

Urban Public Policies and Poverty in the City of Cotonou

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Abstract

Traditionally, cities, especially African ones, are often considered dynamic places where services and transactions take place. In Cotonou, the need to have a sustainable and resilient city has led the State towards urban reforms driven by public policies. Paradoxically, the implementation of strategies seems to generate more disadvantaged and excluded social classes. From this perspective, it is appropriate to identify the problem of emerging cities by focusing on the aspects of the reforms which exacerbate the poverty of the masses. The analysis starts from empirical data capture to justify how urban structures and the construction of sustainable cities induce coercive measures that are poorly perceived by the “poor”. To understand reality, the methodological approach taken was based on an appropriation of the methods of constructing urban zoning and a collection of data on the impact of urban reforms on the poverty of city dwellers. The empirical materials collected for this research come from field surveys carried out in two districts declared to be of public utility, Xwladodji and Fiyégnon 2. In total, two hundred and one (201) actors were approached on the basis of reasoned choice sampling applied to resource actors. The random sampling method is used for interviews with potential users of the developed areas. From the analysis of the data, it follows that the sustainability requirements of cities, the housing situation in the “new Cotonou” and the difficulties of access to basic social services compress survival strategies in Cotonou. This research is an indicative correlation between urban public policies and the exacerbation of poverty in urban areas.

Keywords

Sustainable City, Public Policies, Poverty, Development, Cotonou

1. Introduction

The city is an accelerator of change and a variable of economic growth. Thus de-

signed, it invites you to take on multiple challenges in order to respond to the different functions to which it is invited. Despite countries' institutional measures, 490 million people are still in poverty today, compared to 284 million in 1990 (World Bank Group, 2020). In addition, it is estimated that 60% of the total urban population of African countries resides in slums or informal neighborhoods (UNICEF, 2022) with a critical urban framework and disconcerting structures. From this perspective, the need for planning reforms appears timely in view of the new challenges raised by sustainable cities. Driven by political aims, urban planning initiated decades ago has made many African cities attractive with the effect of accelerating economic growth and social development. The city of Cotonou is no exception to this reality. Indeed, since 2016, the city has experienced a structural and spatial transformation, within a political vision which intends to make Cotonou a flagship city.

The city of Cotonou, like other cities in developing countries, has experienced very high demographic growth in a short time. With a population of approximately 203,842 inhabitants in 1979, it increased to 536,827 inhabitants in 1992 then to 665,100 inhabitants in 2002, representing an average annual increase of 3.9% (1979-1992) and 2.2% (1992-2002) (INSAE, 2003). In 2013, it had 679,012 inhabitants in 2013, a slight increase, 2.09% over the period 2002-2013, after an increase of 2.17% over the decade 1992-2002. In 2021, Cotonou remains the largest city in Benin with 1,228,667 inhabitants in 2021. This significant growth of the city has generated demographic pressure in places and problems of education, health, sanitation, housing, transport and communication; especially in its formerly poorly controlled peripheries. This demographic growth of Cotonou finds its basis in the status of indicated economic city and among other things, by its opening to the sea, the presence of the autonomous port, the establishment of most of the large commercial companies of South Benin, and the fact that the city constitutes a large center of transactions and administrative services. Correlatively, there are housing problems and unstructured occupation of space. This complicates urban planning parameters. The identity of the city becomes problematic with negative profitability balances in terms of growth gains.

This unresponsive image of Cotonou and the political impetus to create sustainable cities has led the Beninese government into urban reforms materialized by urbanization projects in almost all neighborhoods and especially peripheral and occupied public utility zones. by certain assets. These reforms, carried out under renovation policies sometimes considered "austere", have led to social, spatial and economic changes and a deprivation of city dwellers of their heritage. From this perspective, it follows to investigate how urban public policies have accentuated the poverty of actors in Cotonou?

2. Material Methods and Analysis Methods

To better theorize the problem, it is assumed that urban reforms generated from the angle of the virtue of sustainability admit effects that bring resilience even if

they induce habitual destructuring. Indeed, city policies require operational directives that disrupt the traditional lifestyles of urban occupants. The effects are more perceived if the areas to be urbanized are occupied public utility or in deficit from subdivision actions. The “New Cotonou” as conceived and designed today by the Beninese government is the fruit of a political line of conduct that is variously appreciated by the actors. The conceptual framework below gives a brief overview of the correlation between the commonly used notions (**Diagram 1**).

