

Contested Airport Land

Social-Spatial Transformation and
Environmental Injustice in Asia and Africa

**Edited by Irit Ittner, Sneha Sharma,
Isaac Khambule and Hanna Geschewski**

First published 2025

ISBN: 978-1-032-80003-5 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-80004-2 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-49496-6 (ebk)

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Irit Ittner

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DOI: 10.4324/9781003494966-6

The funder of the Open Access version of this chapter is University of Bonn.



Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

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Introduction

In January 2020, security officers at Félix-Houphouët-Boigny (FHB) International Airport did not notice, and therefore could not impede, a 14-year-old boy entering the airport grounds in order to hide himself in the landing gear of a plane going to Paris. Ivorian and French news mourned his fatal journey and debated the unlikelihood of this occurring. Many people in Abidjan were shocked by the event while facing conflicting opinions to the political responses that followed. The Ivorian Ministry of Transport, determined to prevent such incidents in the future, gave the order to the private airport operation enterprise AÉRIA to enforce the security zone. There was desperation and resignation, as well as lamentation and rage, when residents in Adjouffou had to leave their homes for a 200 m wide strip to be bulldozed parallel to the wall surrounding the airport grounds. While Adjouffou residents and some journalists subscribed to the view that this eviction was unjust and a threat to human rights, many other *Abidjanais* were in complete agreement with the eviction. In their opinion, Adjouffou residents had illegitimately been there. They welcomed the clampdown against illegal squatting, at times with anti-poor or xenophobic undertones. Later in this chapter, we will return to the residents of the security zone. The eviction from their homes, however, is part of a long history of urban displacement that accompanied the evolution of Abidjan. The metropolis was founded as a French colonial capital in 1903. It served as the capital of the independent Côte d'Ivoire until 1983. Today, Abidjan is a coastal metropolis with a mixed West African, European, and Lebanese population of 5.61 million inhabitants and very high economic ambitions, as well as vast social-economic inequalities.

This book chapter tells how the Ivorian government is strengthening the FHB airport in order to boost the national economy through tourism and a revived aviation sector. It also narrates how various local interest groups appropriated the demarcated land for airport expansion (referred to as the airport reserve) since the 1950s and how co-evolution between the airport and the city resulted in two distinct spatial forms: peri-urban agriculture and dense urban housing. The study also explains the eviction of Adjouffou residents in the larger framework of the urbanisation of Port Bouët, the respective municipal district of Abidjan.

DOI: 10.4324/9781003494966-6

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The chapter is guided by the following questions: How did the appropriation of land resources around the FHB International Airport by diverse actors lead to the contemporary spatial forms on the airport reserve? And with regard to Adjouffou, what strategies did the displaced residents use in order to negotiate the persistence of their settlement within the security zone of the airport?

Primary data consisted of observations noted in research diaries, photographs taken during photo walks, and semi-structured interviews conducted during six intense weeks of ethnographic field research in November and December 2021. Analysis also draws from Ivorian newspaper articles and historical photographs. The description of historical land appropriation is based on earlier studies conducted by Ivorian scholars and the author.

The chapter continues with a background section on Ivorian aviation and the central role played by the FHB airport in development visions. This is followed by a conceptual section. The following sections present agriculture and unplanned housing in a historical perspective and describe resistance strategies in Adjouffou.

The chapter concludes that ongoing contestations on airport land¹ in Abidjan originated from restrictions to Ivorian citizenship and the barring of foreigners² from legal landownership, as well as from the illegal appropriation of the airport reserve. *Laissez-faire* politics and eviction policy by public authorities also contributed to contestations. Practices of urban citizenship turned the airport reserve into an intensely used urban and peri-urban landscape, with dynamic politics and high competition over land resources. This situation on the ground is hindering the government's attempts to implement the airport city.

The FHB International Airport

Côte d'Ivoire, a West African country with more than 29 million inhabitants, has 27 military and civil airports/airfields, including three international airports. Six civil airports underwent modernisation under a government programme from 2014, including the airport in San Pedro, where an aviation-related eviction of more than 260 households was reported in April 2019.³ Evictions and resettlement of villages were also scientifically documented in the case of airport expansion in Bouaké (Sanogo & Doumbia 2021).

The largest airport covered by the government's modernisation programme, the FHB International Airport, is situated in Port Bouët Municipality, about 6 m above sea level between the Ebrié Lagoon and the Atlantic Ocean (see Figure 6.1).

The municipality's land is flat and swampy, with inland valleys. Urban farms, gardens, watersides of the lagoon, and beaches are characteristic, as well as large areas covered by factories and warehouses, in addition to French military zones. Port Bouët Municipality had about 618,792 inhabitants in 2021.⁴ Many residents are industrial workers, students, farmers, fishermen, or people employed in the informal sector who live on very low budgets. Other residents work around the airport or trade across West African transnational networks. In 2013, about one-third of housing in Port Bouët was situated in precarious quarters. Two-thirds of the residents were tenants (Fall & Coulibaly 2016: 52). Farmland, waterfronts,

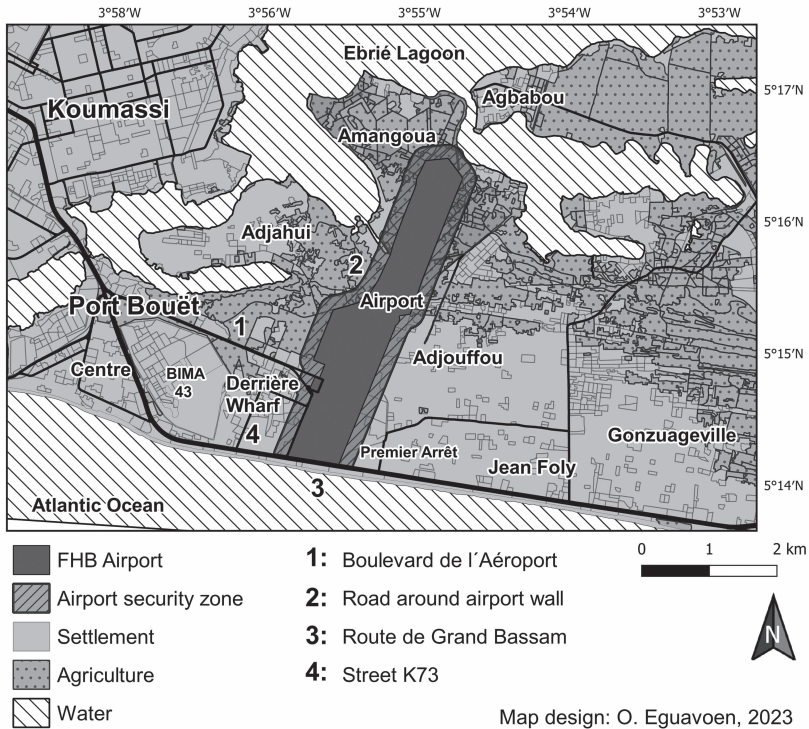


Figure 6.1 Location of the FHB International Airport.

