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## URBAN DYNAMICS AND ANARCHIC OCCUPATION OF PUBLIC SPACE IN THE CITIES OF PORTO-NOVO AND ABOMEY-CALAVI IN SOUTHERN BENIN

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### ABSTRACT

La présente recherche vise à appréhender l'état des lieux, les contraintes et les implications socio-économiques de l'opération de libération des espaces publics dans les villes de Porto-Novo et Abomey-Calavi. L'approche méthodologique adoptée est axée sur la recherche documentaire, la collecte des données auprès des populations cibles, leur traitement et l'analyse des résultats à l'aide du modèle Pression, Etat, Impacts et Réponses (PEIR). Il ressort des résultats que les fonctions des espaces publics sont détournées, et ils sont occupés à des fins commerciales, religieuses, résidentielles, etc. Cette occupation illégale et anarchique des espaces publics est l'une des manifestations de la crise de planification urbaine. Selon les personnes ressources interrogées, les opérations de "déguerpissement" ont pour fondements l'occupation anarchique de l'espace public, l'aménagement du territoire et le renforcement de la sécurité. Conduites par les préfets des départements, ces opérations impopulaires ont obtenu des résultats ambivalents. D'une part, elles ont contribué à l'embellissement des villes, la libre circulation des piétons, la réduction des cas d'accidents de la route, d'autre part elles ont induit l'augmentation du sous-emploi, la baisse drastique des revenus des commerçants, les problèmes sociaux de tous ordres. Ces répercussions sont d'autant plus prégnantes que le gouvernement n'a pas prévu dans l'immédiat, des sites de relogement.

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## INTRODUCTION

One of the major concerns of geography is the study of the organization and functioning of the territory or territories. Thus, R. Brunet et al. (1992, p. 44) define geographical space as a terrestrial expanse used and arranged by human societies with a view to their reproductions in the broad sense, not only for food and shelter but in all the complexity of social acts. Space is, then, a place, a territory or a delimited portion of the terrestrial extent of which Geography analyzes the human traces in their distributions and in the spatial

articulations. Forms of such spatial growth vary from region to region. Thus, in developed countries, the growth of cities occurs in height (multiplication of multi-storey houses) while the contrary is observed in developing countries: cities sprawl out on the surface. It is to support this idea that J. Bastié and B. Dézert (1980, p. 142) assert that urbanization must adapt to the site and/or to the natural conditions of the environment. The planning and management process in its both spatial and temporal aspects, the aim of which is to best meet the needs of the populations, while ensuring the best possible use of the natural resources they exploit, is capital. The debate on public space and its spontaneous and illegal occupation in the cities of tropical Africa poses the particular problem of urban space

management in a more general context of a rapid urbanization that is poorly controlled by urban development actors (E. Le Bris, H. Giannitrapani, (1991, cited by Gbétanou, 2010, p. 14). Public space is only public if it is open and accessible to everyone. It is assigned to several functions and uses common to city dwellers. It is a space for meeting, exchange, communication and socialization that reflects the image of the city. Y. Grafmeyer (2004, p. 96). The public space is therefore a multifunctional space, intended for multiple uses for the individual and collective development of the citizens of a city. After the periods of independence in 1960, Africa experienced an economic crisis in the 1980s (L. Bamba Ngaladjo et al., 1992 p. 12). Thus, the forced eviction of the inhabitants on the basis of these modernization policies are perpetuated. The French colonial administration was the first to use this practice in 1914, which is taken over by the independent states. Such a practice destroyed neighborhoods identified as hotbeds of epidemics (Dakar), to prevent the risk of flooding the marshy areas where the inhabitants have settled (Douala) (P. Taliercio, 2008, p. 2). These policies when applied in African urban centers are not without impact on the sectors of activity and the living conditions of the populations. The cities of Benin are no exception to this reality. In order to adopt a forward-looking attitude, urbanization has been badly conducted and left almost to the law of human settlement without consideration of urban planning as well as the phenomenon of the occupation of public spaces (KD Gbétanou, 2010, p. 13). The results of the liberation operations during the colonial period and then in the first decades of independence until 1990 can be summed up in systematic evictions of inhabitants in precarious neighborhoods (O. Dembélé, 1997; A. Yapi-Diahou, 1990, p. 53). People living in traditional dwellings built with materials such as mud and derivatives, as well as precarious dwellings recognized as such by their occupants themselves, were evicted without causing any real protests (O. Dembélé, 1997, p. 486) in Benin, as in other African countries where public spaces have long been occupied and diverted from their primary purpose. Indeed, a simple observation shows that public spaces in general, sidewalks in particular, and even the rights-of-way of certain roads are occupied for multiple activities. With the aim of making the country's large cities, including Abomey-Calavi and Porto-Novo, an attractive hub in the sub-region, the Beninese government has undertaken reforms, in particular those relating to the liberation of public spaces. Economic activities for a few months have been weighed down. It is to support this idea that A. Mondjannagni (1977, p. 13) asserts that the human density of the cities of southern Benin is linked to the attraction of their infrastructure to rural populations. He specifies that this uncontrolled mode of urbanization entails externalities in the management of space and the availability of basic infrastructure. Such a situation poses problems of land use and space management, because often these cities do not have development plans or land use plans; or that these are not implemented. We are then witnessing an anarchic occupation of public space, hence the interest of this research which aims to understand the current situation, the constraints and the socio-economic implications of the public spaces clearing operation in the towns of Porto-Novo and Abomey-Calavi.

