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A comprehensive approach to urban plot pricing in Tohoun (Togo)

A small West African town

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ABSTRACT

Context and background

The dynamism of the urban economy in Africa has led people to market all their goods and possessions, including land. However, unlike other goods, where prices are set according to the law of supply and demand, the price of land is determined by a multitude of factors. The small town of Tohoun is no exception to the diversity of land pricing conditions.

Goal and Objectives:

This paper seeks to understand the determinants of urban plot pricing in the small town with the aim of explaining the impact of social factors on the varied conditions of land transactions.

Methodology:

This study is carried out through documentation, observation, the administration of a questionnaire to 48 sellers and households, and semi-structured interviews with 23 sellers, buyers and resource persons

Results:

The results have showed that plot prices generally vary for a number of reasons, most of which are interwoven with social relations within the community. However, the absence of a regulatory framework raises questions about the risks of such a market, and about possible ways for the state to set an average land price in small and medium-sized towns

Keywords

Small town, land market, price fixing, urban plot, social report, Tohoun

1. INTRODUCTION

The dynamism of the world economy has led people to trade all goods at their disposal, including land. Thus, land is increasingly being inserted into the market economy, which is itself being dynamited by rapid urbanization. The phenomenon of commodification of land in sub-Saharan Africa, especially in rural, peri-urban and urban areas, does not date from today. Colonists often acquired large tracts of agricultural, forest and residential land, either in freeholds or in concessions (Ayarma, 2019). This committed sales movement will no longer be able to stop and has even amplified with the global economic situation and the search for land by nonnatives and the haves of society in urban areas. From 1980 to 2022, in West Africa alone, the urban population increased from 29.2% to 49.9%, and estimates are 65.7% by 2050 (UN-Habitat, 2017). The majority of this population resides in commercial and administrative cities with between 5,000 and 100,000 inhabitants (Satterthwaite & Tacoli, 2003; Hilgers, 2012). That is, urban areas are gradually replacing rural areas in all countries. This urban and demographic growth contributes to increasing the demand for plots of land. Owing to this growing demand, land has become the most coveted asset in West Africa (Bertrand, 2021). This desire is justified by the needs of individual housing construction, agricultural and mining exploitation, speculation and even money laundering. These multiple needs have meant that the land is now subject to the law of supply and demand (Kolani, 2010) and seems to be more accessible to the highest bidders, mostly urban dwellers.

Like other African countries, Togo is not on the sidelines of this commodification of land. This phenomenon of land sales began during the colonial period in small and medium-sized Togolese cities. Indeed, in the areas of small towns such as Missahohoe (Kpalime sector) and Kamina (Atakpame sector), estates ranging from 1,000 to more than 5,000 ha have been acquired by Germans for residential and cultural needs. Thus, the character of common and sacred land began to erode during this period in small urban centers. The land "whose importance boiled down to agricultural and pastoral practices for the survival of the community" (Dziwonou, 2003) has changed its status with the colonization that the African continent has experienced. It has become a commercial and speculative asset (Djergou, 2016; Sondou, et al., 2023). This phenomenon has grown over the years, taking on critical proportions with uncontrolled urbanization. Indeed, demographically speaking, 43% of Togo's population will be living in cities in 2023, compared with 37% in 2010 (Institut National de la Statistique et des Etudes Economiques et Démographiques, 2023). If trends continue, this rate will rise to 50% in 2030 and 58% in 2050. This increase will inevitably lead to a requalification of the environment (Manda, 2013; Tione & Holden, 2020).

Faced with this strong urbanization poorly supported by the authorities, the demand for building land imposed by the desire of every citizen to live in his own house, what Guézéré, (2011) calls "the obsession with home regardless of income", has greatly increased, and cities have not been able to help spread out. Land thus becomes a major stake in this change. Once an integral part of community relations, it is now becoming a commodity. Here, sacred, undivided and inalienable conceptions of land begin to give way to new issues. Land becomes an object on which many actors speculate to earn income. This practice is becoming increasingly common in small and medium-sized towns, where this

resource seems to be abundant (Bernier, 1978). In these urban areas, the share of ancestral acquisition methods (inheritance, gift, leg, etc.) has decreased in favor of commercial transactions on the market (Colin & Ayouz, 2005; Durand-Lasserve & Le Roy, 2012). This evolution is explained briefly by the monetization of society and the retreat of the collectivist spirit in favor of the individualist spirit and the transformation of the nature of transactions in the land field in the regions undergoing urbanization (Kola, 2003)

Urbanization is always accompanied by increased pressure on resources. As a region urbanizes, land tenure and land use practices become virtually uncertain (Kuusaana & Eledi, 2015). Holden et al. (2009) have comprehensively documented the evolution of land tenure institutions, showing that landowners in many regions are moving from customary tenure systems, in which land was allocated by traditional authorities, to individualized forms of rights. The landowner must then adapt to the law of supply and demand so dear to economists. However, by following multiple supply chains (Durand-Lasserve et al., 2017), we realize that land for residential or economic use in urban areas is governed by a diversity of rights in transactions.

The small town of Tohoun, located in the prefecture of Moyen Mono, knows this dynamic of land transactions, with almost 40% of the exchanges being monetized (Nyalewo, et al., 2022). The value of land, the support of urbanization, continues to gain momentum due to urban dynamics, in favor of the sprawl of this city following the natural growth of its population and the positive net migration that has experienced in recent years. Faced with the high demand for housing and the nonexistence of urban policies in this municipality, we are witnessing a proliferation of unregulated housing construction and nascent land hoarding. Indeed, the pressure of urbanization often favors land speculation. Landowners as well as purchasers compete for the acquisition of wealth: monetary for some, natural resources to be valued for others.