Source: Ittner (2023).

and the proximity to the airport attracted the attention of the national government, estate and tourism developers, as well as business consultants. Though their specific objectives differed, they formed a coalition that envisages Abidjan regaining its pre-conflict importance as the economic hub of West Africa with international business tourism.⁵ The coalition perceives the expansion of aviation and the construction of an airport city as crucial ingredients to realising this target.

While the history of aviation in Côte d'Ivoire began in the 1920s based on the use of the Ebré Lagoon as a marine aerodrome, the history of the terrestrial FHB airport began in 1939, when Côte d'Ivoire was part of colonial French West Africa (Reynaud-Matheis 1962: 79). Kouassi (2021) argued that the Ivorian aviation sector and the FHB underwent six periods characterised by specific historical conditions and developments.⁶ In 2022, during the ongoing 'period of revival', FHB airport was one of the fastest-growing African airports in terms of passenger numbers and cargo. In 2017 and 2019, it served more than 2 million air travellers. The government under President Alassane Ouattara, who began his third term in 2020, envisioned an

increase to 8 million air travellers to and from Abidjan.⁷ Supportive policies were implemented, such as the winding up of the insolvent national airline, Air Ivoire, and the foundation of the novel national airline Air Côte d'Ivoire in 2012. Abidjan was repositioned as the central platform of a West and Central African hub-and-spoke network (Kouassi 2021: 79f.).⁸ Passenger numbers of FHB were on the rise, until the Covid-19 pandemic reduced international air travel in 2020.

But how was the land for the airport appropriated at first? In 1939, when terrestrial aviation began in Port Bouët, the local economy was dominated by a wharf. A few buildings dominated the airport grounds, including the aerodrome and the runway. On historical aerial photographs from the 1950s, the land beyond the airport grounds seems to have been covered by natural vegetation (Mairie d'Abidjan 1963: 37). Only a few people lived around the vicinity of the airport, including employees of the airport. In 1979, the Ivorian government, under President Félix Houphouët-Boigny, formally designated a large area in Port Bouët to the airport, including a large land reserve for future expansion.⁹ The airport decree from 1979 was renewed in 2010 and reaffirmed these lands to be state land.

In line with the political era of state capitalism in Côte d'Ivoire after independence, the airport was first managed as a public enterprise. When the Ivorian economic miracle began to collapse in the mid-1980s and President Félix Houphouët-Boigny died in 1993, his successor, President Henri Konan Bedié, coming to power in 1995 and facing empty treasuries, took a different political course. In 1996, when airports in Côte d'Ivoire were privatised, the government gave out a 15-year-long management concession to Egis, a French multinational entrepreneurial group with a broad portfolio, which handed the operation of the airport to AÉRIA, an Ivorian company and part of the Egis group. The land concession for the airport land runs until 2030. The airport ground and land reserve have become the quasi-private property of Egis for the duration of the concession. In everyday parlance, most people living and working around the airport told us that the state owned the land, without paying too much attention to the concession.

The international airport of Abidjan is mainly owned by private entrepreneurs and investors, with a minor public share.¹⁰ However, the airport began to exceed the airport grounds as various large actors and interest groups established a mosaic of aviation-related uses,¹¹ in addition to French military zones and other land uses on the reserve. Non-aviation-related uses included urban agriculture, housing, and manifold commercial activities. Before discussing agriculture and unplanned housing in detail and returning to Adjouffou, we will need to introduce the basic conditions of land tenure and belonging in Abidjan.

The governance of land and claims of belonging in Côte d'Ivoire

Land governance

Land tenure in Abidjan is pluralistic. It draws from state law and customary rules of the Ebrié, which overlap and, at times, conflict with each other. In addition, there is a local regulatory body going back to none of these sources. West African migrants

introduced it. They institutionalised new rules for land transaction through repeated practices of exchanging, inheriting, renting out, and selling land. Their leaders, referred to as neo-customary leaders, have been described as actors of numerous social-legal transformations in the city and who are politically powerful (Shighata 2017: 13f, 39; Chéke et al. 2018). Their performance of land governance is contested by the state and the Ebrié but supported by the municipal council of Port Bouët (see later text). Legal pluralism allows forum shopping; individuals choose the body of rules that best suits their interests. They also tend to politically ally with authorities who govern these bodies of rules.

While land legislation in Côte d'Ivoire was reformed in 2013 with the introduction of the *Arrêté de Concession Définitive* (ACD), which is the only legally accepted and protected private landownership title since, many land transactions in Abidjan continue to follow the customary rules of the Ebrié. This population settled around the lagoon long before French colonisation and the foundation of Abidjan. Their customary territories consist of large areas around the 27 villages in the city and extend to water spaces. Villages are administered by *chefferies* (chieftaincy councils). Legally, Ebrié villages and customary territories form rural enclaves today, which the metropolis has spatially overgrown. Land transactions in Ebrié territories combine collective with individual bundles of rights. Their practice and social acknowledgement are determined by the social relations, embedded networks, and status of rights-holders within local Ebrié communities.¹²

In Abidjan, as in rural Côte d'Ivoire, the *tutorat* is a typical institution for long-term land transaction between first-comers (autochtons) and latecomers (migrants). Latecomers receive land rights after entering an enduring patron–client relation with the natives, who act as tutors. Land rights stemming from a *tutorat* can also be inherited. For land-takers, *tutorat* contracts entail a duty of gratefulness, social integration, and political followership of local authorities. Even if land transactions are monetarist and documented by receipts, customary land transactions remain socially embedded land transactions. Tutors continue to own the land. In Port Bouët, it was explained that following Ebrié generations could not use the customary land any longer due to enduring *tutorat* contracts. This was one source of conflict between younger Ebrié and land-takers.