**Field of Study:** The Municipality of Abomey-Calavi is located in the southern part of the Republic of Benin. It is situated between  $19^{\circ}20'$  and  $6^{\circ}42'51''$  N latitude and between  $2^{\circ}11'45''$  and  $2^{\circ}25'15''$  E longitude (Figure 1). It covers an area of 539 km<sup>2</sup> representing 0.48% of the national population of Benin (INSAE, 2016). The municipality of Abomey-Calavi has seventy (70) villages and city districts spread over nine (09) districts which are: Calavi Centre, Godomey, Akassato, Zinvié, Ouèdo, Togba, Hèvié, Kpanroun and Golo-Djigbé. In 2013, the population of the Municipality was estimated at 656,358 inhabitants (getting to practically the double of that of 2002 which is estimated at 307,745 inhabitants, with therefore an average annual growth rate of 7.86% in 2013). This constant growth requires significant spaces for economic and social activities. The main economic activities undertaken are agriculture, fishing, processing of agricultural products, animal husbandry, small industry, commerce, crafts and tourism. Commercial and craft activities are carried out in markets, but especially at the edges of roads (public places).

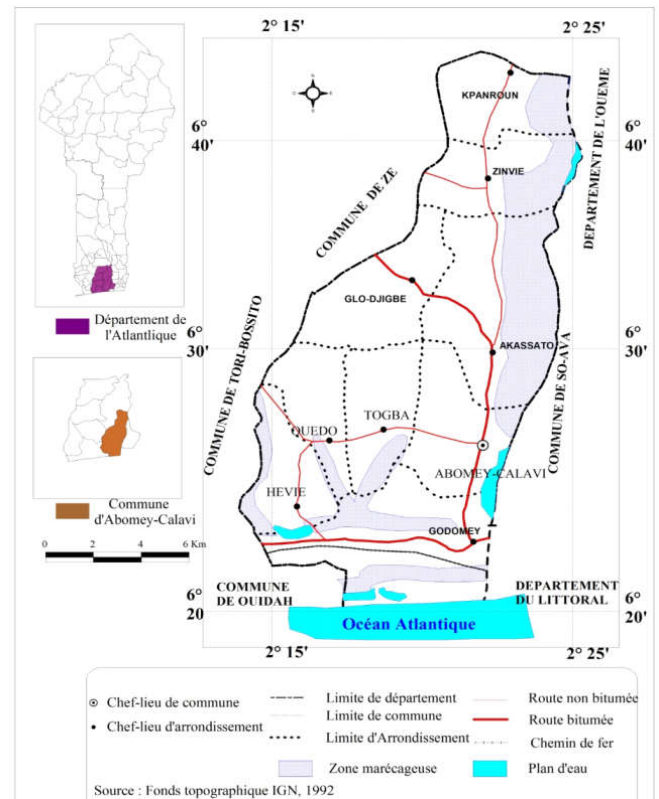


Figure 1. Geographical location of the Municipality of Abomey-Calavi

In the Municipality of Porto-Novo, the operation to liberate public spaces took place mainly in the 5th municipal subdivision. This district is formed by the former commune of Ouando, located between  $6^{\circ} 44'$  and  $6^{\circ} 47'$  North latitude and between  $2^{\circ} 25'$  and  $2^{\circ} 31'$  East longitude. It covers an area of approximately 14.25 km<sup>2</sup> (Mairie Porto-Novo, 2017). The population of this subdivision is 81,747 inhabitants (INSAE, 2016), or 30.92% of the municipality's population. The population is divided into eight (8) districts namely: Akonaboè, Djilado, Dowa, Houinvié, Louho, Ouando, Tokpota I and Tokpota II (Figure 2).

