AN ANALYSIS OF AIR TRANSPORTATION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract
Air Transportation is the transportation of passengers and cargo by aircraft and helicopters. An efficient air transport contributes to economic growth and development. However in Nigeria, it suffers from poor reputation for operational efficiency and safety. This is attested by the present state of the industry in the country. Recently available statistics and data show an increase in the use of air transportation. In Nigeria this is facing problems which arise as a result of factors militating against efficiency of the system. These factors include absence of a coherent air transport policy, bad management, decaying facilities, loose security, closure of airports, intermittent air crashes etc. This paper therefore recommends that adequate measures should be taken to ensure efficiency of the system for economic growth and development in Nigeria.

Introduction
Air Transportation is the transportation of passengers and cargo by aircraft and helicopters. It is a transport system that involves the movement or carriage by air of persons or goods using airplanes and helicopters (WIE, 2011). It has become the primary means of common carrier traveling. Greatest efficiency and value are obtained when long distances are involved and high value payloads are moved, although, the time and cost efficiencies obtained decreases as distances traveled is reduced, air transport is often worthwhile even for relatively short distances. It also provides a communication link, which is sometimes vital, between the different groups of people involved (WIE, 2011).

Nigeria is classified as an emerging market and is rapidly approaching middle income status with its abundant supply of resources; well endowed communication, financial sector and stock exchange (Wikipedia, 2011). Such a country and its economy needs efficient air transportation. Furthermore, the large size of the country coupled with geographically diverse regions, difficult terrain, water bodies etc necessitates the use of efficient air transportation. Efficient air transportation is a means of transport that conveys people and goods from one place to another safely, on time without delay or flight cancellation or any other problem. It also contributes to economic growth and development. However in Nigeria, it suffers from poor reputation for operational efficiency and safety (Wikipedia, 2011). The aim of this paper is to undertake overview of air transportation and recommend how it can be made efficient for economic growth and development in Nigeria.

Historical development of air transportation in Nigeria
Air Travel in Nigeria commenced during World War II (1939-1945) when it become necessary to move troops and supplies fast across the country. Several air strips were built then which were converted after the war, to Civilian use (Iloeje, 2003).

Nigerian Airways was established in October, 1958 as a Joint Venture between the Nigerian Government, Elder Dempster Lines and the British Overseas Airways Corporation (BOAC). The Airways took over the operation of domestic flights from the disbanded West African Airways Corporation (WAAC) which had been operating commercial aircraft within the country since 1946 (Filani, 1983).

In 1963, the Nigerian Federal Government bought out the other shareholders and Nigeria Airways became wholly-owned by the Nigerian government. The airline has a monopoly for providing domestic air services in Nigeria. It was also the national flag carrier for international services along the West African Coast, Europe and the United States of America.
In 1976 Nigeria Airways operated a fleet of nineteen aircraft consisting of two each of Boeings 707 and 737 and one DC 10-30 aircraft used mainly for international flights. There were Seven F.28 Jets and Seven Folder F.27 propeller aircrafts used mainly on domestic routes (Filani, 1983). There were also other major international airlines which operate flights to Nigeria, thereby linking Nigeria with the World’s major socio-economic and political centers. Within Nigeria itself, several charter companies operate additional flight in small aircraft from Lagos to the main economic centers in the Southern parts of the country.

The Nigerian Federal Government realizing the role of air transport in the nation’s development made significant attempts to develop the country’s air transport system. The most gigantic was the 1975-1980 Airport development programme in which the Murtala Mohammed airport complex was about N240 million (Filani, 1983). Six other airports in Kano, Ilorin, Kaduna, Sokoto, Port Harcourt and Maiduguri were developed to accommodate the largest intercontinental aircraft. Apart from these airports development programme the Federal Government also intensifies manpower development in the aviation industry. The Nigerian Civil Aviation Training Centres provides a substantial number of trained air personnel. This is in the areas of piloting, maintenance engineers, air traffic controllers, aeronautics teleprompter operators and communications personnel. These personnel were reinforced with those from the Nigerian College of Aviation Technology, Zaria.

