

CHALLENGES OF THE GROWTH AND URBANIZATION OF KARU TOWN, 1991-2015

Peter Wilfred Naankiel, PhD

Department of History and International Studies, Federal University of Lafia, Nasarawa State
naankiel@gmail.com

&

Obadiah Giwa Ishaya

Government Secondary School, Kyakale, Lafia, Ministry of Education, Nasarawa State,
&

Paul Yakubu Kigbu, PhD

Department of History and International Studies, Federal University of Lafia, Nasarawa State
kigbup250@yahoo.com

Abstract

This study interrogates the transformation of Karu town in Nasarawa State between 1991 and 2015, tracing its shift from a rural agrarian settlement into a satellite community of Abuja, Nigeria's Federal Capital Territory. Using a political economy framework, it examines how migration, governance, and market forces shaped Karu's socio-spatial development. Evidence from archival records, oral testimonies, and field surveys indicates that Abuja's relocation acted as a catalyst for Karu's expansion, while limited access to affordable land, the rising cost of residential and business premises, and inadequate housing provision within the Federal Capital Territory created strong pressures for settlement in Karu. The study concludes by situating Karu's experience within broader patterns of Nigerian urbanisation, underscoring the tensions between rapid expansion and uneven social outcomes.

Keywords: Abuja, Challenges, Growth, Karu, Urbanisation

Introduction

Urbanisation has been described as one of the defining processes of the twenty-first century, with Nigeria at the forefront of this transformation (United Nations, 2016). Karu town, located on the northeastern edge of Abuja, provides a striking case study. Between 1991 and 2015, its population expanded from about 20,000 to more than 750,000, driven by Abuja's restrictive housing market, inadequate provision of housing infrastructure, and rural–urban migration (Federal Capital Development Authority [FCDA], 2014; National Population Commission [NPC], 2016).

This paper situates Karu within Nigeria's postcolonial urban history, examining how state policies, migration flows, and global economic pressures influenced its growth. It considers the impact of Abuja's relocation in 1991, the socio-economic and infrastructural challenges that accompanied Karu's expansion, and the broader implications for understanding peri-urban development in Nigeria. Karu's trajectory illustrates the contradictions of urbanisation: prosperity for some and precariousness for many. By focusing on Karu, the study contributes to Nigerian historiography by drawing attention to peri-urban spaces often overshadowed by metropolitan narratives such as Lagos or Kano.

Conceptualising Urbanisation

Urbanisation is often described in simple terms as the growth of towns and cities, yet historically it has represented far more than demographic expansion or physical construction. It has involved shifts in social organisation, economic activity, and political control. In the case of Karu between 1991 and 2015, urbanisation cannot be understood merely as population increase but as a process shaped by broader historical forces.

Different scholars have approached urbanisation from varying perspectives. Some emphasise the concentration of people in urban areas, while others highlight the social and structural changes that accompany this movement. Historically, these interpretations converge on the idea that urbanisation reflects power relations: who controls land, who benefits from growth, and who is excluded. This dimension is particularly relevant to Karu, where the expansion was closely tied to Abuja's development as the Federal Capital. The relocation of the capital displaced many residents and created pressures that redirected settlement into Karu.

From a historical standpoint, Karu's transformation illustrates how urbanisation is never neutral. It emerged from decisions about land allocation, the rising cost of housing and business premises, and the limited provision of infrastructure within Abuja. These conditions pushed middle- and lower-income groups outward, producing rapid growth in Karu. Urbanisation here was therefore not simply the outcome of natural demographic trends but the result of political and economic choices that shaped settlement patterns.

By situating Karu's experience within the wider historical context of Nigerian urbanisation, the study underscores that urban growth is best understood as a process embedded in social struggles, economic pressures, and state policies. This perspective allows us to see urbanisation not only as physical expansion but as a historical phenomenon reflecting deeper inequalities and transformations in society.

Theoretical Framework

Studies of urbanisation have often been approached through different theoretical lenses, including evolutionist, modernisation, and political economy perspectives. For the period under review in Karu (1991–2015), the political economy approach provides the most historically consistent explanation. Unlike modernisation theory, which tends to assume linear progress and overlooks the contradictions of urban growth in developing contexts, the political economy perspective situates urbanisation within broader struggles over class, resources, and power.

