Abstract
Professor Carlos Moreno, Paris City Hall’s special envoy for smart cities, is regarded as the key theorist behind the concept of “the 15-minute city”. The concept aims to improve quality of life by ensuring that everything that a resident needs is no more than fifteen minutes away. Despite the interest and recognition that the concept has received around the world, we are yet to really ask how the concept can be used in African cities. In this essay, I have brought together three mobility stakeholders who have worked in Lagos, to gauge whether a 15-minute city is indeed relevant to, or possible in, Lagos, using six social functions: living, working, supplying, caring, learning and enjoying.
Covid-19, and the associated government and societal responses, has made us rethink the way we live in cities, from working remotely to limiting the number of interactions we have. Professor Carlos Moreno of the Sorbonne in Paris and Paris City Hall’s special envoy for smart cities, is regarded as the key theorist behind the concept of “la ville du quart d’heure” or “the 15-minute city”. The concept aims to improve quality of life by ensuring that everything that a resident needs is no more than fifteen minutes away. Travelling between home, work, restaurants, parks, hospitals and cultural venues should be reached by foot or bike within the 15-minute timeframe. Each neighbourhood should fulfil six social functions: living, working, supplying, caring, learning and enjoying.

Despite the interest and recognition that the concept has received, there has also been some criticism. Jay Pitter, of urban design firm Jay Pitter Placemaking in North America, believes that the 15-minute city is a top-down process that is not hyper local. The planning process does not take into account histories of urban inequalities and cultural bias, and is not evidence based. Another criticism comes from a US-based economist, Edward Glaeser, who agrees with Jay Pitter that the 15-minute city separates rather than brings people together. In high-income areas, the 15-minute city may improve quality of life, but overall the concept stifles opportunity. The rich have the opportunity to innovate in cyberspace while the poor innovate on the ground. Therefore, they suggest that the 15-minute city cuts off opportunities and segregates communities.

Both arguments have merit, but are these arguments applicable
in African cities? More specifically, could the 15-minute city concept be used positively in Lagos, Nairobi, Dakar or Cairo? I brought together three mobility stakeholders who have worked in Lagos to gauge whether a 15-minute city is indeed relevant to, or possible in, this city. Here follows reflections from my conversations with Dolapo Hannah Osunsina¹, Christopher Kost² and Dennis Kange³.

Overall, there was consensus between the four of us that the concept is a move in the right direction. Kost said: “the idea of the area around your house being walkable, being able to
access shops, buy food, and maybe even have a school in close proximity makes really good sense, and we should be striving to build neighbourhoods like that”.

Osunsina agreed that having access to your daily and weekly needs within a three-to-five mile radius from where you live and being able to access these places with your bike or walking is ideal. She also gave an example of where she lives and works. She described Lagos Island as a 15-minute district. Lagos Island is located in the south of Lagos State and it is usually labelled old Lagos because it is where the city was founded. From here, Lagos spread to the multiple islands around it. It is both residential and commercial and houses the main head offices of banks and large markets that feed Lagos State and its surroundings. Despite its commercial prowess, the majority of residents have low incomes. During working hours, the roads are congested and filled with commuters in single use vehicles and informal and formal public transportation. Due to its size of 70 km2 it is walkable and cyclable and residents tend to walk or use paratransit for trips to school, the market and recreational activities. While describing the benefits of living and working in this 15-minute district, Osunsina emphasised the importance of having a network of people in close proximity for emergencies and access to healthcare, giving examples of how the young people she works with on a daily basis have been able to leverage these networks even without telephones.

Though the terminology of a 15-minute city was new to Kange, he mentioned that it is in essence what he is already advocating for through the work that he does. He described
the ideas behind it as ‘looking back to get to the future’ because he imagined being back in his grandfather’s village, a remote village in Benue State where cars were not popular: “we would walk or cycle to the market”. He then described why it is even more important in an urban environment to think about compact communities. The transition to populous urban environments such as Lagos further exacerbates the need to advocate for cycling and walking to improve wellbeing and accessibility to social amenities, but also to reduce traffic congestion and therefore noise and air pollution.

When we started to think about how we could implement the concept of a 15-minute city locally, we discovered some gaps and some potential ways to address them. These are explored anecdotally through the lenses of the six social functions, and are not exhaustive.

**Living**
Similar to Kange and Osunsina, who both gave examples of existing 15-minute cities in Nigeria, Kost did the same for Nairobi. “In a lot of our neighbourhoods, especially in the lower income parts of our cities, they’re already very mixed use, they’re compact and they’re dense”. He then went on to explain where the gaps are in these compact communities: “The issue is not in the land use as much as it is in the physical infrastructure that’s available. Streets may not be paved, the major streets may not have proper walkways or cycle tracks, the public (and green) spaces may not be developed very well, so that’s really where we need the investment”.

It is evident from the discussion and the reality on the ground that people are already walking in both Nairobi and Lagos. In both cities, approximately 40% of all daily trips are made on foot due to necessity. This is likely to have increased due to COVID-19 lockdowns. Though there is no data, one can see more people are walking and cycling in African cities. It is more noticeable that there is a need for non-motorised transport (NMT) for last mile mobility, and more investment needs to
be made in safer, NMT-friendly streets and infrastructure to ensure there is a dignified space in which to walk.

Working
“I think the part where it becomes more problematic is when we’re talking about access to jobs,” Kost remarked. “Because the labour market is much bigger than your 15-minute neighbourhood, and it’s not practical to think that everyone would be able to find employment there”. This echoes Edward Glaeser’s sentiments on the potential of the 15-minute city to further entrench inequality and segregation.

