



INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

*An initiative of
the National Academy of Public Administration,
and the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs
and the Bobst Center for Peace and Justice,
Princeton University*

Oral History Program

Series:
Interview no.:

Governance Traps
D12

Interviewee: Babatunde Fashola

Interviewer: Graeme Blair

Date of Interview: 7 August 2009

Location: Lagos
Nigeria

Innovations for Successful Societies, Bobst Center for Peace and Justice
Princeton University, 83 Prospect Avenue, Princeton, New Jersey, 08544, USA
www.princeton.edu/successfulsocieties

BLAIR: This is Graeme Blair, an interview for Princeton University, with His Excellence the Governor of Lagos State, Mr. Babatunde Fashola. Thank you very much for joining us. Perhaps we could begin with: as you were Chief of Staff for the former Governor, Mr. [Bola] Tinubu, what your perspective was on the changes that needed to be made to government to begin to get the reforms that you had in mind for Lagos done in the transition period to becoming Governor yourself.

FASHOLA: *I think the basic thing was to take ourselves more seriously, to use time more judiciously and to value time really as an asset for which we must get the optimum value. Every tenure of political officeholder in modern-day democracy is circumscribed by time, tenure: two, three, four, five years, depending. Therefore, to see that time as an asset apart from the people. It is an efficient march of the use of the time and the human resources and the financial resources that leads to the efficient service delivery that is the real objective of good government, especially a democratic government.*

BLAIR: So what were some of the changes that you planned to make, to make government use its time more efficiently?

FASHOLA: *Well, as I said, at the time I was chief of staff. I couldn't see this coming, and there was no interest to contest office as governor. I was planning at that time to go back to my law practice, but a few events conspired to put me here today. But one of the things I resolved to do immediately when I became governor was, as I said, to ensure that we build a team where—because I couldn't do everything alone, and I realized that I needed a team of people where we could always think together, be on the same page, trust and depend on each other's strengths, and be able to also compensate for each other's weaknesses.*

I therefore constituted a cabinet of some of my former colleagues when I was chief of staff. That was important, to settle down the government very quickly. They would have experience. And also brought in some new people to inject some fresh thoughts and fresh ideas into what we had done in the last administration. I think that in that sense we found a very healthy mix. We went into a lot of retreats. We had several meetings, communicating the ideas, communicating the vision.

In many instances also immediately after the elections—because I was, once in that government, at a very exalted level in the governor's office—I had some ideas about how I thought certain things should be done. So immediately after my election, certain programs had been developed in detail, even before the cabinet was constituted. So quite a number of commissioners, on assumption of office, had working documents on day one. This is what we want to do. Of course, those were the details of the implementation of the larger program, the ten-point agenda, which is not different from any problem of the Millennium Development group or any of those problems that challenge humanity wherever you are on the planet: healthcare, roads, water supply, education, transportation, security, sustainable environment. All of that.

So it was developing a plan of action for each ministry. That also helped us start very quickly. Because I'd been there, also had participated in the making of four budgets before I became governor. I was particularly familiar with the budgetary process. Many of the institutional heads of the various government ministries, departments, and agencies were people I'd worked with. I knew many of them on a first-name basis. So it was easy to get the team settled. The prejudices were

fewer. We knew each other; we got on the road very quickly because we went into several retreats welding the political leadership with the institutional leadership, the permanent secretaries and the career civil servants, breaking down the mistrust. We developed a language of communication so that we could function as a team.

BLAIR: One of the—there were several programs that have been initiated that have already been completed, some very visible, politically feasible programs: the parks program, the program to green different parts of Lagos, prosecuting low-level criminals, programs like that. Was that part of the plan, to get some visible, quick things done?

FASHOLA: *Well, we were conscious of the fact that for about three decades during which Nigeria was in a sense politically adrift, a lot of undemocratic governments running affairs, so many promises made to make things better were not fulfilled. Not necessarily because they were not meant to be fulfilled—the environment just didn't lend itself to any sustainable development taking place. You had military administrators in states who did not know how long they were going to be there. So it was difficult for them to develop any long plan.*

You had even national military heads of states who had no determined tenure. Their continuous stay was always a matter of agitation for the convocation of a political process that would result in a democratically elected government. So those were not the ideal environments in which any meaningful development could take place. We realized that this was a huge moment for us, to begin to break the cycle of broken promises and to begin to fulfill the social contract. That people must see the social contract and democracy as actually having a value that they can hold on to. Otherwise we run into a very dangerous cycle where people could not differentiate between the benefits of a democracy and the benefits, if any, of a dictatorship. That was particular.