Thinkers such as David Harvey and Manuel Castells reoriented the study of urbanisation by emphasising its historical and structural dimensions. Harvey argued that cities must be understood as products of specific political economies and class relations, while Castells examined urbanisation as a process of spatial concentration shaped by social hierarchies and economic systems. Their work underscores that urbanisation is not a neutral demographic shift but a reflection of deeper social and economic forces (Harvey, 2003).

Applied to Karu, this framework highlights how the town's expansion was tied to Abuja's relocation and the exclusionary housing market that followed (Harvey, 2003). Rising land costs, limited access to affordable plots, and inadequate housing provision within the Federal Capital Territory pushed large numbers of middle- and lower-income groups outward. Karu's growth therefore illustrates how urbanisation in Nigeria was historically conditioned by state policies, economic pressures, and class structures (Harvey, 2003).

By adopting the political economy perspective, the study situates Karu's transformation within the wider historical trajectory of Nigerian urbanisation. It shows that the town's development was not simply the result of population increase but part of a larger pattern of uneven growth shaped by historical decisions, economic constraints, and social inequalities.

Historical Context

Pre-colonial Karu was a Gbagyi-Gwandara agrarian community. Oral histories describe a subsistence economy anchored in yam, millet, and pottery, with land communally managed under clan heads (Sarkin Karu) (Nasarawa Ministry of Land, 2012). The Gurara River facilitated trade with neighboring towns such as Keffi and Lafia, though Karu remained peripheral to regional power centers (Okeke, personal communication, July 22, 2023). British indirect rule between 1903 and 1960 integrated Karu into Plateau Province but preserved its agrarian character. Colonial reports highlight Karu's role as a labor reserve for Jos tin mines, seeding early migration patterns (Harvey, 2003).

Nigeria's 1975 decision to relocate the capital from Lagos to Abuja aimed to foster national unity (Agbola & Ajayi, 2011). By 1991, Abuja's master plan, modeled on Brasília, displaced indigenous communities and pushed middle-income civil servants to Karu (Roy, 2005). As one interviewee recalled, "Abuja was for the rich. We moved to Karu to build our homes" (Karu Local Government Council [KLGC], 2019). Abuja's land auctions during the 1990s privileged elites, displacing indigenous Gbagyi communities into Karu (Nasarawa State Government, 2006). The 2012 Centenary City Project epitomised speculative land grabs, allocating 1,200 hectares to developers while farmers received negligible compensation (KLGC, 2019).

Table 1: Population Growth in Karu, 1991–2015

Year	Population	Growth Rate
1991	20,000	-
2000	150,000	650%
2015	750,000	400%

Source: National Population Commission, 2016

The above table indicates the population growth of Karu from 1991 to 2015. The population growth of Karu in 1991 was 20,000. In 2000, the population increased to 150,000, representing 650 percent growth, while in 2015 the population rose to 750,000, representing 400 percent growth. Karu experienced increased population growth due to its proximity to Abuja, Nigeria's Federal Capital Territory. As Abuja expanded and became overcrowded and expensive, many people moved to nearby towns like Karu for cheaper housing (KLGC, 2019).

This movement of people increased Karu's population and led to rapid urban growth and the availability of affordable land and housing. Land and rent in Karu were cheaper compared to Abuja, making Karu attractive to workers, traders, civil servants, and families who could not afford to live in the capital. As more people settled in Karu, the town expanded and became more

urbanised. Improved transportation and road networks also contributed to the population growth of Karu. Karu is located along major roads linking Abuja to Nasarawa State and other northern towns. These transport routes made it easier for people to live in Karu and work or conduct business in Abuja.

Economic opportunities and commercial activities also contributed to the urbanisation process of Karu town. Markets, shops, banks, and small businesses grew rapidly due to the expanding population. Government investments in schools, hospitals, electricity, and water supply further stimulated growth. Rural–urban migration from Nasarawa State and other parts of Nigeria in search of employment, education, and social amenities accelerated the urbanisation process.

However, this rapid growth also created several challenges. The increasing population placed pressure on basic services such as water supply, electricity, and waste management. Roads became congested because of increasing vehicular traffic, while poor land-use control contributed to flooding and erosion. Social services such as schools and hospitals became overstretched and unable to meet the needs of the growing population.

