Equity in the Lagos Urban Transport Project (LUTP)

Lagos, located in south-western Nigeria (West Africa), was the country's commercial capital and one of the world's fastest-growing megacities. It spans an area of approximately 1,171 km² (452 mi²) and was home to more than 20 million people. The city's complex geography, stretching from the Atlantic coastline to densely populated inland suburbs, created both opportunity and strain for mobility planning. Mile 12, a major produce-market hub in north-western Lagos, and Iponri, a busy residential and transport interchange in central Lagos, were focal points of the Lagos Urban Transport Project (LUTP). Their contrasting locations revealed how transport infrastructure decisions affected different communities, those at the periphery who relied on informal trade, and those closer to the city's administrative core. In October 2015, dozens of roadside traders gathered at the Mile 12 bus terminal in Lagos, waving placards. They had just been displaced to make way for the expansion of the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) corridor. While the Lagos Metropolitan Area Transport Authority (LAMATA) had organised public meetings and issued a resettlement plan in accordance with World Bank safeguards, traders claimed that their voices were never meaningfully considered. "They informed us after the decisions were made," said Mrs. Alake, a pepper seller whose stall was demolished without compensation, a scenario was echoed in studies documenting lack of effective communication and participatory resettlement planning in similar Lagos displacement cases. World Bank Operational Policy 4.01 addressed Environmental Assessment, which required borrowers to evaluate and mitigate environmental and social impacts before project implementation. Operational Policy 4.12 covered Involuntary Resettlement, mandating that displaced persons (PAPs) receive adequate compensation and livelihood restoration. Both policies governed LUTP activities and shaped LAMATA's Resettlement Action Plans (RAPs), defining the equity and safeguard standards for the project.

For Engineer Abimbola Akinajo, Managing Director of the Lagos Metropolitan Area Transport Authority (LAMATA), the Lagos Urban Transport Project (LUTP) was more than an engineering initiative, it was a political and ethical test. At the time of the 2015 Mile 12 protests, Engineer Abimbola Akinajo had not yet assumed leadership of LAMATA. Nevertheless, she brought to her later role over 30 years of engineering and transport-project experience, much of it in both road and rail infrastructure, which had shaped her awareness of how procedural consultation could deepen mistrust when communities feel sidelined (LAMATA-NG, 2025). The LUTP, launched in 2003 with over $200 million in World Bank funding, was hailed as a model for modernising public transit in Sub-Saharan Africa. It introduced high-capacity buses, traffic flow reforms, and, eventually, integrated rail systems. But as new corridors were developed, tensions over consultation, compensation, and displacement resurfaced, especially in informal communities, where urban poor were rarely granted full rights to the city or adequate notice or compensation. While LAMATA maintained that "stakeholder engagement was carried out at each stage," affected groups questioned the depth, timing, and responsiveness of these engagements, highlighting the gap between procedural compliance and genuine inclusion (Walker et al., 2020). By 2022, with Akinajo now serving as managing director, the stakes had grown even higher. With the launch of the Lagos Blue Rail Line and planned integration with BRT systems, city authorities faced pressure to balance efficiency with equity. Whether community consultation could evolve from procedural compliance to a platform for shared decision-making, or would it remain a formality that left urban residents unheard? Research suggested that the failure to provide adequate compensation and participation rights in infrastructure development continued to undermine trust and deepen social vulnerabilities in affected communities (Tagliarino et al., 2018).

Table 1. Stakeholder Influence–Interest Matrix in LUTP

Stakeholder	Influence	Interest	Power Form (Gaventa)	Engagement Type (Arnstein)
LAMATA	High	High	Visible / Closed	Consultation
World Bank & AFD	High	Medium	Visible / Hidden	Partnership
NURTW & RTEAN (Unions)	Medium	High	Hidden	Placation
Informal Vendors	Low	High	Invisible / Claimed	Informing
Civil Society Orgs	Medium	High	Claimed / Hidden	Consultation
Low-Income Commuters	Low	High	Invisible	Manipulation

Source: Authors own work

As shown in Table 1, stakeholder power in the LUTP was concentrated among donors and LAMATA. This case has been structured in five parts. First, it outlines the project's background and institutional context. Second, it describes the consultation mechanisms adopted during implementation. Third, it analyses the equity and access concerns that arose. Fourth, it explores the power dynamics that constrained participation. Finally, it presents Akinajo's leadership dilemma and invites students to propose strategies for equitable co-design.