So in that sense we raised to signify our presence by things that people could see and associate with and which helped to increase or improve the quality of their lives.

BLAIR: One of the things several of your ministers have pointed to was a strategic plan from the beginning, to sort of, as you say, under-promise from the beginning and then over-deliver after that. Is that an accurate characterization of how you were thinking about things?

FASHOLA: *Well, in a sense, at every time of a change of leadership, expectations are there. What you have also as a leader is responsibility to be true to yourself. If you truly mean to keep the social contract, if you truly desire to be committed to the social contract, your responsibility as a leader is to manage the expectation by being real with the citizens. This is done by looking at what you promise, what has been expected, and what resources you have. Because the social contract cannot be performed if it remains an idea on paper or in print or electronic media, if there are no resources in human, financial and whatever sense within which to deliver it. In some ways it was more to manage the expectation.*

BLAIR: Are there particular examples you can think of of programs where you sort of dialed back the promises or made sure that the promises were—?

FASHOLA: *No, we haven't in any way modified any promise that we made in the way of reducing it. On the contrary we have scaled up and given more than we had*

promised, because the program that formed the core of my campaign and the electoral promises and the social contract I made with the people of Lagos was drawn up from an informed position as chief of staff to the last governor. So I knew what was doable and I knew what was unrealistic. So it was an informed promise. That if the environment was right it could be delivered. It was then my responsibility to make the environment right, to whip the team that could do it together, to find the resources with which to do it, to find the energy within which to deliver it, to plan it, to be deliverable also within a particular timeframe, and to ensure that we stuck to the plan.

The only thing that I think we have in any way modified as a promise, even in that sense, in terms of quantum, we have given more than we promised. But in terms of scope, we have changed the concept. We were looking at a social welfare payment of a fixed sum to unemployed graduates. But our studies after the election revealed that all of the economies that had developed a welfare system of that type were looking at ways of getting out of it. We were also seeing that it was creating a culture of dependence, and it was also undignified for people to queue up or to expect a paycheck. It wasn't the kind of environment in which you wanted to build a platform for development.

Instead of doing that, therefore, we put the money that we would have used to give graduates 10,000 naira a month into a microfinance fund. Therefore we used the same fund to achieve more. Each person who got access to the fund got more than 10,000 to start a business. He acquired more dignity because he became self-employed, and he acquired the ability also to employ others. We think that was better and bigger than what we had initially planned. But in concept, it was a scheme that provided financial security for young graduates and young school-leavers who wanted to venture out.

Therefore, apart from just consuming 10,000 naira, we were using 50,000 in some cases, some got 100, some got 200. So in quantum, for individual benefit it was larger. It became also productive because it was used to keep the economy going. People were being employed. Some got their moneys to buy taxis and they became taxi owners and they employed people to man the taxis. Some got theirs to start photographic studios and employed and trained people. Some started dressmaking cottage industries, and so on and so forth. In that sense that was a shift, but the output was certainly bigger than what we even thought in the beginning.

BLAIR: Sure. When you think about these relatively small programs that were achievable and very visible, how did you go about deciding which ones to do first?

FASHOLA: *It was a simple rule. Our decision-making process is governed by the time-tested rule in a democracy, what gives the greatest benefit to the greatest number within the location of the project. So if it is a road, for example, our resources are always limited, the demands are limited. Now, within that area there will be ten roads. Which road carries the heaviest traffic? That in our view would be the road that gives the greatest benefit to the greatest number.*

BLAIR: One of the things a lot of people are saying: one of the reasons that your administration is able to make progress is that there has somehow been this trust built between the people and the administration. People believe that the administration can get things done where previous people could not. That's not something that comes out of thin air; how has that developed?