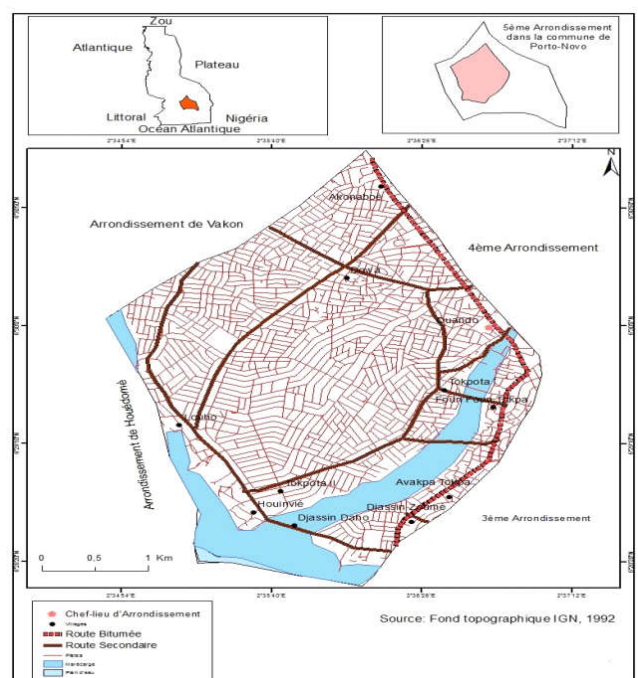


Figure 2. Geographical location of the 5th district of Porto-Novo

On the demographic level, the 5th subdivision of the municipality of Porto-Novo had 81,747 inhabitants in 2013, of which 52.05% were women (INSAE, 2016). Its population is mostly young, which is a dynamic factor for the economic development of the subdivision. Diverse socio-cultural groups coexist and participate in the local development. Indeed, Yoruba traders have developed commercial activity while the Gouns and Wemè are heavily involved in agriculture and transport. As for the other ethnic groups, they are found in the provision of services, in refreshments and restaurants and in the trade of various products and by-products (Mairie de Porto-Novo, 2006, p. 17). The local economy of the district is based mainly on the informal sector, favored by the permeability of the Benino-Nigerian borders. The district has the largest market in the south-eastern region of Benin. It is the Ouando market, a food market located 5 kilometers from the city centre that is under renovation.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The methodological approach adopted for this research can be summed up in three points, namely data collection, data processing and analysis of the results obtained. The sample size was determined a posteriori and based on reasoned choice. The criteria retained for the choice of interviewees are: residence in the target community for at least five (5) years; at least three (3) years of experience in target activity; being affected by the public spaces clearing operation. The size of the sample is determined by the information saturation threshold respectively in the two municipalities. A total of 241 people were interviewed with 147 in the Municipality of Abomey-Calavi, and 94 in the 5th subdivision of Porto-Novo. In the Municipality of Abomey-Calavi, fieldwork took place in the districts most affected by the operation: Calavi, Godomey, Akassato, Golo-Djigbé and Togba.

For the collection of empirical data, the methods used are direct observation (with an observation grid) and interview (based on a questionnaire and interview guide). The questionnaires are sent to the occupants of public spaces while the interview guides are addressed to local authorities and resource persons. The observation grids made it possible to observe on the ground the shops that were broken up, the spaces that were vacated and the difficulties faced by the victims. The data collected in the field were incorporated into automatic processing software for enumeration. It provided access to the information presented in the form of tables and graphs produced using a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. The Pressure-State-Impact-Response (PEIR) model was used as a basis for the analysis of the results.

## RESULTS

**Motives underlying the public spaces clearing operation:** The public domain is anarchically occupied by the populations of the cities of Porto-Novo and Abomey-Calavi. They often occupy approaches to the main roads for carrying out various activities. This situation makes it difficult to access the sidewalks, forcing pedestrians to walk on the roadways with all the related risks such as accidents.