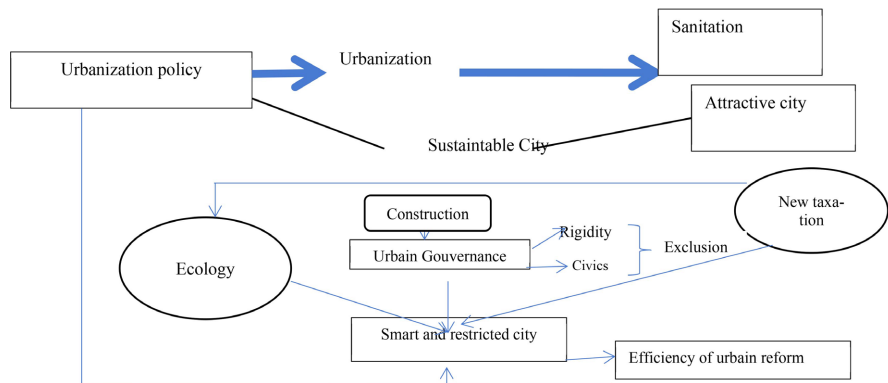


Diagram 1. Linking work concepts. **Source:** Field survey, December 2024.

It illustrates the link between urban policies, sustainable cities and their requirements, urban governance and their relativities, on which the effectiveness of urban reforms depend. The basic hypothesis combined with the conceptual game makes it possible to bring together the presuppositions of a sociology of exclusion with theories of urban governance; public policies being the framework.

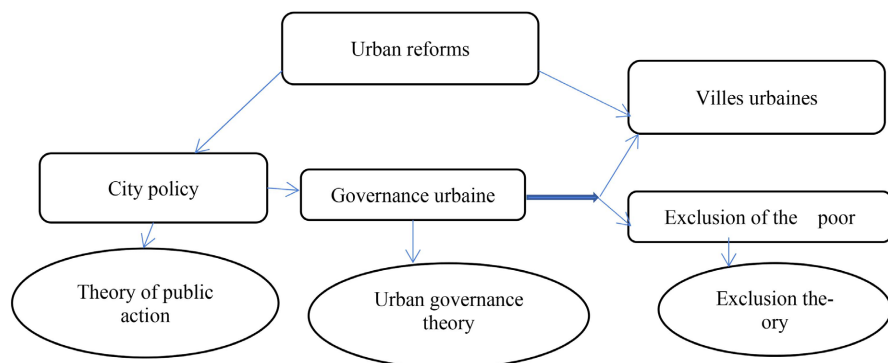


Diagram 2. Theoretical perspective of work. **Source:** Field survey, December 2024.

The present work therefore calls upon these three theories in order to better explain the correlations under study (**Diagram 2**). Popular understanding of the impact of reforms was carried out in this work based on a corpus of dimensions of well-being borrowed from the work of Djima, Moustapha, & Vodounou (2002) for the analysis of poverty in Benin. These dimensions integrate twenty-five composite parameters divided into five batches of five dimensions (**Table 1**).

Table 1. Distribution of the twenty-five composite parameters into groups.

N°	Lot 1 size	Lot 2 size	Lot 3 size	Lot 4 size	Lot 5 size
1	Money	Child	Transportation	Potable water	
2	Job	Urban sanitation	road	income	business
3	Health	Social network	Culture	Walk	Pateimone
4	Food	Accommodation	Public services	Credit	wisdom
5	Education	Subdivision	Electricity ²	Leisure	Taxation

Source: Djima, Moustapha, & Vodounou (2002).

Data collection was carried out on the basis of a survey sheet and an approach responding to accelerated participatory research methods. It is supported by a content analysis of different policy documents.

