

'We are working towards adopting a Smart City Transport System'

...Dr. Abdul-Lateef Bello

The Executive Officers of Media Ideals for Development in Africa held a brief Chat with the Director, Directorate of Road Transport Services Dr. Abdul-Lateef Bello on the progress recorded so far since his assumption of office in March 2022. In his very calm, unassuming and gentle disposition the Director spoke convincingly on his journey so far and the direction his leadership is taking the transportation system in the Federal Capital Territory.

On the various efforts the Directorate been made to reposition the Directorate?

One of the things we observed when I assumed office was that the recruitment procedure was wrong. This was one of the issues behind the attitude of staff that looked out of place. I was once a commuter. I was once a non-VIO staff who used the road. I had seen how people feel, and by the time I see how people feel, I can externalize myself and feel what people feel about us and with that we now know how to go about the process of repositioning the organisation. But then, I decided we have to do the repositioning quietly. There is no doubt that publicity is key, but when I started, I decided that there was no need to make noise so that I could go far and when we begin to roll out our stories and people come to us, they will be surprised when they see how far we have come. Sometimes it gladdens my heart when I see the surprise in people when they see how far we have come. Today we are reviewing our recruitment procedure which has been one of our weaknesses. We just concluded a review of some of our staff that are always on the road. A substantial number of these people are casual staff. We have the most enlightened officers sitting in the office while the less enlightened ones are on the road. They are not a good reflection of what the VIO is. Unfortunately, the ones on the road are our gatekeepers in terms of impression management. We are in the process of training them. We are now recruiting people that we believe will give us what a capital like FCT deserves. We are also looking at some of the people we had been using as casual staff to pick some of them because of their experience and then remold them. We are therefore in a form of transition. I will plead that the residents bear with us.

On what the Directorate under his leadership is doing to adopt the use of technology as it is done in advance clime?

"We have also deployed the use of technology to our activities. We have a self-service portal. Now, you can sit in the comfort of your homes and renew your car papers, even the number plates, you only have to come here and share evidence of payment and we will give you the number plates. But we all know Nigerians have trained themselves in a culture of referrals, in which you ask people, who did this for you and we through that, refer the questioner to the person that helped. This had always been the case when we wanted things done. However, with the new development, we believe that will change over time. We have to do a lot of awareness and enlightenment. This was something that was unveiled by the Honourable Minister around March this year. It is working perfectly now. Even the staff were surprised. They had thought it was going to affect our revenue generation but it has not. We are also aware that some people are making money from our premium numbers ABJ, ABC.

We found out that by the time we roll out our plate numbers, some people will buy some of these numbers off and start reselling them for inflated prices. I never knew about this until I was told that some particular set of people will not like to drive their vehicles unless it is with our ABJ or ABC plate numbers. And they pay huge money for that. So, what we did was that we created a page in our online



number plate buying web for premium numbers. Even if you just want to access the premium numbers, you have to pay to access them. Now, instead of creating wealth for few individuals, we are making the money for the government. We are gradually changing the process. Today, we have gotten a broker, who is going to coordinate all the insurance policies for FCT residents. Gone are the days when we have unregistered insurance firms churning out papers and when you have accidents people are fighting on the road because they don't have recognizable insurance back up. We are working on ensuring that we have a uniformed insurance body to ensure that vehicle owners are able to make claims when there is an accident. The whole arrangement is in the pipeline. Though we will not be making money from this because it is not within our mandate, we however believe that morally we are bound to work on this because it is part of the things, we check on the road. We therefore believe we must create the environment for resident to enjoy claims when there is an accident. All these we are doing gradually.

There is no doubt that we have a lot of catching up to do because we have lagged behind as a city. Every city is now operating what we call a SMART CITY TRANSPORTATION SYSTEM. And that is what we aspire to be. We cannot continue to run our operations manually. We cannot continue to stay on the round and tell drivers, 'STOP, bring out your papers'. We look forward to a situation in which we have electronic enforcement with fewer men working on the roads, maybe for recoveries. By then we would adopt artificial intelligence to help us monitor traffic. We have already deployed pilot cameras around the city, just pilots. All our traffic lights are working courtesy of the Chinese government. We also have other companies who are working. All these are going on as part of the pilot project. We are sharing information, we are interfacing. A lot of things are happening. When we get to the point where we are ready, the people will hear from us. Some of the organizations we are still talking with them on the level of funding.

On the need to unbundle the Directorate to foster better and more efficient service delivery to residence of the Federal Capital City?

"We believe there is the need to grant the agency some form of autonomy. This can be achieved when the organization is unbundled. A lot of things have been muddled up, but that task has to be undertaken. In Lagos for instance, what we are doing here is being done by several agencies; the LAMATA, THE LASTMA, and other things. All these things we do as VIO, people don't know that VIO is just a unit of the FCT Road Traffic Directorate. We have to unbundle, get to that level that people will feel us in all departments. This is the challenge that the new FCT government will face. *The incoming government should declare transportation in FCT an emergency and going forward we already have a template which we will push forward to ensure that the Department actualizes its mandate.*