FASHOLA: *As I said, we took ourselves very seriously first, and therefore we expected to be taken seriously, and when we made commitments to people, we told ourselves that none of our commitments would accept any excuses. Our commitments demanded only that we discharge and perform them. So if we give a deadline that we will finish a project within a particular timeframe, whatever it took we delivered on it. That was important to establishing confidence with the people.*

We for example had a major road repair. There was only one road into that part of town in Ekoru. It was threatened by a structural defect. The choice was to leave it; it wasn't visible to the public, but we knew there was a danger there, but we knew that fixing that danger would inflict some pain. But we went in there and took down that bridge and we told them we would deliver it in six months. In spite of the pain I went out there to explain to them. We didn't want to lose any life by the bridge suddenly collapsing. We were aware that it was defective, and we felt that the responsible thing to do was to take it down, rebuild it so that we didn't lose any life. That would cause some pain. But we told them we would deliver it in six months, and we did so in under six months. That was particularly important in settling down, because a major bridge into Lagos from the mainland, the third mainland bridge, also needed to be fixed at that time, and everybody thought that the whole state would shut down. But we managed it. We provided alternative routes. We told them that the program would take only eight weeks. We delivered in seven weeks.

There was a building that had partially collapsed. I think it was a 17-story building that had partially collapsed, and we knew that to bring it down in a built-up area, nothing like that had ever been done in this sub-region, not to talk of in the country. We told them that we could do it, and we brought it down without incident. Not even the building standing next to it was affected.

I think those early signposts of delivery earned us people's confidence that if we put our name to it we will deliver.

BLAIR: So it wasn't something that came about during the campaign, it was after a couple of milestones—?

FASHOLA: *Yes, we said to ourselves that, look, people can distrust and disbelieve what we say, but they cannot disbelieve what we do.*

BLAIR: Sure. One of the things I've heard is one of the ways you go about—that there is this rule for improvements, that it must be the greatest good for the greatest number of people, but there's also a sense that improvements are being spread out across the whole city. So when roads are being built there's some sense of trying to spread it out into all the different districts. Is that part of the plan, and what—?

FASHOLA: *Yes, that is part of the plan. You see, one of the problems in this state has been transportation since before I was born. It is a trading state; there's a lot of migration into the state from time immemorial, from I think around the 15th century. Lagos had begun to play host to the Portuguese and so many European explorers and expeditions. So traffic was always a problem. One of the things we decided to do was to manage traffic by redistributing the resources of the state. What do people—what are people coming to look for? Why is there traffic heading in a particular direction and not in several directions? Therefore, we realized that there had been some—albeit unintended—lopsidedness in the distribution of resources.*

We said, look, we'll use the same quality of material, the same quality of contractors to do the same roads in the high priority area as we would for the poor.

BLAIR: Was that something that you communicated? How did you go about communicating to the people that that was—?

FASHOLA: *We didn't bother to communicate it, we just decided it. I'm happy to hear from you that people have noticed it.*

BLAIR: What is the—one of things that the Information Minister said was that the plan for communication is not communication, no propaganda. You don't go out and talk about what's going on, you try to focus on people seeing the improvements. But there must be some communication that is going on. When I drive around and listen to the radio, you hear ads fro Lagos State. How do you think about telling the people what is going on with the government?

FASHOLA: *One of the things, as I said, is that there has been—people have lived on a diet of broken promises. We realized that we would be walking a very tough road if we continued to make promises. The only thing that would be believable is what we do, not what we said. In the sense that they can see what we do, they have given us all of the support and encouragement to continue to do more. In places where we anticipate—the gray areas—we feel the need to talk to them, like the need to pay taxes, the need to be more concerned about the environment, the need to be more law-abiding in traffic; those are places where we recognize that probably we have made some over-estimated assumptions about what the citizens know, and on further evaluation we probably realize that we haven't communicated enough.*

If people understand why certain actions or decisions are in their interest, they will more readily comply than be compelled to comply, and under those instances we try to communicate through advertisements, through town hall meetings, through stakeholders' meetings, through information dissemination. But certainly not with the projects that we are doing.

BLAIR: Interesting. What is the tone of those communications?