The research focuses on two neighborhoods declared to be of public utility: Xwlacodji and Fiyégnon 2. The potential effects of urban policies are assessed based on observations made of the landscaping of Boulevard de la Marina and those of the expropriated areas. A total of two hundred and one (201) stakeholders were approached. The target group is composed of “evicted” residents, residents of neighborhoods close to the developed areas, commuter migrants, and urban development policy officers.

The table below provides an overview of the statistical distribution of the sample:

Target groups	Name		Percentage
The expelled	Xwlacodji	32	16
	Fiyégnon 2	56	27,86
Residents of neighborhoods close to developed areas	Habitat	11	5,47
	Fidjrossè	23	11,44
Planning policy officers		08	4
Pendular migrants		72	35,82
		201	100

Sources: Fieldwork.

The ordinal classification of the dimensions of poverty and their weighting made it possible to assess the new concerns of stakeholders and to appreciate the impact of urban reforms on life in Cotonou.

3. Results

3.1. The Sustainable City: Requirements and Conditionalities

In semantics, the term sustainable city—designates a political horizon of distant scope, and serves as a prospective reference (Emelianoff, 2007: p. 48) for the con-

struction of urban frameworks which meet the required criteria and standards. According to (Emelianoff, 2007: p. 10), the sustainable city designates a city which seeks, in application of the principles of sustainable development, to take into account social, economic and environmental issues in its development and operation: “economically viable, socially livable and respectful of the environment.

By combining resilient cities and economic growth, the need to reconfigure metropolises is timely almost everywhere in Africa with regard to the outdated classic model of cities built on pseudo urbanization and unindicated urban practices. Faced with inconvenient urban sprawl and a fragmented urban identity, urban renovation is essential and induces planning codes and appropriate governance. By seeking to provide cities with an identity and a showcase seal, public action establishes a political project of sometimes coercive territorial governance emphasizing a set of factors involved in the sustainable city process. In this perspective, by seeking to make Cotonou a smart city, the reforms undertaken have made it possible to create improved frameworks that meet the imperatives of economic development, environmental sustainability and social guarantee. If the new urban policy has encouraged a kind of civic-mindedness with a civilizational scope, however, in places it has had the effects of gentrification. Thus, certain neighborhoods, formerly affordable and inhabited by low-income populations, are transformed into more expensive neighborhoods reserved for wealthier residents (Sassen, 2014: p. 17).

3.2. Cotonou Through the Prism of Urban and Land Use Planning Policies

“The city is a paradoxical place insofar as it can be the scene of social struggles for the liberation of the most deprived as well as the scene where the alienation of the proletariat is organized” (Karl Marx). Cotonou, the dynamic metropolis of West Africa, has been transformed in recent years thanks to the implementation of a well-structured land use planning program. Indeed, not too long ago, Cotonou was struggling with significant problems, including rapid population growth exceeding infrastructure capacity. The chaotic streets, the lack of adequate planning, and the pressure on resources thus testify to a precarious urban state. Environmental challenges, inadequate waste management and the absence of green spaces contributed to an urban picture that was difficult to grasp. **Figure 1** & **Figure 2** below give an overview of cohabitation in urban areas and suburbs of Cotonou.

3.3. Equations

A reform was then essential to remedy these shortcomings and establish the foundations for more sustainable urban development and give Cotonou the face of a flagship city which reflects the image and quality of the people who live there and especially those of those in power. Thus, thanks to the political will and a clear vision of both local and state authorities, Cotonou was transformed in no time. This very remarkable change which is now propelling the city towards sustainable

economic growth results from a territorial reform accompanied by principled governance. One of the salient aspects of this transformation is based on the principle of evictions (**Figure 2**).



Figure 1. Cohabitation the urban areas and suburbs of Cotonou. **Source:** Field survey, December 2024.



Figure 2. Vacant land after residents' expropriation. **Source:** Field survey, December 2024.

Urban planning was therefore carried out by the displacement of certain populations and the reconfiguration of neighborhoods. But this approach, although necessary for development, has sparked debates and controversies around its social implications. This desire to create a new Cotonou was thus accompanied by challenges linked to the precariousness of certain social classes, creating more pronounced pockets of poverty. For example, rapid gentrification coupled with large-scale real estate projects have increased housing costs, forcing low-income residents to move from central neighborhoods to more remote neighborhoods. This is a social change which has resulted in a material and symbolic transformation of urban space. Furthermore, these urbanization projects have led to the relocation of low-income communities, moving them away from economic opportunities and basic social services. Furthermore, these reforms favored the interests of economic elites to the detriment of the most vulnerable social classes, without forgetting that increased pressure on the real estate market made housing more expensive, particularly affecting displaced households.

