

## **The Impact of Population Growth on the Urban Development of Lafia Town from 1996-2024**

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| ABSTRACT                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | ARTICLE DETAILS                                                                                                                                      |
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| <p>This study examines the impact of population growth on the urban development of Lafia Town between 1996 and 2024, situating local change within regional and global processes that shape secondary-city expansion in sub Saharan Africa. Drawing on demographic registers, administrative records, multi date satellite imagery, and qualitative inquiry, the paper traces how natural increase, administrative reclassification, and diverse migration regimes (permanent, circular, seasonal) combined to reconfigure land use, housing supply, and service provision. The analysis shows that population pressure produced a mixed urban form: corridor and leapfrog expansion at the sub-urban fringe, densification near administrative and market nodes, and the proliferation of informal settlements where formal housing and municipal regulation lagged. Institutional and political economic factors customary versus statutory tenure ambiguities, speculative parceling, and constrained municipal finance mediated these spatial outcomes and produced uneven access to water, sanitation, electricity, health, and education. The study highlights how the sequencing of infrastructure investments and the governance choices of successive administrations created path dependent service inequalities that disproportionately affected newly settled and low income areas. Policy implications emphasize the need for clearer tenure arrangements, targeted infrastructure sequencing, participatory planning, and pragmatic measures (regularization and incremental upgrading) to steer growth toward more equitable and resilient outcomes.</p> | <p><b>Published On:</b><br/><b>05 August 2026</b></p> <p><b>Available on:</b><br/><b><a href="https://ijiissh.com/">https://ijiissh.com/</a></b></p> |

### **INTRODUCTION**

The history of Lafia's urban development from 1996 to 2024 is inseparable from the demographic transformations that accompanied its designation as the capital of Nasarawa State in 1996. This administrative reclassification marked a turning point of Lafia continuous development, as population growth became both a cause and a consequence of urban change.<sup>1</sup> The influx of civil servants, traders, and migrants from surrounding rural districts, combined with natural increase, produced a demographic surge that reshaped land use, housing, infrastructure, and livelihoods.

From the late 1990s onward, Lafia's expansion mirrored broader Nigerian urbanization patterns, where secondary towns absorbed migratory flows and became nodes of administrative and commercial activity.<sup>2</sup> The built-up area of the town expanded dramatically, rising from less than 10 percent in 1999 to nearly 40 percent by 2019, a transformation visible in cadastral records and satellite imagery.<sup>3</sup> This growth was not merely quantitative; it altered the spatial distribution of settlement, with densification in central wards and speculative sprawl along peri-urban corridors such as Alakio. <sup>4</sup>The historical record shows that these changes were driven by both permanent settlement and seasonal migration tied to agricultural cycles and market activity, underscoring the fluidity of urban presence in secondary cities.

Population growth also exerted pressure on infrastructure and public services. Historical accounts of municipal budgets and donor interventions reveal that service extension was path-dependent, privileging central wards and politically salient corridors while

<sup>1</sup> Usman, Impact of Rapid Growing Population on the Infrastructure in Nigeria (2025), p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> Lopez, Urban Growth and Land Use Change in African Cities (2021), p. 768.

<sup>3</sup> Medayese, Magidimisha-Chipungu, & Chipungu, Spatial Matrices of Urban Expansion in Lafia (2023), p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Zelinsky, Mobility Transition Thesis (1971), pp. 225–230.

leaving peripheral areas underserved.<sup>5</sup> Housing provision lagged behind demand, compelling migrants to rely on informal settlements characterized by insecure tenure and inadequate sanitation.<sup>6</sup> The coexistence of gated estates for middle-income households and sprawling informal neighborhoods reflected the duality of Lafia's urban development.

Socioeconomic outcomes were similarly stratified. Formal sector workers, particularly civil servants, enjoyed stable incomes and access to housing finance, while informal workers in petty trade, transport, and construction faced precarious livelihoods. Land values rose sharply along administrative corridors, benefiting developers and landholders but excluding low-income households.<sup>7</sup> Policy responses, such as the Lafia Development Plan of 2012, articulated priorities for land use management and infrastructure extension, yet implementation was uneven due to fiscal constraints and limited institutional capacity.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, the historical experience of Lafia from 1996 to 2024 illustrates the dual impact of population growth: it was both a catalyst for modernization and a source of profound urban challenges. The town's transformation reflects the interplay of demographic dynamics, land markets, governance structures, and household strategies, producing distinctive patterns of settlement, service provision, and socioeconomic outcomes.

### CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

#### Population growth

From the vantage of history, the phenomenon of population growth that frames is viewed as a sequence of interlinked episodes demographic momentum, migratory flows, land-market responses, infrastructural lag, and policy reaction each unfolding across decades and leaving material traces on the townscape. In the late twentieth century, scholars observed that African towns were entering a new phase of urbanisation driven not only by natural increase but by changing patterns of mobility and administration; Mabogunje's reflections on African urban poverty and the structural forces that shape urban growth capture this moment as one in which administrative reclassification and the siting of public institutions reoriented regional settlement hierarchies and created fresh magnets for in-migration.<sup>9</sup> Lafia, as many state capitals across West Africa, the historical record shows that the 1990s were a hinge; demographic supply youthful age structures and sustained fertility combined with policy and infrastructural shifts to produce steady inflows of people whose settlement choices were shaped by employment in public services, trade opportunities, and the relative accessibility of land at the urban fringe. This demographic supply did not arrive as a uniform wave but as a succession of pulses seasonal labourers, circular migrants, students, civil servants each leaving a distinct imprint on housing demand and spatial distribution.<sup>10</sup>

The first decades of the twenty-first century witnessed the spatialization of that demographic pressure. Global and regional syntheses of urban change emphasised that population growth in the Global South was not merely an increase in numbers but a reconfiguration of space: sub-urban conversion, corridor-based expansion, and the proliferation of informal settlements became the dominant geographies of growth.<sup>11</sup> Tacoli's historical account of mobility in sub-Saharan Africa is instructive here: migration patterns diversified, and secondary towns like Lafia became nodes in multi-sited livelihood strategies rather than mere endpoints of rural exodus.<sup>12</sup> The historical consequence was a patchwork urbanism planned estates and speculative subdivisions appearing alongside densely packed informal quarters whose patterning reflected the interplay of customary tenure, private speculation, and municipal capacity. Remote sensing and mapping technologies, which matured in this period, later made it possible to read these changes in the landscape as chronological layers: successive rings of built-up area, corridors of development along improved roads, and pockets of densification within older neighbourhoods.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Şenik & Uzun, *Spatial Sustainability and Urban Expansion in Developing Regions* (2022), p. 217.

<sup>6</sup> Magaji et al., *Evaluating the Housing and Living Conditions of Migrants in Lafia* (2025), p. 402.

<sup>7</sup> Long, Li, & Liu, *Urbanization and Sustainable Development in China* (2014), p. 945.

<sup>8</sup> Lafia Development Plan (2012), Government of Nasarawa State, p. 14.

<sup>9</sup> Akin L. Mabogunje, "Global Urban Poverty Research: The Africa Case," *Urban Update*, no. 10 (2007).

<sup>10</sup> Mark R. Montgomery et al., eds., *Cities Transformed: Demographic Change and Its Implications in the Developing World* (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (UNCHS), *An Urbanizing World: Global Report on Human Settlements* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

<sup>12</sup> Caroline Tacoli, "urbanisation and Migration in Sub-Saharan Africa: Changing Patterns and Trends," in *Forms of Mobility and Mobility of Forms: Changing Patterns of Movement in Africa and Beyond*, ed. Mirjam de Bruijn, Rijk van Dijk, and Dick Foeken (Leiden: Africa Studies Centre, 2001), 43–68.

<sup>13</sup> C. L. Eicher and C. A. Brewer, "Dasymetric Mapping and Areal Interpolation: Implementation and Evaluation," *Cartography and Geographic Information Science* 28, no. 2 (2001): 125–138; Andrew J. Tatem et al., "WorldPop, Open Data for Spatial Demography," *Scientific Data* 4 (2017): 170004.

As the town's footprint expanded, the historical record of infrastructure and service provision revealed a recurrent theme; networks and institutions extended more slowly than settlement. International reports and comparative studies from the era document a common sequence in secondary cities water mains, sanitation works, electricity grids, clinics, and schools were extended incrementally and often in response to political priorities rather than demographic need.<sup>14</sup> Lafia's municipal archives and provider records, this pattern appears as a series of lagged investments; major projects that served central wards and administrative nodes, followed by long intervals before peripheral wards received comparable attention. The historical implication is important for this study; population growth produced immediate spatial demand, but the institutional capacity to translate that demand into reliable services was conditioned by fiscal constraints, governance arrangements, and the sequencing choices of successive administrations. The social history of livelihoods and tenure during this period further complicates the narrative. Sociological and mobility theories, when read historically, show that households adapted to urban growth through a variety of strategies incremental housing, reliance on kin networks, engagement in informal trade, and negotiation of customary tenure arrangements.<sup>15</sup> Schaefer's sociological framing and Zelinsky's mobility transition thesis together illuminate how demographic transitions altered occupational structures and social stratification: a growing cohort of young migrants entered informal and service sectors, while landowners and speculative developers captured rising rents and capital gains. The historical consequence was a spatial sorting of wealth and vulnerability: serviced estates and central neighbourhoods consolidated value, while newly settled peripheries often remained precarious, with tenure insecurity and limited access to services.<sup>16</sup>

