



Road Safety and Urban Governance in Cameroon: Navigating Informal Mobility, Spatial Friction and Planning Dictates

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ABSTRACT: The Cameroonian urban road safety lies at the crossroads of surging mobility demands, a dominant informal transport sector (taxis, motorcycle-taxis), and infrastructure modernisation imperatives. This paper analyses the evolution of local governance in Yaounde, Douala, Bertoua, and Garoua, where road safety is increasingly framed through urban planning and technological control. Based on an exclusively qualitative, multi-sited methodology (semi-structured interviews, ethnographic observations, and documentary analysis), the study examines the impacts of physical restructuring (*Yaounde Cœur de Ville*, BRT, MoVe), digital tracability (digital tagging, CCTV surveillance), and flow regulation (zoning, entry of ride-hailing platforms like Yango). The study identifies a significant “risk displacement” phenomenon, wherein the spatial restriction of informal mobility within metropolitan cores appears to correlate with an increased frequency of traffic-related incidents in peri-central, infrastructure-deficient areas. Furthermore, the research demonstrates that the effectiveness of these policies is hampered by institutional fragmentation among ministries and local authorities due to the lack of a unified Urban Transport Authority. In conclusion, the paper advocates for integrating road safety directly into master urban plans, supported by effective fiscal decentralisation for municipalities.

KEYWORDS: Road safety, Urban governance, Informal transport, Urban planning, Cameroon.

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid urbanisation experienced by major cities such as Yaounde and Douala, as well as by regional capitals such as Bertoua and Garoua, has placed mobility at the heart of governance priorities. Long viewed solely through the lens of coercive and repressive measures on major inter-city routes, road safety is now an eminently urban challenge, at the crossroads of spatial planning, the need to modernise infrastructure, and meeting the daily travel needs of millions of city dwellers. Faced with the historic failure or inadequacy of mass public transport, Cameroon’s urban mobility landscape has gradually taken shape around an omnipresent and overwhelmingly dominant informal sector centered on motorcycle taxis and artisanal shared taxis. Whilst these flexible modes of transport meet a fundamental social need by compensating for the shortcomings of the road network and the isolation of certain neighborhoods, they are also the main cause of road safety issues, characterised by a high accident rate, a recurring lack of driver training and constant conflicts over road use on under-capacity roads. Recently, this complex equation has been further complicated by two major developments: the emergence of digital transport platforms such as ride-hailing services—for example, Yango—which are disrupting traditional travel patterns by introducing new regulatory requirements; and the increased use of technological governance by the state and local authorities.

Faced with this saturation of public space and the proliferation of road risks, the role of municipalities is undergoing a profound transformation. Urban communities are no longer content with one-off awareness-raising campaigns, but are asserting themselves as strategic players in safety through the planning and restructuring of urban space. On the ground, this transition is reflected in the roll-out of large-scale infrastructure projects, such as “*Yaounde Cœur de Ville*”, initiatives to transition towards sustainable transport (MoVe for green mobility) and the planning of Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) networks designed to physically separate traffic flows. At the same time, a range of regulatory and technological measures is being implemented to clean up the sector through actions such as the targeted ban on motorcycle taxis in city centres, the enforcement of restrictive policies targeting informal transport providers, the installation of extensive urban CCTV networks in major cities, and the systematic digital identification of

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taxis in Yaounde and motorcycle taxis in Douala using modern tracking systems. This article examines the efficacy and systemic limitations of this hybrid municipal approach, which combines physical planning, technological monitoring and sectoral regulation. The study demonstrates that the success of these policies now hinges on overcoming two major obstacles. On the one hand, the removal of institutional interoperability barriers to overcome the fragmentation of responsibilities between ministries and local authorities; and on the other hand, the seamless integration of new digital platforms into the master plan for modern, safe and inclusive urban mobility in Cameroon.