These factors combined have intensified economic and social disparities in Cotonou, thereby exacerbating poverty. According to Van Crielingen M., gentrification therefore reminds us that neighborhoods do not evolve like organisms reconnecting with the city after a hibernation, but that transformations are fundamentally inscribed in the mechanisms of capitalist production of space **David (2007: p. 14)** explores the consequences of neoliberal urban policies on cities. The

author argues that these policies have led to the privatization of public spaces, real estate speculation and the marginalization of poor populations; which is confirmed by the findings noted in the case of Cotonou. Public spaces which should be accessible to all have become controlled and regulated places, often reserved for consumers and the wealthy classes. This privatization of public space limits freedom of expression and democratic participation by excluding the voices of marginalized populations. Despite these nuances, the major challenge of the reform lies in the desire to forge a sustainable city, anchored in sustained and attractive economic growth. Policymakers have sought to balance urban development while preserving the environment and improving citizens' quality of life. Cotonou, through these territorial adjustments, thus aspires to embody a model of a modern and prosperous city (**Figure 3**).



Figure 3. Modernization of public spaces in Cotonou. **Source:** Field survey, December 2024.

Thus, by endowing itself with this attractive identity, Cotonou embodies the image of a responsive and credible city and justifies the appropriateness of the reforms promoted for this purpose. But this was not achieved without consequences for the supposedly excluded who see in the new urban policy an instrument for reproducing poverty.

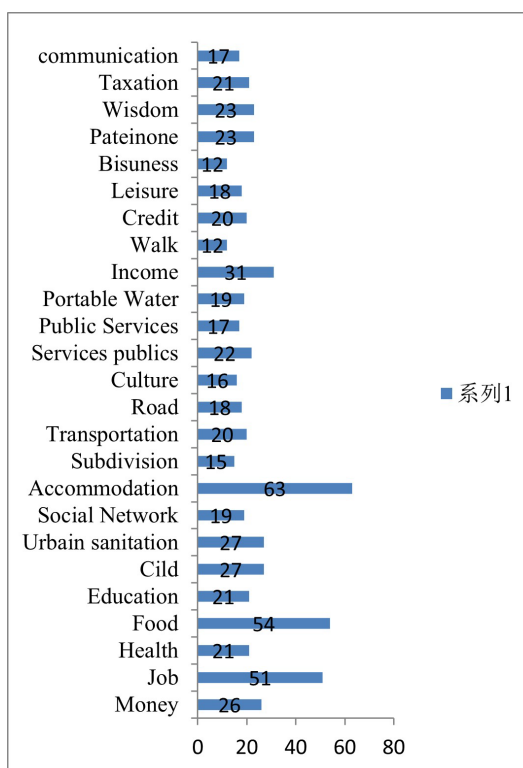
3.4. The New Poverty in Cotonou

In trying to establish a correlation between the “new Cotonou” and the poverty of residents, the results revealed that there is no marked difference between the perceptions of men and women although orders of priorities differences have appeared in terms of the dimensions of poverty. For all social strata surveyed, the monetary dimension constitutes an essential component of well-being. This increases significantly with access to employment, housing and food. Access to basic social services such as health and drinking water is also considered necessary. However, these dimensions are preceded by the housing parameter as evidenced by the compilation of field data (**Graph 1**). Indeed, the frequency distribution of each dimension provided shows that the concern for housing comes first in the concerns of Cotonois today. Added to this are food, employment, income and money (**Graph 1**). Analytical constructions show that poverty is correlated with

housing in Cotonou.

For respondents, finding where to sleep in Cotonou is indicative of all other needs. By having somewhere to sleep, you can go get food, create or find an income-generating activity and make money. Which defines relationships with basic social services, the market, transport and other dimensions.