FASHOLA: *The tone essentially always is that—it is to make them understand that this is a two-way thing essentially. That I as head of government and the people I have appointed to work with me can only deliver if they play their role. We don't have a magic wand. Therefore, if people want roads, for example, if they want water, if they want refuse to be cleared, if they want hospitals to function, there is still a duty beyond voting. It is our duty to pay taxes.*

If you want traffic to move, you have a duty not to drive in a manner that endangers other road users. You owe a duty not to shop in traffic, not to encourage street trading. If you want a cleaner city you owe a duty to make sure that the cleanliness starts from your household. Put the refuse in a bag and put in the appropriate place where they come and get it. If you don't want flooding, don't build on the drainage channels. So they're getting involved and they're seeing the results of their getting involved, because some people don't even understand, for example, that the bitumen and tar on the road doesn't deal well with water. I knew that only when I got into government in 2002, and I'm educated.

So I felt that, let's go out and explain to them, this road will only last if you don't allow water to remain on it. And for you to assist us in assuring that water flows when it rains, don't block the drainage.

BLAIR: Do you think this strategy has been working? Do you see people's attitudes changing?

FASHOLA: *I think that it has worked, and I see that in the response that we get. I get a lot of feedback from the public directly through my emails, through SMS messages to my phone, and also through letters written to me, and also by the use of the informal social contact. I still go out from time to time to social clubs, to social grounds, and sitting there and talking to people you get some information about what people feel on some general basis. And also watching—I keep my eyes to the news, I read the newspapers, I read editorial comments. We have talk shows too. Also, share information feedback from members of government, from what they pick up and all of that.*

BLAIR: What do you see as the challenges to maintaining the high level of support that the administration has now?

FASHOLA: *The challenge?*

BLAIR: Yes.

FASHOLA: *I think we see that in continuing to do more of what we get the feedback that people want, and beginning to do less of those things that they certainly feel makes life less comfortable for them. For example we're reviewing our processes, our service delivery processes. We're reviewing policies instituted twenty, thirty years ago when there were no computers, where there was no technology at this level. We're trying to see what procedures we can do away with, that can be effectively cut short now by technology, that makes the entry and exit process into doing business with us more effective. To set up a ways and means committee in the executive council to look at those things that we should do less of and those things that we can do more of. So spending the time on the quality of service delivery.*

BLAIR: Do you think it will become harder as more and more difficult reforms need to get through? For instance, thinking about the taxation issue. The tax base has been increased, more people, but it is only beginning to get into the area where people will be taxed the full amount that they will be taxed. Do you think that kind of thing will make—?

FASHOLA: *If you use taxation as a model, for example, you will find that taxation is a very, very impassioned subject. Sometimes vexed I call it. If you look at the last elections in the US, the last few days turned on taxation; Joe the Plumber was a tax issue. We get more complaints and more details as we go ahead, but I don't think that it would be impossible to sustain. Once people begin to see the value for what they do, the question now will not be whether to tax, but whether the tax fairly redistributes the wealth amongst the people. I think that is where we are heading now. People have seen that, look, it is in our collective interest to pay taxes, and we will soon be moving to where the discussions and the debates will get to the level of: how fairly does tax A redistribute the wealth within the commonwealth? That's where I hope for us to be. We're stepping in there very closely now. So it is a question of: should the poor be paying more? Should the*

rich be paying more? What is the balance? What tax policy puts more money in whose pockets?

BLAIR: This is an administration, I think it is fair to say, of technocrats, of people who have a bunch of particular skills and particular expertises from the private sector and from working in the civil service. But there is politics here, right, with the trade unions, with the House of Assembly, with the federal government, traditional leaders. Who deals with the politics? Where is the politics operating here? What are the constraints?

FASHOLA: *I think that it depends on how you look at politics, how you define politics. But for me, politics is good policies. As I said, politics also requires efficient use of time. It requires being business-like. Sadly, we seem to be developing and encouraging the notion that politics is a no-good thing. That notion we quickly must correct. I try to draw the distinction here, therefore, between the political jobbers and politicians. I see the people who use public resources, public time and public support to attempt to deliver on voluntarily-made promises in order to give the greatest good to the greatest number as true politicians. And I see those who think that all of that is a charade as political jobbers.*

In this state, I think, it is fair to say that we're all on the same page; the legislature, the judiciary, they realize what the vision is. They realize what is at stake, and in spite of the constitutional gray areas, a spirit of maturity of leadership, of a coming to one—. You know when you're coming to one, about the essence of the occasion, takes preeminence. So the [Indecipherable] and development becomes the unifying force. If there is need to compromise, they are always the first to do so in the interest of Lagos.