Challenges of the Growth and Urbanisation of Karu Town

The expansion of Karu between 1991 and 2015 reflected wider historical pressures linked to Abuja’s relocation and the restructuring of land and housing markets. As Abuja developed under a master plan that privileged elite housing, many middle- and lower-income groups were excluded from affordable access to residential and business premises. The scarcity of housing infrastructure within the Federal Capital Territory, combined with rising costs, created strong incentives for settlement in Karu (Abari, personal communication, July 15, 2023). This process produced uneven outcomes. While Karu’s population grew rapidly, reaching over 750,000 by 2015, the town’s infrastructure struggled to keep pace. Roads became congested, water and electricity supplies were overstretched, and social services such as schools and hospitals could not adequately serve the expanding population. The growth also highlighted socioeconomic inequalities, as elites benefited from speculative land markets while informal settlers relied on precarious livelihoods in trade, artisanal work, and small-scale enterprise (National Population Commission [NPC], 2016).

From a historical perspective, Karu’s urbanisation illustrates how state policies, economic pressures, and social stratification combined to shape peri-urban development. The town’s trajectory underscores the contradictions of Nigerian urbanisation: expansion driven by exclusion from the capital, prosperity for a few, and precarious living conditions for many. In this way, Karu’s history reflects broader patterns of uneven growth and social tension that characterised urbanisation in Nigeria during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Income Disparities and Poverty in Karu

By the mid-2000s, poverty levels in Nasarawa State were high, with surveys indicating that nearly two-thirds of households identified themselves as poor. Karu’s informal settlements were particularly affected, as most residents depended on low-income trades and services. The majority of the workforce engaged in informal activities such as petty trading, artisanal mining, and small-scale services, with monthly earnings often below ₦20,000 (KLGC, 2019).

Table 2: Income Distribution in Karu, 2015

Sector	Monthly Income (₦)	% of Workforce
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Formal Employment	80,000-150,000	5%
Informal Trade	10,000-20,000	65%
Artisanal Mining	5,000-15,000	20%
Unemployed	-	10%

Source: Karu Local Government Council (KLGC), 2015

In contrast, a small fraction of the population employed in the formal sectors earned significantly higher wages, creating a sharp divide between the few who benefited from secure employment and the many who relied on precarious livelihoods. This imbalance reflected the broader structural inequalities of Nigerian urbanisation, where rapid growth did not translate into equitable economic opportunities. The predominance of informal work in Karu also meant limited access to social protection, unstable incomes, and vulnerability to market fluctuations. Women, who formed a large proportion of informal traders, faced additional challenges due to restricted access to credit and property rights. These conditions reinforced cycles of poverty and underscored the uneven nature of Karu's urbanisation (Karu Women's Cooperative, 2014).

Informal Economy and Livelihoods

By the early 2000s, Karu's economy was overwhelmingly informal. Small-scale trading, artisanal mining, and service activities dominated, with limited opportunities for formal employment. Historical records suggest that nearly 95 percent of the workforce operated outside the formal sector, earning modest incomes that rarely exceeded subsistence levels. This reliance on informal livelihoods created resilience but also vulnerability. Traders and artisans adapted to the demands of a growing population, yet their earnings were unstable and subject to market fluctuations. Women, in particular, were concentrated in informal trade, where they faced challenges relating to credit access, insecure working conditions, and limited recognition of their economic contributions.

The predominance of informal work also meant that Karu's residents lacked social protection and were exposed to economic shocks. This condition reflected broader patterns in Nigerian urbanisation, where rapid growth often outpaced the development of formal employment structures. Historically, Karu's reliance on informal livelihoods illustrates how urbanisation was sustained by precarious economic activity, reinforcing inequalities even as the town expanded.

Gender Inequity and Access to Public Goods

The rapid growth of Karu exposed significant gendered dimensions of urbanisation. Women formed a large proportion of the informal workforce, particularly in petty trade, street hawking, and small-scale services. Their economic contributions were vital to household survival, yet they often lacked secure access to property, credit, and formal employment. This limited participation in more stable economic sectors reinforced cycles of vulnerability and inequality (Dauda, personal communication, August 5, 2024).