### Urban Development

Urban development, in the scholarly views, is conceptualised as the historical unfolding of demographic, economic, political, and social processes that together shape the morphology and social composition of towns and cities. Demographers and urbanists emphasise that population growth is a primary driver of urban change but one whose effects are mediated by migration regimes, age structure, and the composition of inflows; Zelinsky's mobility transition and the demographic transition literature locate urban expansion within long waves of fertility decline and changing mobility patterns, showing how youthful cohorts and sustained natural increase create enduring population momentum that conditions demand for housing and services.<sup>17</sup> Montgomery and colleagues extend this demographic lens by arguing that demographic change must be read spatially; aggregate population totals obscure intra-urban variation, and policy responses require spatially disaggregated measures of density, growth hotspots, and migration composition to be effective.<sup>18</sup>

Scholars of migration and mobility complicate simple push-pull narratives by demonstrating that urban population change in sub-Saharan Africa is often multi-sited, seasonal, and circular rather than exclusively permanent relocation; Tacoli's work highlights how livelihood strategies link rural and urban spaces and how secondary towns function as nodes in circulatory networks of labour and exchange, producing fluctuating demands on housing and services that differ from those generated by permanent settlers.<sup>19</sup> This body of work implies that conceptualizations of urban development must incorporate temporality and heterogeneity of population presence, since the needs and settlement behaviours of seasonal or circular migrants diverge from those of long-term residents.<sup>20</sup> The political-economic situates land conversion and housing production at the heart of urban development, arguing that land markets, tenure regimes, and the distribution of political power determine how demographic pressure is translated into built form. Mabogunje's analyses of African urbanisation foreground the role of administrative siting and state decisions in creating locational attractors, while Brenner and Theodore's critique of neoliberal urbanism shows how marketization and speculative dynamics reconfigure sub-urban space, producing leapfrog subdivisions, gated developments, and fragmented urban fabrics.<sup>21</sup> Ananya Roy and other scholars of informality argue that informal land markets and self-help housing are not marginal anomalies but central

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<sup>14</sup> UN-Habitat and World Health Organization guidance on urban service provision; UNCHS, *An Urbanizing World*.

<sup>15</sup> Richard T. Schaefer, *Sociology*, 9th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005); Zelinsky, Wilbur, "The Hypothesis of the Mobility Transition," *Geographical Review* 61, no. 2 (1971): 219–249.

<sup>16</sup> Literature on land markets and tenure in West Africa; comparative case studies in *Environment and urbanisation and Urban Studies*.

<sup>17</sup> Wilbur Zelinsky, "The Hypothesis of the Mobility Transition," *Geographical Review* 61, no. 2 (1971): 219–249.

<sup>18</sup> Mark R. Montgomery et al., eds., *Cities Transformed: Demographic Change and Its Implications in the Developing World* (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 2003).

<sup>19</sup> Caroline Tacoli, "urbanisation and Migration in Sub-Saharan Africa: Changing Patterns and Trends," in *Forms of Mobility and Mobility of Forms: Changing Patterns of Movement in Africa and Beyond*, ed. Mirjam de Bruijn, Rijk van Dijk, and Dick Foeken (Leiden: Africa Studies Centre, 2001), 43–68.

<sup>20</sup> United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (UNCHS), *An Urbanizing World: Global Report on Human Settlements* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

<sup>21</sup> Akin L. Mabogunje, "Global Urban Poverty Research: The Africa Case," *Urban Update*, no. 10 (2007); Neil Brenner and Nik Theodore, "Cities and the Geographies of 'Actually Existing Neoliberalism'," *Antipode* 34, no. 3 (2002): 349–379.

mechanisms of urbanisation in the Global South; informality, they contend, must be theorized as an organized set of practices and rationalities that produce durable urban forms even in the absence of formal planning.<sup>22</sup>

### The Mobility Transition Theory

The **mobility transition theory** was propounded by Wilbur Zelinsky in 1971 in his seminal article *The Hypothesis of the Mobility Transition* published in the *Geographical Review*. Zelinsky argued that migration patterns evolve in tandem with the stages of demographic transition. In pre-modern societies, mobility is limited and largely local; as fertility and mortality decline and economies industrialize, migration becomes more complex, involving permanent relocation, circular migration, seasonal labour flows, and eventually international movements.<sup>23</sup>

Applied to the study of Lafia's urban development between 1996 and 2024, Zelinsky's theory helps explain why population growth manifests in diverse forms: permanent settlers drawn by administrative and market opportunities, seasonal migrants linked to agricultural cycles, and circular migrants maintaining ties to rural communities. Each type of mobility produces distinct spatial imprints: densification in central wards, corridor growth along transport routes, and suburban sprawl where land is accessible but services are limited.<sup>24</sup> Historically, this aligns with broader African urbanisation trends noted by scholars such as Caroline Tacoli (2001), who emphasised the fluidity of rural–urban linkages and the role of secondary towns as nodes in multi-sited livelihood strategies.<sup>25</sup>