You could put it this way, that we have resolved amongst ourselves—the executive arm, the legislative arm and the judicial arm—that while it is fair to play politics in Lagos, we will not play politics with Lagos.

BLAIR: I like that. Why do you think this consensus emerged now and hasn't been able to emerge before between the executive and the—?

FASHOLA: *No, no, no, it was always there, even in the last term when I was there. It was there, and indeed if it wasn't there in the last term I probably wouldn't be governor now, because there was a contrivance to break that consensus in order for the opposition party, as they hoped then to win Lagos. But it was the unity of purpose, of commonness of purpose, the feeling that Lagos was safer in the hands of progressives than the conservative national ruling party that kept that hope alive, that led to me emerging as governor. So it has always been there.*

BLAIR: Sure. Why do you think the consensus emerged under Governor Tinubu?

FASHOLA: *Well, again, I think that it was the involvement of people in government. He got more people involved in government. I never had any foretaste of what government operations were like. It was he who invited me, invited so many people from the private sector. He came from the private sector himself. He came to see, this is what we're dealing with. I remember he used to say that if we do not get involved, people who did not have our skills would make laws for us and take decisions on our behalf by which we would have to be bound.*

Therefore that if we thought that we were more skillful, if we thought that we were more competent and we were more educated, we better take responsibility for ourselves and those people who we thought we were better than.

BLAIR: That goes right into something I was going to ask, which is: a lot of your senior staff are from the private sector, were not civil servants. The top staff in several ministries and finance are seconded from banks. There are other examples. What is your thinking on that?

FASHOLA: *It's very simple. The public sector as a government exists only for one reason, for the private sector, and I said that before. From the unemployed chap to the biggest corporation. Who better to write the manual of operation, to write the process of implementation for the public sector, than the private sector on whose behalf they exist. If they continue to speak different languages, they won't function.*

BLAIR: Fair enough. One of the things that is in still early days, I think you would agree, is working on issues in the civil service and changing attitudes of civil servants, and doing some reforms that I know you have on the agenda. What are the challenges to that work that are holding it back, or perhaps you don't think they are holding it back?

FASHOLA: *No, I don't think it is being held back. I think it is making progress, but you must recognize that changing a civil service that has a staff strength at the state and local government level combined of 112,000 plus won't happen in one day. It is like what we saw about the campaign, changing how Washington works. You won't change how Washington works, the bureaucracy in Washington, in one year. But we're making progress. Attitudes are changing for the better and I think that more than anything, some of the feedback that I have got, is that public servants have told me that they have never felt so proud than now to be public officers.*

BLAIR: What do you think has brought about that change? Is it—?

FASHOLA: *Simply because as a group we have taken ourselves seriously.*

BLAIR: What is your big picture view of the reforms that you have to make to the civil service to make those changes?

FASHOLA: *Well, it's a lot. First of all, you have to remove the conditions that predispose Nigerians generally, civil servants in particular, that predispose them to desperation. I have to be able to deliver for them a home of their own, affordable over the lifetime of their career, payable in convenient installments. I have to be able to give them an asset from which and by which they can now take credit. I have to be able to secure their tenure subject to breach of contract conditions. I have to deliver for them a pension that protects them when they no longer have the energy to work.*

The pension is already in place. The law was passed by the Tinubu administration. The processes for implementing it were started then, and we just keep going on making it better. We set up the Pension Commission now, which acts as the regulator, regulating me to make sure that I make my remittances, and regulating the Pension Fund administrator to ensure that the investment is properly used. We're working through the process for administering pensions, the paperwork and removing conditions that are no longer necessary that have been

there for forty, fifty years, because of computerization. We're making it interactive and easy-in and easy-out. I don't see why somebody shouldn't get his pension within 48 hours or a week at most after he leaves work. And all of this is already going on.