During the 1980s and 1990s, many airports were built, existing ones were modernized and more services and facilities added, all under the management of Nigerian Airports Authority. Iloeje, 2003 states that it is estimated that by the year 2003, over four million Nigerian fly and use the airports each year. However, private domestic air carriers began to win business at the expense of Nigeria Airways, the government-owned national airline and it was declared bankrupt in 2004. The national flag carrier of Nigeria is now-virgin Nigeria Airways, joint ventures between Nigerian private investors and the UK-based Virgin Atlantic Airways with the backing of the Nigerian government (Wikipedia, 2011). The replacement of Nigerian Airways with Virgin Atlantic Airways is an attempt at deregulating the civil aviation industry. On 17th September, 2009, Virgin Nigeria were re-branded as Nigeria Eagle Airlines which on 2nd June, 2010 was further changed to Air Nigeria Development Limited, branded as Air Nigeria.

According to Wikipedia (2011), there are a total of thirty eight (38) airports with paved runways and sixteen (16) airports with unpaved runways. The figure below shows some of the airports and air routes in Nigeria.

Figure 1: Airports and Air routes in Nigeria.
2007 and Gombe Airport in 2008. In the year, 2011 the State Governors of Bauchi, Kebbi, Kwara and Niger carried out rehabilitation and upgrading of airports in their State capitals to attract investors from anywhere in the world. These airports are to create an efficient transportation network which is indispensable for economic growth (Alao, 2011). However, few planes fly in these airports as the overwhelming majority in these States can only afford road transport.

In the years 2011 and 2012, there are new developments which have improve and further develop air transportation in Nigeria in the near future. These include renovation and upgrading of facilities at in Lagos, Kano, Port Harcourt, Enugu and Jos. Example include the construction of new terminals at Nnamdi Azikwe International Airport Abuja and the construction of domestic wing of Mallam Aminu Kano Airport. On December 12, 2011 Arik Air launched the Abuja-London Flight while earlier in the year, a new airline 1st Nation Continental Airlines started the Lagos (Nigeria)-Kigali (Rwanda) direct flight.

The situation of air transportation in Nigeria

Statistics have shown that from the beginning of the Millennium 2000, there had been an increase in air transportation in Nigeria. This is in the areas of number of departing/arriving passengers, loaded freight, and arriving aircraft. This can be seen on table 1.

Table 1: Air Transport Basic Data, 2000-2004

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<th>2000</th>
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<tr>
<td>Loaded freight (000 tonnes)</td>
<td>11,923</td>
<td>12,726</td>
<td>18,052</td>
<td>19,972</td>
<td>22,518</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unloaded freight (000 tonnes)</td>
<td>15,302</td>
<td>15,266</td>
<td>20,785</td>
<td>55,160</td>
<td>62,158</td>
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<tr>
<td>Passengers departing (Number)</td>
<td>533,585</td>
<td>624,174</td>
<td>652,019</td>
<td>646,777</td>
<td>733,445</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transiting Passengers (number)</td>
<td>163,776</td>
<td>139,503</td>
<td>91,344</td>
<td>31,260</td>
<td>27,857</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arriving Passengers (Number)</td>
<td>519,987</td>
<td>609,984</td>
<td>611,307</td>
<td>614,307</td>
<td>711,781</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aircraft arriving (Number)</td>
<td>6,996</td>
<td>7,009</td>
<td>6,930</td>
<td>7,869</td>
<td>9,097</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source – NBS, 2005

From 2005 to 2007, the aviation industry witness some growth which the result that by 2008 passenger movement increased by 21 per cent, cargo movement rose by 744.6 per cent and aircraft movement increased by 2.3 per cent (Olalerin, 2009). In first quarter of 2009, the Global Economic Recession affects aircraft movement, but later in 2009/2010 traffic figures shows a 17.2 per cent growth, aircraft traffic figures showed a 12.3 per cent growth (Nnodim, 2010). This reasonable growth in the aviation industry have a positive impact on the economy.