The mobility transition framework further highlights that different mobility types generate different demands on urban systems. Permanent settlers create cumulative, long-term demand for durable housing, schooling, and health services, while circular and seasonal migrants produce episodic pressures on accommodation, transport, and sanitation. For planners and researchers working on Lafia, this means that census totals alone obscure critical variation. Instead, a mixed temporal approach combining census snapshots with migration histories, labour cycle calendars, and seasonal mapping is required to capture the pulses of presence that shape market dynamics and service loads.<sup>26</sup>

### The Urban Political Economy Theory

The urban political economy perspective emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, drawing on Marxist urban theory and critical social science traditions in Europe and North America. Early formulations by scholars such as David Harvey in the United Kingdom and Manuel Castells in Spain reframed the city as a site where capital accumulation, state action, and social struggle intersect to produce particular spatial forms and social relations. Harvey's *Social Justice and the City* (1973) and Castells' *The Urban Question* (1977) articulated the idea that urbanisation is not a neutral process of population redistribution but a historically specific mode of production in which land and built space are central to the reproduction of capital.<sup>27</sup>

Later debates on neoliberalisation of urban governance crystallized in the work of Neil Brenner and Nik Theodore (2002) on “actually existing neoliberalism,” while African scholars such as Akin Mabogunje extended the tradition to explain the uneven development of secondary towns.<sup>28</sup> At the heart of the urban political economy approach is the recognition that land is both an economic asset and a political resource. Land markets are shaped by speculation, regulatory frameworks, and political power, producing patchwork urbanism where serviced estates coexist with dense informal settlements.<sup>29</sup>

Applied to Lafia between 1996 and 2024, this lens reveals how administrative reclassification and expansion of public institutions created locational advantages that drove speculative parceling of farmland. Customary tenure systems coexisted with statutory land law, producing ambiguities that facilitated informal subdivision and parallel land markets. Municipal fiscal constraints meant that infrastructure was extended selectively, privileging central wards and politically salient corridors while leaving peripheral areas

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<sup>22</sup> Ananya Roy, “Urban Informality: Toward an Epistemology of Planning,” *Journal of the American Planning Association* 71, no. 2 (2005): 147–158.

<sup>23</sup> Wilbur Zelinsky, *The Hypothesis of the Mobility Transition*, *Geographical Review* 61, no. 2 (1971): 219–249.

<sup>24</sup> Medayese, Magidimisha-Chipungu, & Chipungu, *Spatial Matrices of Urban Expansion in Lafia, North-Central Nigeria*, *Forum Geografi* 37, no. 1 (2023): 5–7.

<sup>25</sup> Caroline Tacoli, *Rural–Urban Linkages and Poverty Reduction*, International Institute for Environment and Development (2001), pp. 12–15.

<sup>26</sup> Lopez, *Urban Growth and Land Use Change in African Cities*, *Urban Studies Review* 58, no. 4 (2021): 765–780.

<sup>27</sup> David Harvey, *Social Justice and the City* (London: Edward Arnold, 1973), pp. 22–25.

<sup>28</sup> Neil Brenner & Nik Theodore, “Cities and the Geographies of ‘Actually Existing Neoliberalism’,” *Antipode* 34, no. 3 (2002): 349–379.

<sup>29</sup> Akin L. Mabogunje, *Urbanisation in Nigeria* (London: University of London Press, 1968), pp. 112–118.

unserved.<sup>30</sup> Informal housing production became the principal absorber of population growth, not as a failure of planning but as a rational response to market incentives and institutional constraints.<sup>31</sup>

### The Impact of Population Growth on the Urban Development of Lafia Town, 1996–2024

The history of Lafia's urban development from 1996 to 2024 is inseparable from the demographic transformations that followed its designation as the capital of Nasarawa State in 1996. This administrative reclassification marked a decisive turning point in Lafia's transformation, as ministries, parastatals, and government institutions relocated to Lafia, bringing with them civil servants, contractors, and service providers. The influx of migrants from surrounding rural districts, combined with natural increase, produced a demographic surge that reshaped land use, housing, infrastructure, and livelihoods.<sup>32</sup> The expansion of ministries such as the Ministry of Works and Infrastructure, the Ministry of Lands and Urban Development, and the Ministry of Health and Education created new demands for office complexes, residential quarters, and supporting facilities. The judiciary expanded with new court complexes, while the legislative assembly required chambers and administrative buildings. These institutional developments consolidated Lafia's role as a political and administrative capital, anchoring its urban identity and stimulating rapid geographical expansion.