Thus, the commodification of built or non-built land creates an erasure of use value in favor of exchange value (Fijalkow, 2011; Aholou, 2016) The trend is thus toward the complete disappearance of acquisitions by inheritance or donation. The expansion of urban land markets reflects more subtle changes in the institutions governing the allocation of land. However, in the absence of a regulation on land pricesⁱ, the determinants of transactions become problematic. How are land prices constructed and set in the small town of Tohoun? What are the profiles and motivations of the actors involved in setting land prices in this town? Thus, the hypothesis that land price formation is entangled in the social relations that link buyers and sellers in the town, and that urban plots are not traded at identical prices but always have prices that are influenced by several characteristics, was formulated for the data analysis.

2. Physical framework of the study

Capital of the prefecture of Moyen Mono, urban canton of the commune Moyen Mono 1, Tohoun, is a small town in southeastern Togo. It is located more than 120 km from the capital of the plateau region (Atakpame). Its area is 4500 ha at an altitude of 105 to 290 m. It adjoins the official eastern border of the Republic of Benin. It is a mainly agricultural environment but has a strong presence of administrative services (Prefecture, Town Hall, Prefectural Departments of Agriculture, Environment, Social Action, Hospital) and urban infrastructure (**Figure 1**).

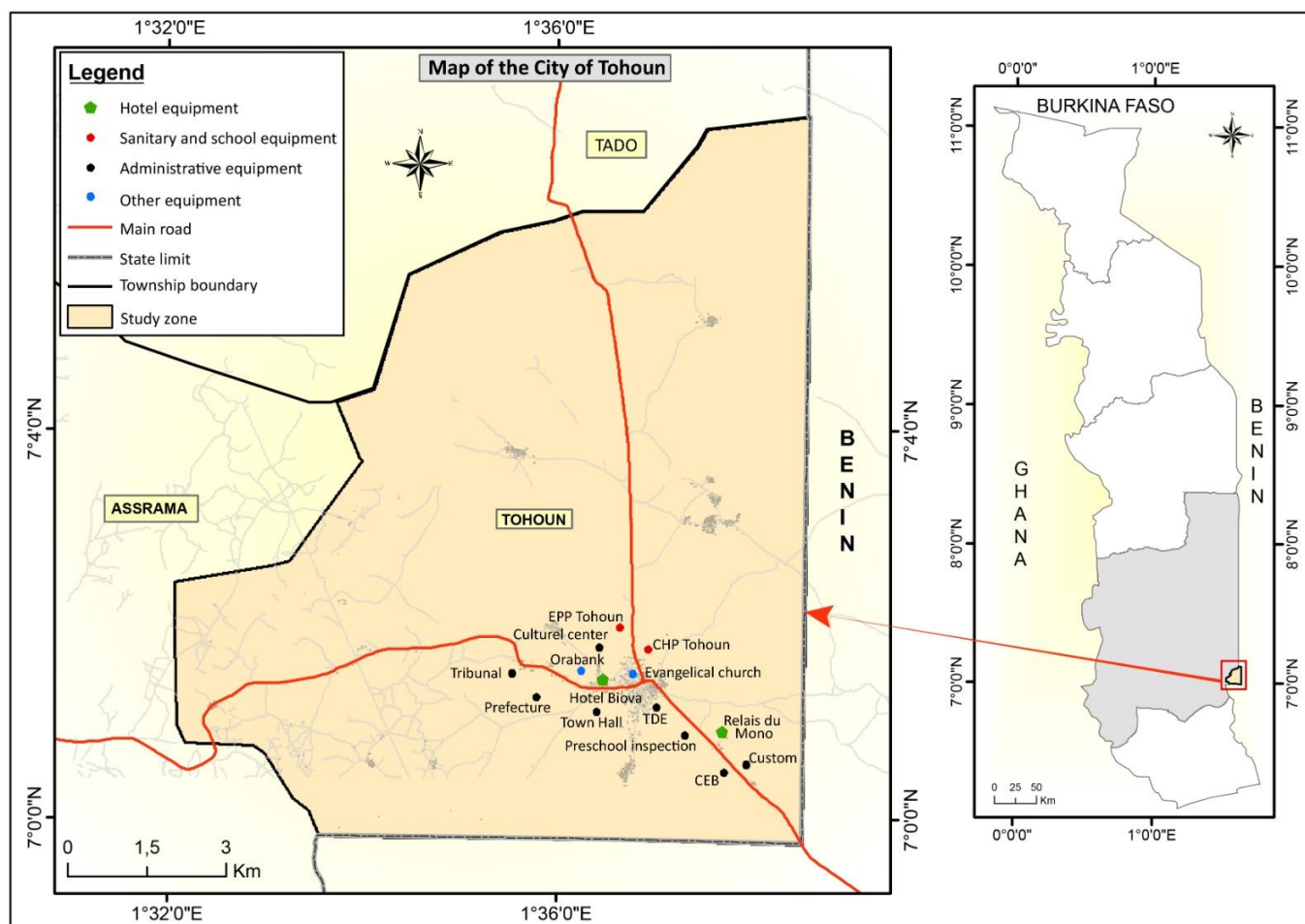


Figure 1: Map of the city of Tohoum

Source: Authors, 2023

Figure 1 shows that the city of Tohoum is located between an east longitude of 1 degree 32 minutes and a north latitude of 7 degree 4 minutes. It points to us a concentration of urban equipment along the paved national n° 6, which comes from the west side to the east, and some equipment on the main road, which goes to Tado, the second urban pole of the municipality. The habitat is concentrated in the city center, but the human pockets are scattered throughout the lanes and interstices of the town.

3. Research methodology

Most social science surveys are one-off, cross-sectional surveys. They ask individuals about their characteristics, opinions and attitudes on a given date "t". Given that the land transaction system is not just a statistical phenomenon, we opted for a comprehensive approach to understanding how it works. The comprehensive approach adopted in this research goes beyond the dialectical framework between explanation and understanding and focuses on the knowledge produced, the principles of scientific validation and the production of explicit results (Dayer & Charmillot, 2012).