METHODOLOGY

With a view to understanding the complexity of the dynamics governing road safety, urban governance and the regulation of mobility in Cameroon, this study adopts an exclusively qualitative, comprehensive and multi-sited approach. This epistemological choice is based on the need to move beyond the mere statistical measurement of accident rates in order to analyse in depth social representations, the rationales of stakeholders and the constant tension between official legal and administrative norms and the practical norms¹ that emerge spontaneously on the road. The methodological framework is structured around a comparative empirical basis drawn from three complementary field sites: the political capital, Yaounde, a testing ground for physical restructuring projects (*Yaounde Cœur de Ville*, MoVe) and the digital identification of taxis; the economic hub of Douala, the epicenter of motorcycle-taxi hyper density, experiments with dedicated lanes and the roll-out of digital ride-hailing services; and finally, two medium-sized towns (Garoua and Bertoua), serving as control sites for assessing the acceptance and limitations of urban video surveillance systems beyond the two major metropolises. By focusing on the meaning that actors attribute to their spatial practices, this approach enables us to deconstruct the actual functioning of the urban transport system by analysing how technological control and land-use planning are negotiated, subverted or integrated by users and professionals in the sector.

At the heart of this data-collection framework lies a rigorous protocol of qualitative triangulation, combining in-depth semi-structured interviews, on-site ethnographic observation and critical documentary analysis. The semi-structured interviews are conducted with a diverse sample selected using the reasoned choice method until theoretical saturation, structured around three distinct groups of stakeholders. Firstly, the institutional and technocratic group (managers from the Urban Communities, officials from the MINT and MINHDU ministries, and DGSN officers assigned to video surveillance command centres) in order to elucidate the political rationale, planning decisions and barriers to interoperability. Next, the group of comprising operators and intermediaries (trade union representatives, traditional taxi drivers, motorcycle-taxi drivers or ‘benskineurs’, unlicensed transport providers and drivers affiliated with ride-hailing platforms) to capture strategies for economic survival, the social impact of digital tracking and mechanisms of resistance to spatial exclusion. And finally, the group comprising users and local residents (pedestrians, residents of outlying areas) to assess the social acceptability of zoning policies and the sense of safety. These first-hand accounts are supplemented by direct and ethnographic observation sessions conducted during peak and off-peak hours at strategic locations. These observations enable us to map the physical coexistence of different modes of transport, analyse drivers’ behaviour in relation to cameras and traffic lights, and document the ‘cat-and-mouse’ game between the municipal police and informal transport operators. Finally, guided journeys aboard vehicles (motorcycles, taxis, private hire vehicles) complement this material by capturing, “in the act”, perceptions of danger, surveillance and urban navigation.

The analysis and processing of the resulting empirical corpus comprising full transcripts of interviews, ethnographic field notes and official documentation², were carried out using a method of thematic content analysis and a cross-analysis of discourses and practices. The raw material was coded using a thematic framework structured around the research’s key concepts: institutional legibility and traceability, spatial segregation and exclusion, fragmentation and interoperability, the “platformisation” (Van Dijk et al., 2018) of the informal sector (integration/circumvention of Yango and private hire vehicles), and the shift of risk towards peri-central areas. This categorisation stage enables a systematic deconstruction of public policy by directly comparing decision makers stated intentions with the behaviour actually observed on the road. The analysis focuses in particular on identifying cognitive behavioural dissonances, the economic rationales underlying anti-social behaviour on the roads, and the local compromises that enable the transport system to function despite the theoretical rigour of the regulations. While this qualitative approach offers in-depth insight into stakeholder perceptions, it recognizes potential biases inherent in social desirability among institutional respondents. Furthermore, the findings reflect the specificities of the chosen case studies; while indicative of broader trends in Cameroonian urban governance, they should be extrapolated with caution.

¹ As defined by Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan.

² Municipal by-laws, urban development master plans, funding agreements, etc.

