urban terrorism is a significant threat, with cities targeted by terrorist attacks and cities with radicalized populations breeding grounds for extremist ideology. Addressing these issues requires a multi-faceted approach considering social, economic, environmental, and political dimensions of urban development.

Against this backdrop, this study discusses the nexus between urbanization and security challenges in Lafia City, the capital of Nasarawa State. Lafia is located in the North Central region of Nigeria. The coordinates of Lafia are approximately 8°29'30"N 8°31'0"E, and it is the largest city in Nasarawa State.<sup>4</sup> The state borders Kaduna State to the north, Taraba and Plateau States to the east, Benue and Kogi States to the south, and the Federal Capital Territory (Abuja) to the west. Essentially, Lafia is centrally located within Nigeria, serving as a key administrative hub in the North Central region. Historically, it has been established that Lafia was founded by Muhammadu Dunama in the late 17th century and has a rich history dating back to the late 19th century. The area was inhabited by various ethnic groups, including the Kanuri, Fulani, Gwandara, Alago, and Migili (Koro) peoples.

In the late 19th century, Lafia became the capital of a local chiefdom and became a significant trading center during Mohamman Agwai's rule.<sup>5</sup> In 1903, Chief Musa was recognized as Lafia's first emir by the British. The Lafia Emirate became a major part of the Lafia Division of Benue Province. Post-Independence, Lafia became part of Benue-Plateau State in 1967 and later Plateau State in 1976. In 1996, Nasarawa State was created, and Lafia was designated as the capital. Since becoming the state capital, Lafia has experienced significant development, becoming an administrative, educational, and commercial center. Educational institutions like the Federal University of Lafia have contributed to its growth, form, and structure in the 21st century.<sup>6</sup> Lafia, the capital of Nasarawa State, has experienced rapid urbanization since its 1996 designation, driven by rural-urban migration and economic opportunities. The city's population has grown consistently, putting pressure on infrastructure, housing, and social services. It is on the

backdrop of this knowledge that this paper investigates the rapid urbanization of Lafia and security challenges since 1996.

### **Drivers of Urbanization in Lafia since 1996**

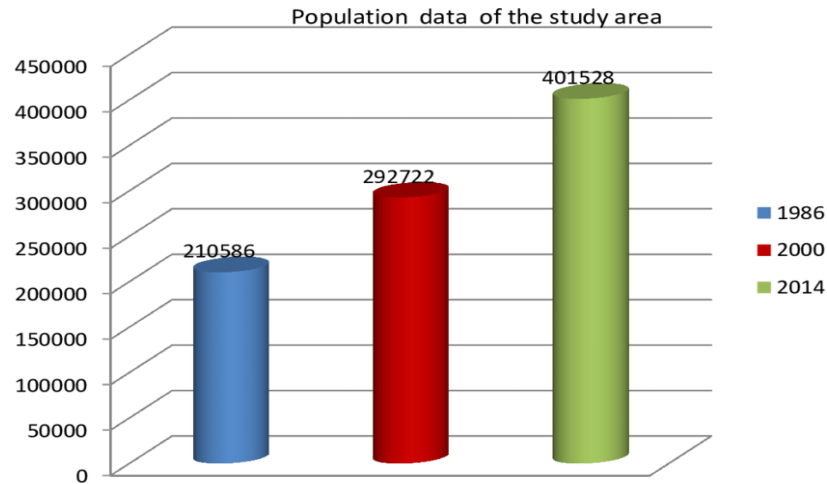
Since 1996, urbanization of Lafia continued to experience steady growth arising from the interplay of factors. One of such remarkable factors is government presence and administrative functions. This immediately transformed the city's role from a regional town to a center of government.<sup>7</sup> The relocation of state government ministries, agencies, and parastatals created a surge in administrative jobs and related economic activities. While government workers, their families, and associated service providers migrated to Lafia, leading to a population boom. Besides, the state government immediately started investing in infrastructure, focusing on improving road networks, improving access to essential utilities like water and electricity, and investing in educational and healthcare facilities. The development of institutions like the Federal University of Lafia and investments in hospitals and clinics have driven infrastructure development. Urban planning and development have been prioritized, with projects like the Lafia Bus Terminal and Lafia Cargo Airport being examples.<sup>8</sup> Economic infrastructure has been boosted through investments in the solid mineral and agricultural sectors. Public-private partnerships (PPPs) have been used to address the infrastructure deficit. Key trends include the continuity of projects initiated by previous administrations, a strong emphasis on infrastructure development supporting economic growth, and a growing trend towards using PPPs to finance and implement infrastructure projects. These efforts aim to address the infrastructure deficit and accelerate development in Lafia and other parts of Nasarawa State.<sup>9</sup>