**Anarchic exploitation of public spaces and public responsibility:** The main determinant of the occupation of public spaces seems to be linked to the difficulties of mastering urban dynamics and the management of urban space. Whether in markets or in the public domain, businesses in Benin are subject to taxes which, if not regularly paid by business owners or business operators led them to face closure. This practice, which has sometimes lasted for dozens of years, has led people to believe in the legitimization of occupied spaces and therefore makes the current eviction operations more difficult. Obviously by paying taxes, occupants believe they are paying the counterpart of their occupation. But, in this turmoil, the political and administrative authorities shirk their responsibilities. Several reasons have led social actors to occupy public spaces (Figure 3).

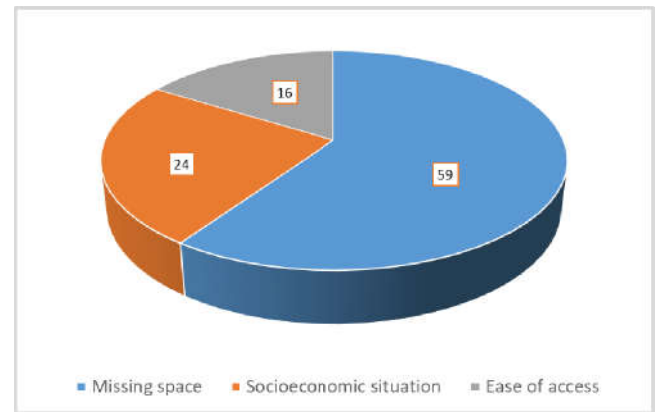


Figure 3. Reasons for anarchic occupation of public spaces  
Source: Field data, August 2020

Figure 3 shows that the reasons for the anarchic occupation are very diverse. According to the respondents (60%), the state of the local markets, marked by insanitary conditions, insufficient places and the cost of places explain their decision to settle near the roads and in public spaces. For 24% of those affected, the socioeconomic situation forced them to start a small business in order to survive, and the roadsides are, according to them, their first choice. For the last category of victims (16%), settling near public roads and other spaces offers an ease of access to customers and clients that is essential for commercial activities. At this level, it should be noted that most customers and/or clients have adopted the habit of purchasing goods and/or services without getting off of their vehicle. This habit has conditioned in a certain sense the installation of these salespersons near public roads. In addition, one can note the responsibility of the local authorities in these illegal installations. Some traders received an authorization from their local authorities before occupying the space prohibited to all economic activities and even other activities (Figure 4).

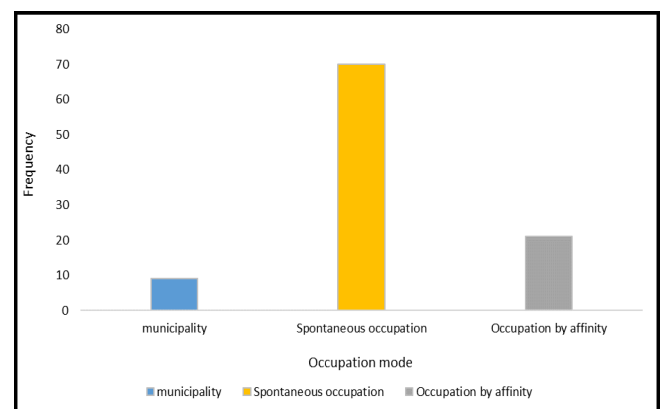
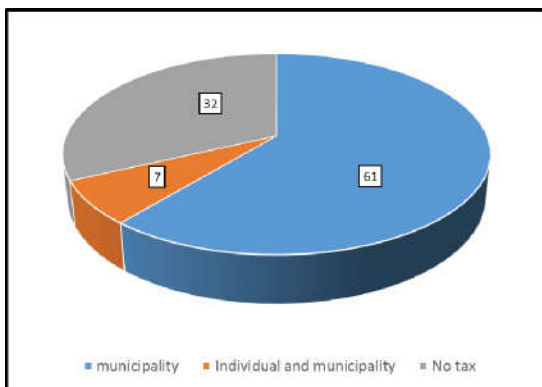