The research was based on a set of data collection tools. After documentation on the subject, the research continued with questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and non-participant observation. The first phase of data collection took place in 2020. This data collection was part of the Master's thesis on land information in secondary towns in Togo. The second phase of data collection took place in 2022 to deepen and update the data already collected in 2020. Thus, the same sample of

48 landowners and purchasers, based on a calculation proportional to the total population on the average household size in urban areas of 4.2 people (QUIBB, 2015) on a sampling rate of 1/100, administered by questionnaire was retained. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 23 resource persons during the second collection periods: traditional chiefs, local authorities, surveyors/topographers, the Agent of Togolese Revenue Office (OTR), the Agent Directorate of Cadastre, Land Conservation and Registration (DCCFE), and the General Directorate of Urban Planning and Housing (DGUH). Non-participant observation is one of the most important stages in our research. It enabled us to observe the mutations underway in the city. For reasons of confidentiality, expressions such as "chief", "agent", "surveyor", and "authority" are used to relate the assertions. Kobocollect software was used to prepare and administer the questionnaire. The data were extracted in CSV format and statistically analyzed using Excel spreadsheets.

4. Theoretical framework of the study

Rosen,s (1974) "hedonic price method" (HPM) approach and Halbwachs' (1970) "theory of the land market as a reflection of collective representations" are used to test the hypothesis of this work. The HPM teaches us that the determination of land price is not limited by intrinsic characteristics of the property, such as surface area, geographical location or center-periphery gradient, and that other characteristics, such as mobility, urban amenities (proximity to schools, health centers, roads), landscape and urban function, can also influence price. Its mathematical function has often been used by researchers working on the pricing of goods, but for this work, it just helps to understand that the price setting of goods often spans several characteristics.

The theory of "the land market, reflection of collective representations" evokes the value of opinion in fixing land prices. The question of opinion is interesting insofar as opinion covers the intention of the actors. This intention is based on social reflections. Opinion is formed from uses, certainties, and social know-how, and it makes it possible to question how the social environment furnishes individual minds Kaufmann, 2003. Social relations are the foundation of African land, and a priori transactions cannot ignore the aggregation of individual opinions that constitute collective representations in land transactions for M. Halbwachs.

5. Results

5.1. The land market: from social recognition to a desire for monetization

In the city of Tohoun, we notice a change in the view of the first officials of the city on the commodification of land. In the past, they described cultural reasons not to give in to sales temptations or to allow sales operations only in case of social emergencies (illness, funeral, accident, marriage, etc.). However, today, perceptions are changing, and the right to abuse is now evoked to justify laissez-faire. Many people use this registry, such as this local authority, which said that "whoever buys knows that it officially becomes his private property even before the law it is better that we give it to you and we come back to claim it from you". Recognition of this sale is also due to the acquisition of large plots of land by the authorities, civil servants and various religious figures sent to the town since independence. They have contributed to a change of mentality among local authorities and communities with regard to cessation by sale. This transformation has led to an interest in the motives

of sellers and buyers when carrying out land transactions. At this level, as shown in **Figure 2** above, several motifs are mentioned.

