

Local Dynamics in Daily Mobilities in West and Central African Cities

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The rapid demographic growth of large African cities is accompanied by the extension of urban areas in zones that lack basic infrastructures and services and employment opportunities, generating a growing need for motorized mobility. These urban evolutions have taken place in a context of multiform crisis that affects the transport sector in terms of infrastructure, services and governance. The road network is generally underdeveloped and in poor condition, the few asphalt roads are in the centre and on the main routes between the centre and the outskirts. Due to urban transport deregulation, strongly encouraged by structural adjustment plans and transport sector projects, in most large cities state-owned transport companies closed down and transport services provided by small entrepreneurs expanded. They operate vehicles of various sizes, from saloon cars to freight vehicles that have undergone more or less rudimentary transformations that enable them to carry passengers. Moreover, since the early nineties an unusual form of public transport has appeared in a number of capitals and large cities in Western and Central Africa. Motorized two-wheelers, which are traditionally intended for purely private use, have been appropriated for a commercial activity: the motorbike taxi.

The aim of this paper is twofold: first, to highlight the main trends affecting the daily mobility patterns of city-dwellers and second, to show evidence of collective use of vehicles that are used traditionally in an individual way, as a solution to compensate for chronic deficiencies in urban transport supply.

The first section presents daily mobility patterns in several Western and Central Africa cities (Bamako, Ouagadougou, Niamey, Conakry, Dakar, Duala). The second and third sections analyze respectively the evolution in mass transit supply and use, and the “collective” use of cars and the increasing place of motorbikes taxis in daily travel. These two examples contribute to a two-fold movement, on the one hand the pooling of personal vehicles and in the other hand the individualisation of public transport. Our analyses are based on empirical material gathered in quantitative and qualitative surveys undertaken in the 1990’s and 2000’s. The concluding section discusses the need for urban transport policies to regulate and organize daily travel in sub-Saharan Africa.