Second is the issue of economic opportunities like trade, commerce, and small-scale industries, which have increased trade and commerce. The influx of government workers and residents stimulated local trade and commerce, markets expanded, and new businesses emerged to cater to the growing population's needs.<sup>10</sup> While Lafia's traditional role as an agricultural trade hub was reinforced with increased demand for agricultural products. Also, small-scale industries have created opportunities for food processing, crafts, and service-oriented businesses. Through these opportunities, the informal sector also grew, providing employment for many residents. Similarly, the solid minerals sector also draws people to the region, with the hopes of economic gain.

Third is the educational institutions and healthcare facilities that came to Lafia since it became the capital city of Nasarawa State. For instance, the establishment and expansion of educational institutions, particularly the Federal University of Lafia and other tertiary institutions, have been a significant driver of urbanization. These institutions attract students, faculty, and support staff, contributing to the city's population growth. The presence of educational institutions also stimulates related economic activities, such as housing, transportation, and retail. The increased improvements in healthcare facilities and the establishment of new hospitals and clinics open better healthcare facilities and attract residents from rural areas and smaller towns into Lafia.<sup>11</sup>

Fourth is the issue of migration from rural areas due to insecurity and economic hardship. Some of the security challenges in rural areas of Nasarawa State and neighboring states, including farmer-herder conflicts and banditry, have led to significant rural-urban migration. Thus, people seeking safety and stability have migrated to Lafia, contributing to its population growth. On the economic hardship, it is a generally acceptable phenomenon that there are limited economic opportunities in rural areas apart from farming activities. However, there is an existential threat by rural farmers as a result of the ongoing farmers-herders crisis coupled with the decline of traditional agricultural practices. Because of these reasons, a good number of rural people migrated to Lafia in search of better economic prospects.<sup>12</sup> Added to the above factors is the fact that Lafia's proximity to Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory, has had a significant impact on its urbanization. Thus, Abuja's rapid growth and high cost of living have led to an overflow of residents and businesses into neighboring towns, including Lafia. As a result, Lafia has become a commuter town for some Abuja workers, leading to increased demand for housing and transportation. This led to urban sprawl, which resulted in the development of new residential areas, commercial centers, and infrastructure projects.<sup>13</sup> The road between Abuja and Lafia, the Aso-Pada toll road, has greatly increased the traffic of people and goods between the two cities. The population increase of Lafia has been captured in Figure 1:

Table 1: Population Growth of Lafia between 1986 and 2014



Source: National Population Commission, Lafia, and.png

The above figure captures the population growth of Lafia from 1986 to 2014. It indicates that in 1986, Lafia had a population of 210,586 people. By 2000, after four years of Lafia as the new capital city, its population jacked up to 292,722 people, and by 2014, the total population of the city stood at over 401,528. This population might have doubled in 2025. Thus, the increase in population has brought an increase in security challenges, as the next chapter interrogates.

### Urbanization and Security Threats in Lafia

Urbanization in Lafia has brought economic and social benefits but also introduced a complex web of security threats. The rise in petty theft, armed robbery, kidnapping, communal clashes and ethnic tensions, herder-farmer conflicts, criminal gangs, drug abuse, yahooyahoo or cybercrime, and spillover from regional conflicts has all contributed to the city's instability. Petty theft, such as pickpocketing and bag snatching, has increased due to the crowded markets and public spaces.<sup>14</sup> It is generally observed that pickpocketing is a common crime in urban environments, particularly in markets, bus terminals, public transportation hubs, crowded public events, and areas with high foot traffic, which Lafia is not an exception. These areas are often congested during peak hours, especially during market days, and can lead to traffic bottlenecks at key intersections, government offices, educational institutions, and places of worship. The focus on buying and selling in these areas creates opportunities for thieves. Bus terminals and public transportation hubs are also vulnerable, as they are often filled with confusion and congestion. Crowded public events, such as festivals or rallies, all attract pickpockets in the Lafia urban settlement.