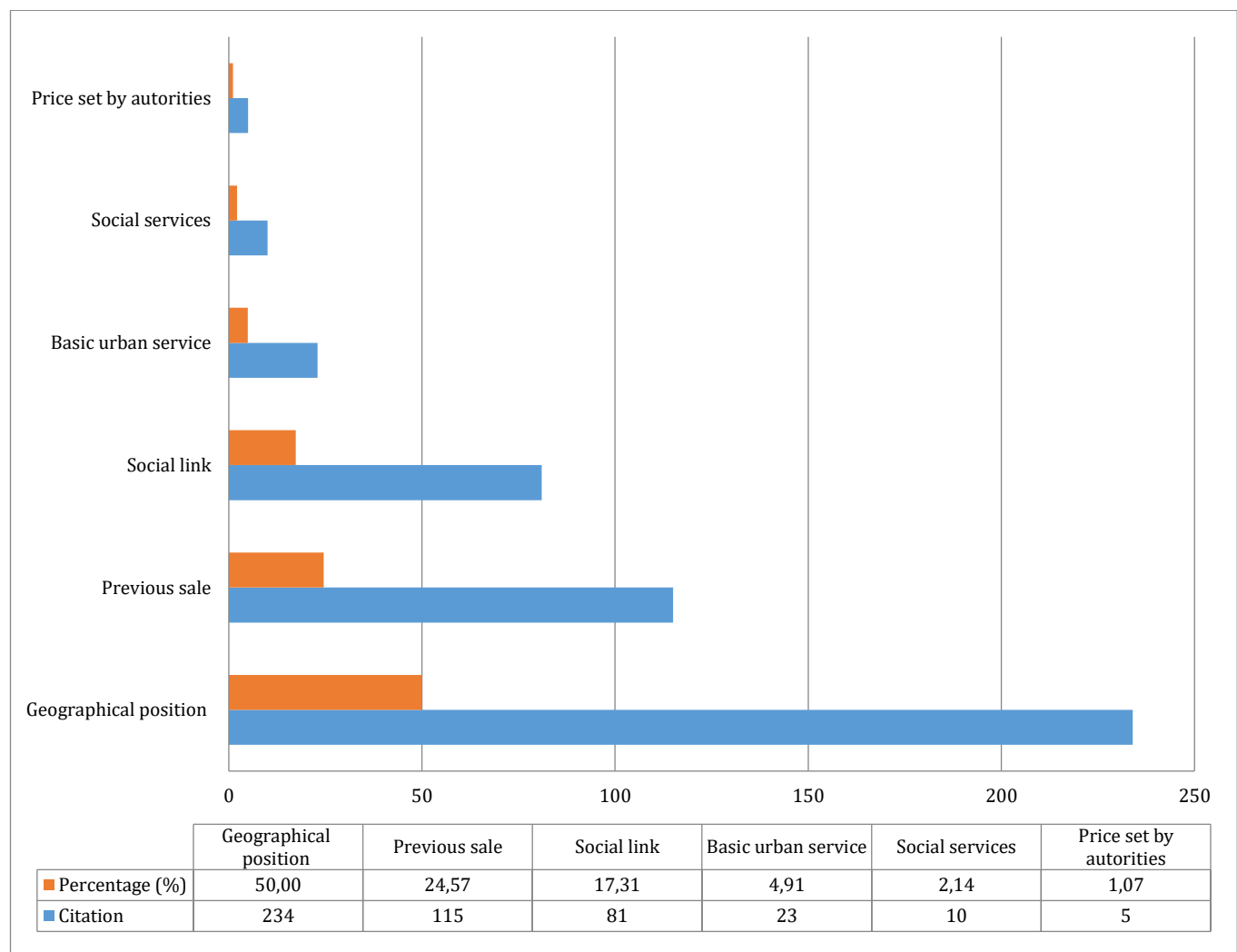


Fig. 2: Reasons for the formation of land prices

Source: Authors, 2023

Analysis of this Figure (2) shows that land transactions are based on several motives. The main motives are geographical location (50%), information available on previous sales (24%) and social ties (17%). Urban land has an economic value due to the dynamics of buying land to build houses, or to attract economic benefits (Falle, 2018). In terms of social ties, their influence is based on biological, political and symbolic proximity as a result of the various parental, friendly and electoral filiations between individuals who feel they belong to the same community. Proximity creates incessant interactions that lead owners and buyers to set prices according to certain constraints, in this case knowledge of the other. Urban and social services such as access to drinking water and electricity, and the existence of a health center or school, are less taken into account in transactions; on the other hand, the passage of an improved road generally leads to a surge in land prices along the axis. As a neighborhood leader put it, "people sell on several criteria, often depending on the position of the plot, except that they are reframed if the price is too exorbitant or too cheap, especially if there's a road". This expression suggests that local stakeholders are making an effort to control prices, but as **Figure (3)** shows, price trends seem to be getting out of control.

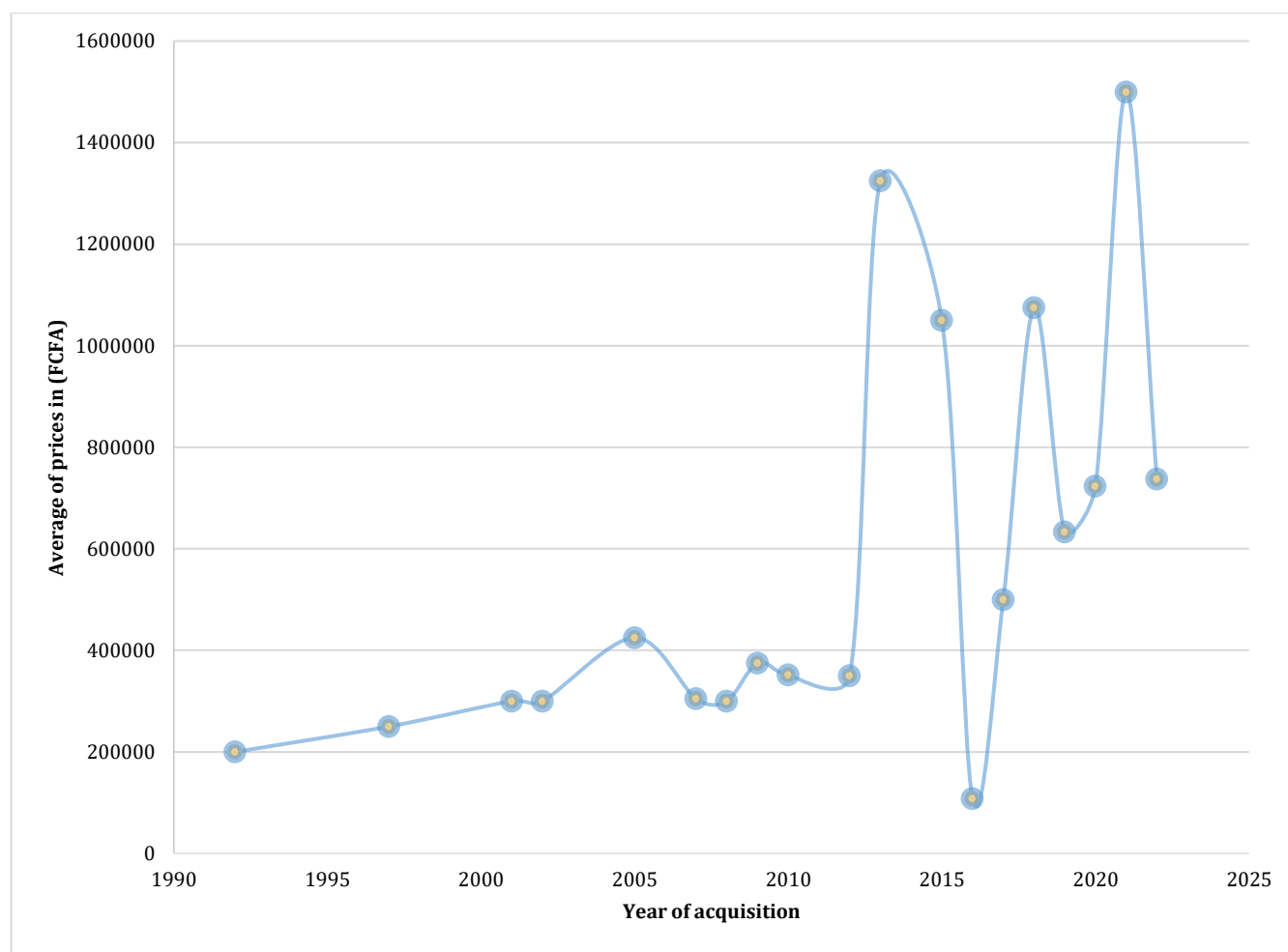


Fig. 3: Evolution of land prices in the City

Source: Authors, 2023

Figure 3 shows that the price of a 600 m² lot, the classic unit for subdividing urban plots, has been rising steadily, from 200,000 FCFA in the 1990s to over 1,500,000 FCFA today. Over the past 3 decades, land values in the city have risen by 750% overall, representing a steady 23% annual increase in price. This also means that a property of 600 m² hoarded in the 1990s will bring 23% more each year to its owner or land speculators. According to a municipal agent, "this exorbitant increase in land prices indicates the lack of regulatory framework in the land field". However, the evolution of prices that exceed these thresholds put forward the inflationary framework (on average, 1 to 3% is the accepted evolution of prices). When more than 3% of the land is affected, inflation according to economic standards)ⁱⁱ creates an unstable land market. It clearly appears that the costs induced by the acquisition of a plot in the city center of Tohoun and in its peripheral neighborhoods are speculated costs. However, the absence of public actors and official regulations on market value in small and medium-sized cities leads to questions about the actors who model the sale price of a plot (**Figure 4**).