After the liquidation of Nigerian Airways Virgin Nigeria Airways (now Air Nigeria) is the new airline for Nigeria. The airlines inaugural flight was on 28 June, 2005 from Lagos to London Heathrow using an Airbus A340-300 aircraft. Virgin Nigeria has since gone on to become one of Nigeria’s largest airlines carrying one million (1,000,000) passengers and four thousand (4,000) ton of freight within two years of operation (Wikipedia, 2011).

Besides Air Nigeria, there are private domestic airlines that operate on mainly domestic routes within the country. Some of these include Aero Contractor, ADC Airline, Bellview Chanchangi, Capital Airlines, Allied Air, Kabo Air, IRS Airlines, Okada, Sosoliso, Dornier Aviation etc. However, these domestic air lines engaged in frequent flight cancellations and delays. This has resulted in dwindling confidence of passengers on the airlines. Even Air Nigeria has of recent been facing criticisms from both its customers and the government agencies, due to incessant air and ground returns, as well as flight delays (Aduge-Ani, 2007).

In October and December, 2005 there were plane crashes involving Bellview and Sosoliso airlines. These air disasters forced the government to overhaul safety and operating standards which has improved air transportation. Presently there are eight (8) International Airports at Abuja, Calabar, Enugu, Lagos, Kano, Maiduguri, Port Harcourt and Sokoto. Inspite of the status of these airports they can be closed down to the dismay of passengers. For example, the Port Harcourt International
Airport was abruptly closed in August, 2006 and reopened after 16 months (Agbo, 2008).

The domestic air carriers are also involved in the annual airlift of pilgrims for Hajj. They have over the years performed disapprovingly in the Hajj operations. It is because of this, that the National Hajj Commission (NAHCON) is opting for the use of foreign airlines in the operation beginning from 2008 (Garba, 2007). The performance of the domestic air carriers is a blatant breach of contract agreement as it affects the religious trip.

The Air Transport sector thrives on services and safety of passengers and goods. It is in realization of this that the Nigerian government set a deadline of April, 30, 2007 for all airlines operating in the country to re-capitalise or be grounded, in an effort to ensure better services and safety. The airlines that satisfied the Nigerian Civil Aviation Authority (NCAA)’s criteria in terms of re-capitalization were re-registered for operation (Wikipedia, 2011).

In the year 2008, NAHCON has short-listed nine (9) airlines for the Hajj, five (5) of which are foreign airlines. These are Niamey Air, Egypt Air, Hamsal Air Ltd, Saudi Airlines and Emirates Tough Aviation Ltd. Foreign airlines are generally larger, better maintained, have more modern facilities and services and fly passengers at greater comfort and higher speed than the domestic airliners (Ileoje, 2003).

In Nigeria only top executive’s politicians businessmen and other persons travel by air. This is because air travel is the most costly means of transport in Nigeria. As at 2003, a bus ride from Lagos to Abuja cost about N1,500 but one would need some N10, 000 for the same journey by air (Ileoje, 2003). According to Joslin (2006), airfares vary from $25 - $40, but since the average household income is only $300 per year, very few Nigerians can afford to fly. Travel to Europe is even more cost prohibitive at $1000-$1,500, a full three to five years income.

It is clear that there are problems facing air transportation in Nigeria today. It is in realization of the role of air transportation in economic growth and development that President Yar’adua’s Seven Point Agenda included transportation. Yar’adua’s Aviation vision is that “Nigeria’s airports should be safe, secure and efficient (NTA, 2007). The Jonathan administration that succeeded Yar’adua has the vision of transforming the air transport industry. However, in 2011 crisis emerged in the aviation sector due to shortage of aviation fuel leading to increase in flight charges in some cases and delays/cancellation of flights.

It was recently noted that private airlines are doing well as they have taken over from the national carrier. They have improved the quality of their services by using modern aircraft, keeping to flight schedule and use of information communication technology for booking flights(online booking). Also the introduction of low fares for flights booked well in advance(say 2 months before) have made some people to now use air transportation. Bad roads and fear of highway armed robbery are forcing some people to use air transportation in the country.

**Problems facing air transportation in Nigeria**

The following factors have over the year militated against efficient air transportation.

