

To Drive or Not to Drive: That is the question

Public discourse on the subject of roads is always newsworthy. Their construction, existing conditions, maintenance and lack of, are of deep fascination to the public. One can perhaps attribute this interest to the significance of roads in the day- to- day existence of the populace, and to the crucial role they play in creating an enabling environment for socio-economic advancement.

Last December, Minister of Works and Housing, Mr Babatunde Fashola made headlines when he declared to the Federal Executive Council (FEC) that he would deliver 524 roads and bridges nationwide, saying 80 were priority projects scheduled for completion in the 2020-2021 fiscal year. In his presentation to FEC, Fashola said N412.64 billion would be needed for the project. Also making headlines on same day was FG's announcement to set aside N36.57bn for the rehabilitation of 123 roads across 36 states. What the priority projects were or which roads need rehabilitating and why he did not say.

The question this begs is what actual analysis of the state of existing roads and the requirement for new roads was undertaken before banding such figures about? After all, surely FEC needs to know how crucial these roads are to overall economic development in order to justify the priority and significant portion of the budget allocated to constructing them? Perhaps the minister took his cue from the president who earlier in the same year was credited with the declaration to create 10 million jobs over the next five years and lift 100 million people out of poverty in a decade. For a population of 200 million, taking into account that youth (under 15) make up half the population with a non-insignificant contribution of above 65, physically challenged, etc. Who then would these 10 million new jobs be created for?

Oftentimes, big numbers are bandied about. It appears that the bigger the better, to impress upon the largely uninformed public the idea that government are doing a stellar job in handling the country's affairs. In reality however, these numbers do not translate to measurable economic development, owing to the fact that planning is severely handicapped in Nigeria due to a widespread lack of data.

This lack of data and its attendant obstruction to integrated planning cuts across all sectors of Nigeria's economy. In education for instance, there is a yawning gap in available data on

basic issues that inform the administration of the sector, statistics such as the number of children enrolled in school, number of schools nationwide, number and competence of teachers, and so on, are unavailable. This holds true for every sector of our economy. The only reliable data we have are from international players, such as the World Bank, the World Health Organisation, and so on. Sadly, locally accumulated data where available is inaccurate or inadequate. It seems we fail to see the necessity in collecting and recording accurate data; there is no compilation of statistics on a periodic basis as a matter of course. Even the National Bureau of Statistics does not have up-to-date data on anything and the accuracy of the data it does have is questionable.

The importance of data cannot be overemphasized as it reveals a true picture of an economy's condition. It allows one to understand how a nation stands in respect to its peers and whether it is being run efficiently. More importantly, data can help determine whether plans and programmes which have been adopted are constructive or not. Critical analysis of past trends is key to holistic planning for the future.

This 'number-playing' without corresponding data to enable judicious planning sadly is not the way forward. If it is an acknowledged fact that it is impossible to plan without reliable data and that no economy can thrive without planning, what exactly does the government hope to achieve with these grandiose statements regularly made?

Roads are wonderful, fascinating things. However, unless properly planned and structured to fit into an overarching framework for economic planning by use of proper data analysis, the big numbers would always have a hollow, insincere ring to them as the socio-economic situation of the country would not show any marked improvement.