Armed robbery, both in residential areas and commercial establishments, is another serious concern in Lafia due to the increased availability of small arms. Thus, there is increasing kidnapping for ransom in Lafia affecting both locals and travelers. It has been argued that Lafia township, particularly around the Federal University of Lafia (FULafia), has seen a rise in kidnapping incidents, particularly targeting students. Thus, these incidents are not isolated but recurring, creating fear among students and residents.<sup>15</sup> It has also been established that the thick forests surrounding Lafia, particularly near Nasarawa Eggon and Toto Local Government Areas, provide hideouts for kidnappers, and the demand for ransom payments fuels these criminal activities. The frequent kidnappings have caused significant trauma and fear among residents, leading to student protests and calls for increased security measures.

On several occasions, the Nasarawa State Police Command has been actively involved in rescue operations, using technical intelligence and tactical operations to combat these crimes. Despite law enforcement efforts, kidnapping remains a significant security challenge in Lafia township. Only in 2022, the State Commissioner of Police, Maiyaki Muhammed-Baba, exposed that the Nasarawa State Police Command arrested 810 suspected criminals from January to December, with 136 arrested for robbery, 112 for kidnapping, 138 for cultism, 59 for rape, and other offenses. 374 were charged, 23 convicted, and 704 firearms, 44 live ammunition, six motorcycles, five vehicles, and N600,000 cash recovered from the culprits.<sup>16</sup>

Today, Lafia has been caught in the dilemma of yahoo-yahoo people who also indulge in ritual killings. "Yahoo Yahoo" is a colloquial term in Nigeria referring to internet fraud, not a formally defined historical event.<sup>17</sup> It gained prominence with the increased accessibility of the internet in Nigeria, particularly in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Early forms of these scams often involved email-based fraud, hence the association with "Yahoo," as Yahoo Mail was a widely used platform. Cybercriminals have adapted their methods over time, moving beyond basic email scams to include online dating scams, impersonation on social media, business email compromise, and cryptocurrency fraud. Lafia, like many other Nigerian cities and urban settlements, has seen its share of cybercrime. Reports from the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) indicate that individuals in Nasarawa State have been prosecuted and convicted for internet fraud. The EFCC plays a crucial role in combating cybercrime in Nigeria, including in Nasarawa State.<sup>18</sup> Court cases and convictions reported by the EFCC demonstrate that law enforcement is actively working to address the issue. Cybercrime can have a significant negative impact on individuals and communities, both financially and emotionally, and damage Nigeria's international reputation.

There are also increasing criminal gangs who engage in activities like drug trafficking, arms smuggling, and extortion. The emergence of youth gangs involved in drug distribution and street violence creates a sense of insecurity in certain neighborhoods. Drug abuse, particularly among young people, contributes to increased crime rates and social instability. Some of these drugs included cannabis, which is the most commonly abused substance.<sup>19</sup> Tramadol, a synthetic opioid painkiller, is also a popular choice due to its accessibility and perceived performance enhancement. Alcohol consumption is prevalent among young people, contributing to social and health issues. Pharmaceutical drugs, including sedatives, tranquilizers, codeine cough syrups, solvents, inhalants, cocaine, and heroin, are also misused. Designer drugs and other psychoactive substances are also a growing concern among the youths in Lafia.<sup>20</sup> and other psychoactive substances are also a growing concern among the youths in Lafia. Key factors contributing to this issue include peer pressure, unemployment, economic hardship, easy access to drugs, and lack of awareness about drug abuse dangers. While regional conflicts lead to increased violence and criminal activity, as displaced persons strain resources and create security challenges. Community clashes and ethnic tensions do escalate into violence, with occasional clashes over land ownership or grazing rights in Lafia leading to displacements and humanitarian crises.