This conception tends to ignore the urbanization efforts and the beneficial urban reforms which are making the city of Cotonou healthier and cleaner. The weighted dimensions justify the priority needs of the respondents and their perception of urban governance.

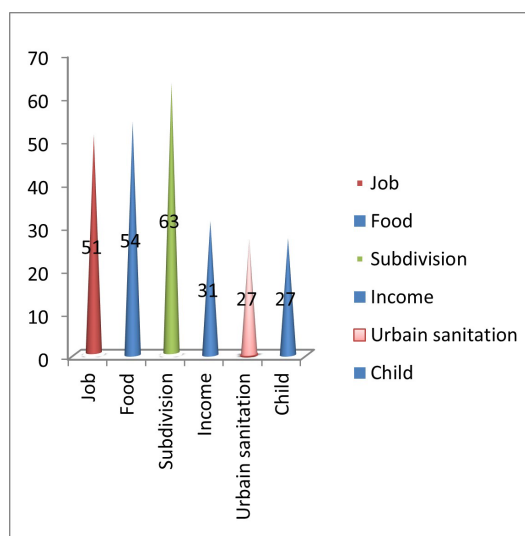


Graph 1. Ranking of priorities according to the needs of city dwellers in Cotonou. **Source:** Field survey, December 2024.

By revisiting the first six dimensions mentioned by the respondents, urban sanitation is ranked in 5th position after income, employment, food and housing (**Graph 2**). The child occupies 6th place, thus reflecting the effectiveness of marriage in an urban environment. This position of urban sanitation reflects the popular conceptions of the evacuees who see in the reforms coercive measures reproducing poverty. For them, urban governance can take place without sanitation; which would always keep the city in a sphere of non-competitiveness with ghettos where violence and banditry are active on a daily basis.

Furthermore, the high trend of the housing dimension as a priority for city dwellers is consistent with the work of [Dansou \(2005\)](#) who justifies the role of

housing, as a vital necessity, in the formation of personal identity and social structure. According to the author, housing issues directly influence the development of individuals through their significant effect on the standard of living of populations.



Graph 2. Pro-priority of the population of Cotonou.
Source: Field survey, December 2024.

In urban centers and almost everywhere, housing intrinsically becomes an indicator for measuring well-being at the same time as a variable for assessing individual identity. By rallying around the theory of needs designed by Maslow, housing occupies a fundamental place in the lives of individuals because it ensures the satisfaction of psychological and security needs. Everyone needs shelter to live, protect themselves, store provisions and organize their social life. The ultimate development of each individual can therefore only be achieved if these fundamental needs are met and allow the emergence of higher needs. This confirms the work carried out in 1960 on housing conditions in the Chelsea district of New York, one of whose conclusions assumes that housing “is the symbol of status, of accomplishment, of social acceptance. It appears to control how the individual perceives himself and is perceived by others” Schorr (1970: p. 710). Thus, from a psychological point of view, housing participates in the formation of the individual’s identity and therefore determines their self-esteem and their attitude towards the world around them. These deliberations reinforce the results of our surveys and justify the housing situation experienced by the populations surveyed and who are for the most part the victims of the urban reforms undertaken in Cotonou.

Housing, food and income are determining factors of life in society. As Thompson (2000: p. 184) points out, each housing unit is connected to the others by a set of complex links that form the physical infrastructure of group life. In this context, “when the physical foundation of social life is dislocated, several upheavals in the functioning of individuals and groups ensue.” What the phenomena of evictions

in Cotonou reveal, followed by the appropriation of spaces and entire neighborhoods occupied by individuals. Indeed, the development of several neighborhoods and ghettos in Cotonou has made housing patterns in the city complex with a dislocation of exchange links within sedentary communities whose returns to the village pose a major problem. It is in view of these dislodged actors that city reforms and policies are poorly perceived and poorly appreciated. For them, these urban reforms create more poor people than existed before.

4. Discussions

The urban reality and the different dynamics that drive it have been for a long time and very often the centrality of reflections in the social sciences. The work of the Chicago School on the city, the capitalist enterprise, the impoverishment of immigrants and other social layers which constitute the American urban proletariat, the social constraints inherent to life in the city illustrate the depth of the reflections which have been brought to the city. For [Aholou & Coralli \(2010: p. 49\)](#) the culturalist approach has great importance in the history of urban sociology. She perceives the city as an economic and social product where dynamics and transactions take place in connection with space and housing.