From the late 1990s onward, Lafia's expansion imaged broader Nigerian urbanisation patterns, where secondary towns absorbed migratory flows and became nodes of administrative and commercial activity.<sup>33</sup> Satellite imagery and cadastral records show that the built-up area of the town expanded dramatically, rising from less than 10 percent in 1999 to nearly 40 percent by 2019.<sup>34</sup> This growth was not merely quantitative; it altered the spatial distribution of settlement, with densification in central wards and speculative sprawl along peri-urban corridors such as Alakio. Permanent settlers civil servants, teachers, and traders clustered near administrative and market nodes, while seasonal migrants tied to agricultural cycles concentrated around transport hubs and market precincts. Interviews with municipal officials in 2015 confirmed that "many parcels were sold informally, and service provision could not keep up," highlighting the governance gap between rapid land transactions and infrastructure extension.<sup>35</sup>

Population growth exerted immense pressure on infrastructure and public services. Historical accounts of municipal budgets and donor interventions reveal that service extension was path-dependent, privileging central wards and politically salient corridors while leaving peripheral areas underserved.<sup>36</sup> Housing provision lagged behind demand, compelling migrants to rely on informal settlements characterized by insecure tenure and inadequate sanitation. The coexistence of gated estates for middle-income households and sprawling informal neighborhoods reflected the duality of Lafia's development. A civil servant interviewed in 2018 remarked: "Working in the ministry gave us stable income, but housing was expensive. Many colleagues had to move to Alakio or rent in informal settlements."<sup>37</sup> This testimony underscores the stratified outcomes of growth, where formal workers accessed finance and stability, while informal workers in petty trade, transport, and construction faced precarious livelihoods.

The establishment of Federal Polytechnic Lafia 1998, and later the Federal University Lafia 2011, added another layer to the town's transformation. These institutions attracted thousands of students, lecturers, and administrative staff from across Nigeria, reinforcing Lafia's role as an educational hub. The presence of these institutions stimulated demand for hostels, rental housing, commercial services, and transport, thereby contributing to economic growth and modernization. However, interviews with community leaders and police officials reveal that the influx of young people also coincided with rising urban insecurity.<sup>38</sup> Cases of kidnapping, phone snatching, cult clashes, and petty theft became more frequent, particularly in areas surrounding student hostels and market precincts. Traders interviewed in 2020 lamented: "Population growth brought more customers, but congestion and poor sanitation in the market make daily business difficult and now we fear phone snatchers who target us in broad daylight."<sup>39</sup>

The negative impacts of institutional expansion were not limited to petty crime. The concentration of students and youth populations created vulnerabilities in policing and governance. Community leaders in 2022 noted: "We asked for better security patrols around the university area, but government projects always start in the central wards. Peripheral communities are left behind."<sup>40</sup> The rise of

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<sup>30</sup> Şenik & Uzun, Spatial Sustainability and Urban Expansion in Developing Regions, *International Journal of Urban Planning* 46, no. 2 (2022): 215–230.

<sup>31</sup> Magaji, Abeke, Musa, & Ismail, Evaluating the Housing and Living Conditions of Migrants in Lafia, *IJRISS* 9, no. 7 (2025): 399–410.

<sup>32</sup> Usman, *Impact of Rapid Growing Population on the Infrastructure in Nigeria* (2025), p. 11.

<sup>33</sup> Lopez, *Urban Growth and Land Use Change in African Cities* (2021), p. 768.

<sup>34</sup> Medayese, Magidimisha-Chipungu, & Chipungu, *Spatial Matrices of Urban Expansion in Lafia* (2023), p. 5.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Ministry of Lands Official, Lafia, 2015.

<sup>36</sup> Şenik & Uzun, *Spatial Sustainability and Urban Expansion in Developing Regions* (2022), p. 217.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Civil Servant Resident, Lafia, 2018.

<sup>38</sup> Police Report, Lafia Division, 2019.

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Market Trader, Lafia, 2020.

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Community Leader, Lafia, 2022.

kidnapping incidents, often linked to broader insecurity in Nasarawa State, underscored the challenges of managing rapid population growth in a context of weak institutional capacity. While the universities and polytechnic contributed to modernization and educational advancement, they also inadvertently intensified social pressures, creating new zones of vulnerability within Lafia's urban fabric.

Policy responses were uneven. The Lafia Development Plan 2012, articulated priorities for land use management, housing, and infrastructure, yet implementation was constrained by fiscal limitations and weak institutional capacity.<sup>41</sup> National housing programs had limited reach in secondary towns, leaving informal housing production as the principal absorber of growth. Ministries attempted ad hoc interventions such as staff housing schemes but these were insufficient to meet demand. Scholars of Nigerian housing delivery emphasize the need for diversified approaches, including public-private partnerships, incremental housing support, and low-cost finance, to expand supply and mitigate inequities.<sup>42</sup>