**Absence of coherent air transport policy**- The National Transport Policy has indicated the need to take measures to bring co-ordination and rationality in the transport network. According to Filani and Ikporukpo (2000), the early history of transportation development in Nigeria was marked by an attempt at coordination. However such attempts were virtually abandoned in later years. The result of this is that the Nigerian Airways was declared bankrupt and replaced with a private cum public airliner. Other African countries such as Cameroun and Ghana still have their national carriers – Cameroun Airlines (CAMAIR) and Ghana Airlines.

The demise of the Nigerian Airways is a clear indication of lack of coherent policy which paved way for the death of the national carrier. Furthermore, if there is a coherent policy, major airports in the country should have been expanded and modernized long time ago as many of the airports were built in the 1970s with an old architectural design. There is the need for a coherent policy that will ensure balance between the needs of the society and the economy for adequate transport facilities and the ability of the transport sector to meet such demands (Yusufu, 2007).
Bad management- Transport corporations and hence the transport systems have been poorly managed. This explains the management agreements between the Nigerian Airways and the Royal Dutch Airline in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Filani and Ikporukpo, 2000). In 1999, bad management led to a crisis in the Nigerian Civil Aviation industry following the decline and near collapse of the Nigerian Airways (Akpoghomeh, 1999). This bad management finally resulted in the Nigerian Airways declared bankrupt in 2004. It is clear that over the years the national carrier Nigerian Airways could not be managed successfully as a business venture. The result is sharp reduction in the number of airplanes in the fleet of the Nigerian Airways. For example, in 1979, the nation could boast of twenty nine (29) well maintained and functional aircrafts in the fleet of the Nigerian Airways flying locally and internationally, but by 1999, only two (2) were left functional (Nwakoro, 2007).

Decaying facilities- Facilities provided at the nation’s International Airports at Lagos and Kano is overstretched. Facilities such as seats, air-conditioning system, conveyor belt, toilet facilities, etc are decaying. This arises as they are not upgraded based on the increase in human traffic (Ajanaku, 2008). Owerri Airport in Imo State is worst in terms of facilities, there are no trolleys to carry passenger’s load and as such passengers goes through difficulties before boarding a flight. In Nigeria, while passengers and cargo traffic has increased, the infrastructure provided has not experienced a corresponding overhaul and expansion over the years (Ajanaku, 2008). The decaying facilities especially at international airports gives the country a bad image as airports are the first port of call for foreigners coming into the country. According to Yusufu (2007), airport infrastructures are vital to the economic growth of any nation.

Loose security- There is loose security at airports in Nigeria. There is no solid perimeter fencing at all the airports in the country. The lack of perimeter fencing allowed grazing by the runway of some airports. For example, in 2005 an Air France flight crashed on cows on the runway of Port Harcourt International Airport, killing seven of them and damaging the landing gear of the aero plane (Agbo, 2008). Besides, the roads leading to some airports such as those at Owerri and Port Harcourt are not secured, as armed robbers and militants attack travelers (Agbo, 2008). The Isolo Expressway leading to Lagos International airport also witness armed robbery incidents. These robbery incidents occur due to loose security along roads leading to airports which need to be secured for the safety of travelers and their properties. There are also petty thieves in some airports who capitalize on the loose security to break into visitor’s car and carry handy belongings (Ajanaku, 2008). Also all kinds of people are found at the airport due to loose security.

Closures of airports- Airports in Nigeria are closed down for repairs that are expected to take few months but stretches beyond this time. For example, the Port Harcourt International Airport was closed down for repairs (from August 18, 2006 to December 18, 2007) that the airport authorities said would last for four months only. This however took 16 months! (Agbo, 2008). During this period, travelers and business community in the Niger Delta and South east has suffered considerable inconveniences and lost money while the closure lasted. The closure was a huge financial loss to Federal Airport Authority of Nigeria (FAAN) estimated at more than N500 million of landing fees, parking fees, sundry levies etc. (Ajanaku, 2008). During the closure, airlines such as Air France, Lufthansa and KLM that were the international operators at the airport suspend direct flights to the airport. The delay in undertaking the repairs shows lack of commitment on the part of the Government. On 9th January 2012, due to the nationwide strike called by the Nigerian Labour Congress, all airports in the country were shut down and scheduled flights on that day and some days later were cancelled and thousands of travelers became stranded.