The expansion of Karu placed immense pressure on basic services such as water supply, electricity, and waste management. Roads became congested, while schools and hospitals were overstretched and unable to meet the needs of the growing population. These deficiencies reflected the imbalance between population growth and infrastructural provision. From a historical perspective, the gendered experience of urbanisation in Karu highlights how women

bore disproportionate burdens in sustaining households under precarious conditions. At the same time, the inadequacy of public goods underscored the structural weaknesses of urban growth driven by exclusion from Abuja. Together, these factors reveal the contradictions of Karu's urbanisation: a town expanding rapidly in size and activity, yet marked by persistent inequalities and infrastructural strain. Only 12 percent of households had access to piped water, while the rest depended on costly water vendors or polluted wells (Nasarawa Water Board [NWB], 2015). Karu's sole public secondary school recorded a student-teacher ratio of 80:1, compared to 25:1 in Abuja (Nasarawa Ministry of Education, 2015).

Drivers of inequality also included speculative land markets. Abuja's elite-centric land policies spilled into Karu, where developers such as Karu Mega City priced low-income residents out of the housing market (KLGC, 2019). By 2015, approximately 60 percent of Karu's residents lived in informal settlements such as Kabayi Community and Kabasa Village (Abuja Environmental Protection Board [AEPB], 2013).

Figure 1: Informal Settlement of Kabayi Community in Karu



Source: Researchers Fieldwork on 15th July, 2023.

Figure 2: Informal Settlement of Kabasa Village in Karu



Source: Researchers Fieldwork on 15th July, 2023.

Institutional Neglect and Migration Pressures

Institutional neglect was another driver of inequality in Karu. Jurisdictional conflicts between Nasarawa State and the Federal Capital Territory stifled infrastructure investment. A 2013 audit found that 65 percent of buildings violated planning regulations, yet enforcement remained weak (Nasarawa State Government, 2006). Rural–urban migration also intensified the challenge of equitable urbanisation. Migrants from conflict-prone regions such as Zango-Kataf during the 1990s and the Niger Delta during the 2000s flooded Karu, competing for scarce resources (FCDA, 2014).

Youth unemployment and crime increased significantly by 2015, driving participation in artisanal mining and cybercrime. Reports suggested that nearly 45 percent of youths in Kabasa, Mararaba, Masaka, and Ado were involved in illegal activities due to economic hardship, thereby contributing to insecurity in the area (Abari, personal communications, July 15, 2023; Dauda, personal communication, August 5, 2024).

Transport and Urban Mobility in Karu

Transport constituted one of the major challenges confronting sustainable urban development in Karu. The town’s road network, originally designed for fewer than 50,000 residents, became severely overstretched under the pressure of rapid population growth. By 2015, the Nyanya–Karu–Mararaba axis recorded traffic congestion lasting up to three hours daily. The absence of an efficient mass transit system forced approximately 78 percent of residents to depend on motorcycles popularly known as *okada* and unregulated minibuses, contributing to a significant increase in road accidents and fatalities between 2000 and 2015 (Abadu, 2001).

Table 3: Transport Modes in Karu, 2015

Mode	Percentages of Users
Motorcycle (<i>Okada</i> or going)	45%

Private cars	20%
Minibuses	33%
Walking(trekking)	2%

Source: Nasarawa State Transport Authority (2015).

From the early 1990s, the transportation industry in Karu expanded rapidly alongside population growth. The number of private vehicles and commercial transport operators increased tremendously, resulting in severe traffic congestion along the Karu–Keffi–Abuja highway. Urban transportation schemes became an important aspect of government intervention aimed at improving mobility and reducing the hardships faced by commuters (Abadu, 2001). Following the population increase in Karu, the transportation sector experienced remarkable development driven by government agencies, private organisations, and individual investors who provided passenger transport services to meet the increasing demand for mobility. The expansion of road networks also enhanced Karu’s strategic importance as a gateway linking Abuja with other states in the North Central region of Nigeria. This encouraged commercial interaction and population movement, thereby accelerating urban growth.

The study further observed that buses, taxis, motorcycles (*okada*), and tricycles (*keke*) became the dominant means of transportation because they were relatively affordable and adaptable to local conditions (Danboyi, 2011). Several transport companies, including Young Shall Grow Motors, CHISCO Transport, and Peace Mass Transit, established operations in Karu between 1991 and 2015. These services were intended to alleviate transportation challenges and facilitate urban mobility.