Background and Context

Lagos was one of the fastest-growing megacities globally, with a metropolitan population now estimated at over 20 million and rising rapidly. Urban expansion had far outpaced infrastructure growth, creating chronic traffic congestion, commuters routinely lost up to three hours daily in traffic jams. Vehicle density and road usage patterns intensified; for example, road traffic in Lagos was frequently disrupted by peak-period congestion, poor driving habits, and inadequate road infrastructure. Over 1.8 million vehicles plied Lagos roads annually, yielding about 226 vehicles per kilometre (about 140 vehicles per mile), far exceeding Nigeria's national average and placing immense strain on road capacity. Congestion imposed heavy economic costs, workers in Lagos reported time loss that negatively impacted job performance, job satisfaction, and career progression (Korede & Olufemi, 2024). Air quality had also deteriorated, with vehicular pollution contributing to elevated PM2.5 levels and respiratory risks, especially near traffic intersections. In response to these mobility and equity challenges, the Lagos state Government established the Lagos Metropolitan Area Transport Authority (LAMATA) in 2003 to overhaul urban transit in collaboration with development partners. The Lagos Urban Transport Project (LUTP) was officially approved by the World Bank in November 2002, with co-financing from the International Development Association, the French Development Agency (AFD), and the Nigerian government (Mobereola, 2009). The primary development objective in the Project Appraisal Document was to support the Program by improving management of the transport sector in Lagos, enhancing bus services, and promoting water and non-motorized transport in an environmentally, socially and financially sustainable manner. The initial loan budget was approximately USD 190 million (SDR 119.6 million), with nearly USD 100 million in co-financing from AFD. At project launch, one key goal was to establish a semi-autonomous LAMATA capable of planning, coordinating and regulating the

multimodal transport system, including BRT, non-motorised transport and mass transit elements (Mobereola, 2009).

By 2008, LAMATA launched Africa's first "BRT-lite" corridor, supported by the World Bank, featuring dedicated bus lanes and lower-cost stations adapted to local context. That pilot corridor achieved rapid ridership growth, serving over 200,000 daily commuters, and reduced average travel times from 45 to 30 minutes between Mile 12 and the CBD. Public transport expenditure by poor households along the corridor fell by approximately 31 percent in real terms, while CO_2 emissions declined by about 8.5 percent, even as overall traffic volumes rose by 43 percent. Road accidents also dropped significantly along the corridor, contributing to improved road safety outcomes. Beyond the BRT component, LUTP supported institutional strengthening through capacity building and technical assistance to LAMATA and the Lagos State Ministry of Transportation. This included reforms in procurement, financial management, transport planning, road management, and social safeguards (Otunola et al., 2019). The project financed resilience measures such as pedestrian overpasses, flood-resilient design, road widening, bus terminals and depot construction to enhance system efficiency and accessibility.

LUTP also included environmental safeguards such as a vehicular emissions baseline study and multiple rounds of stakeholder engagement workshops as part of its environmental and resettlement action plans (Owolabi et al., 2017). Integration of transport modes, including plans for waterway transport and non-motorized options, was embedded in LUTP's design, with preparatory work for future rail transit lines and feeder systems. Indeed, the Lagos Rail Mass Transit (Blue Line), although implemented later, became a key multimodal component, supported in later phases by the same institutional architecture created by LUTP. LUTP emerged as a flagship urban transport program set within a city grappling with severe congestion, inequality, and environmental degradation. Its goals were ambitious: reduce travel time and transport costs, improve air quality and road safety, and create a more integrated, equitable public transit network across Lagos, anchored in institutional reforms and inclusive design frameworks. When Engineer Akinajo assumed leadership of LAMATA in 2019 as the first female Managing Director of LAMATA, she inherited an agency with a record of operational achievements but also a legacy of public mistrust over displacement and participation. Her engineering career that spans more than three decades across road and rail infrastructure projects in Nigeria and the United Kingdom meant she was deeply familiar with the technical imperatives of delivery. Yet, as the Blue Line came online and new BRT expansions were planned, she also faced the mounting challenge of reconciling LUTP's efficiency-driven model with calls for more inclusive, co-designed transport planning (BusinessDay, 2019; LAMATA, 2025).