RESULTS

A. Digitalisation and surveillance as tools for traceability and security

The introduction of digital identification systems for informal public transport³ is part of an attempt to streamline and bring transparency to a sector that has historically been characterised by informality. From a sociological perspective, drawing on research into urban governance and geographic information systems (GIS) as applied to the Global South, this digitisation is not merely a tool for managerial efficiency, but a means of ‘extracting legibility’ (Scott, 1998). Informal transport, traditionally characterised by a high degree of autonomy from legal and fiscal constraints, is here re-embedded within a framework of institutional control. In terms of road and urban safety, the allocation of a unique identifier (QR code, microchip or municipal badge) alters the structure of behavioural incentives for drivers: dehumanisation and anonymity⁴ give way to traceable individual accountability. By making the presence of the State and the local council tangible on the driver’s person or the vehicle, digital identification brings about a form of disciplining of transport workers; the risk of criminal behaviour is reduced not so much by the immediate fear of punishment, but by the realisation that every journey now leaves an institutional trace.

At the same time, the expansion of the urban CCTV network overseen by the General Delegation for National Security (DGSN) illustrates the shift from a reactive, physical model of policing to a dynamic of technological and preventive surveillance. Drawing on the analytical framework developed within Surveillance Studies (Graham and Marvin, 2001) and research on the introduction of CCTV in African cities, this system transforms the perception and use of the street. By digitising public space, the authorities are attempting to create a disciplinary space where the camera’s eye replaces the physical presence of the police officer on the public highway. In terms of road safety, the impact of this urban panoptisation is evident in three ways. Firstly, through real-time traffic monitoring, which enables rapid decongestion of critical junctions; secondly, through the ability to issue fines remotely using captured images; and finally, through detailed mapping of accident black spots. The camera does not merely observe the offence (speeding, failing to obey traffic lights, unauthorised parking); it objectifies road risk by shifting it from the realm of presumed incivility to that of measurable and verifiable data.

However, an in-depth sociological analysis highlights the tensions between these technological systems and the ‘reality on the ground’ – not to mention the ‘revenge of contexts’ (De Sardan, 2021). Whilst digital identification and remote surveillance aim to modernise the regulation of traffic flows, they come up against the spatial stratification of Cameroonian cities. On the one hand, video surveillance tends to provide excessive security for administrative hubs and main thoroughfares (prestigious routes), creating a phenomenon of ‘displacement of insecurity’ towards the outskirts, which cannot be covered and are not equipped with cameras. On the other hand, digitalisation comes up against avoidance strategies developed by those in the informal sector: falsifying identification documents, bypassing monitored routes, or passive resistance to fines issued via CCTV. The technocratic rationality imposed from above seeks to improve traffic flow and enhance safety, but clashes with the socio-economic survival strategies of a section of the population for whom informal transport is the sole means of livelihood. Thus, traceability and surveillance can only guarantee a lasting reduction in traffic congestion if they are accompanied by a renewed social contract between local authorities, law enforcement agencies and transport operators’ associations, transforming the imposition of controls into a collaborative approach to road safety.

B. Physical restructuring and improvement of the road network

The physical restructuring of traffic areas, embodied by the “Yaounde Coeur de ville” project, reflects a desire to reshape urban morphology in response to infrastructure saturation. Targeted intervention at strategic and critical communication hubs⁵ addresses a congestion relief strategy through spatial re-engineering. Drawing on theories of the production of space (Lefebvre, 2000) and the sociology of urban public action, these developments go beyond the purely technical dimension of road engineering: they constitute attempts to reorder the social uses of the street. By widening road rights-of-way, creating dedicated lanes, establishing safe pedestrian crossings and incorporating traffic-channeling islands, the local authority seeks to impose a geometric rationality on spaces historically characterised by spatial disorder and spontaneous occupation. The societal effectiveness of these redevelopments is measured by the reduction in points of friction and conflict of use between different modes of transport (heavy goods vehicles, private cars, shared taxis, pedestrians). However, this transformation of the physical space also alters the geography of informal activities established around these junctions, either pushing them to the fringes of the redeveloped areas or triggering mechanisms of spatial adaptation.