Figure 3: Traffic Congestion along Masaka-Karu-Nyanya to Mararaba



Source: Fieldwork by Researchers on 15th July, 2023

Nevertheless, the urban transport system in Karu remained highly disorganised and inefficient. Public transportation was often unreliable, uncomfortable, and inadequate, leading many residents to rely on private vehicles. Traffic congestion became a critical challenge, especially for civil servants and private-sector workers commuting daily to Abuja. Many workers arrived late to work because of persistent traffic delays. The poor condition of roads further compounded transportation challenges. Only about 35 percent of roads in Karu were considered to be in good

condition, while the remaining 65 percent were in varying degrees of deterioration. The rapid increase in motorcycles and other two-wheeled vehicles also intensified traffic disorder and heightened safety risks for commuters.

Karu's proximity to Abuja accelerated its growth and urbanisation, as the town served as a residential hub for workers employed in the Federal Capital Territory. The resulting daily movement of commuters placed enormous strain on the already inadequate transport infrastructure. With an estimated annual population growth rate of about 40 percent, transportation challenges became one of the defining features of Karu's urbanisation experience.

Urban Infrastructure, Environmental Pressures and Social Services

The rapid expansion of Karu placed enormous pressure on urban infrastructure. Water supply systems proved inadequate to meet the needs of the growing population, electricity supply remained irregular, and waste management services lagged behind the pace of urban settlement. Roads became increasingly congested due to the heavy daily movement of commuters between Karu and Abuja, while unregulated construction activities contributed significantly to flooding and erosion. These developments reflected the imbalance between population growth and the limited institutional capacity to provide essential urban services.

Figure 4: A Flooded High Court in Karu



Source: Nasarawa Geographic Information System (NGIS), 5th September, 2024

Environmental pressures also became increasingly evident. The spread of informal housing onto marginal lands heightened vulnerability to seasonal flooding, while inadequate drainage systems worsened soil erosion and environmental degradation. The absence of effective land-use planning meant that residential, commercial, and industrial activities frequently developed side by side without proper regulation, thereby creating long-term sustainability challenges (Musa, personal communication, June 10, 2024).

Historically, these infrastructural and environmental strains demonstrate how Karu's growth was shaped by exclusion from Abuja's planned urban system but unfolded without adequate planning mechanisms. The result was a rapidly expanding town that struggled to provide the basic amenities required for stable urban living (Yusuf, personal communication, July 15, 2024).

Again, the rapid increase in Karu's population placed immense pressure on social services. Schools became overcrowded, hospitals and clinics were overstretched, and recreational facilities remained limited. Many families experienced difficulties accessing quality healthcare and education, while the shortage of social amenities contributed to feelings of marginalisation among residents (Dawson et al., 2009). Despite these challenges, community life in Karu adapted to the pressures of urbanisation. Informal networks of trade, religious organisations, and cooperative associations emerged as important support systems for residents. Women's cooperatives, in particular, played a crucial role in sustaining household economies through petty trading and informal credit arrangements. From a historical perspective, the development of these community structures highlights the resilience of Karu's residents in the face of infrastructural and social challenges. It also demonstrates the uneven nature of urbanisation, where formal institutions struggled to provide adequate services while informal community networks attempted to fill the resulting gaps.

Conclusion

The history of Karu's urbanisation between 1991 and 2015 reveals a complex interplay of migration, land access, housing costs, and infrastructural limitations. Abuja's relocation acted as a catalyst for urban growth, but the exclusionary housing market and inadequate provision of services within the Federal Capital Territory pushed large numbers of people toward Karu. Consequently, Karu's growth was not merely demographic but historically conditioned by political and economic decisions.

The town's trajectory illustrates the contradictions of Nigerian urbanisation: rapid expansion accompanied by persistent inequalities, infrastructural strain, and heavy reliance on informal livelihoods. Karu's experience contributes significantly to the broader historiography of Nigerian urbanisation by drawing attention to peri-urban spaces often overshadowed by metropolitan narratives. It demonstrates that urbanisation in Nigeria has been shaped not only by population growth but also by historical processes of exclusion, adaptation, and uneven development.

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