The case of Lafia Town examined across the period 1996–2024 illustrates how demographic dynamics combine with political-economic forces to shape patterns of settlement, housing, service provision, and livelihoods. This essay synthesizes theoretical perspectives and empirical literatures to provide an exhaustive account of those interactions, drawing on mobility and demographic theory, urban political economy, and comparative studies of housing, service delivery, and secondary-city growth in Nigeria and beyond. The analysis proceeds in four interlinked sections that mirror the study's empirical concerns: (i) quantifying and interpreting population change and spatial distribution; (ii) tracing land-use and housing responses to demographic pressure; (iii) assessing infrastructure and service stress; and (iv) evaluating socio-economic outcomes and policy responses. Throughout, the discussion is grounded in scholarly debates and in local studies and planning documents relevant to Lafia, including the Lafia Development Plan, 2012 and empirical work on Nigerian urbanisation and housing.<sup>43</sup>

### Population Change and Spatial Distribution: Interpreting Growth as Mobility and Composition

The expediency for understanding Lafia's population growth from 1996-2024 requires moving beyond aggregate headcounts to examine composition, tempo, and spatial concentration. Zelinsky's mobility-transition thesis provides a conceptual starting point: as demographic regimes shift and economic structures change, mobility becomes more varied permanent relocation, circular migration, seasonal labour, and administrative transfers all contribute to urban population dynamics.<sup>44</sup> In Lafia, the demographic record and local histories indicate that growth was not a single homogeneous wave but a composite of natural increase (youthful age structures and high fertility), in-migration of civil servants and traders following administrative reclassification and public-sector expansion, and recurrent circulatory flows tied to agricultural cycles and market activity.<sup>45</sup>

Geographically, these different mobility types leave distinct imprints. Permanent settlers often public-sector employees, teachers, and established traders tend to concentrate near administrative nodes and market centres, producing densification in central wards and demand for durable housing and household services. Circular and seasonal migrants market traders, agricultural labourers, and itinerant service providers concentrate around transport nodes and market precincts, generating episodic pressure on informal accommodation, transport, and sanitation. Sub-urban sprawl emerges where land is accessible and affordable but formal services lag, a pattern that is visible in multi-date satellite imagery and cadastral change where sub-urban farmland is parceled and built upon.<sup>46</sup> These spatial patterns echo broader African trends: secondary towns function as nodes in multi-sited livelihood systems, and their population presence is often fluid rather than permanently settled.<sup>47</sup>

Empirically, quantifying these dynamics requires a mixed temporal approach. Decadal censuses provide baseline totals and age-structure information, but household surveys with migration histories, administrative staff transfer records, and multi-date GIS layers are necessary to disaggregate permanent from temporary presence and to map seasonal pulses. Dasymetric mapping and gridded population products can redistribute aggregate counts into spatial surfaces, but the mobility lens cautions that such surfaces

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<sup>41</sup> Lafia Development Plan (2012), Government of Nasarawa State, p. 14.

<sup>42</sup> Magaji, Abeke, Musa, & Ismail, *Evaluating the Housing and Living Conditions of Migrants in Lafia* (2025), p. 402.

<sup>43</sup> Lafia Development Plan (2012), UN-Habitat, Abuja, for Nasarawa State Ministry of Lands and Urban Development, Lafia.

<sup>44</sup> Wilbur Zelinsky, "The Hypothesis of the Mobility Transition," *Geographical Review* 61, no. 2 (1971): 219–249.

<sup>45</sup> National Population Commission, *National Census for Lafia Town* (1991); see also demographic analyses in Ode, *Demography: Principles and Applications*.

<sup>46</sup> C. L. Eicher and C. A. Brewer, "Dasymetric Mapping and Areal Interpolation: Implementation and Evaluation," *Cartography and Geographic Information Science* 28, no. 2 (2001): 125–138; Andrew J. Tatem et al., "WorldPop, Open Data for Spatial Demography," *Scientific Data* 4 (2017): 170004.

<sup>47</sup> Caroline Tacoli, "urbanisation and Migration in Sub-Saharan Africa: Changing Patterns and Trends," in *Forms of Mobility and Mobility of Forms: Changing Patterns of Movement in Africa and Beyond*, ed. Mirjam de Bruijn, Rijk van Dijk, and Dick Foeken (Leiden: Africa Studies Centre, 2001), 43–68.

are snapshots within a moving tableau of human presence.<sup>48</sup> Lafia, triangulating census data (including the National Population Commission counts), local administrative records, and household migration histories will reveal not only where growth concentrated but when and why information that is essential for diagnosing service gaps and land-market responses.<sup>49</sup>

### Land-Use Change and Housing: Markets, Informality, and the Geometry of Expansion

Population growth exerts pressure on land and housing, but the form that pressure takes depends on land-market structures, tenure regimes, and developer behaviour. Urban political economy theory foregrounds these mediating mechanisms: land is commodified, tenure is contested, and governance choices shape who benefits from growth.<sup>50</sup> In Lafia, customary tenure systems have historically coexisted with statutory frameworks, producing legal ambiguities that facilitate informal subdivision and the emergence of parallel land markets. Such ambiguities lower transaction costs for speculative parceling but increase tenure insecurity for purchasers, a dynamic documented across Nigerian secondary cities.<sup>51</sup>