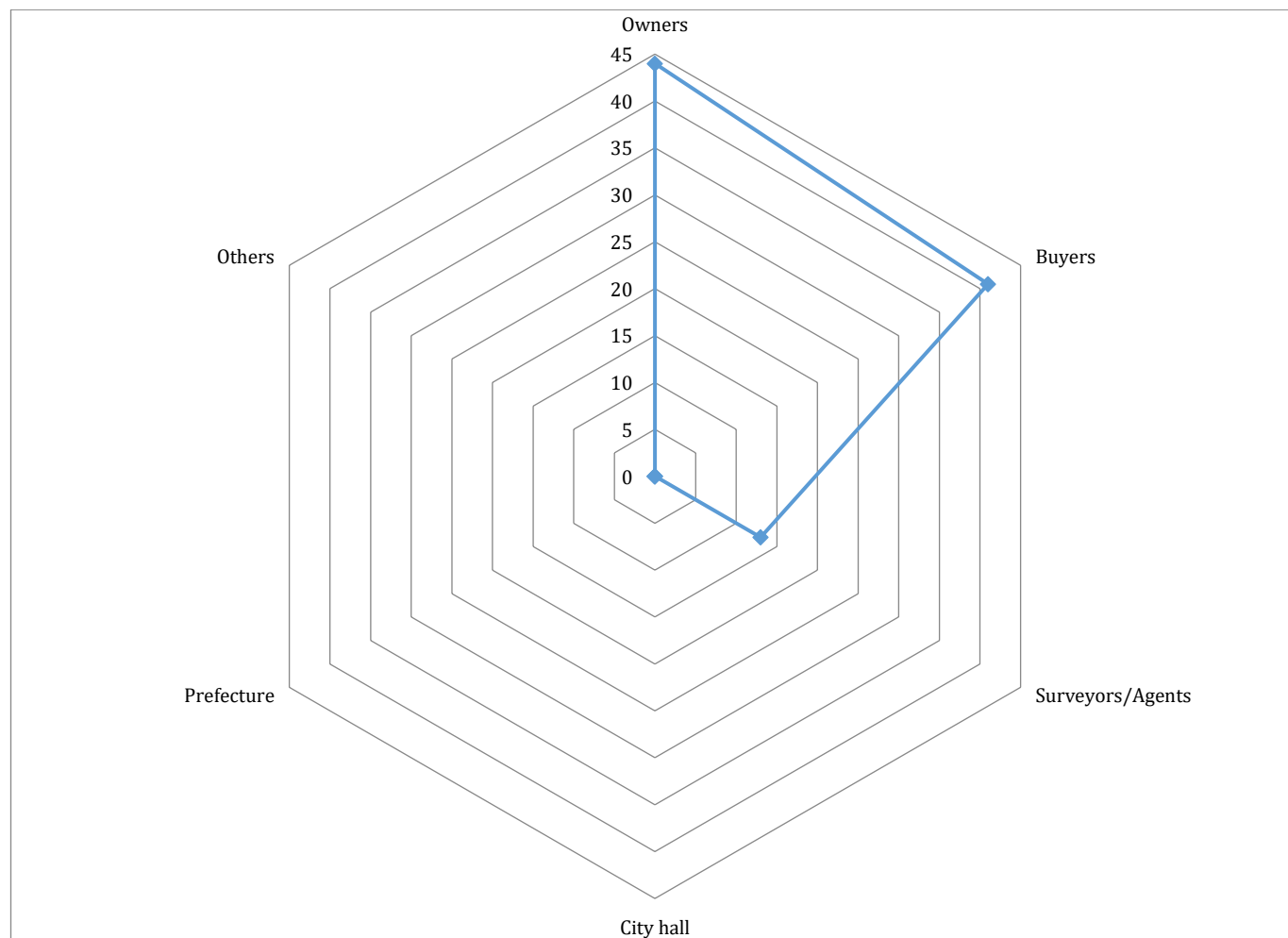


Fig. 4: Participants in the setting of land prices

Source: Authors, 2023

According to Figure 4 the owner is the first actor who sets the land price; he is followed by the buyer and, to a lesser extent, the surveyor or the agent. All the actors representing the public authority (Prefecture and Town Hall) are not involved at all in the formation of the price on the land market. Land management most often escapes public actors due to the lack of knowledge and methodologies on these issues (Sondou et al., 2023). This is also justified by the fact that the adoption of a new Code Foncier et Domanial (2018) has not been followed by a national land policy (PFN), despite being provided for in the Code. As a result, none of the country's legislation takes the land market into account. In addition, the foundation for the creation and production of urban land in Togo is based on customary communities.

The land tenure system in Togo is based on strong customary law. However, due to land pressure and the excessive commodification of land, this customary law is evolving toward more individualization of land management through transaction mechanisms that bypass customary procedures. It should be added that the price is the subject of negotiation between the actors of the transaction and not that it is fixed unilaterally by one of the actors of the operation; however, it can be noted that the buyer is abandoned to his fate since he has no objective basis to frame the price to be paid. Thus, faced with the volatility of all that can constitute price fixing mechanisms, socioeconomic conditions can be used as a reference in land acquisition.