The Ivorian land law from 1998 aims ‘to identify, recognize and protect rights acquired through customary transfers but excludes foreigners from land ownership’ (Chauveau & Colin 2010: 86). The land law thus strengthened the administrative rights of land users and opened an option for the registration of landownership of land-takers, to the disadvantage of tutors. At the same time, the law prevented landownership for non-Ivoirians.

People excluded from legal access to building plots in Port Bouët find appropriate plots via squatting, customary or neo-customary transactions. These transactions are widely practised. In Port Bouët, some West African migrant communities received land from Ebrié tutors in order to establish farms or *campements* (camps).¹³ Some of these settlements grew massively in population, turned into unplanned settlements, and were formally recognised by the municipal council as urban quarters of Port Bouët. Adjouffou became one such urban quarter. Other settlements

received the legal status of an urban village. Leaders of urban villages and urban quarters act autonomously and cooperate with municipal authorities. In urban villages, they govern land issues, such as the issuing of temporal use rights (*attestation villagoise*), and land administration. In the context of airport expansion, an increase in land conflicts between tutors and former *campements* was observed (Ittner 2023).

The Ivorian civil war was, among other factors, triggered by related questions. Heirs of tutors questioned the legitimacy of long-term *tutorat* contracts, feeling that these hindered them from accessing their ancestors' lands. Scholars interpreted the Ivorian civil war as a 'war of modernity', which contested the definition of Ivorian belonging and the access to legal rights attached to the Ivorian passport, such as political participation and landownership (Baégas & Marshall-Fratani 2007: 83). Landownership and belonging, therefore, remain very sensitive political issues in the country (Bredeloup 2003; Marshall-Fratani 2006; Zina 2017).

In Abidjan, the temporal allocation of customary land use rights, the so-called *location provisoire* (temporal rental), has gained prominence. Rents generate income for Ebrié landowners but, perhaps more importantly, exercise leadership over customary territories. Obviously, territorial boundaries of Ebrié overlap neither with municipal borders nor with the designated limitation of the airport land. The Ebrié village of Ancien Koumassi, for example, spreads over areas of Marcory and Port Bouët, including minor parts of the airport reserve. The Ebrié village of Agbabou in Port Bouët stretches over a major part of the airport land, including the airport grounds. Customary landowners initially had to be included in decision-making over the airport. When the airport land became a public utility in 1979, the government compensated the Ebrié villages for the expropriation of customary land. The municipal council in Port Bouët legally holds no decision-making power over the public utility. By formally acknowledging unplanned settlements located on the airport reserve and the integration of their leaders into the municipal council, the municipal government practically accessed and governs four populous urban quarters located east of the airport grounds: Adjouffou, Derrière Wharf, Jean Foly, and Gonzuageville.

Claims of belonging

Citizenship is perceived as a political, legal, social, and cultural institution (Isin 2009: 371). In this chapter, I consider citizenship as a legal status and everyday practice in order to better understand the land use dynamics on the airport reserve. Urban citizenship is conceptualised independently from the national citizenship of urbanites. It refers to the political claim-making and the everyday exercising of rights, such as the rights to housing, work, mobility, or political participation. By occupying and inhabiting urban spaces (from the perspective of the authorities in an illegal or anarchic way), residents practice urban citizenship.

The understanding of citizenship in the legal sense is also important for the Ivorian case study because of the restrictive land law from 1998. According to the census from 2021, 22% of the resident population in the country did not hold

Ivorian citizenship. Apart from many Ivorians and *Abidjanais* with foreign, mainly West African, passports, Côte d'Ivoire hosts the largest population of stateless people worldwide. The United Nations Refugee Agency estimates the number at more than 955,000 people (Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung 2020). The French enforced and encouraged labour migration from other African French colonies to Côte d'Ivoire. After independence in 1960, immigration continued. Statelessness affects mainly the children and grandchildren of West African migrants because of a very rigid nationalisation law. Many people also lost their documents when fleeing to Abidjan during the civil war because they felt safer in the city (Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung 2020).

Agriculture on swampy sections of the airport reserve

Most of the western and northern parts adjacent to the airport wall remain open peri-urban spaces with rural settlements (see Figure 6.1). The local economy is dominated by agriculture, poultry, and rabbit rearing, as well as by artisanal fishery. Many residents commute to other parts of Port Bouët or to adjacent municipalities for work. Agriculture takes place in mainly two forms: vegetable farming and decorative gardening. Both activities are economically relevant for Abidjan because they support livelihoods and produce large quantities of food and plants for urban greenery.

Vegetable farming

In 2005, a study identified three different farming areas for vegetables around the FHB airport, with the largest area counting about 800 farmers on a production area of 70 ha (Babo 2010: 102). In 2013, another study investigated 30 ha next to the airport and 35 ha on a nearby peninsula called Adjahui. In total, 299 farmers were interviewed (Wognin et al. 2013).¹⁴ Urban vegetable farming provides livelihoods for thousands of people, especially for young men with little formal education. Besides producers, vegetable farming employs intermediate traders and market traders, many of whom are female. Long before the establishment of the cargo airport in 1974, migrants from the savannah cultivated inland valleys and plots with a high water table in Port Bouët.¹⁵ Migrants accessed farms and garden plots through the *tutorat* with two local Ebrié villages: Ancien Koumassi and Agbabou (Koffi-Didia 2016; Shighata 2017). The northern diet was based on rice, vegetables, and leafy vegetables, rather than on yam and fish eaten by the native population of the coastal region. Different to the Ebrié, people from the north were also experienced with inland valley farming. Migrants removed the natural vegetation and reclaimed the swampy parts of the airport reserve for agriculture. At the end of the 1990s, about 80% of the urban farmers in Abidjan had a migrant background (Babo 2010), originating mainly from Burkina Faso. Over the decades, the vegetable farms and gardens became an integral part of the peri-urban fabric between the lagoon and the ocean. Work on the vegetable farms and gardens created a demand for housing in walking distance.

Initially, migrant farmers produced vegetables for subsistence and sold overproduce to the growing population of industrial workers. Later, the proximity to the cargo airport encouraged them to cultivate export crops, such as flowers, bananas, and pineapples (Nassa 2011). Current urban farms mainly provide vegetables to the markets of Abidjan, such as leafy vegetables, spices, garden eggs, okra, onions, garlic, and garden leek.