³ In particular, the digital registration of taxis in Yaounde and the geolocated or numbered livery of motorbike taxis in Douala by the Urban Communities

⁴ Major drivers of impunity in ‘illegal transport’ and opportunistic crime (assaults, pickpocketing)

⁵ Such as the Mvan junction (southern gateway and inter-city transport hub), Olembe (northern access point) and Gare Voyageurs (city centre junction)

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Alongside these major interventions in the road infrastructure, traffic management policies rely on administrative measures of zoning and traffic control materialised by the banning of motorcycle taxis in the administrative and commercial downtown cores of Yaounde and Douala. By analysing this framework through the lens of the sociology of public policy and urban governance in a postcolonial context, this invisible boundary drawn at the heart of the city reveals a strategy of selectively excluding informality from spaces of institutional prestige. The stated aim is to reduce road vulnerability and curb the systemic insecurity associated with two wheeled vehicles in areas with high concentrations of motor vehicles and pedestrian traffic. Whilst this policy of sectoral exclusion helps to maintain the smooth flow of traffic and the image of the political or commercial centre, it comes up against major structural limitations, notably the ‘risk displacement phenomenon’. Forced out of the city centre, moto taxi drivers concentrate their activities in peri-central areas and neighborhoods lacking adequate infrastructure, thereby increasing accident rates and congestion on feeder routes. The measure highlights the irreconcilable tension between the state’s desire to present a modernised, urban image and the population’s functional dependence on a mode of transport that has become indispensable for overcoming the isolation of informal residential areas.

Finally, the institutional enforcement of restrictive policies targeting informal transport providers—commonly referred to as “clando”—forms part of a process to clean up public spaces, which highlights the complexity of the interaction between formal regulation and informal arrangements. By arguing for the need to rid the road network of unregistered vehicles or those operating outside their designated zones, the urban authorities seek to restore the state’s authority and fiscal equity for regular users of the transport sector. However, the longevity and resilience of these clandestine transport networks demonstrate a deep “social embeddedness⁶” of popular mobility. The economic opportunities created by the crisis in formal employment, coupled with the constant demand from low-income urban residents for negotiable fares and tailor-made journeys, make clandestine transport a vital socio-economic resource for household survival. Police and municipal crackdowns, lacking the backing of an alternative, affordable and universally accessible mass public transport system, give rise to a perpetual cycle of evasion, informal on-the-ground negotiation and the re-establishment of illegal pick-up points as soon as the police leave. Consequently, the reorganisation of road space cannot be reduced to a mere operation of spatial coercion; it requires a comprehensive restructuring capable of addressing the issues of urban under-provision and the genuine travel needs of the most vulnerable social groups.

C. Towards a structured sustainable mass transport system

The introduction of Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) schemes in the metropolitan areas of Douala and Yaounde forms part of an approach centered on spatial justice and the comprehensive re-regulation of the urban road network. Drawing on work in urban geography and sociology devoted to transit-oriented development (TOD) and the governance of transport in sub-Saharan Africa, the creation of dedicated, physical lanes for BRT aims to break the dominance of private cars and the perceived chaos of informal transport. In terms of road safety, BRT achieves spatial segregation of traffic flows: by isolating mass transit from the rest of the traffic (motorcycle taxis, private vehicles, pedestrians), the system neutralises at source the points of friction and dangerous overtaking maneuvers that are the main cause of serious accidents in urban areas. However, the integration of these dedicated corridors into a dense, pre-existing urban fabric brings about profound sociological changes. The reallocation of road space to the BRT reduces the residual space available to other road users, risking an escalation of conflicts over the use of side roads that have not been widened. The societal success of BRT therefore depends on its ability not to appear as an ‘infrastructure enclave’ reserved for an elite or imposed by international technocratic rationality, but to integrate harmoniously with the feeder network traditionally provided by taxis and motorcycle taxis.