The material consequences are visible in the town's built environment. Satellite imagery and land-use maps for Lafia show a pattern of corridor growth along major roads, leapfrog subdivisions in sub-urban fringes, and pockets of densification near administrative and market nodes patterns consistent with speculative anticipation of value following infrastructural or administrative investments.<sup>52</sup> Developers and landholders, acting on expectations of rising demand, have engaged in parceling that often precedes formal service extension; where municipal capacity and fiscal resources are limited, newly parceled areas remain unserved for extended periods, compelling residents to rely on private boreholes, informal sanitation, and ad hoc electricity connections.<sup>53</sup>

Housing supply responds to these market and institutional conditions. Formal housing delivery in Nigeria has long struggled to meet demand due to high costs, regulatory barriers, and limited developer interest in low-income segments; as a result, informal housing production incremental building, subdivided plots, and a robust rental market becomes the principal absorber of population growth.<sup>54</sup> Studies of Nigerian towns (and comparative work in Kampala and Namibia) show that informal housing often provides flexible, low-cost options for migrants and low-income households but also produces overcrowding, poor housing quality, and tenure insecurity.<sup>55</sup> In just like many emerging cities Lafia, the coexistence of gated estates and informal settlements reflects this duality: while some investors have developed serviced estates for middle-income households, a large share of newcomers especially low-income migrants occupy informal settlements with limited access to services and weak legal protection.<sup>56</sup>

The housing–health nexus is also critical. Poor housing quality and overcrowding are associated with adverse health outcomes, and the literature on housing and health underscores the importance of adequate shelter, ventilation, water, and sanitation for public health. This case in Lafia, the proliferation of informal housing without commensurate service provision raises concerns about waterborne disease, inadequate waste disposal, and the spread of communicable illnesses issues that intersect with municipal capacity and public-health planning. Quantifying the extent of sprawl and housing change requires integrating multi-date remote sensing with housing stock records and field surveys. Change-detection algorithms applied to Landsat or higher-resolution imagery can identify built-up expansion and infill; cadastral and land-transaction records reveal parceling patterns; and household surveys

<sup>48</sup> Mark R. Montgomery et al., eds., *Cities Transformed: Demographic Change and Its Implications in the Developing World* (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 2003).

<sup>49</sup> National Population Commission (1991); see also local planning documents and household survey protocols.

<sup>50</sup> David Harvey, *Social Justice and the City* (1973); Manuel Castells, *The Urban Question* (1977); Neil Brenner and Nik Theodore, "Cities and the Geographies of 'Actually Existing Neoliberalism'," *Antipode* 34, no. 3 (2002): 349–379.

<sup>51</sup> Akin L. Mabogunje, "Global Urban Poverty Research: The Africa Case," *Urban Update*, no. 10 (2007); Ismail et al., "Urban Growth and Housing Problems in Karu Local Government Area of Nasarawa State, Nigeria," *Global Journal of Research and Review* 2, no. 1 (2015): 45–57.

<sup>52</sup> Mohammed L., *Comprehensive Master Plan of One, Lafia* (unpublished report, Dept. of Urban and Regional Planning, Isa Mustapha Agwai I Polytechnic Lafia, 2004); *Lafia Development Plan* (2012).

<sup>53</sup> Olayiwola, Adeleye, and Ogunshakin, "Public Housing Delivery in Nigeria: Problems and Challenges," *World Congress on Housing* (2005); Makinde, "Housing Delivery System, Need and Demand," *Environment, Development and Sustainability* 16, no. 1 (2014): 49–69.

<sup>54</sup> Ananya Roy, "Urban Informality: Toward an Epistemology of Planning," *Journal of the American Planning Association* 71, no. 2 (2005): 147–158; Olarewaju and Oviasogie, "Effect of urbanisation on Housing Demand in Nigeria: A Review," *Journal of Interior Designing and Regional Planning* 4, no. 2 (2019): 38–45.

<sup>55</sup> S. Mukiibi, "The Effect of urbanisation on the Housing Conditions of the Urban Poor in Kampala, Uganda," *Second International Conference on Advances in Engineering and Technology* (2011); Nelago, "The Effect of urbanisation on Housing Conditions in Namibia," *IJHSSE* 2, no. 7 (2015): 1–8.

<sup>56</sup> Jiboye, A. D., "Evaluating the Pattern of Residential Quality in Nigeria: The Case of Osogbo Township," *Facta Universitatis, Series: Architecture and Civil Engineering* 8, no. 3 (2010): 307–316; Jiboye, "Significance of House-Type as a Determinant of Residential Quality in Osogbo," *Frontiers of Architectural Research* 3, no. 1 (2014): 20–27.

document housing quality, tenure status, and incremental construction practices. Combining these sources enables a nuanced assessment of how population growth translated into land-use change and housing outcomes in Lafia.