In 1979, after the introduction of the airport decree, the government compensated Ebrié villages and vegetable farmers for the loss of either customary territories or farmland. Shigata argued that the compensation entailed unintended outcomes in the local balance of power:

[T]he natives [the Ebrié] who have recognized customary rights over space find themselves dispossessed of the land by the state. In fact, the space has been declared twice a public utility zone, which immediately places the [customary] landowners on the same footing as the migrants in land relations. Migrants can refer to legal provisions [of state law] to reject the terms of [tutorat] contracts binding them to the natives.

(Shighata 2017: 26, quotation translated by the author)

The payment of compensations to vegetable farmers politically weakened the Ebrié. From their perspective, farmers should not have received compensation, because they were not landowners. In contrast, vegetable farmers interpreted the receipt of compensation payments as official acknowledgement of their use rights to the land. They felt encouraged to develop neo-customary leadership and new rules for land transactions within their communities. The airport decree and compensation payments thus initiated a novel neo-customary system of land tenure in Port Bouët, which weakened the Ebrié tutors but strengthened land-taking migrant communities.

When it became obvious that the state would not utilise the huge reserve for the airport in the near future, vegetable farmers emancipated themselves as landowners. They based their claim on the government's compensations, as well as on the idea that their valorisation of the land constituted ownership. Compensated farmers illegally re-appropriated their former farm plots and plantations in order to continue with cultivation. They settled on the plots, established their own councils, and sold land to house builders. As a result, especially in Adjouffou and the other three large quarters along the coast, land transactions follow neo-customary rules today.

The Ebrié villages sought to reclaim the underused airport reserve from the state by legal means, which did not succeed. They, however, also re-appropriated the expropriated land by recalling that the airport reserve was part of their customary territories and exercising customary landownership by giving out contracts for temporal rentals around the airport (Koffi-Didia 2016; Eguavoen 2021, Ittner 2023).

During the Ivorian civil war (2001–2011), the airport reserve was highly secured. The French operate a military zone next to the airport (43 BIMA) and one to the north of the airport land. Securitisation had two implications on land use in

Port Bouët. Migrant farmers without Ivorian nationality faced harassment by the military and the airport police. Farming was shifted to earlier and later hours in order to escape controls. Many migrant farmers, especially from Burkina Faso, left the country for some years and returned to Abidjan after the conflict years. Farming was technologically adapted because farmers had less time and workforce to sow, irrigate, and harvest. Despite facing difficulties and opening additional farms in other parts of the city, farmers continued to work around the airport in order to secure their plots, as well as keep up contact to their customers (Babo 2010: 109ff). Different to other areas in Abidjan during this period, they were unable to form associations and, thus, missed support from the government or development agencies. Insecure land tenure seems to have prevented farmers' social organisation (Babo 2010: 114).

The second implication of securitisation and the presence of the French military was that Port Bouët became an attractive housing zone. The pacified area experienced another influx of people, who fled from other quarters of Abidjan and rural areas. The new residents mainly became tenants. In Port Bouët, migrants felt generally safer and less harassed by xenophobic actors, because cosmopolitan neighbourhoods were an everyday experience and migrant leaders were politically powerful. Building plots and rental accommodation could easily be accessed via neo-customary land transactions and migrant networks.

In 2019, mainly young men from families of northern origin cultivated vegetable farms on the airport land, using intense gardening as a response to unemployment. They rented plots from either the Ebrié (temporal rental) or migrant farmers (commercial rental). Market traders, residents of Port Bouët, and airport workers bought their products. As these vegetable farmers were aware of the risk of eviction by AÉRIA, they prevented any erection of infrastructure on their farms and followed a short production cycle that allowed two to four harvests in a year (Kra 2019),¹⁶ supported by the heavy application of fertilisers and pesticides. A more sustainable form of agriculture seems unsuitable under conditions of land insecurity. The study by Shighata pointed to the fact that Ebrié women, who could not directly access Ebrié customary land, rented farm plots from migrants (Shighata 2017), circumventing male-dominated, customary authority over land transactions.

During our study in 2021, we observed high levels of activity on the mixed-crop farms. On any day of the week, and at any time of the day, we saw hundreds of male and female farmers sowing, planting seedlings, and applying fertiliser, weeding, harvesting, and irrigating their fields with watering cans. A section of farms had to be abandoned for the construction of a large multi-purpose logistic centre serving the airport. Many vegetable farms on the way to Adjahui that we had documented in 2018/2019 were overgrown by unplanned housing (see next section). As a result, farmers squatted and reclaimed new land plots, including waterfronts (see Figure 6.2), while other approached Ebrié for novel rental contracts. After AÉRIA implemented the security zone around the airport wall in 2020, farmers quickly re-appropriated plots of demolished houses by removing rubble and re-establishing vegetable gardens.



Figure 6.2 Freshly reclaimed vegetable beds near the airport wall.

Source: Photograph by Ittner.

Decorative gardening

The second form of agriculture on airport land was decorative gardening. Nursery gardens selling decorative plants and trees were mainly established along the *Boulevard de l'Aéroport* and the *Route de Grand Bassam*. On the backside, these areas directly border the French military zone BIMA 43. Located on drained plots crossed by canals and small ponds, and with a rich offering of various and colourful garden species, more than 150 garden businesses decorate the entrance to Abidjan when coming from the airport. More importantly, these gardens have evolved into small ecosystems providing biodiversity and a tangible micro-climate. Migrant families from West Africa had founded these businesses and transferred them to the next generation. Land use was based on 40- to 50-year-old *tutorat* arrangements with the Ebrié of Agbabou village. Some plots were previously used as vegetable farms. Since 1979, with a stronger presence of the state around the airport, florists mainly referred to the interest of the state when discussing the insecure tenure of their gardens and the endangered future of their businesses. Large billboards indicated unequivocally that this land was part of the airport and a public utility (see Figure 6.3).

Our interview partners were afraid to lose their gardens to airport expansion. Despite the fact that they had organised a professional council, which facilitated communication with the municipal council, decorative gardeners thought they had no bargaining power because they were foreigners working on a public utility. As one old owner of a business explained to us:

We [our garden businesses] are well located, but the land is not guaranteed. We are already here for 40 years, almost 50 years. And we live well. No problems. But it is not guaranteed. One day or the other, one can displace



Figure 6.3 Billboard indicating public landownership.

Source: Photograph by Ittner.

us. It is the day when the state arrives, as foreigners are arriving, we will be obliged to leave. . . . I paid my taxes, first to the Ebrié, then under President Ouattara, to the town hall. See, we have lost the land [the land use rights given to us by the Ebrié].