5.2. Socioeconomic conditions and land transactions

According to Kabba & Li, (2011); Nicodemo & Raya, (2012); Yuan, et al., (2023) socioeconomic factors (population, income, employment, economic activities, etc.) are suggested to be the key influencing factors of urban land prices. That said, to buy a good, it is necessary to have a particular monetary resource; most often, it is the income earned through the profession that favors the purchase of this or that number of goods. In this context, we wanted to determine through income the areas acquired by the buyers (**Figure 5**).

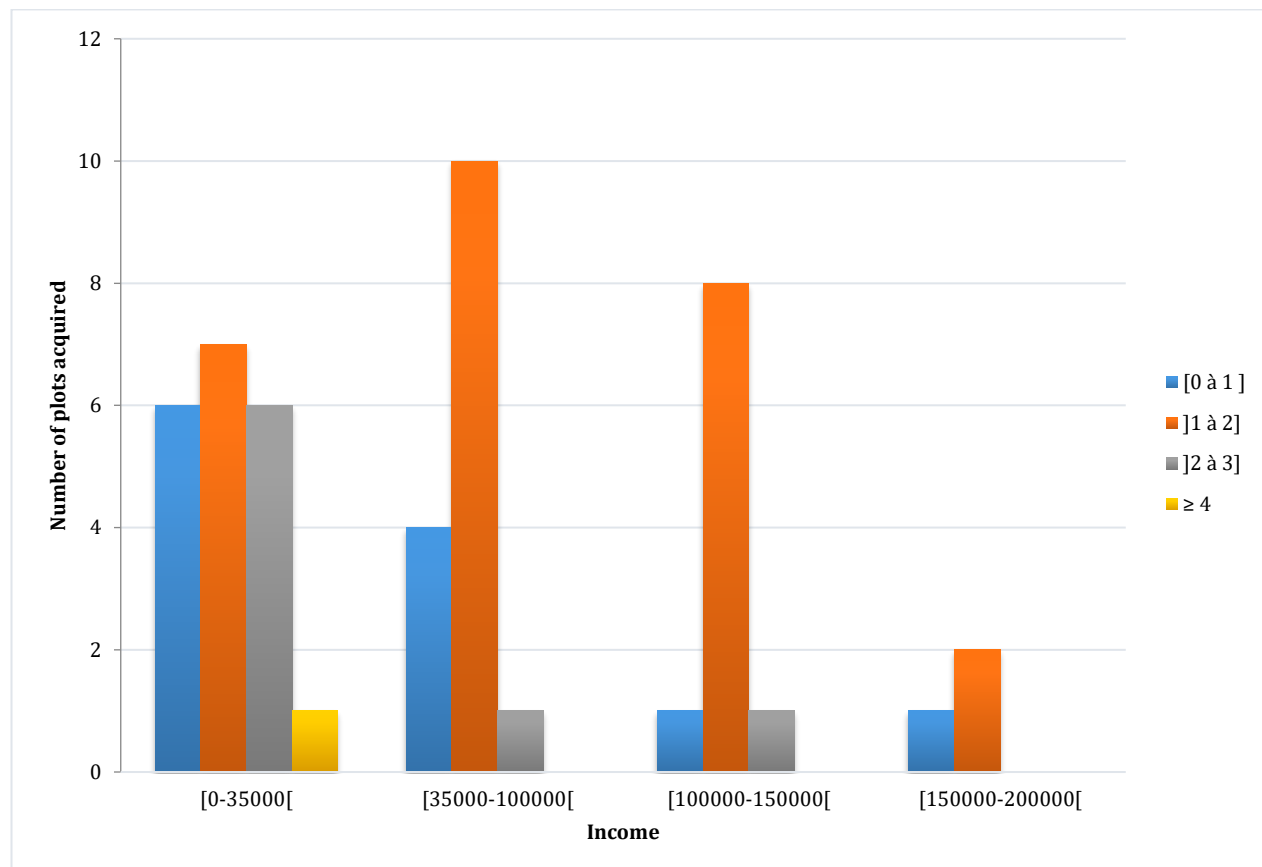


Fig. 5: Income and acquired plots

Source: Authors, 2023

This graph shows that income is in the range of [35000-200000] FCFA in the study environment. The acquired surfaces lie in the interval]1-4[. The analysis also shows that, regardless of income, the majority of people acquire at least 2 lots of 600 m² and at most 4 in urban neighborhoods. These data reveal the availability of land in the area and the effort of all social strata to become owners as much as they can of urban plots. However, the question arises of the social category that derives its interest from this availability of land. In this case, the age and gender of the people involved in land transactions are reliable indicators that we have requested (**Figure 6**).