At the same time, the MoVe (Green Mobility) project embodies the local implementation of the international call for ecological transition, by aiming to make urban fleets greener (electric or low-emission buses) and to promote soft modes of transport (walking, the development of cycle paths and pedestrian walkways). Drawing on the sociology of ecological transitions and sustainable mobility (sustainability transitions) as defined by Geels (2002), this approach examines the adaptation of Western frameworks to the socio-economic realities of Cameroon. In Cameroonian cities, walking is not so much an ‘ecological choice’ as a form of forced mobility endured by the most disadvantaged households due to the cost of motorised transport. Consequently, making non-motorised transport safer through the MoVe project (by constructing protected pavements, installing street lighting and creating safe pedestrian crossings) is a key priority for reducing road vulnerability. As pedestrians and users of non-motorised transport have historically been the group most at risk of road injuries in Central Africa, the provision of dedicated infrastructure helps to institutionalise the protection of ‘city dwellers on foot’. Furthermore, the gradual decarbonisation of public transport initiated by these projects aims to reduce air pollution along major roads, thereby linking road safety, public health and environmental justice.

Nevertheless, the simultaneous implementation of BRT and “Mobilité Verte” faces the strategic challenge of modal and social integration. Recent sociological literature on transport hybridisation in the Global South (Chenal, 2014) demonstrates that major modern infrastructure projects fail when they attempt to abruptly eradicate the informal sector. In the context of Yaounde and Douala, the BRT and the “green lines” will only be able to ensure sustainable road safety if they are designed in an integrated and

⁶ Borrowing from Karl Polanyi’s perspective on the embedding of the economy.

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complementary manner. The informal sector (motorcycle taxis and taxis) must be formally restructured to serve as a feeder network for mass transit stations. Without this negotiated coexistence, operators in the informal transport sector, whose livelihoods are threatened by competition from the BRT, risk resorting to anti-social behaviour to circumvent the system or shifting congestion and road safety issues to unserved outlying neighborhoods. Thus, sustainable mass transport provision must not be viewed merely as a feat of heavy engineering or a symbol of metropolitan modernity, but as a new social pact on mobility capable of ensuring the physical safety and economic inclusion of all city dwellers.

DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

A. Institutional fragmentation: navigating the interoperability gap in urban policy

A sociological analysis of road safety policies in Cameroon reveals a major obstacle to public action which consist in an institutional fragmentation and a lack of interoperability between the various sovereign decision-making bodies. On the one hand, the Ministry of Transport (MINT) holds regulatory authority over vehicle registration, driving licenses and road safety standards; on the other, the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development (MINHDU) and the Urban Communities fund and guide the physical planning of roadways and street furniture. At the same time, the General Delegation for National Security (DGSN) oversees enforcement on the ground via the police force and manages urban CCTV systems.

Each local authority maneuvers to retain or attract activities that could generate more taxes and local revenue for it. This is a common practice in urban communities across Africa and demonstrates once again that the disorder in transport spaces within African urban environments is a construct that is fuelled by the revenue generated through the interplay of interests between stakeholders over time' (Yemmafouo et al., 2019, pp. 91–92)

The observed institutional fragmentation stems from the overlapping mandates defined by the General Code of Decentralized Territorial Collectivities (2019), which creates an operational mismatch between the regulatory oversight of the Ministry of Transport (MINT) and the urban planning authority vested in Municipalities. These conflicting interests create friction in institutional collaboration and limit the sharing of information and the coordination of efforts to improve Cameroon's urban transport system. Drawing on the sociology of public action (Lascoumes and Galès, 2004) and decision-making analysis (Crozier and Friedberg, 1977) and from a public policy analysis perspective, these institutional dynamics can be conceptualized as structural fragmentation where each entity defends its prerogatives, budgets and networks of influence. This bureaucratic compartmentalisation creates areas of friction. The police may issue fines for offences on sections of road where faulty signage is the responsibility of the local council, whilst the MINT issues transport licenses without prior coordination with municipal road network development plans. The lack of a shared data language and unified information platforms thus negates a significant proportion of the benefits of technological modernisation.

As widely reported in local media and public communications in March 2026, footage depicting high-level administrative friction between the MINHDU and the Yaounde city council over road workers on the “Madagascar-Cité verte” corridor highlights the acute vulnerability of inter-institutional coordination. This situation -- characterized by operational standoffs on site and tentions involving international contractors -- illustrates how the absence of a unified metropolitan authority can lead to severe governance deadlocks where sectorial jurisdiction supersedes operational efficiency (Minka, 2026).