To combat this, it is important to think about a multimodal public transport system, where NMT can link to mass transit modes that are accessible and affordable. Long term, land use planning is integral to ensure working clusters are not all in one CBD, such as is found in Lagos State, where on a daily basis commuters move to the south-central part for jobs in the morning and in the evening head back out towards the north, east and west.

Supplying
There are 20 local government areas in Lagos State, and within each local government there is a market. These larger markets are not located at a walkable distance for customers, and this has led to pop-up local markets and stalls within residential and commercial areas. These temporary roadside stalls sell vegetables, fruits and essential goods and encourage walking as the main means of transport due to their locations.

Supply to these local vendors is a lot more arduous. The vendors
travel to different parts of Lagos to purchase the best-priced items, usually on public transport. In addition, the majority of fruits and vegetables come from outside Lagos, increasing the cost of the goods for the consumer.

Bringing the supply of goods closer to the end consumer will bring the cost down and ensure people are able to access healthy food locally. At Lagos Urban Development Initiative, we have been working with Lagos State Parks and Gardens Agency to develop an allotment garden framework, where local public spaces are used by the community to grow food for personal consumption and commercial purposes.

**Caring**
The healthcare service in Nigeria is definitely not one to write home about. State and federal government funded hospitals are few and far between, and are unable to support the growing population of over 20 million people. The 256 public healthcare centres which are managed by local government are also inadequate due to the lack of equipment, services and trained medical professionals. This negatively impacts the health of Lagosians, especially the poor who do not have the option of visiting private hospitals. Due to cost, availability of beds, and distance to government hospitals, people tend to self-treat and often put themselves in more danger. The role of the public healthcare centres is integral in improving access to healthcare. Therefore local government needs to play a key role in improving accessibility as well as quality.

When speaking about improving social services, Kange noted the importance of implementing hyper-local solutions that
meet the needs of the people. This can happen when we tackle urban development using a bottom-up approach, working with community leaders and local government, instead of making decisions from the top and expecting drastic change on the ground. In addition, as Osunsina mentioned, leveraging the community networks that have been established (especially in emergency situations) can ensure that people have access to healthcare as quickly as possible.

**Learning**

Similarly to healthcare, educational facilities are funded and managed by different layers of government. Though there are a number of primary schools under each local government, some schools are more populated than others, and therefore students do not always live within walking distance within the catchment area. However, cycling is a possibility. The African Cycling Foundation where Kange works has a ride-to-school project where they teach children to cycle and supply bicycles to schools.

Universities in Lagos are starting to promote cycling on campus by working with organisations like Cycology, a bike-sharing company, and introducing bike-sharing schemes. This helps to reduce congestion on the roads, curb pollution from vehicular traffic, and improve the health of the students and lecturers. There are multiple possibilities for the different levels of education, and ensuring that transport is accessible and affordable is most essential.
Another consideration is implementing a tiered and regulated fare on public transport. At present the formal bus services (BRT) have fixed rates for their journeys, but informal public transport charges depend on weather, traffic conditions and sentiment. If all public transport services can be regulated with affordability as a prerequisite, travellers are assured of a more accessible public transport service. Having a tiered way of charging can mean that students, people with disabilities, and the elderly pay a discounted rate.

Kost explained that in Nairobi, “the informal fare structure usually ends up higher for short trips. For a short trip, you pay 30, 40 shillings”. If this high base fare was regulated using a uniform per kilometre rate, more people could use affordable public transport within 15 minutes, a reasonable alternative for some long walking trips, especially for those who are less able bodied.

**Enjoying**

Lagosians like to party! The going-out culture is as strong as the hustle culture. However, many of the entertainment venues, art and cultural spaces, and restaurants are situated in the south-central part of Lagos State. The difficulty in accessing these spaces regularly due to distance, lack of a regular public transport service, and cost of transportation for a vast majority of Lagosians, has exacerbated the spatial, cultural and economic inequalities in Lagos. As mentioned above, bringing together the land use planners and transport planners to think through the spatial issues in Lagos alongside the concept of the 15-minute city can be a good way to explore possibilities of bringing people closer to spaces of joy, happiness and
economic prosperity.

Overall, the 15-minute city concept was accepted by our discussion group as a concept which could be useful in Lagos, particularly as an advocacy tool. In our conversations, we realised that the time of 15 minutes was the least important part of the concept. Having existing examples of compact communities, usually in low-income communities, we can learn how land use is planned to encourage accessibility, while removing formal urban planning restrictions on density. The 15-minute city concept has value therefore as an advocacy tool for reinforcing compact communities with accessible goods and services, and especially to push investments towards walking and cycling infrastructure. However, due to the size of most cities in Africa and the inequality that exists, even if basic services may be within walking or cycling distance, jobs may not be. Therefore, while compact communities already show potential as 15-minute neighbourhoods, faster, convenient and affordable linkages are still needed to connect these communities with the rest of the city, and to be able to shift towards a 15-minute city. Here, affordable and multimodal public transport that links with last mile connectivity is integral. Lastly, the 15-minute city touches on multiple sectors including health and education, the responsibility for which often rests at various levels of government and across sectors. Therefore, strong multi-level governance is important to enable local impact that sufficiently meets the needs of people and communities.
Endnotes

1 Dolapo Hannah Osunsina is the co-founder of H factor collective, a social enterprise that connects communities with opportunities.

2 Chris Kost works at the Institute for Transportation Development Policy (ITDP) based in Nairobi.

3 Dennis Kange is project manager at African Cycling Foundation, an organisation promoting cycling at grassroots level.

References


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