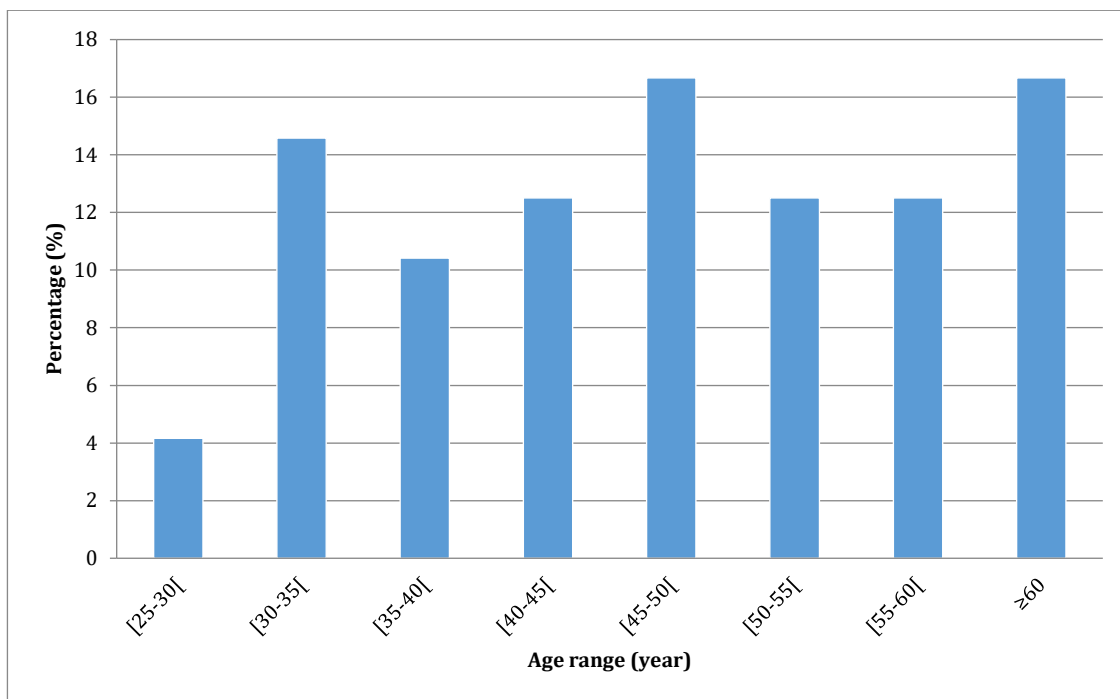


Fig.6: Age of the persons concerned by land transactions

Source: Authors, 2023

The analysis of Figure 6 reveals that the minimum age of people who once bought a property is 25 years. However, on average, people aged 45 to 50 (16%) and those aged older than 60 (16%) years are the most involved in land transactions. If the majority of people are adults (over 35 years old), then it is necessary to see between the man and the woman the possibility of acquiring a piece of land. In this, **Figure 7** that follows edifies us better.

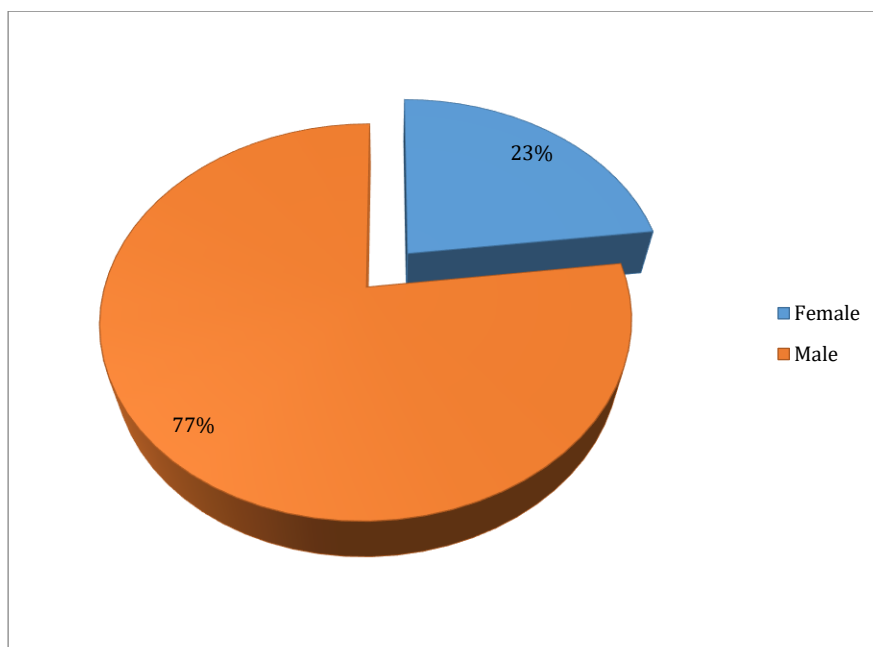


Fig. 7: Sex of people who acquired a plot in the city

Source: Authors, 2023

Figure 7 reveals that 77% of men and 23% of women made purchases of plots in the small town of Tohoun. That is, 3 times more plots were bought by men than by women. However, at almost 25%, the women's score means that there is a new dynamism that is underway in this city if we adhere to the cultural norms that govern the social life of our patriarchal-dominated environment. According to the very admission of a neighborhood leader, "Women are doing a lot of business today, and they are increasingly interested in buying land". Therefore, it can be stated that both sexes are concerned about land transactions. However, acquiring also means inserting oneself into society. Therefore, it was also important not to ignore the origin of the buyers in land transactions (**Figure 8**).

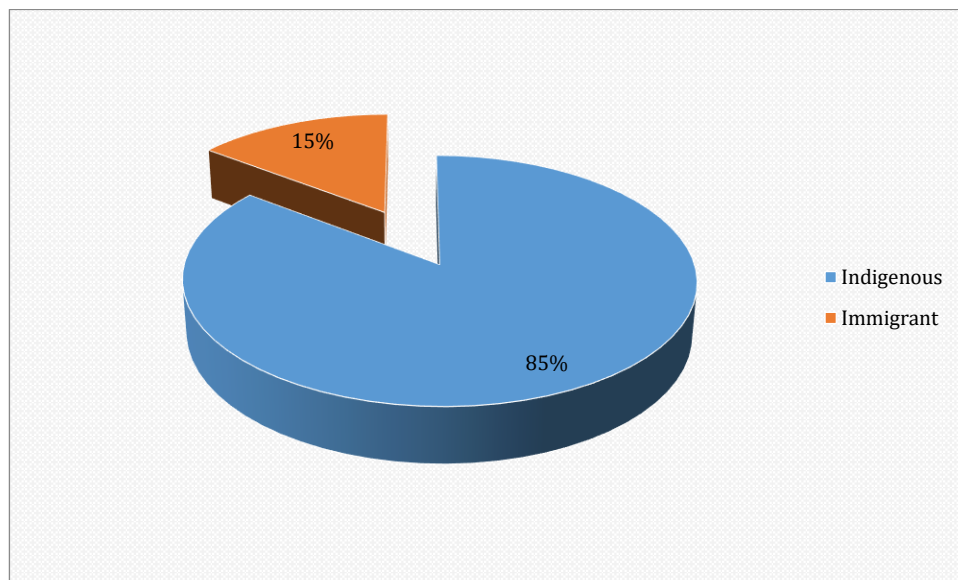


Fig. 8: Origin of land buyers in the town

Source: Authors, 2023

85% of landbuyers are indigenous. This approach makes it possible to determine the endogenous character of land transactions. We exchange goods according to the knowledge we have of the environment and the landowners in a small human agglomeration. According to a surveyor, "national citizens are the main participants in the markets for the purchase of plots and that most transactions occur among urban and rural populations who are linked by ethnic or family ties or even nationality ties". In addition, these markets have contributed to equitable land use patterns, declining agricultural productivity and a rural transformation of the environment into semiurban or even urban areas.

