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## Benin's urban policies are deepening social inequalities

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Since the arrival of Benin's President-entrepreneur Patrice Talon in 2016, urban development projects have accelerated in Cotonou. Aimed at strengthening the international attractiveness of the city, this new urban planning has led to the destruction of several neighbourhoods and the increasing eviction of the poor from the city centre, emblematic of neoliberal urban policy.

In the last decade, forced evictions have all too often made the urban news across the continent. In Benin, they have multiplied since the arrival in power of Patrice Talon, an entrepreneur with massive interests in the country's economy, and one of the largest fortunes in French-speaking Africa. His presidency, which signifies an **authoritarian turn** in the country's recent political history, has seen a speeding up in **urban development**

**projects**, particularly in Cotonou, the country's economic capital, promised to become 'Benin's showcase'. A notable consequence of this new urban policy has been **the eviction of poor neighbourhoods** situated until recently in and around the city centre. One of the last episodes of this series of dispossessions has just taken place on Cotonou's coastline, and reveals a telling instance of state authoritarianism in the treatment of the urban poor.

Shortly after mid-August 2021, I was sitting at the counter of the 'Carrefour des Jeunes' cafeteria with a few young and not so young men, discussing a **ministerial communiqué** that had suddenly come out in mid-July. The announcement had declared the neighbourhood 'illegal', giving the inhabitants little over a month and a half to pack up before their forced eviction. Between anger and resignation, the small group wondered about the meaning of their citizenship in the face of such a lack of dialogue: 'Shall I become a refugee in my own country?' asked one. 'We are considered like chickens', summarised another, to convey the sense of disposability that the men were experiencing.

Others yet were recalling how old the neighbourhood actually was. Some families had been living there for half a century, well before the construction of the villas that now faced them, at a time when there were only coconut groves and market gardens in the vicinity. With 623 registered households and about 3,000 inhabitants distributed over approximately eight hectares next to Cotonou's beach, the neighbourhood, known as 'Fiyegnon 1', was built both in cement and in more precarious materials, depending on the economic conditions of the households, and looked in places like a slum.

When it was founded approximately 60 years ago, the settlement was born out of a community of fishermen. They had been settled there at the turn of independence around 1960, after being evicted from the site of the presidential palace. In 2021, the vicinity was still inhabited by many fishermen who depended on their proximity to the sea for their livelihoods,

although there were also many other workers of the so-called 'informal' economy.

With the gradual urbanisation of the area, the district has undergone various planning operations since the early 2000s, and was in fact part of the national and municipal authorities' urban development plans at the time. The vicinity benefited from electricity and water connections, the inhabitants obtained official certificates in 2004 and 2005 attesting to the limits of their respective plots, straight roads were laid out through the neighbourhood about 10 years ago and the contours of the plots were revised accordingly. With an officially elected 'chef de quartier', there was no doubt that there was ample state recognition of the legitimacy of the site's occupation.

In 2006, as early plans of redrawing the coastal infrastructures emerged, the area was declared a zone of 'public utility', opening the legal possibility for the state to proceed to expropriations. Yet, these expropriations should have included proper compensations, since people had recently received official certificates attesting of the legitimacy of their presence, and in the few preceding years, the neighbourhood had been taken into consideration in the deployment of new coastal infrastructure: the design of the new coastal road was, for instance, modified to pass around it.

## The government's 'liberation' of public spaces

A ministerial announcement in mid-July 2021 referred to the situation in quite different terms: it spoke of an 'illegal' occupation of the premises, and the need for their 'immediate' release. In the last few years, such undertakings have been systematically promoted by the government as part of an enterprise of 'liberation of public spaces'. The formula would be laughable if it were not in fact the mask of state violence against precarious populations and the dizzying euphemism of a form of class contempt.

Contrary to the authorities' **subsequent bold media statements**, no prior contact had been made with the head of the neighbourhood, nor a fortiori with the inhabitants. Neither had proposals for rehousing or compensation been made. In the weeks that followed the announcement, requests by the elected neighbourhood head and representatives of the inhabitants to meet with the political and administrative authorities concerned – from the commune of Cotonou to the presidency of the Republic – met with mixed success, to say the least. No response came from the presidency, the mayor's office or the ministries concerned. The only officials who agreed to receive the delegation had no real grip on the issue.

Urban growth is of course a major challenge for many sub-Saharan African countries today. There is obviously no question here of contesting the Beninese state's legitimate ambitions for urban development. However, 'development' cannot become the all too easy cover story for a policy hostile to the poorest city dwellers, which denies them their right to the city. Or, to put it in the words of a now former resident: 'Development, yes, infrastructure, yes, but not at the price of dehumanisation.'

On the morning of 13 September 2021, the area declared 'illegal' began to be destroyed, with the support of a large police deployment. Three people died of heart problems during the demolition, a situation similar to what had already happened in the aftermath of **other forced evictions in Cotonou** in the last few years. In the days that followed, despite heavy rain, many inhabitants were still living among the rubble, not knowing where to go. Until the site was completely cleaned up in mid-October, a few dozen people were still in the same situation, some of them returning only at nightfall so as not to be seen. Others had found temporary shelter in the courtyards of other houses in the neighbourhood, and still others were staying temporarily with relatives or friends. Those who were better off had managed to rent new accommodation in a hurry.

'I can't forget'; 'I can't sleep at night'; 'of course I'm angry'; 'people are suffering a lot': The residents I continue to correspond with are grieving. Despite **claims to the contrary** by local authorities in the media, the

inhabitants have still not, at this stage, been informed of any possible compensation. Until mid-October, representatives of the inhabitants still wanted to privilege dialogue and attempted to reach to the President, the 'Father of the Nation', whom they believe to be misinformed and misled.

Yet, the case of Fiyegnon 1 is far from unique since the arrival in power of Patrice Talon, whose urban development projects seem to be more directed at strengthening the city's international attractiveness than to accommodating the city's urban poor. In fact, the urban policy put in place since 2016 appears as an eloquent African instance of a neoliberal urban policy, in the sense given by **Loïc Wacquant**: complacent towards the rich, hard on the poor. Cotonou seems on track to converge with a scenario, **already well known in other large African cities**, of deepening social inequalities in access to the city through urban policies. Meanwhile, the now ex-inhabitants of Fiyegnon 1 have not finished questioning the meaning and contours of their citizenship.

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*Photo: Cotonou Skyline, Benin. Credit: Shubert Ciencia. Licensed under CC BY 2.0.*

## About the author



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