In the current of globalization, African cities are generally the subject of major structural projects relating to the transformation of the urban landscape. The city of Cotonou was no exception to this urban dynamic and is subject to a registration project in terms of a sustainable and resilient city to meet the characteristics of a smart city with a “smart economy”, “smart mobility”, a “intelligent environment”, “intelligent inhabitants”, an “intelligent lifestyle” and, finally, an “intelligent administration according to [Giffinger, Fertner, Kramar, Kalasek, Pichler-Milanovic, & Meijers \(2007\)](#). From this perspective, the discourses which justify this vision of Cotonou under construction are not the same depending on the categories of actors.

Cotonou in its new urban configuration is part of a strategic aim whose physical materiality is the creation of road infrastructures, monuments, green and attractive public squares and many other intelligent and resilient sustainable city works. This new dynamic of transformation and modernization of the city seems relatively in contradiction with the social reality according to the perceptions of the populations who were once sedentary and now evicted and reduced to the ranks of the deprived and therefore poor and “excluded”. For the [World Bank Group \(2018\)](#), urbanization generates opportunities. However, it can also pose problems when it is not well managed. Therefore, the structural modernization of cities, although bringing economic growth and poverty reduction, can also lead to inequalities and hinder human development. This apparent contradiction is explained by the fact that the benefits of modernization are not always equitably distributed, favoring certain groups, especially the State.

For [Blot & Spire \(2014\)](#), the city is produced in unequal power relations. For these authors, the policies of forced displacement in the city which support urban

public policies take place in extremely diverse contexts. They think that the modernization of the city is made from pure and simple eviction to proposals for rehousing on cleaned up plots or access to social housing, the measures adopted by the actors of the eviction diverge depending on the political and land context and resources available to resettlement programs. These forced displacements therefore have consequences. Their analysis notes that even when the displacement process has been planned for a long time and is part of a development project, the displacement takes place in an emergency and with violence, not always giving displaced people time to gather their personal belongings. By relating the results of their work to particular urban contexts such as Cotonou, the limits of their hypotheses are exposed. In typical cases, state violence is imposed against communities that are already aware and whose practices constitute an affront. Providing cities with an identity brand has a cost.

Even if the eviction process is experienced by many city dwellers as a trauma and remains in collective memories as a significant event, this seems self-evident given the challenges of sustainability and the construction of responsible cities. The State, in its role, must ensure the coherence of the various policies and interventions in the city. The ideology of the exacerbation of poverty and the creation of new poor people conveyed by the so-called “excluded” is a result of the refusal to adopt innovations at the same time as a refusal to appropriate the components of development. Certainly, the new urban format induces a suppression of a certain traditional communitarianism and a breakdown of the relational fabric. The precariousness of employment or its virtual non-existence, the high taxation and the problematic access which characterize the reformatted city are illustrative of new urban facts which are difficult to grasp by those relocated.

5. Conclusion

Territorial planning requires coercive conditions combining planning and scheduling. The political imposition of urban regulation induces spatial restructuring which takes place to the detriment of precarious neighborhoods and randomly occupied spaces. The often erroneous perception of actors regarding state interventions justifies the classification of urban poverty. Urban public action accompanied by principled governance defines the rays of an ecological, resilient and sustainable city. The “new Cotonou”, by meeting the criteria, has generated distorting effects thwarting traditional habits and lifestyles.

The growing rise in unemployment, housing needs, insufficient income to cover the needs for basic social services and high taxation in almost all areas of activity justify the facts of poverty among the so-called excluded. Public action in the service of sustainable cities has a cost. If housing and food appear to be the two priority dimensions for city dwellers today, this is resolutely attributable to the structural transformations of the city and the rigidity of a governance system concerned with urban legality. Furthermore, the lack of support for housing policy and the mismatch between the growth rate of administrative units and that of

the evicted population has generated situations which only exacerbate poverty and the living conditions of already weakened urban populations, due to the employment crisis.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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