

Businessmen without borders ? A geography of informal economic networks between Niger, Benin and Nigeria

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Abstract

Urbanisation in West Africa is recent and fast. If only 10 % of the total population was living in urban areas in 1950, this proportion reached 40 % in 2000 and will be estimated to 60 % in 2025. Small and intermediate cities, located between the countryside and large metropolis, are particularly concerned with this process. They are nowadays considered as efficient vectors of local economic development because of fiscal or monetary disparities between states, which enable businessmen to develop particular skills based on local urban networks.

The majority of these networks are informal and extremely flexible, like in the Gaya – Malanville – Kamba region, located between Niger, Benin and Nigeria. Evidence shows that this economic space is characterised by high potentialities (climatic and hydrological conditions, location on main economic West African axis) and few constraints (remoteness of some potentially high productive areas). In this context, this PhD deals with the economic relationships between the three market cities. Focusing on the links that unite the businessmen of the local markets – called *patrons* – it reveals the extreme flexibility of their strategies as well as the deeply informal nature of their activities. Through the analysis of examples taken from the commerce of agricultural products, import and export flows and detail activities, it studies the changes that have taken place in the city centres of Gaya, Malanville and Kamba. Meanwhile, this research shows how these cities represent a border economical area based on rival and complementary connections.

In the first part, it was necessary to reconsider the usual spatial analysis devoted to the question of economic centrality. As a matter of fact, the organisation of West African economic spaces is very flexible and mobile. Centrality is always precarious because of seasonal or temporary reasons. This is why the

first chapters are devoted to the study of the specificity of the Sahelian territoriality. Two main elements are relevant: first the population diversity and second, the urban-rural linkages. In the second part, the study considers three main factors on which the cross-border economic networks are dependent: enclosure that prevents goods to reach the markets, administrative constraints that limit free trade between states and cities and the concurrent or complementary relationships between markets. A third part deals with the clientelist ties engaged between the patrons and their clients with the hypothesis that these relationships are based on reciprocity and inequality. A fourth part is devoted to the study of the spatial organisation of commercial goods across the borders, as far as the agriculture commercial products, the import-export merchandises and the retail products are concerned.

This leads to the conclusion that the economic activity is directly linked to urban growth. However, the study notices that there is a lack of efficient policies dealing with strengthening the business sector and improving the cross-border cooperation.

This particularity allows us to favour new local development approaches, which would take into account the important potential of private economical actors. In the same time, the commercial flows should be regulated with the help of public policies, as long as they are specifically adapted to the problems that these areas have to deal with.

Board of examiners

Professor Jean Ruegg, president, University of Lausanne ; professor Jean-Bernard Racine, co-director, University of Lausanne ; professor Denis Retaille, co-director, University of Rouen ; professor Ronald Jaubert, expert, University of Lausanne ; Dr Odette Louiset, expert, University of Rouen.

Institutional framework

The results have been acquired through the Geneva International Academic Network (GIAN) “Water – Conflicts of Interest in Regions of Scarcity”. The study of urban dynamics has been improved through the author’s fieldworks from 2003 to 2006 in Gaya, Malanville and Kamba. This work is furthermore based on a collaboration between the Institute of Geography at the University of Lausanne and the Department of Geography at the University of Niamey, the local programs of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) in Niger, the Agence Nigérienne pour la Promotion de l’Irrigation Privée (ANPIP), a national program funded by the World Bank, and a close relationship with the local municipal and customs authorities of Gaya, Malanville and Kamba.

Keywords

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