This administrative fragmentation is exemplified by the absence of an Urban Transport Organising Authority (AOTU) in major cities such as Yaounde or Douala. In the sociological theory of the regulation of complex systems, the AOTU acts as a systemic mediator capable of harmonizing trade-offs between land-use planning, transport provision and user safety. Without this single steering body, public policy is characterised by strategic inconsistencies and costly duplication. By way of illustration, the digital identification schemes for taxis run by the Yaounde Urban Community and those for motorbike taxis in Douala risk operating in isolation, without direct links to the National Driving License Registers or the DGSN's databases. These organisational discontinuities create regulatory loopholes that are exploited by operators in the informal sector and those involved in illegal transport. Road safety thus ceases to be treated as a cross-cutting and integrated public policy, becoming instead a juxtaposition of temporary sectoral measures⁷, the coexistence of which generates more institutional confusion than actual safety for city dwellers. Consequently, overcoming this fragmentation requires viewing interoperability not merely as a matter of IT compatibility or administrative engineering, but as a sociological process of negotiating power and resources. With a view to renewed urban governance, the creation of an AOTU or a metropolitan road safety council in Cameroon entails redefining roles and establishing a culture of co-decision-making between the central government and the Decentralised Territorial Authorities (DTA). This requires the institutionalisation of consultation forums where CCTV data from the DGSN, accident statistics from the MINT, and development plans from the MINHDU and local councils are collated to rigorously identify accident black spots and address them in a coordinated manner. Only such institutional convergence will make it possible to overcome administrative frictions and build

⁷ These include, amongst other things, MINT awareness campaigns, police crackdowns and local by-laws banning traffic.

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a genuine metropolitan public policy on road safety, capable of coherently steering the transition towards safe, modern and sustainable urban transport.

B. The “platformization” of mobility: opportunities and regulatory tensions

The emergence of digital transport platforms such as ride-hailing services, dominated in Cameroon by players such as Yango or local alternatives, is introducing a major ‘disruption in usage’ within metropolitan mobility in Yaounde and Douala, even though “*African cities are struggling to ensure the necessary technology transfer and to adapt it to their realities*” (Yobo, 2018: 16). From theories of the “platformisation” of the economy and the sociology of technological networks, these systems embody a form of ‘ambivalent opportunity’. On the one hand, the platforms represent an undeniable step forward in terms of users’ subjective and objective safety. Through the built-in real-time geolocation of journeys, the prior identification of the driver and the vehicle, and the digital recording of routes, they mitigate the criminal risks historically associated with informal public transport (pickpocketing, assaults, and the phenomenon of ‘fake taxis’). Digital traceability instils a sense of trust and security in city dwellers. On the other hand, this dynamic creates a systemic risk by destabilising the traditional urban transport ecosystem. By operating in a legal vacuum or grey area regarding the exact nature of their activity, and hiding behind the status of software publishers rather than transport operators, these companies circumvent the system of operating licenses, transport permits and parking licenses imposed on ordinary taxis. The result is a phenomenon of ‘uberisation’ of the informal sector. Under the guise of technological modernity and convenience comes out what sociologists interpret as potential regulatory optimization by digital platforms.

This convergence of cutting-edge technology and a regulatory vacuum raises the question of how these platforms should be integrated into the overall strategy for road safety and planning. Drawing on the framework of the sociology of technological controversies and urban governance, the key challenge for local councils and urban authorities lies in rejecting a purely repressive regulatory approach which would prove ineffective in the face of users’ massive uptake of these services in favor of a negotiated yet binding regulatory framework. The most strategic lever for this regulation lies in traffic data sharing. Currently, platforms accumulate a considerable volume of spatial data on travel flows, average vehicle speeds and areas of congestion during peak hours. Imposing, through regulation, the anonymised handover of this data to local authorities would enable them to map areas with high accident rates in detail, adjust traffic management plans and optimise the positioning of road signs. Furthermore, the regulation of ride-hailing platforms requires strict verification of the legality and technical compliance of affiliated vehicles: the platform must not become a haven for dilapidated or uninsured vehicles. The successful integration of these stakeholders therefore involves creating a system for cross-checking between local council databases (vehicle identification numbers and digital identifiers) and the ride-hailing platforms’ algorithms for allocating journeys.