### **Infrastructure and Public Services: Capacity, Sequencing, and Spatial Inequality**

Population growth places pressure on urban infrastructure and public services, but the distribution of that pressure and the capacity to respond varies across space and over time. The urban political economy study emphasises that infrastructure extension is not neutral; it follows political priorities, fiscal cycles, and profitability, producing path-dependent patterns of service provision. In Lafia, municipal budgets, administrative decisions, and donor-supported projects have shaped where water, sanitation, electricity, health, and education services were extended, often privileging central wards and politically salient corridors while peripheral and newly parceled areas remained underserved.

### **Socio-Economic Outcomes, Policy Responses, and Recommendations**

Population growth affects livelihoods, employment, living standards, and land values, and it elicits policy responses that shape future trajectories. The literature on urban livelihoods emphasises the centrality of informal and precarious work in absorbing urban labour in secondary cities: petty trade, transport services, casual construction, and small-scale manufacturing are common, and they interact with housing and service conditions to shape living standards.<sup>57</sup> In Lafia, the expansion of informal economic activities has likely provided livelihoods for many newcomers but also produced precarious incomes and limited social protection. Employment outcomes are stratified: those with formal sector jobs (often public servants) enjoy more stable incomes and access to housing finance, while informal workers face volatility and limited upward mobility.<sup>58</sup>

Land values and tenure security are central socio-economic variables. Speculative parceling and the siting of administrative functions can drive rapid land-value appreciation in certain corridors, benefiting landholders and developers while excluding low-income households. Tenure insecurity in informal settlements reduces incentives for investment in housing quality and can expose residents to eviction risk. Policy responses that clarify tenure, regularize informal settlements, and integrate informal land markets into planning can mitigate these inequities, but such reforms require political will and administrative capacity.<sup>59</sup>

Reviewing policy responses in Lafia since 1996 reveals a mix of planning efforts, ad hoc interventions, and limited institutional reforms. The Lafia Development Plan (2012) articulated priorities for land-use management, infrastructure extension, and housing, but implementation has been uneven due to fiscal constraints and capacity gaps.<sup>60</sup> National and state-level housing programs have had limited reach in secondary towns, and public housing delivery has historically struggled to meet demand. Scholars of Nigerian housing delivery emphasise the need for diversified approaches public-private partnerships, incremental housing support, and facilitation of low-cost finance to expand supply.

## **CONCLUSION**

The historical experience of Lafia from 1996 to 2024 demonstrates position population growth not simply just a matter of rising numbers but a multi interplay of mobility, land markets, infrastructure, and governance. The designation of Lafia as the capital of Nasarawa State in 1996 triggered administrative relocation and institutional expansion, which in turn attracted civil servants, traders, students, and seasonal migrants. This demographic surge reshaped the town's spatial distribution, producing densification in central wards, speculative sprawl along peri-urban corridors, and the coexistence of gated estates with sprawling informal settlements.

Theoretical lenses such as Zelinsky's Mobility Transition Theory and the Urban Political Economy perspective help explain these dynamics. Mobility theory highlights the diversity of flows permanent settlers, circular migrants, and seasonal labourers each leaving distinct imprints on housing demand and service pressures. Political economy theory underscores how land commodification, tenure ambiguities, and selective infrastructure extension created patchwork urbanism, privileging some corridors while leaving others underserved. Together, these frameworks reveal that Lafia's growth was both structured by macro-level forces and negotiated through household strategies and local institutions.

The establishment of Federal Polytechnic Lafia in 1998 and Federal University in Lafia 2011 added further complexity. These institutions reinforced Lafia's role as an educational hub, stimulating demand for housing, commerce, and transport. Yet they also coincided with rising insecurity kidnapping, phone snatching, and cult clashes particularly around student hostels and market precincts. Interviews with traders, civil servants, and community leaders highlight the duality of growth: modernization and opportunity on one hand, congestion, inequality, and insecurity on the other.

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<sup>57</sup>R. J. Lawrence, "Housing and Health: Beyond Disciplinary Confinement," *Journal of Urban Health* (2006).

<sup>58</sup> Petkar et al., "urbanisation and Its Impact on Housing," ResearchGate (2012); remote-sensing methodologies in Eicher and Brewer (2001) and Tatem et al. (2017).

<sup>59</sup> Brenner and Theodore (2002); World Bank, *urbanisation and Development: Emerging Futures* (2016).

<sup>60</sup> Lafia Development Plan (2012); Mohammed, *Comprehensive Master Plan of One, Lafia* (2004).

Policy responses, like the Lafia Development Plan 2012, articulated priorities for land use and infrastructure but were hindered by fiscal constraints and weak institutional capacity. Informal housing production remained the principal absorber of growth, while service extension lagged behind settlement. Scholars and local records emphasize the need for diversified approaches public-private partnerships, incremental housing support, and tenure regularization to balance growth with equity.

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