(elder gardener, translated interview transcription, 23 November 2021)

This quotation shows that the businesses evolved and remained despite decades of great uncertainty. Not being able to base their use rights on customary land rights any longer, the strategy of the gardeners, therefore, was to keep the tolerated status quo, demonstrate humility, and fully comply with the rules of the airport zone. They were cautious not to contest the authority of the state, of AÉRIA, or any of its representatives (owners of gardens and gardeners, interviews, 23./24.11.2021).

To sum up this section, the farmland and the garden plots are owned by the Ivorian state and managed by AÉRIA. The long period of underutilisation for airport expansion allowed producers to re-appropriate swampy sections of the airport reserve near the lagoon. They are using the farmland until the state or AÉRIA reclaims the airport reserve for construction. There is a close historical and spatial dependency between the airport and urban agriculture in Port Bouët. Apart from the wetness of the land, which made it less attractive for housing, the legal prohibition of private landownership prevented urban development. An open peri-urban landscape persisted, with villages as the main form of housing. A massive population influx to this area began not earlier than 2011 and first manifested on the Adjahui Peninsula.

Villages accommodate up to a few thousand people. Residence is characterised by simple rural housing, as well as the lack of electricity and a potable water

supply. Most villages on the public utility are tolerated by the state and formally acknowledged by the municipality. They were not equipped with adequate infrastructure by the municipality. These villages recorded a stark increase of requests for building plots and rental housing in recent years (Eguavoen 2021; Ittner 2023).

Popular urban quarters along the Atlantic coast

To the west of the airport grounds, planned urbanisation was prohibited by the airport decree as well. Along the Atlantic coast, however, spatial development took a completely different turn. *Campements* and unplanned settlements in Port Bouët date back to the 1930s. From the 1950s onwards, after the abolition of forced labour in 1947, Port Bouët faced several waves of immigration initially triggered by the construction of the Vridi Canal connecting the Atlantic with the lagoon and the establishment of industrial zones in Port Bouët. Farmers from the north of Côte d'Ivoire and former French West Africa were eventually joined by fishermen from Togo, Benin, and Ghana who searched for housing near the Atlantic, as well as by industrial workers and West African livestock traders. Four large precarious quarters that accommodate more than half of Port Bouët's population today, Adjouffou, Derrière Wharf, Jean Foly, and Gonzuageville, were initially small settlements based on early *tutorat* contracts, the illegal re-appropriation of the airport reserve after compensation in 1979, and squatting (Koffi-Didia 2016; Shighata 2017). The quarters are sub-divided into sectors and governed by neo-customary leaders (*chef de quartier*), who gained initial legitimacy through the foundation of the settlements, and local councils. Their political power is based on their central role in local land governance, as well as the dependency of the municipal government on their database and knowledge about land transfers, as well as on social-political ties in these quarters, as Chéke, Nikebie, and Gballet underline:

The municipality is obliged to collaborate with the neo-customary actors. While refusing to acknowledge their land tenure practices in their new configuration, the governance actors rely on neo-customary systems for interventions into the management of traditional land resources
(Chéke et al. 2018: 278f., quotation translated by the author).

Under the past municipal government, the authors observed alliance building between neo-customary actors and municipal officers' units, as well as a lack of political control by the municipality over these actors (Chéke et al. 2018).

Formal urbanisation in the centre of Port Bouët, the former location of Abidjan's wharf, was extended incrementally by private and public housing schemes. Employees of the airport were given the opportunity to buy family houses on compounds situated near the airport behind the wharf during the 1950s. Today, the Cité Météo, the Cité Policier, and the Cité Douane, as well as houses built for staff members of the Agency for the Safety of Air Navigation in Africa and Madagascar (ASECNA), constitute spatial islands on the airport reserve in Derrière Wharf with secured private house and landownership (see Figure 6.4).



Figure 6.4 Gate to the Cité Douane.

Source: Photograph by Ittner.

These spacious compounds of airport professionals are surrounded by sectors that were informally constructed on insecure building plots. The construction of public housing in the city from 1977 to 1984 was followed by an urban rehabilitation programme by the World Bank in the 1990s. *Campements*, which had evolved into larger unplanned settlements, were destroyed and evicted. Their residents moved eastwards to unused spaces of the airport reserve along both sides of the coastal road to Grand Bassam. Other evicted residents re-established smaller but also densely populated settlements along waterfronts of the lagoon behind industrial zones, the slaughterhouse, the cemetery, and the livestock market.

While unplanned housing in Port Bouët first served as accommodation for West African migrants, these residential areas later became popular among *Abidjanais* of all origins due to their proximity to industrial jobs and low rents. Because the acquisition of legal landownership was impossible on the public utility, Port Bouët evolved into a municipality dominated by low-cost, precarious housing with a cosmopolitan population. When the municipal system was introduced in 1978 and population pressure increased, settlements in Port Bouët experienced an influx of people from the lower and middle classes, of foreign and Ivorian origin alike, who bought building plots under the neo-customary regime, rented housing, or bought housing in the few formal housing schemes outside the airport reserve, such as in the Cité Atlantique. New buildings in Port Bouët centre also included military camps and student dormitories. From 1990 to 2016, only two more housing schemes were built, including '48', constructed by ASECNA for airport workers (Koffi-Didia 2016).

While Derrière Wharf's growth was spatially limited by the *Boulevard de l'Aéroport* and the airport grounds, Adjouffou sprawled to the north and to the west

right up to the security wall of the airport. The subsequent national governments and District of Abidjan tolerated informal housing practices, although the residents of Derrière Wharf and Adjouffou were constantly reminded that they lived illegally on the airport reserve and would need to leave one day. An urbanist told me about observations during his internship with the technical service of Port Bouët municipality in 2011:

I worked on the restructuring of the quarter Derrière Wharf, just behind the military camp. The first thing I noticed was that residents had already been compensated. They lived there for long. They [the District of Abidjan] had to evict them because of airport expansion. In an official letter, which was published in a newspaper, it was said that these people would be evicted because they lived on the airport reserve. They received this letter in 1960 or 1965. Until 2011, they were not evicted. No airport expansion project was implemented. You find yourself in a situation where residents know that they are illegal. But nobody comes and tells them to leave. There were even resettlement zones which they never went to.