Intermittent Air crashes- There are intermittent air crashes in Nigeria which damages the safety record of airlines in the country. This also makes passengers to be afraid of traveling by air, as air crashes are fatal. For example, in October, 2005, 117 people were killed when Bellview Airlines Boeing 737 bound for Abuja came down shortly after taking off from Lagos. In December of the
same year, a Sosoliso Airlines DC-9 crashed in Port Harcourt, killing 103 people on board. The closure of Port Harcourt International Airport was to prevent further air crashes after the Sosoliso Crash. (Agbo, 2008).

**Economic and managerial implications of the problems**

The problems facing air transportation in has economic and managerial implications which include:

1. The decaying facilities at the nations airports gives Nigeria a bad image and thus investors from abroad are unwilling and hesitant to come and invest in the country. Also with loose security these same investors will fear coming into the country for fear of been attacked by armed robbers or militants. Thus Nigeria loses a lot of foreign investments which have negative implications on the economy.

2. The dwindling confidence of passengers on domestic airlines leads to limited business travels by air and thus a lot of time is wasted when other means of transportation are used and in business time is money. Also with intermittent plane crashes, passengers will fear to travel by air and thus resort to using road transport which has high rate of accident leading to further loss of lives and properties.

3. With problems facing air transport sectors of the economy that rely heavily on air transportation will witness negative economic growth. Furthermore domestic airlines can not win business contracts involving carriage of freights and passengers such as the annual airlift of pilgrims for Hajj to Saudi Arabia.

4. The sudden and long closure of airports especially international ones is a big loss economic loss in terms of revenues to be collected by FAAN and losses by local businesses at the airports. The suspension of direct flights by foreign airlines is another economic loss.

5. The problems of air transport portrays Nigerians as bad managers who can not sustain ably and profitably manage public corporations and thus had to join hands with foreigners.

6. The problem of bad management creates persistent crisis in the Nigerian civil aviation industry which have a negative effect on the economy.

**Recommendations**

The following recommendations are made in order for Nigeria to have efficient air transportation for economic development

There should be the presence of a coherent transport policy for the country. Such policy should be well pursued to ensure co-ordination and rationality in the transport sector. The Federal Government Draft National transport Policy drafted in August, 2010 should be implemented to ensure the overall development of the transport sector for the benefit of the people and the economy.

The Federal Government should ensure that air transportation is well managed in order to achieve results and develop the sector to international standards. Good management should ensure that there is adherence to business principles and sustainable development of the aviation industry.

Government should continue to invest in the development of infrastructure at the airports by overhauling and expanding the facilities used at the nation’s airports. Maintenance culture should be imbied to sustain the facilities provided.

The Government should improve the security situation at the airports. Security experts should be employed to overhaul extensively the airport security system. NCAA should comply with international Aviation safety standards.

Government should show commitment by expediting action on the repairs at airport when they are closed down for repairs so that they re-open on time. All airlines operating in the country should adhere strictly to safety standards by emphasizing inspection and maintenance of aircraft. The use of meteorological reports will also assist in ensuring safety.

The Federal Government should ensure that only credible airlines are awarded contracts for the airlift of the pilgrims. It is to halt further suffering by the pilgrims on their way to and back from the Holy land.

**Conclusion**
Since the inception of the present democratic dispensation in 1999 and removal of the status of a pariah nation on the country, there has been a boost in air transportation. This is so because presently there is an increase in the number of airlines and aircraft operating in the country. However domestic airlines have over the years disappointed passengers on both domestic and international flights. This has led to the engagement of foreign airlines in some operations. Nigerians, therefore can not rely on the domestic airlines, who should thus take the challenge by improving their services. Efficient air transportation ensures fast movement of people and loaded freight; stimulate national and international trade, commercial transactions, investments and tourism. It is in recognition of the role of air transport as the only means of transport that links all nations of the world that it becomes subjected to international regulations and oversight functions. Nigeria can thus improve the situation and tackle the problems facing it for economic growth and development.

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