Table 2. LUTP to Lagos State Transport Master Plan (STMP) Timeline (1999–2025)

Year	Key Development	Outcome
1999	Lagos State Transport Policy adopted	Set policy vision for multimodal system
2002	LAMATA established	Institutional coordination for LUTP
2003–2010	LUTP I–II implemented	BRT pilot, corridor rehabilitation, safeguard systems
2010	STMP developed (with JICA, World Bank)	Formal integration of LUTP outputs
2015–2025	LUTP III and IV	Rail and BRT corridor expansion (Blue & Red Lines)

Source: Authors own work

By 2010, the Lagos Urban Transport Project (LUTP) had matured into the broader Lagos State Transport Master Plan (STMP) as shown in Table 2, a long-term strategic framework designed to integrate all modes of transport(including road, rail, ferry, and non-motorised mobility), under a single institutional vision. This evolution marked the institutional transition from project-based reform to a comprehensive state-wide transport vision. The STMP, prepared by LAMATA with support from the World Bank and Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), sought to address the fragmentation that had historically characterised Lagos mobility planning. The LUTP's institutional reforms, funding mechanisms, and resettlement frameworks formed the foundation for this master plan, which continued to guide the city's multimodal transport expansion today.

Community Consultation Mechanisms

Required Consultations

LUTP was bound by World Bank safeguards, including Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA) and Resettlement Action Plan (RAP) protocols, mandating stakeholder consultations and grievance arrangements. The Mile 12 to Ikorodu BRT corridor RAP involved detailed enumeration and socio-economic profiling of project-affected persons (PAPs) and required consultation with every stakeholder for disclosure of compensation entitlements. These engagements were designed to comply with World Bank Operational Policy 4.12, ensuring avoidance or minimisation of involuntary resettlement, and inclusion of grievance mechanisms (World Bank, 2013). Grievance mechanisms were established to allow PAPs to lodge complaints, seek remediation, and mediate disputes, ideally through community dialogue and conflict resolution processes compliant with international best practice (Mobereola, 2009). The Grievance Framework was intended to operate in parallel with engagement activities, allowing remediation in cases where consultation did not yield consent or adequate adjustment.

Actual Practices

In reality, consultation meetings were conducted in a format typical of ESIA exercises: late-stage hearings where affected parties were invited to comment on pre-determined project components (IEG, 2016; Oluwakoya, 2024). Meetings were often intermediated via consultants, with limited two-way dialogue, and frequently occurred after key decisions were finalized (World Bank, 2013). Consultation frequency was limited to major project milestones, initial disclosure of alternative routes, draft RAP review, and compensation roll out, and not continuous engagement. The timing of meetings often meant that community inputs could not influence substantive design changes but functioned more as information sessions. Consultants responsible for facilitating the engagement tended to rely on union representatives and community leaders to relay messages; trade associations such as the NURTW were used to manage and structure meetings, reducing direct dialogue between LAMATA officials and affected residents. Grievance channels existed largely on paper, and uptake was low, which raised questions about access and meaningfulness of redress (IEG, 2016; Oluwakoya, 2024; Walker et al., 2020). Table 3 illustrates how participation plateaued at the consultation stage.

Table 3. Mapping LAMATA's Participation Practices to Arnstein's Ladder

Arnstein Level	Typical Meaning	Evidence in LUTP	Assessment

Manipulation / Therapy	Non-participation	Minimal – information sessions framed as dialogue	Minimal Influence
Informing	One-way communication	RAP disclosures, ESIA notices	Procedural only
Consultation	Gathering views, limited influence	Stakeholder hearings at draft stage	Tokenistic
Placation	Advisory input, not binding	Union representation in RAP committee	Partial
Partnership	Shared decision-making	None recorded	Absent
Delegated Power / Citizen Control	Community-led	Not applicable	Absent

Source: Authors own work

Under Akinajo's leadership, LAMATA maintained compliance with donor safeguards such as the World Bank's OP 4.12 and OP 4.01, while signaling a strategic orientation toward more inclusive planning. In an interview conducted by Mobility Redefined in May 2025, Akinajo stated that 'regulated transport and informal transport must meet' (Mobility Redefined, 2025, p. 1). These integrative ambitions, however, had to navigate the enduring constraints of tight delivery timelines, donor funding cycles, and cost containment, which historically limit the scope for genuine participatory engagement.