Finally, the regulation of digital platforms raises the fundamental question of the social and territorial contract for urban mobility in Cameroon. Allowing platforms to set their own pricing conditions and operational scope freely risks exacerbating the ‘spatial fragmentation’ of cities. By prioritising highly profitable journeys in affluent residential neighborhoods and central business districts, ride-hailing services contribute to the creation of a two-tier transport network: on the one hand, connected, safe and seamless mobility for the middle and upper classes; on the other, the marginalisation of residents in outlying and working-class neighborhoods towards unregulated, informal transport that is more exposed to road risks. The integration of these private companies into the modernisation strategy must therefore involve a mechanism for fare regulation and territorial equalisation. In exchange for the right to operate on public land and to access road infrastructure funded by local authorities, public authorities (MINT, MINHDU, Urban Communities) must impose specifications on the platforms that include contributions to overall road safety (road rehabilitation funds, compulsory training for affiliated drivers in defensive driving). Only through this public reappropriation of algorithmic regulation will it be possible to transform digital platforms into genuine partners in an integrated, equitable and safe metropolitan transport system.

C. Spatial justice and the “right to the city”: contesting exclusionary planning

Any analysis of policies aimed at improving the safety and modernisation of urban roads in Cameroon must take into account the social tensions caused by measures of spatial exclusion, in particular the ban on motorcycle taxis in city centres and the targeted enforcement of restrictive policies targeting informal transport providers. According to the sociology of spatial inequalities and scholarship on the right to the city (Lefebvre, 2000; Harvey, 2011), these municipal decrees on health and security zoning give rise to a form of mobility segregation. While Henri Lefebvre’s concept of the “right to the city” provides a valuable lens for examining spatial inclusion, its application in the Cameroonian context requires careful recalibration. Unlike the Western urban models where informality is often treated as a peripheral anomaly, in Yaounde and Douala, informality constitutes the foundational structural logic of mobility. Thus, modern urban planning policies must move beyond Western-centric ‘order-versus-disorder’ dichotomies to embrace a hybridized governance model.

By banning two-wheeled vehicles and unregistered vehicles from prestigious, administrative and business thoroughfares, the authorities are seeking to bring about a visual and functional pacification of public space. However, this technocratic rationale overlooks the socio-economic integration function fulfilled by these informal modes of transport. For tens of thousands of young

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urban dwellers marginalised by the formal labour market, working as a ‘benskineur’ (motorcycle taxi driver) or a “clando” driver constitutes a fundamental social safety net – the sole material resource guaranteeing their livelihood and that of their dependents. The exclusion of these operators from the city’s most profitable areas is thus experienced not as a measure in the public interest for road safety, but as a spatial injustice and a perceived rupture in the social contract between the state and informal operators, which potentially fosters institutional mistrust towards the police and municipal officials.

Public transport is an eminently political sphere. The construction of a tramway or underground system, the tackling of insecurity, or the decision to provide free transport to jobseekers give rise to public debates in which local elected representatives and various pressure groups participate. Thus, the relationship between the user and the customer is complicated by the emergence of the citizen (Le Breton, 2002, pp. 15–16)

This policy of territorial containment has a major adverse effect on road safety: the phenomenon of risk displacement. Forced to leave the city centres on pain of having their work equipment seized, drivers of motorcycle taxis and unlicensed vehicles are shifting their activities massively to peri-central neighborhoods, suburban areas and working-class outskirts. Drawing on theories of environmental and spatial justice, this dynamic amounts to a geographical transfer of road safety risks from the affluent classes and institutions to the most vulnerable populations. Indeed, these outlying areas are characterised by road infrastructure that is under-resourced, dilapidated or completely lacking in paved roads, pavements for pedestrians and street lighting. The sudden over-concentration of informal transport flows on these saturated secondary networks leads to a dramatic rise in accident rates, the severity of injuries and conflicts over road use within residential neighborhoods. The risk is by no means eradicated or brought under control by the public authorities; it is simply displaced and invisible to decision makers, exacerbating the vulnerability of city dwellers on the urban fringes, who pay the heaviest price for this restructuring of space.