#### **Urbanization and Infrastructure Services in Lafia**

Lafia, like many Nigerian urban centers, is experiencing significant population growth due to rural-urban migration, as earlier observed. This influx of people puts immense pressure on existing housing infrastructure.<sup>21</sup> Thus, this leads to situations where multiple families occupy single dwellings, or many individuals reside in single rooms. While areas on the fringes of Lafia have seen the rapid growth of informal settlements, or "slums," characterized by densely packed, substandard housing.<sup>22</sup> These areas often lack basic amenities like running water, sewage systems, and proper waste disposal.

There are also social challenges of adequate water and sufficient electricity supply. It should be noted that water scarcity is a major issue, particularly during the dry season, as the city's existing infrastructure struggles to meet the growing population's demand. Residents often rely on water vendors, whose water sources may be questionable, leading to health risks. Poor distribution networks also result in unequal access across different neighborhoods. While power supply is often dependent on electricity, it can negatively impact water supply. The rapid increase in population strains the existing water infrastructure. Furthermore, electricity supply challenges in Lafia include epileptic power supply, frequent power outages, inadequate power generation and distribution, and infrastructure overload.<sup>23</sup> The national grid faces challenges in generating and distributing sufficient power to meet demand, with reports showing that the amount supplied to Lafia is far below what is needed. As the city grows, the current infrastructure becomes overloaded, leading to failures in the power supply. The unreliability of the power supply forces many people to use generators, increasing the cost of living and doing business.

Another social problem in the Lafia settlement is traffic congestion and transportation issues; they continue to affect the city's efficiency and daily lives. Thus, traffic congestion stems from rapid urbanization, inadequate road infrastructure, increased vehicle ownership, lack of effective public transportation, market and commercial activity, and poorly managed parking.<sup>24</sup> There are also issues of poor road conditions, such as potholes and lack of maintenance, slowing down traffic flow. The limited number of arterial roads and narrow roads contribute to bottlenecks. Traffic congestion can lead to increased travel time, economic losses, environmental pollution, safety concerns, and a lower quality of life.

On healthcare, it is generally observed that the population growth causes strain on healthcare facilities and leads to long wait times and resource shortages.<sup>25</sup> The implication is that maternal and child health services are particularly stressed due to overcrowding. Overcrowded living conditions increase the risk of infectious disease outbreaks, while the distribution of healthcare facilities may not align with population density, leading to unequal access to care. Addressing these challenges requires investing in healthcare infrastructure expansion, increasing healthcare professionals, improving access to family planning services, and implementing public health initiatives. By acknowledging the connection between population growth and healthcare strain, Lafia can work towards a more resilient and equitable healthcare system.

### **Urbanization, Law Enforcement and Security Governance in Lafia**

The Nigerian Police Force and other security agencies play a crucial role in the urbanization process of Lafia. They ensure that the city's development, safety, and overall livability are feasible. Their key roles include maintaining law and order, addressing urban crime, managing urban conflicts, enforcing urban regulations, protecting infrastructure, providing security for development projects, and addressing the growth of slums. The security forces also maintain law and order by mediating in conflicts, enforcing urban regulations, and protecting critical infrastructure.<sup>26</sup> However, security agencies often face resource constraints, including inadequate funding, equipment, and personnel, which limits their effectiveness. It is also observed that corruption within security agencies undermines public trust and hinders their ability to enforce the law. A lack of community trust has impeded effective policing and crime prevention. Policing has transcended traditional styles in the 21st century given the nature and dynamics of crimes that are rife. Therefore, community policing holds the key but has not been properly adopted in Lafia. It should be noted that community policing is a strategy that promotes collaboration between law enforcement agencies and their communities. It aims to build trust and foster cooperation through regular interactions, information sharing, and joint problem-solving. It also emphasizes proactive problem-solving to address root causes of crime and disorder, such as social disorder, drug abuse, and youth delinquency.<sup>27</sup> Community policing encourages decentralized decision-making and accountability, empowering local police officers to work closely with their communities, and this enhances public trust, improves information gathering, and increases crime prevention. However, there are challenges of trust deficit, resource constraints, lack of community engagement, and inconsistent implementation, and this hampers effective policing in Lafia.