Figure 4. Occupation of public space Source:  
Field data, August 2020

The analysis in Figure 4 shows that 9% of participants declared that they had received authorization from local authorities before installation. But spontaneous occupation is the main mode of settling for evicted people as confirmed by 70% of participants. The last form of settlement mentioned by 21% of respondents is occupation by affinity. Traders who settled by affinity have signified that they have had the consent of a third person, who is either a relative or a property owner. These different installation modes are subject to taxes paid to the Service in charge of Merchant Equipment (SEM) of the municipality or to third parties (Figure 5). Figure 5 shows that 61% of respondents admitted paying daily taxes to the municipality. In contrast, 7% of traders who rent or occupy premises made available by individuals pay them money at the end of the month, in addition to paying taxes to the municipality. However, 32% of respondents do not pay any taxes or fees to anyone.



**Figure 5. Recipient of taxes or fees paid by illegal occupants**  
Source: Field data, August 2020

### 3.1.2. Anarchic occupation of the public domain as a source of insecurity

The anarchic occupation of the approaches to the main arteries in the cities of Porto-Novo and Abomey-Calavi offers a spectacle of crowds of vendors, strolling or sitting on the ground in the sun, with stalls arranged all the way up and/or down to the roadway. There are several ensuing cases of traffic accidents with both material and human damage. The preponderance of accidents on these places is important when we already know that the occupation of sidewalks is an obstruction made to pedestrians leading them to use the roads reserved for vehicles. Indeed, 86% of people say that they do not feel at all safe in such an environment. These installations help to narrow the main lanes, creating traffic jams. They violate all the norms and principles of town planning. All of these reasons explain the decision of government and municipal authorities to evacuate illegal and uncivil economic agents installed in public spaces and around traffic lanes.

#### Strategies for liberating public spaces

**Sensitization sessions for illegal occupants:** Based on the political will and determination of the Government, it is evident that illegal occupants of the sidewalks and central medians in the cities of Porto-Novo and Abomey-Calavi will have to evacuate willingly or by force. Indeed, the adopted and published operationalization plan is planned to take place in two phases. The first consisted in clearing all the sidewalks and central medians of the main roads. The second phase concerns the sidewalks and central medians of other urban roads and related infrastructures, public spaces between sidewalks and alignments of the properties of all urban primary and secondary roads. In reality, since the decision was taken, the government as well as local authorities have taken the time to sensitize the populations concerned. To this end, 90.5% of participants to this study in Porto-Novo and Abomey-Calavi declared that they had been made aware at least once about the imminence of the operation. This awareness took the form of posters on billboards, spots broadcast on television, radio and in several national languages.

**Modus operandi in Porto-Novo and Abomey-Calavi:** The government has recovered the public domains in Abomey-Calavi and in the 5th administrative subdivision of the city of Porto-Novo, located along the main arteries that were illegally occupied by the population (Plate 1). Photos 1.1 and 1.2 show the cleared spaces along the interstate road in Godomey and Akassato. Most of the illegally occupied public spaces are cleared by populations who have themselves taken the lead in the operation, to the great happiness of the authorities at different levels. Thus, 86% of participants did so and did not wait to be forcibly removed. Considering the deadline set by the government, most of the illegal occupants organized themselves to clear the tracks, central medians and other public spaces housing their barracks, hangars, straw huts and other buildings erected here and there.



**Plate 1. Public spaces cleared in Godomey (1.1) and Akassato (1.2), Abomey-Calavi Photo: Hountondé, February 2017**

For the remaining 14%, they feel they either pay taxes or have no other places left. They did not do so voluntarily and were evicted manu militari.

#### Socio-economic effects of public space clearing operations

**Social effects:** On the social level, these operations had the merit of improving the landscape and the visibility in the two cities. They have also enabled the reduction of traffic accidents and the free movement of pedestrians on the sidewalks. But, they have caused a lot of discontent among the population, because they are a source of significant social damage. In fact, more than 95% of participants say that they experience enormous difficulties in resettling elsewhere. The results showed that the operation enlarged the already long list of unemployed people in the two municipalities. Indeed, 75% of craftsmen said they had fired at least one employee. A fishmonger manager met in Akassato said:

I found myself without activity following this eviction operation because the clients no longer came to our shop after our relocation. My boss had to fire me because of the drop in his income. This operation ruined my life and that of my daughter because I can no longer support her "(Yèdé, 32, Fongbo).