Examples

One illustrative case involved plantain traders displaced from the Mile 12 BRT terminal. They were relocated under a lease agreement to Ajelogo market, pending permanent relocation after corridor construction. However, when the lease expired in 2017, many traders were forced to relocate again due to lack of permanent arrangement. Despite the RAP commitments, traders reported that they had not been engaged in planning for their permanent resettlement site. Similarly, engagement with transport unions like NURTW and RTEAN was frequent but largely focused on securing logistical cooperation rather than enabling agenda-setting. Union leaders were consulted to inform their members of planned relocations and negotiate timing of moves but were not involved in route alignment or compensation formula design (Agbiboa, 2020). Community members later complained that consultation existed as a legal formality rather than a meaningful participatory process.

Equity and Access Concerns

Who Benefits?

Commuter access along the BRT corridor improved transit times: between Mile 12 and the Lagos central business district, travel time dropped from approximately 45 minutes to 30 minutes (Otunola et al., 2019). Poorer households using the corridor saw their public transport expenditure fall by roughly 31 percent in real terms (Owolabi et al., 2017). The BRT system achieved high ridership, serving over 200,000 passengers daily, thereby relieving congested roads and reducing CO_2 emissions by 8.5 percent even as general traffic rose by 43 percent (Amiegbebhor et al., 2016). Enhanced safety and reduced accident rates were also reported along BRT corridors where regulated services replaced unregulated minibuses.

Who Loses?

Informal vendors, especially plantain and snack sellers at Mile 12, saw their stalls demolished to accommodate BRT stations and vehicle access, often relocated to temporary sites without permanent compensation. Commuters living beyond walking distance from BRT stops, particularly in low-income suburbs, continued to rely on overpriced minibuses or shared taxis, missing out on travel-time and fare savings. Low-income residents without nearby stops therefore bore disproportionate transport burdens (Korede & Olufemi, 2024). Table 4 summarises who gained and who lost from the project's outcomes.

Table 4. Equity Impact of the Lagos Urban Transport Project (LUTP)

Group	Gains	Losses	Implications
Middle-income corridor commuters	Reduced fares, shorter trips	None	Reinforces accessibility advantage
Informal traders	None	Displacement, income loss	Livelihood precarity
Women / vulnerable users	Better station safety	Persistent harassment risk	Gendered safety deficit
Low-income periphery residents	None	Higher post-subsidy fares	Transport poverty

Source: Authors own work

Public Safety and Gender

In February 2022, 22-year-old Oluwabamise "Bamise" Ayanwole was abducted and murdered after boarding a BRT bus in Lekki, triggering widespread public outrage and a temporary halt in BRT operations. The incident underscored ongoing public-safety concerns in Lagos's formal transport system, particularly for women (BBC, 2025).

Fuel Subsidy Removal & Affordability

In mid-2023, Nigeria's government removed the longstanding petrol subsidy, causing pump prices to nearly triple and inflation to surge to nearly 30 percent, a change that significantly increased public transport fares and worsened affordability for low-income commuters. Research in southwest Nigeria showed that households adjusted travel frequency and relocated closer to essential services due to rising transport costs. Fuel cost increases had also negatively affected transport system performance, with declining route frequency, reduced maintenance, and worsening safety and reliability (Korede & Olufemi, 2024).

Institutional Constraints and Power Dynamics

The Lagos Metropolitan Area Transport Authority (LAMATA) was established in 2002 through an enabling law to coordinate transport planning, regulate transit operations, and manage infrastructure delivery across Lagos State. These dynamics had been previously documented in participatory governance research (PASGR, 2016). Although legally empowered to lead multimodal transport reforms, LAMATA's institutional culture had remained technocratic, focused on engineering solutions, efficiency metrics, and donor accountability, often at the expense of inclusive, community-based planning (Jose, 2019).