Finally, the social acceptability of these exclusionary measures is directly undermined by the lack of credible, affordable and immediately available transport alternatives. Drawing on the sociological analysis of strategies of circumvention and everyday resistance (Scott, 1998), the recurring failure of road clearance campaigns can be explained by city dwellers’ functional dependence on informal transport. In a metropolis such as Yaounde or Douala, where mass transit bus networks remain in their infancy or are geographically limited, the population relies on the flexibility of motorcycle taxis and “clandos” to navigate topographical barriers and serve informal settlements that are inaccessible by motor vehicles. When the public authorities ban these modes of transport without offering an equivalent alternative, they create a conflict between the legal norm and the practical norm of daily survival. The reaction of users and transport operators then takes the form of systematic circumvention: the clandestine re-establishment of terminus points on the fringes of prohibited zones, night-time operation beyond the reach of patrols, or informal negotiations on the ground. Consequently, for road planning and safety policies to gain genuine social legitimacy, local authorities must move away from a sole reliance on spatial coercion and instead commit to a collaborative approach to mobility. This involves prioritising the development of feeder routes from the suburbs, formalising the status of informal transport operators rather than stigmatising them, and integrating informal transport as a complementary component – rather than an enemy – of urban modernisation in Cameroon.

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A NEW SOCIAL PACT FOR SUSTAINABLE URBAN MOBILITY

In short, the analysis of metropolitan mobility in Cameroon demonstrates that urban road safety has reached a paradigm shift: it can no longer be reduced to a mere question of individual discipline or the enforcement of rules governing drivers’ behaviour on the road. Road safety issues in Yaounde, Douala, Bertoua and Garoua are fundamentally the sociological and spatial product of the very layout of the city; a space characterised by the saturation of transport hubs, the conflictual coexistence of informal, makeshift transport modes and heavy goods vehicles, and chronic under-infrastructure of the outskirts. Faced with this reality, the public response has begun a structural shift by placing physical restructuring (the “Yaounde Cœur de Ville” project, BRT and MoVe projects), technological monitoring (CCTV, digital identification of taxis and motorcycle taxis) and traffic flow regulation (zoning of the city centre, regulation of ride-hailing services such as Yango) at the heart of municipal action. However, the effectiveness of this hybrid posture remains hampered by the bottleneck of institutional fragmentation between sectoral ministries and local authorities, as well as by the social acceptability tensions generated by the spatial eviction of the informal sector. It therefore appears essential to advocate for the retrospective and prospective integration of road safety from the very outset of the urban land-use planning phase. Road safety must no longer be treated as a reactive, post-accident stopgap through temporary coercive campaigns, but as an endogenous variable of urban design, embedded at the heart of Urban Master Plans (PDUs), Urban Development Master Plans (SDAUs) and metropolitan transport plans.

This strategic shift towards preventive and inclusive planning nevertheless raises the crucial question of how it can be implemented at local level. How can the ongoing decentralisation process in Cameroon transfer the necessary budgetary and decision-making powers to Urban Communities and District Councils to bring about a sustainable transformation of their road networks? Whilst the theoretical transfer of powers relating to roads and urban transport is enshrined in the General Code of Decentralised Local

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Authorities, the reality remains one of acute financial dependence on the central government and international donors. The budgetary autonomy of municipalities⁸ is the true political lever for the future. Without control over their own financial and regulatory resources, Cameroonian local authorities risk being confined to cosmetic measures, unable to fund major infrastructure renewal or ensure the long-term maintenance of smart transport systems. Fiscal decentralisation is therefore not merely a matter of administrative governance, but rather an essential prerequisite for the emergence of safe, efficient and resilient cities in Cameroon.

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⁸ This will be achieved through better allocation of road user charges, the levying of local taxes dedicated to mobility, and the creation of metropolitan decision-making bodies such as an Urban Transport Organising Authority (AOTU)