(Mr Konan, translated interview transcription, 19 March 2019)

As this quotation illustrates, illegal housing on the airport reserve was tolerated for decades by state authorities, who showed a *laissez-faire* attitude to the situation on the ground. Housing on the underused airport reserve was supported by the municipal council of Port Bouët and its mayor, Madame Hortense Aka Anghui, who was in office from 1980 to 2017. The council applied a regulation from 1980 that allowed local governments to permit housing on public land within their municipality by the allocation of temporal housing permits. Housing rights were registered by the councils in the quarters.¹⁷ Unplanned settlements became formally integrated urban quarters, and their residents enjoyed a temporal legality. The municipal council could govern with the support of the neo-customary authorities and provide municipal services for the residents.

During the early 1990s, when the welcoming immigration policy of Felix Houphouët-Boigny ended, the government of Bedié, as well as the following governments under Robert Gueï (1999–2000) and Laurant Gbagbo (2000–2010), openly promoted an ultra-nationalist ideology (Ivorian nativism) and xenophobia. Laws barred foreigners from legal landownership and introduced a very restrictive nationalisation law (Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung 2020). Encouraged by these public discourses, groups of Ivorian *Abidjanais* protested against the neo-customary councils. They argued that foreigners, who had illegitimately appropriated Ivorian public land, should not be selling it to Ivorians. Protesters squatted other parts of Port Bouët and began to build housing. They were joined by young Ebrié who had also experienced a land and housing shortage. Their justification differed in the sense that they underlined their customary rights to the land in Abidjan as autochthons (Koffi-Didia 2016).

In 2012, the total population of Adjouffou alone was estimated at 100,000 inhabitants, many of them living under slum-like conditions in low-quality housing

(ONU-Habitat 2012). The high population of Adjouffou and other precarious quarters in Port Bouët became a political variable in itself (ONU-Habitat 2012), because house owners and tenants made up the highest numbers of voters within the municipality.

For humanitarian reasons, the high number of residents alone actually forbids an urban renewal policy based on demolition and displacement. The municipality lacks land resources and money to create additional housing. The challenge of homelessness is especially felt after evictions, when residents expect the municipal council to solve their housing problem, at times by directly attacking the town hall.¹⁸

Legally secured but forceful evictions of housing patches and smaller unplanned settlements were conducted by the District of Abidjan, who justified these piecemeal demolitions and displacements with either the construction of the international coastal road to Accra, disaster risk reduction, or the city cleaning programme.¹⁹ During the time of study, demolitions along the *Route de Grand Bassam* were announced for the construction of the metro that will link the airport with different parts of the city. Evictions finally took place in July 2022.

The municipal council faced emergencies when thousands of inhabitants became homeless due to evictions along the Airport Road (Moussakro in 2011), along the Atlantic Beach (parts of Derrière Wharf, Adjouffou, Jean Foly, Gonzuageville, Anani in 2013/14), and along the waterfront of the Bay of Biétry (Quartier des Éleveurs in 2017, Abbatoir in 2018).²⁰ These evictions created intra-urban flows of poor tenants searching for housing. This resulted in the densification of people in existing precarious housing, as well as in higher entry cost to rental contracts.

It also contributed to the rapid evolution of Adjahui, a new informal settlement on the airport reserve, which already accommodated more than 60,000 residents in mid-2018. The respective peninsula was mainly covered by three villages, palm plantations, farms, and bush land before urbanisation was set in motion by the eviction of Moussakro in 2011, by the emergency financial support for displaced people paid by the municipality, as well as by the government's announcement of an airport city, which would change the spatial fabric on the airport reserve (Eguavoen et al. 2020; Eguavoen 2021).²¹

The analysis shows that population pressure and eviction policy in the context of legal pluralism in tenure and the underused airport reserve resulted in a concentration of people with low incomes in precarious quarters of Port Bouët. Urban policy at the metropolitan scale pushed poor households into the urban periphery and public spatial niches, where no secure land title could be acquired, while the municipality aimed at securing housing and temporal residential rights for them. Today, the massive population number on the reserve hinders the airport city project. Implementation could only be enforced by evictions and would face massive resistance by the house owners, the councils of the quarters, and the tenants. It is also unlikely that the municipal council of Port Bouët will push the project as much as the national government and the District of Abidjan do.

At the same time, precarious housing also mushroomed in the municipality. Inhabitants of evicted settlements re-established these along the road to Grand Bassam. Their offspring grew up in the city. They are *Abidjanais* of the second or third

generation. Their home country is Côte d'Ivoire, even though Ivorian nationality was denied to them by law. Some inherited land plots and houses from their families.

The eviction of Adjouffou Premier Arrêt – resistance and return

Keeping these two spatial evolutions in mind, we return to the security zone in Adjouffou, where about 2,000 households and 156 landlords were initially given 48 hours to leave the sector in 2020. Shortly after the call by the Ministry of Transport to enlarge the security zone of the airport, public officers arrived and marked the buildings with painted crosses and the letters *AD* (French: *à détruire*, to demolish) in order to announce their eviction. Two members of the committee of the residents of Adjouffou Premier Arrêt, an informal group representing tenants and landlords affected by the eviction, recalled the events during an interview in December 2021. We documented roads of deserted buildings with disassembled features and partly demolished walls before arriving in streets where people had re-appropriated the evicted houses. For Adjouffou, a popular quarter with high population density and many businesses, it was remarkably calm. The men said that everybody in Premier Arrêt knew that land use, as in Adjouffou in general, was temporary and would end when the state reclaimed the airport reserve. Our interview partners and other residents around the airport communicated their sincere doubt about the fatal journey of the boy, which served as justification for the extension of the security zone, and the eviction. Some suspected that the story was made up by either the district or state authorities. Others asked how the boy could know the place well enough to sneak into the airport grounds when he originated from a far municipality. According to them, professional security measures behind the airport wall prohibited any access. From their perspective, the extension of the security zone was part of a piecemeal strategy by the state to reclaim public land of the airport reserve, as Adjouffou and the other urban quarters could not be evicted without causing a humanitarian disaster. Our interview partners explained why they had protested against their eviction:

If there is to be an eviction, I think it should be done in a structured way, with support and a period to allow residents to find another place to go. Because this is a property of AÉRIA. It is state land. The state, however, has no right to force a population to move within 48 hours and without accompanying measures. This is an act of force.