LAMATA's design was heavily shaped by World Bank priorities, which supported the agency's semi-autonomy and performance-based orientation. Funding from the World Bank and Agence Française de Développement (AFD) required compliance with safeguard standards, including Operational Policy 4.12 on Involuntary Resettlement and OP 4.01 on Environmental Assessment (Mobereola, 2009). These protocols called for Environmental and Social Impact Assessments (ESIAs), Resettlement Action Plans (RAPs), stakeholder consultations, and grievance mechanisms to protect affected persons. However, several project evaluations found that these processes were implemented primarily to meet documentation requirements, not to ensure genuine inclusion or co-decision-making (Oluwakoya, 2024). Community consultation often occurred late in the design process, with limited feedback loops or design revisions based on public input. While RAP documentation was technically available, many affected persons, especially informal traders and households, reported being inadequately informed or excluded from the decision-making timeline (Jose, 2019).

As a result, participation was frequently perceived as procedural rather than substantive. Transport unions, particularly the National Union of Road Transport Workers (NURTW), played a central role in LUTP implementation. In early phases of the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) scheme, NURTW operated the first bus fleet under the First BRT Cooperative, which allowed for rapid deployment and partial buy-in from informal operators. However, these unions also became strategic gatekeepers, filtering communication between LAMATA and rank-and-file drivers or traders, thereby concentrating influence among union elites (Agbiboa, 2020). This often undermined the voices of displaced vendors and non-unionised residents who lacked direct access to project negotiators. Donor-driven performance targets also reinforced LAMATA's orientation toward corridor delivery, infrastructure outputs, and modal integration. Multimodal plans, including non-motorised transport and the Blue Line rail, were designed with minimal space for participatory urban design or bottom-up needs assessments (Oluwakoya, 2024). Community concerns about terminal locations, resettlement timing, and service affordability were often subordinated to technical feasibility and institutional efficiency.

Akinajo navigated the dual accountability of delivering to state government timelines while meeting the compliance requirements of international lenders. Her tenure coincided with the commissioning of the Lagos Blue Rail Line and continued BRT expansion, both requiring coordination with multiple agencies, contractors, and informal sector unions. While this cemented LAMATA's role as a central technical authority, it also meant that participatory practices were often filtered through the imperatives of project delivery, leaving limited room for co-created decision-making in corridor design or resettlement planning (LAMATA, 2022). In practice, LAMATA's mandate and donor logic enabled rapid physical transformation of Lagos's transport system, but also reinforced a power imbalance in which affected communities were often informed, but rarely consulted with authority (Oluwakoya, 2024). In 2021, Lagos State commenced construction of the Red Line Rail Corridor, a 37-kilometre (23-mile) north–south route running from Agbado to Marina, forming the second phase of the STMP's rail vision. Unlike the Blue Line, which was fully state-financed, the Red Line leveraged federal collaboration through the Nigerian Railway Corporation (NRC) and adopted a public–public partnership model. The project reused existing NRC right-of-way, minimising new displacement but introducing more complex inter-agency coordination challenges.

By mid-2024, test runs had begun on several sections, demonstrating improvements in stakeholder engagement and environmental compliance compared with earlier phases. Enhanced compensation under Resettlement Action Plans (RAPs) and more transparent

consultation processes reflected institutional learning from the LUTP. Yet, persistent delays and rising costs reminded policymakers that participatory planning alone could not overcome systemic financial and governance constraints.

Decision Point

By late 2024, as integration of the Mile 12–Ikorodu BRT with the Blue Line Rail entered planning, Akinajo faced a defining leadership dilemma, whether Lagos could pioneer a new model of participatory co-design within African infrastructure delivery or repeat a pattern of procedural consultation shaped by donor logic. Civil society organisations were calling for participatory design workshops and more transparent grievance tracking, while donors were urging adherence to construction timelines and cost projections. Her decision would determine not only whether the integration project proceeded smoothly but also whether LAMATA's engagement model shifted toward genuine power-sharing with communities or remained primarily compliance-driven. The Lagos Metropolitan Area Transport Authority (LAMATA) planned further integration between the Mile 12-Ikorodu BRT corridor and the newly operational Lagos Blue Line Rail, with support from development partners including the World Bank, AFD, and the China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (CCECC) (Mobereola, 2009). Internal LAMATA planning documents projected substantial growth in daily ridership as integration progressed (LAMATA, 2025)..