**Economic effects:** The eviction operations had disastrous economic consequences for the victims. Indeed, 92% of the craftsmen interviewed in Porto-Novo and Abomey-Calavi (mechanics, vulcanizers, hairdressers, etc.), affirm that before their eviction, the daily income from their activity was estimated at around 5,000 FCFA, implying a monthly income of about 180,000 FCFA. But, after the these operations, their daily income hardly exceeds 1,000 FCFA, which no longer allows them to meet their own needs and those of their families. The situation seems the same among thousands of small traders and craftsmen who are currently out of business or in financial difficulty. A dealer met in Akonaboè (Porto-Novo) mentioned the increase in rent costs as a negative consequence. He declares :

"It's really complicated for us small traders. My shop was destroyed. And I spent the double of what I used to pay each month to get a new store. I am now required to pay 50,000 CFA francs for a shop in an alley, and I have virtually no visibility "(Kpanou, 42, salesman in Akonaboè, Porto-Novo).

Another informant interviewed in Abomey-Calavi said: "I lost all of my clients as I took on debt. I have resettled. But my activities are struggling to take off again. It is difficult at the end of each month to free the rent costs for the shop "(Ahissou, Manager of a copy centre in Arconville, Abomey-Calavi). In addition, the eviction of small traders and artisans has had an impact on the municipality's tax-related resources since a large fringe of the victims declared to pay taxes to the municipalities. All these broken shops constitute losses for the owners and a reduction in tax revenue for the municipalities concerned.

## DISCUSSION

Development is a proactive transformation of geographic space for the benefit of occupying communities (P. Merlin, 2002). Indeed, the liberation of public spaces is an operation that aims at the attractiveness of cities, mobility and improvement of the living environment, etc. This renewed attention to public spaces is in line with the emergence of new modes of production, consumption and transport. Thus, the achievement of such an ambition in the cities of Abomey-Calavi and Porto-Novo requires the demolition of homes and shops installed in public spaces. By analyzing the determinants of the anarchic occupation of public spaces, the current study has underlined the responsibility of both national and local authorities. This is what E. Le Bris and H. Giannitrapani (1991, p. 29) underlined by recalling that the debate on public space and its spontaneous and illegal occupation in the cities of tropical Africa poses the particular problem of management of urban space in a more general context of rapid urbanization that is poorly controlled by all those involved in urban development. The activities carried out in the public spaces of Porto-Novo and Abomey-Calavi are of several types and range from commerce to crafts, including leisure and transport. These results confirm the analyzes of Y. Grafmeyer (2004, p. 96) who demonstrated that public spaces are assigned to several common functions and uses for the development of city dwellers. Research results have shown that while some occupiers approve the relevance and usefulness of the eviction operations, they still denounce the martial manner in which they were conducted. However, if the goal is to improve the living environment, popular support and cooperation should be its principles. These results are in line with those obtained by A. Fleury (2007) who proved in his thesis that it can be prestige operations likely to improve the attractiveness of a center or to enhance the quality of life in the center as well as on the outskirts of in residential neighborhoods. The forced eviction of illegal occupants of public spaces represents the second phase of the operationalization plan adopted by the Government. This final phase is preceded by a long phase of information and communication. As such, it is not an unexpected operation, but a planned action. These results corroborate the conclusions of P. Taliercio (2008), in Ouagadougou in Burkina-Faso, who recommended raising the awareness of the occupants before any formal eviction by explaining to them the dangers posed by their facilities both for themselves and for the entire population.

## CONCLUSION

Cities recognized everywhere as “the engine of development” may seem like “the engine of underdevelopment”, that is to say the engine of problems. The illegal and anarchic occupation of public spaces has taken on a worrying scale. The extension of small businesses irrespective of urban development planning is visible. The sidewalks of roads in Porto-Novo, Abomey-Calavi and several other municipalities in Benin have become for many city dwellers the main place of exercise of their activities. The problem then arises at the level of the management of public space and urban development but also at the level of urban governance. By considering the social and economic impact of this situation, the responsibility of the authorities is directly engaged. The paradox is that a demolition program is well planned, artery after artery, while what occurs after demolition remains a taboo subject.

Despite an announcement made six months earlier, the authorities have failed to consider common rehousing solutions, which has resulted in soaring rent rates. Without an alternative solution, a new wave of illegal occupations in the same spaces is to be expected.

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