Another aspect is the role of traditional leaders and local security arrangements in Lafia, which plays a crucial role in maintaining peace and security. This is because they act as mediators, gather intelligence, mobilize communities, maintain social order, and provide local knowledge.<sup>28</sup> They also establish vigilante groups to supplement formal security agencies, conduct patrols, and apprehend suspected criminals. However, their activities can be controversial due to human rights abuses and lack of accountability. Community policing initiatives, such as neighborhood watch groups and community policing forums, enhance communication and cooperation between residents and the police.<sup>29</sup> Traditional security practices, such as charms and rituals, hold cultural significance and can be combined with joint task forces to increase security. However, the biggest challenges in this regard lie with such issues as effective coordination with formal security agencies, accountability and human rights, sustainability, and maintaining peace between different ethnic and religious groups.<sup>30</sup>

### **Impact of Urbanization and Security Challenges in Lafia on Vulnerable Groups**

Insecurity fueled by kidnapping, banditry, and other crimes significantly impacts daily life and economic activities. This is because it creates fear and anxiety among residents, restricting movement and affecting social interactions. Schools may be closed or operate under heightened security measures, disrupting education. Social habits are curtailed, leading to increased vulnerability. Significantly, economic activities decline, with businesses suffering due to reduced sales and revenue.<sup>31</sup> Urban insecurity has deterred potential investors and hindered economic growth. In terms of agriculture, the sector suffers due to food shortages and price increases. The transport sector is not left out. Generally, transportation increases due to security risks, adding to the economic burden. While important sectors like tourism potential are negated, and private security measures are increased.<sup>32</sup> Despite the fact that urban dwellers have continued to adopt survival strategies. Notable among these are community vigilance, traditional security practices, social networks, informal communication networks, economic diversification, collaboration with traditional leaders, community policing initiatives, self-defense measures, joint task forces, and the use of local knowledge. Despite these, the vulnerable groups, including women and children, suffer the most. These groups face unique challenges, including



increased risk of gender-based violence, limited access to essential services, economic hardship, increased burden of care, and restricted mobility.<sup>33</sup> Children are exposed to violence and trauma, disrupting their education and posing a risk of exploitation and abuse. Insecurity also leads to food shortages and limited access to healthcare, increasing the risk of malnutrition and health problems.

### Conclusion and Recommendations Towards a Safer Lafia

The paper has argued that rapid and unplanned urbanization has exacerbated security challenges in Lafia, Nasarawa State. The city's growth since 1996 has been accompanied by increased competition for resources, land-use changes, social inequality, and strain on infrastructure, all of which have contributed to the escalation of communal conflicts, herder-farmer clashes, and urban crime. These security challenges have significant implications for sustainable development and human security in the region, hindering economic growth, threatening social cohesion, and undermining people's well-being.

To address these challenges, the following recommendations are made: first, there is every need for the government to outline a comprehensive urban master plan to address the challenges of rapid urbanization, prioritizing essential infrastructure such as water supply, sanitation, electricity, and transportation. This could promote sustainable urban development practices to minimize environmental degradation and resource depletion, while land management should also be prioritized, with zoning regulations and clear guidelines for land acquisition and compensation established. Also, there is the need for infrastructure investment in housing, transportation, public spaces, and recreational facilities to promote social cohesion and reduce crime.

Second, the security sector reform and community engagement should be strengthened through law enforcement capacity. This could be achieved with community policing initiatives built to establish trust and collaboration. However, crimes could also be fought when youth empowerment is promoted through vocational training and employment opportunities. Furthermore, socio-economic development should be promoted through economic diversification, poverty reduction, education and awareness campaigns, and social protection programs.

Third, in terms of technology, which is an important tool in fighting crimes in the modern world, the attention should be on CCTV surveillance in high-crime areas, drones for remote areas, and an emergency response system. Governance and institutional capacity should also be strengthened by enhancing local government authorities' capacity to plan, implement, and manage urban development and security initiatives.

Fourth, the rule of law and justice are also addressed, with improved efficiency and effectiveness of the judicial system. This is obtainable when policy and legislation are reviewed and updated, with new policies and legislation developed to address emerging challenges and ensure effective implementation and enforcement. By implementing these recommendations, Lafia can create a more sustainable and prosperous future for its residents.

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