(committee members of the residents of Adjouffou Premier Arrêt,
translated interview transcription, 2 December 2021)

Thus, the tenants did not claim ownership of their residential place or contest the public domain. They were ready to leave but insisted on the lawful implementation of the displacement and government support to at least partly compensate for the loss. Of course, many other residents in Adjouffou hoped to avert evictions by public protest. A wide coalition of local organisations, associations, and leaders called

for a demonstration. A sociologist at the University of Cocody described some dramatic scenes he observed during the emotional demonstration in Adjouffou, when some people stood on roofs shouting that they would rather die than leave.²² Schoolchildren begged through tears that they wished to continue their school year. TV reporters broadcast the scenes. Because of the protests, the date of demolition was postponed by another two weeks. Tenants used this period for house hunting, packing, entering new rental contracts, or moving to the homes of their relatives. Landlords made sure they left nothing of value behind. They dismantled the buildings. Zinc roofs, windows, and doors were taken away. Providers cut electricity and water supplies. Some neighbours, including our interview partners, addressed letters to various Ivorian ministries, as well as to international politicians:

We wrote to embassies, to the different chancelleries [Germany, USA, France, USSR], to human rights NGOs, to the Ministry of Solidarity, to the Ministry of Justice, to the Ministry of Education. Because there were schools that were to be demolished in the middle of the school year, we had to get the pupils to go out and cry in front of the press, saying that they wanted to go to school. . . . We even wrote to the representatives of the African Union and the EU [European Union].

(committee members of the residents of Adjouffou Premier Arrêt,
translated interview transcription, 2 December 2021)

While most of the letters remained unanswered, Adjouffou residents succeeded to create political pressure and to draw the attention of the media even at an international level after their family members in Great Britain protested in London against the eviction, where the Ivorian president Alassane Quattara was attending an international meeting. He was confronted with uncomfortable questions by the international press about what was going on in Côte d'Ivoire. From the perspective of the residents, critical international media reports prevented the demolitions.

Residential buildings stood empty for more than a year, which encouraged residents who had not found affordable accommodation in the meantime to contact their landlords and return to their former housing units. Housing conditions, however, had deteriorated, and arguments between landlords and tenants arose about the payment of the cost for repairing buildings and setting up new water and electricity connections.

To sum up this section, Premier Arrêt is the section of Adjouffou that directly borders the airport wall and was affected by the implementation of the security zone in 2020. Despite announcing evictions and making residents leave, public protest and media attention created a political climate that made it very difficult for the state to implement demolitions. Unused and undemolished buildings were partly re-appropriated by former residents and house owners. Even though the sector is very small in relation to all land that was illegally occupied on the airport reserve, the state and District of Abidjan had not enough authority and power to reclaim the land plots on the public reserve.

Discussion and conclusion

The high economic ambitions of the Ivorian government are informed by the role of Abidjan in its golden age during the 1970s and 1980s, when the metropolis served as an economic hub of West Africa. Though national economic growth rates are considerable, the number of passengers travelling through FHB airport in comparison to other African international airports is still low. Murtala Muhammed International Airport in Lagos, with more than 7 million air travellers (before Covid-19), stands as the biggest rival in the fierce competition for the West African aviation hub.

The Ivorian government considers air transport essential for the economic growth of the country. It introduced an airport modernisation programme in 2014. The programme is motivated by the need to expand the aviation sector in order to not be left behind in the global competition as a business hub, as well as in order to support other economic sectors of the nation. Abidjan already owns a large and expanding international harbour, though operations have faced problems because of piracy in the Gulf of Guinea. The FHB airport received a new cargo airport. New logistical enterprises are set up on the airport land. Airport expansion and the airport city face difficulties in funding and implementation on the ground because the airport reserve, a public utility, has been occupied by various other users for many decades. Transformation in land use would result in massive changes of the social-economic fabric in Port Bouët and political instability. The implementation of any eviction and final demolition for the establishment of new infrastructure is a political challenge for the government.

Practices of urban citizenship and private investment turned the underused airport reserve into an intensely used urban landscape with important agricultural uses and settlements (villages, unplanned settlements, and urban quarters) that host about half of the population of Port Bouët. The spatial co-evolution with the airport included two different pathways leading to a peri-urban landscape in the east and north on the one hand and a dense urban fabric, especially in the west and south, on the other. These pathways were enabled by different landscape features, legal pluralism (land law, customary and neo-customary tenure) and by the competing development vision and contested leadership of the state and the municipality over the airport reserve (state-led development of airport-related uses, business and tourism site versus stepwise integration of unplanned settlements into the municipal structure). It was also enabled by the historical evolution of Port Bouët into a periphery of Abidjan with unplanned, low-cost housing. The growth of local informal livelihoods and precarious forms of housing, as well as the exclusion of migrants from legal landownership, entailed the evolution of a dense network of social associations and new forms of local land tenure governance and political leadership, as well as of vivid, cosmopolitan, and defensive communities with high voters' base, which gained political weight due to their high population numbers. The Ouattara government is intending to reform the nationalisation law, which might allow more people to legally access secure land titles after the receipt of Ivorian citizenship.

Perhaps it was naive to think that about 100 km² of land near the growing metropolis would remain barren land, or that temporary uses, practices, and claims for landownership would not perpetuate. Acts of urban citizenship hinder formal urban planning and the mid-term implementation of the airport city. House owners and tenants, who see their interests endangered by the airport city, learnt by experience which resistance strategies had worked well over the past decades. They mobilise into community-based organisations and NGOs and search for media attention. They play the customary/neo-customary or 'poor people's area' card and seek patron–client relations with local politicians. They protest on the street, file lawsuits against authorities, and communicate that they are quite aware of their right to accommodation and being in the city. Facing a neglecting *laissez-faire* policy, civil disobedience, and the ignorance of eviction notices proved to be the most successful resistance strategy by residents. After the Ivorian civil war, the national and district governments consequently began to implement the rule of law in order to reclaim their authority and to sanction illegal squatting on the public airport land. The present political means to do this, especially demolitions and forceful evictions, should be questioned because they create humanitarian emergencies and exacerbate the housing crisis. Now, unplanned settlements provide the only response to the housing crisis in the low-price segment of Abidjan (Eguavoen 2021). If evicted places are not fully occupied by public authorities, people tend to reclaim them. It seems that the state and the District of Abidjan have lost some rounds in this regard in Premier Arrêt and elsewhere.

