

We used to have fresh air.

By Ibukunoluwa Naiyeju

Abstract

“We used to have fresh air.” explores the toxic consequences of the ubiquitous use of generators in Lagos, Nigeria’s commercial capital and most populous city. Generators are used to supplement the country’s epileptic power supply and their use is widely associated with persistent noise pollution. However, the graver concern lies with their emission of carbon monoxide fumes and smoke into the atmosphere. Narrated through the lenses of citizens, this fictional piece highlights the threat posed by these emissions to the health of individuals, as well as to the availability of “fresh air”, an immaterial resource prized as the crown jewel of the country’s outdoors. The story explores the implications of hazardous communal practices which contribute to the advancement of climate change in a developing African country.

We used to have fresh air.

Sade was in Lagos to present her team’s pitch at their company headquarters. She was advised by Ngozi, her host, to wake up as early as 4am and be at the bus stop before 5am. “It is better that way if you want to beat the morning traffic.” The headquarters were only an hour away, “but that is when the roads are free. If you get stuck in traffic, you can be there for 4 hours. I kid you not”, Ngozi had warned.

Lagos was Nigeria’s own sleepless city. While some residents returned home by midnight, exhausted from traffic jams, some traders began their workdays at the same hour, displaying their wares for sale at roadsides and sidewalks. The state’s population of over 20 million residents consolidated its reputation as a hub of thriving trade and commerce. By 5am, Sade was at the bus stop. Even then, it teemed with people. “How do they do it?” she marvelled.

The Danfo buses stopped by the roadside so their conductors could call their destinations. Conductors were assistants to the drivers in charge of fare collection from passengers.

“Ketu! Ojota! Mile 12!”

“Eko Idumota!”

“CMS straight!”

She ran towards the one that called her destination. She swiftly entered the bus to avoid being “chanced”. Chancing, a term used to refer to the unfair and brash way a hasty passenger would push into the bus and deprive another of the chance to get into the bus, was especially rife during rush hour. That undercurrent of insensitive behaviour, lurking at every corner of the city, was one of the many reasons Sade felt uncomfortable in Lagos.

She had requested to make her presentation remotely and avoid traveling to Lagos, but their branch office Manager had said it would be better executed in person. She was here now. She steeled herself for the day ahead. On the bus, a passenger argued with the conductor in Pidgin English that he had hiked the fare.

“Nawah o. It is a Monday morning, not weekend. Fuel is not scarce Oga. No be today we dey enter bus.” It was habitual for conductors to increase fares, and frequent bus-takers knew this. This conductor, however, defended the fairness of the specified fare.

For the first 15 minutes of the commute, Sade dozed on the bus, occasionally hitting her head on the seat pane opposite her. Her stomach rumbled as the bus meandered its way on the bumpy roads. The hunger which accompanied the rumbling took sleep from her eyes. She made a mental note to have some breakfast before her presentation by noon.

Now wide awake, she peered out the window, willing herself to observe the city. Like in many other Nigerian towns and cities, generators had become dime a dozen in Lagos. To sustain the electricity supply to their homes, most households purchased smaller petrol-powered generators as backups, since government-supplied electricity was scarce. Small and medium-scale enterprises, factories, banks, hospitals, and occupational facilities all had their own generators as well – commercial or industrial generators powered by diesel. The utilization rate of other states paled in comparison to that of Lagos. From the barbershop to the government office, a generator resided in practically every building.

Over time, the exponential use of generators posed two major health concerns to the environment and the people of Lagos. The lot of them were noisy, particularly the cheaper, portable ones purchased by low- and middle-income households. However, the more serious threat they posed was through their emission of the carbon monoxide fumes and soot into the atmosphere. Over time, Sade, like many others, had become apathetic to the excessive noise. However, as someone who suffered severe respiratory allergies, the persistent air pollution made her even more uncomfortable.

“We used to have fresh air”, the passenger beside her said, as if reading her mind.

“I’m sorry, were you speaking to me?” She asked.

An elderly man, he must have noticed her surprise at his remark, as he smiled and apologized.

“I’m sorry to have startled you. I couldn’t help but notice your shock at the sight of the countless generators around. If I had to take a guess, I would say you are new to Lagos,” her neighbour replied.

“Is it so obvious?” Sade remarked, laughing.

“Oh no, not really. I just happened to notice. But yes, we used to have fresh air. Unfortunately, with all the fumes and soot from generators, vehicles, not to mention open-air burning and the lot of indiscriminate practices that harm the environment, we cannot quite call it fresh air anymore, can we?” He closed with the rhetorical question.

They traveled in silence for the remaining part of the journey, Sade considering what the man had said. When she alighted at her stop, she detoured to grab some snacks and a bottle of juice from a nearby restaurant. Before long, Sade was settled and ready for her presentation. When her presentation was over, she caught up with some colleagues over lunch. She made a note to leave by 3pm so she would not get stuck in “closing time traffic”, another tip Ngozi had given her.

At the apartment, Sade relayed the conversation she had with the passenger in the bus to Ngozi.

“You know, he’s right though. We used to have fresh air.”

“What do you mean by ‘used to’? What do we have now, stale air”? Sade joked.

“Don’t be silly,” Ngozi laughed before she continued. “But really, we don’t have fresh air anymore. Take my son. He is not even 1 and the paediatrician has warned he’s at risk of developing respiratory complications if we don’t take better care of him. But what can we do, really? If we take him out to play because the house is very stuffy and poorly ventilated, there’s so much noise he gets fussy. If we stay in the house, we must cope with the noise, but there’s the added complication of the fumes from the neighbours’ generators coming in through our windows. You can see for yourself now; you see how small the entire compound is? Sometimes, I feel like we live under a vent of smoke. If we could afford a better and more spacious place without these hazards, trust me, we would have moved out of this building a long time ago,” Ngozi said, the frustration in her voice clear.

“But Ngozi, it seems like people think this pollution you describe is some distant reality that does not play out in our individual lives,” Sade replied, concern evident on her face.

“Sade, I used to think that too. I used to think, ‘But we still have the fresh air outdoors. Let’s just open the windows and ventilate our rooms.’ Opening the windows alone will not help. You know why? The air, the atmosphere, the weather, the environment... they are like farms. What we plant is what we reap, and in some cases, along with some weeds. The changes may be subtle, but they are there. Haven’t you read in the news how the flooding in Lagos gets more alarming each year? It’s because the weather is changing drastically, due to our environmentally harmful activities. Sadly, these changes are worsening everyday, some of them right before our very eyes,” Ngozi replied as she motioned to Sade to come join her at the window.

One of the neighbours in the building had just put on their portable household generator. Sade and Ngozi watched in silence as its fumes rose to the sky.