However, civil society groups and residents' associations, particularly those affected by past BRT displacements in Mile 12 and Iponri, were increasingly demanding greater involvement in the planning process. These groups argued that previous consultations were tokenistic, with decisions made in advance and stakeholder feedback solicited only for compliance purposes (Yadua et al., 2024). Internally, some LAMATA planners also recognised that procedural consultation, carried out via ESIAs and Resettlement Action Plans, was no longer sufficient to sustain project legitimacy or ensure smooth implementation, especially after the public backlash following the 2022 Bamise Ayanwole case and worsening public trust in government-operated transport. The agency faced growing pressure to align its strategy with participatory and socially inclusive practices, as advocated by local NGOs, planning scholars, and some state legislators. Yet institutional inertia and time-sensitive funding requirements remained obstacles. Donor safeguards required that environmental and social processes be documented and disclosed, but did not mandate co-design or shared decision-making authority. Integrating meaningful community co-planning mechanisms could delay project delivery, raise negotiation costs, and challenge LAMATA's centralised governance model (Jose, 2019). The central dilemma facing LAMATA was thus both operational and political: Should the agency have co-designed its next corridor expansion with affected communities, sharing real planning authority and modifying route alignments or service structures based on community needs, or continued with top-down consultation models that met donor compliance but risk further social exclusion and public mistrust? The decision carried long-term consequences for institutional legitimacy, project sustainability, and the future of participatory governance in Lagos urban planning.

Conclusion

As Lagos continued its transition into a mega-city of over 24 million people, the need for inclusive, multimodal transport planning had never been greater. While projects like the Lagos Urban Transport Project had made strides in improving infrastructure, institutional legitimacy hinged not only on engineering success but on social acceptance and procedural justice. With inequality deepening across Nigeria, exacerbated by subsidy removals, inflation, and housing

insecurity, transport systems risked becoming a site of tension rather than integration if they failed to reflect the lived realities of those they serve (Castro et al., 2022). For Abimbola Akinajo, the question was not just whether LAMATA could deliver the next phase of BRT–rail integration on schedule, but whether it could do so in a way that transformed community engagement from a compliance exercise into a platform for shared city-making. Already, public trust was shaken by safety concerns, displacement grievances, and perceptions that participation was performative rather than transformative. If LAMATA and its partners continued to privilege compliance over co-creation, they might have achieved corridor delivery but at the cost of enduring resentment and marginalisation (Olaniyi and Agbaje, 2024). Conversely, embracing participatory planning as a core operating principle, not just a donor requirement, offered an opportunity to reshape the relationship between government and citizens in Africa's largest city (Odeleye, 2010; Yakubu & Hassan (2025)). Whether that opportunity was seized or squandered shaped the future of urban governance in Lagos.

Annex 1. Glossary of Terms and Acronyms

Acronym / Term	Full Form	Meaning / Description
BRT	Bus Rapid Transit	A high-capacity bus system operating on dedicated lanes in Lagos.
LAMATA	Lagos Metropolitan Area Transport Authority	Semi-autonomous Lagos State agency responsible for transport planning, regulation, and delivery.
LUTP	Lagos Urban Transport Project	World Bank–funded programme to modernise Lagos's transport infrastructure.
AFD	Agence Française de Développement	French development agency co-financing LUTP.
PAP	Project-Affected Person	Individual displaced or economically affected by the project.
RAP	Resettlement Action Plan	Document outlining procedures and compensation for PAPs.
ESIA	Environmental and Social Impact Assessment	Process for assessing and mitigating environmental/social risks.
NURTW	National Union of Road Transport Workers	Major transport workers' union in Lagos.
RTEAN	Road Transport Employers Association of Nigeria	Association representing transport employers.
CCECC	China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation	Contractor supporting Lagos Blue Line rail infrastructure.
OP 4.12 / OP 4.01	World Bank Operational Policies	Policies on involuntary resettlement and environmental assessment guiding donor projects.
Blue Line	Lagos Rail Mass Transit (Blue Line)	Electric-powered rail corridor linking Marina to Okokomaiko.
Invited / Claimed Spaces	From Gaventa's Power Cube	Terms describing types of participatory spaces , those created by authorities versus those claimed by citizens.

Source: Authors own work

Annex 1 provides a glossary of terms and acronyms used in the case study.

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