BLAIR: So the big picture is, it's all about making—.

FASHOLA: *If you make people comfortable. If you give them hope, you can ask them to go that extra mile.*

BLAIR: Are you thinking about incentives, incentive structures—I know at the high level that there are performance measures that are used?

FASHOLA: *Yes, there are incentive structures, but again, the incentives are circumscribed by existing civil service rules and financial guidelines. We've had to cover, for example, our internal revenue generations service from the core civil service, because we realized that if we ask people to collect billions of naira and we continue to pay them what we pay them, we do a great disservice to ourselves. The chairman of the Internal Revenue Service now and members of his board earn more than I do. So we give them that comfort in case temptation—but clearly we couldn't afford to do that across the board of the civil service as it currently is. But as our revenues increase, as our economy expands and grows, clearly the way forward really is to make civil servants much more comfortable so that they can face their work with much more passion.*

BLAIR: With respect to the higher-level performance measures, where ministries and ministers are held to account for the performance of their programs—what was the plan for those, that this was not something that existed before? Who decides on the measures?

FASHOLA: *It is a collective decision. We hold weekly revenue and expenditure meetings by the agencies that generate revenues and the agencies that expend them. We hold quarterly budget meetings to review the quarterly performance of the budget. Therefore—we told everybody there is no use one agency performing its budget 90% and the other one performing only 10%. We resolved that we were not going to leave anybody behind.*

So we begin to sense the problems as they emerge, and it is a collective decision to go into that ministry, see what the problem is, and see how we can solve it. If, for example it turns out that, look, this is a ministry that has a problem that cannot be solved with that budget year, we quickly either move the funds for that year into another ministry that requires it and can utilize it—. It means that our plans have hit a brick wall and we have to rethink and re-strategize and start all over again.

So we want to be there early, each quarter, review what has worked, what hasn't worked and why, and not wait until the end of the year and then we see that the budget hasn't been implemented.

BLAIR: Has that happened a couple of times?

FASHOLA: *It has happened consecutively for the last two years. We haven't had cause to move any major monies. Of course we've come to the realization sometimes that you can't expend all of this money in this budget every year, and there is another ministry saying look, I need more money. All we do is go back to the House of*

Assembly for the necessary authorizations to make those adjustments. Over the last two full budgets of 2008 and 2009, the performances have been quite encouraging.

This year the first quarter performance was 71%, the second quarter, the first week of July it was 68%, and these figures are by comparative analysis higher than the performances at the same period last year—and this is happening in a depressed economy.

BLAIR: Your administration has enjoyed a good relationship so far with the federal government. I understand in the previous administration there wasn't quite as good of a relationship. What accounts for that change, and how did you cultivate that?

FASHOLA: *Institutionally, I don't think that there was a problem. I think it was the personality and the leadership at the federal level. I think also it was a failure to understand that whether or not Lagos State was governed by a government from an opposing party, Lagos State remains an integral part of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, and it is in the interest of any president in Nigeria who looks at the Nigerian state as an enterprise that must succeed, to work positively with and to support the development of Lagos, irrespective of which political party the government of Lagos State or the governor of Lagos State comes from.*

First of all, this is over 40% of the national economy. This is where you have your largest ports; this is where you have your largest seaport, your largest airport, all of the banking headquarters, your stock exchange. So I mean, as an enterprise manager, it shouldn't matter to me who is the governor of Lagos. What should matter to me is, is Lagos working well? Is Lagos growing? Because as the enterprise manager for the Nigerian state I take the credit.

BLAIR: Right. Maybe we could finish up by: what do you see as the keys to the success so far? If you had to say why you've been able to get these programs through?

FASHOLA: *I think it has been people, really. My team, the electorate, our political party leaders, all the people of Lagos State who have given us their support without question. That really has been it. Of course, one must acknowledge—being a religious person, I believe that some of these things have divine intervention, and I think that God has been particularly fateful in steering one through experience this very, very great privilege to lead a state like this.*

BLAIR: Thank you very much for your time, I really appreciate your hospitality.

FASHOLA: *You're welcome.*