

Why building collapses are all too common in Lagos

August 23 2021, by Olasunkanmi Habeeb Okunola



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The rising status of [Lagos as an emerging megacity](#) and a commercial nerve center in sub-Saharan Africa has come with a number of challenges. One of these is the safety of buildings.

Building collapses are common in Lagos—hardly a year passes by without cases. Some have resulted in the loss of many lives. For instance, it was reported that [115 buildings](#), mostly residential, collapsed in Lagos between 2005 and 2016. And about [4,000 families](#) have been left homeless and traumatized.

I undertook a [study](#) to analyze the trends and causes of this problem in Lagos. I wanted to understand the disaster risk reduction measures put in place by the state government to prevent and respond to building collapse. My aim was to provide information for a policy response to prevent and mitigate these disasters.

It emerged that lapses from both private developers and the government contributed to the problem. The solutions lie in awareness, skills, following regulations and making sure there are consequences for failures.

Building collapse

I obtained data from built environment professionals such as architects, builders, [structural engineers](#), town planners, estate surveyors and valuers. These professionals were from the Lagos State Physical Planning Permit Authority, Lagos State Building Control Agency, Lagos State Safety Commission, and those in private practice. I chose these respondents to get professional insights on the subject matter through in-depth interviews.

Data presented in my recent [article](#) showed that buildings collapsed yearly the state. The highest number of cases in Lagos were reported in [2011](#), [2012](#) and [2019](#), when 19, 14, and 17 buildings, respectively, collapsed.

Out of 152 buildings that collapsed in Lagos between 2005 and 2020,

76.6% were residential, 13% were commercial and 9.4% were institutional. Most of the buildings that collapsed are typically multi-storey buildings.

These cases of building collapse were due to:

- Unqualified or unskilled builders.
- Substandard building materials.
- Illegal conversion or alterations to existing structures.
- Lack of maintenance.

Respondents I interviewed said that collapses were directly linked to greed and ignorance of the developers in charge of building construction in the state. They also stated that ineffective monitoring of building development was a contributor. This was because of lack of manpower and insufficient tools. Corruption of government officials in charge of building plan approval was also a leading factor that respondents mentioned.

Disaster risk reduction practices

The Lagos state government set up four agencies to monitor building development from design stage through construction to completion. They are: Lagos State Physical Planning Permit Authority, which was established in 1998; Lagos State Building Control Agency, which officially started in August 2012; Lagos State Material Testing Laboratory, established in 2006 and Lagos State Safety Commission which was inaugurated in 2009.

But some of the building environment professionals I interviewed told me that the agencies in charge of building development were short staffed. They also said the agencies did not have enough vehicles to adequately monitor construction projects in Lagos State.

[The 2010 urban and regional planning and development law of Lagos](#) empowers the [state government](#) to take possession of a property where a building collapse has occurred. The affected property will, however, not be taken over by the government if the owner can prove that the fault is the developer's poor judgment.

The government also has powers to prosecute the building developers and construction engineers; and require that the professional bodies seize or withdraw the licenses of erring professionals. The implementation of these penalties, however, remains questionable. There is little or no evidence that such penalties have been meted out to defaulters in the past.

I concluded that building collapse is caused by lapses from both the private developers and the government.

Way forward

Citizens, built environment professionals and government must act to prevent the common problem of building collapse in Lagos, and Nigeria generally. The responsible [government](#) agencies and professional bodies must create awareness of the need to obtain planning permission before building. They must also insist on the need to engage professionals in the construction of buildings.

State governments must fund all the agencies in charge of building. They must also ensure that capable and qualified professionals are employed to ensure implementation of building code regulations. This would go a long way towards effective and efficient building development in the entire country. Equally important is the provision of modern facilities such as drones and GPS for effective monitoring and enforcement of building regulations.

I also suggest that punishment such as heavy fines, forfeiture of property and jail terms should be meted out to any professionals or property owners who contravene [building](#) control regulations or engage in unethical practices that could lead to the collapse of buildings.

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