The employment generated by the future airport city was estimated at between 20,000 and 35,000 jobs. Most jobs will be formal, better employment and probably be better paid than existing jobs in the local economy. Evictions, however, also destroy jobs and economic assets. Farmers and gardeners acknowledged the role of AÉRIA as quasi-private landowner and knew that they would need to leave the land as soon as the state claimed it back. Despite putting the land into value for many decades, they had succeeded neither in securing their land use rights nor in building strong political alliances that would help them continue with their livelihood in the event that their gardens and farms were needed for airport expansion.

Therefore, which policies would be promising on the way to urban development, the well-being of the population, and social-economic sustainability? Of course, airport expansion should be critically reflected upon as well with regard to the number of expected air travellers and needed capacities. It seems that the airport city serves rather as a justification to reclaim land for formal urbanisation that promises high economic gains for the state, the district, and developers. A policy option would be to tolerate the existing farms and settlements until 2030, when the concession with Egis runs out. Inhabitants around the airport would need to leave only land plots that are urgently needed for airport expansion.

After 2030, the size of the airport reserve could be drastically reduced by a new government decree. The public utility status of the cut-off land could be transferred to the municipality. This would be important in order to prevent land speculation and gentrification. Urban development outside the reserve would then continue under the responsibility of the Port Bouët municipal council in cooperation with

the district government. This would enable the improvement of precarious housing under public housing schemes for households with low incomes and other housing development. Competition between the district and the municipality, however, over the control of land resources, and between the municipality and the neo-customary leaders in Port Bouët over political power, would probably undermine such a policy option.

Acknowledgements

The Fritz Thyssen Foundation funded the project ‘Everyday entanglement of social-economic extremes and negotiations in anticipation of development-induced displacement in Mumbai and Abidjan’ (2020–2023, 10.20.2.003EL). The foundation also funded open access. I would like to thank Sneha Sharma and Dishani Senaratne for the review of earlier versions, and Oscar Eguavoen for designing the map.

Notes

- 1 For the concept of airport land, see Sharma et al. (2024).
- 2 The French term *foreigners* (*les étrangers*) includes different notions, such as not having Ivorian nationality or, more generally, not originating from this place. This chapter, however, refers strictly to the legal notion of the term ‘foreigners’.
- 3 04.04.2019 AIP. They lived in an unplanned settlement called Plaque Air Ivoire; 25.08.2011 Nord-Sud; 10.05.2015 AIP.
- 4 Census data from 2022.
- 5 The Ivorian civil war and post-electoral crisis (2001–2011) marked a political turning point. For a comprehensive country overview, see Miran-Guyon (2017).
- 6 Kouassi (2021) divides them as follows: 1956–1960 colonial period, 1960–1969 period of post-independence, 1969–1981 period of infrastructural development and expansion, 1981–1999 period of economically difficult years, 1999–2011 period of decline (due to the civil war and post-electoral crisis), since 2011 period of revival.
- 7 16.09.2018, newsaero.info/connectionivoirienne.net.
- 8 Other policy measures included the introduction of an easy online procedure for visa application, American TSA (Transport Security Administration) certification, as well as the construction of a new runway, which permitted the first landing of an Airbus A380 (the largest civil aircraft of the world) in Sub-Saharan Africa. FHB is also the leading African airport with regard to the Airport Carbon Accreditation Level, which is 3+/neutrality. Following the open-sky policy, the Ivorian government signed contracts with 25 international airlines that led to a rapid increase in the number of destinations. In 2018, a milestone was the introduction of a direct connection between Abidjan and New York. It is offered by Air Côte Ivoire three times a week in alliance with Ethiopian Airlines. In recognition of these revitalisation measures, FHB airport received the Africa Routes Marketing Award 2018 for airports with passenger numbers under 4 million travellers. Its efforts were also recognised in 2019 by the Airports Council International, who gave the Airport Service Quality Award to Abidjan in the ‘Most Improved Airport’ category (25.02.2014 news.abidjan.net; 01.03.2014 news.abidjan.net; 13.02.2015 news.abidjan.net; 27.08.2015 [LeDiplomatique D’Abidjan](http://LeDiplomatiqueDAbidjan.com); 31.12.2015 news.abidjan.net; 31.04.2021 [Le Patriote](http://LePatriote.com); newsaero.info; abidjan-airport.com).
- 9 According to Shighata (2017: 58, 79), the airport land extends from latitude 5°00–5°30 and longitude 3°50–4°10. It is limited by the municipalities of Marcory and Koumassi to

- the north and the Atlantic to the south, as well as by Grand Bassam (a city and prefecture of the District of Abidjan) to the east.
- 10 Following Egis in 2019, the shares of the airport are currently distributed among Egis (34.5%), SEGAP (African Investment Managers and Afripar, total 27.1%), the Ivorian government (10%), and private investors (29.1%).
 - 11 For example, the professional training centre for airport workers (*Centre des métiers de l'aviation*), the sports club *Aéro-Club D'Abidjan*, and airport transfer and parking, as well as logistic companies.
 - 12 This status is usually determined by age, gender, class, and/or belonging to an age class. Chauveau and Colin (2010), Shighata (2017: 76f.).
 - 13 In typical Ebrié parlance, Ebrié *chefferies* refer to 'installed migrant communities on the land'.
 - 14 The agricultural site in Adjahui was completely transformed into a dense settlement by 2018 (Eguavoen et al. 2020; Eguavoen 2021).
 - 15 The passenger airport was established in 1939 at the same place.
 - 16 These findings are supported by Wognin et al. (2013), who underline that predominantly uneducated young men made up most of the vegetable farmers.
 - 17 Law 85–582, 29.07.1980. The law permitted the municipal council to parcel the land and request fees and taxes.
 - 18 02.07.2018 infodrome.
 - 19 In 2012, l'*Organisation des Secours* (ORSEC), the government organisation for disaster risk reduction, listed eight quarters of Port Bouët as 'risky zones' (Adjouffou, Gonzuaeville, Jean Foly, Anani, Abrogoua, Tavito, Petit Bassam, and Vridi-Canal), where no housing was permitted in order to protect people from potential hazards, such as flooding. Residents were given orders to leave before these quarters, or parts of them, were evicted and demolished in 2013/2014.
 - 20 The eviction was justified with potential health hazards due to open sewage from the slaughterhouse, as well as the location of the livestock holders' homes under high-voltage lines.
 - 21 The eviction created a housing emergency. Displaced households used financial support for the purchase of land plots on the peninsula (additional to their own resources). The announcement kicked off land speculation.
 - 22 R. M. Chéke, personal conversation, December 2021.

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