6. Discussions

This work set out to show how land as a commercial good is exchanged between owners and land purchasers. Polanyi, (1983) explained in the twentieth century that the market was born from the transformation of traditional society characterized by a strong community dimension, the principle of reciprocity in donations and the redistribution of subsistence to those in need into a market society characterized by the affirmation of the state, machinery, and the substitution of the motive of gain for that of substance. As a result, the principle of collective ownership with the elders and the chiefs to whom the lands of their families, clans and communities are entrusted is under siege because customary land transactions have turned into an economic activity with unpredictable prerogatives on the part of traditional chiefs, heads of family, clans, lineage and private actors (Yaro, 2010). These

problems, among other problems in the administration of customary land, were among the critical issues that some authors have tried to elucidate in their research.

In the African land system, the issue of land markets is generally addressed by a mutation of customary land systems in the direction of private appropriation (Colin & Ayouz, 2005; Chauveau, 2006; Nassi, 2013). These explanations support the language changes underway in the land market in the small town of Tohoun. This market is not characterized by the presence of the state, contrary to what Polanyi reveals in the context of Western societies; it is a market for individuals. However, we cannot ignore that the effect of the Western paradigm of property has helped to monetize African land since the definition of land ownership in the French civil code, for example, is synonymous with the commodification of land (Le Roy, 1995). Therefore, the law of supply and demand on land ownership can be met in the harsh context of economic liberalism because land becomes a commodity, and like any commodity, it has a price and is a source of income. This transformation of the value of a good has led some authors to say that land is a banal commercial good whose exchange is governed by market phenomena generating a value called land rent. This explains part of the processes that prevail in land markets. For there to be value, it is indeed necessary for a good to be socially recognized as mercantile. For there to be a price, there must be an offeror owner and an applicant willing to buy (Donzel, et al., 2008).

We note from this statement that the price is defined by an offeror owner and an applicant ready to buy. However, we think that this approach restricts all the elements that base land prices, especially in urban areas. Moreover, in an article on the formation of urban land prices, Adef, (2011) explains that "the logic of land price formation is fundamentally foreign to each other". This strangeness does not mean a lack of knowledge of the criteria related to land transactions. In this work, for example, geographical position remains the main criterion for land transactions. It fits into various global theories on space, in particular the urban model of Alonso-Muth-Mills (Wheaton, 1974) the theory of central squares by Walter Christaller, (1933) or even theories on location choices in urban economics.

According to their analysis, some authors believe that the traditional monocentric city model states that land prices vary with distance from the central business district because households are willing to pay less or more per housing unit in proportion to travel costs. Since the marginal cost of an additional unit of structure is approximately constant in the city, the solution to the condition of zero profit for housing producers, for example, requires a variation in the price of land. Therefore, the negative gradient of housing prices translates into a negative gradient for land prices (Davis, et al., 2021). Additionally, when the variations in land prices are disaggregated according to the tercile of travel time to the nearest urban area, land prices generally tend to increase the fastest in the areas closest to urban areas (Jayne, et al., 2021) which emphasizes the role of the geographical position of the land, buildings, and infrastructure in determining access to markets (Tione & Holden, 2020; Wineman & Jayne, 2018).

Even in the context of an African city such as Lomé, Djergou, (2022) pointed out that the geographical position of the land is far ahead of criteria such as the affordable price or the proximity of parents. Evoking geographical position, as in the case of Western theories, to explain price variations does not obstruct the consideration of the earth in terms of social relations in Africa. A piece of land is always found in a specific place and is first claimed socially before being exchanged. Additionally, to have

"antecedent information" on operations, it is the social interactions nourished by the social link that bases the base there. For this reason, Weber's explanation, which states that each participant in a monetary exchange is driven by his interest but must normally take into account the interests of third parties, the normal determinants relating to the action is interesting in the African market (Grossein, 2005). All of its determinants, motives or criteria influence the price of a plot. However, one remark seems constant: it is that of a continuous increase in land prices. In Tohoun, we noticed an increase of 23% on average. It joins that of the city of Lomé, where according to calculations, land prices generate between 13.9% and 22.2% of added value, guaranteeing interest rates of more than 100% against 7% in the banking sector (Djergou, 2016). It is a speculative and inflationary spiral according to Aveline (1995), which, unlike developed countries, is maintained by the effort of individuals and financial institutions. The difficulties in obtaining a home are the ones in sight in such a market and will continually be the most scrutinized. In this case, we will probably not be talking about a land crash when the land bubble is at an end in all African cities but rather about a surging conflictuality, as (Bouju, 2009) has already noted with this evocative title "the curse, honor and speculation" in the general case of West Africa. This conflict is constantly fed by those who are the least well off, particularly young people who suffer the penalties of unemployment or underemployment coupled with the difficulties of accessing housing.

7. Conclusion

This article highlights the functioning of the land market in Tohoun, a small African town. Indeed, the value of land is gradually changing in every city on the continent. From the big cities of the past to the small towns of recent decades, land is increasingly becoming a monetized asset. So, pricing should be based on the economic law of offer and demand. When we look at the land market in Tohoun, we see those socio-economic conditions, in particular income, social category, origin and social links, rather than even the geographical location of the land, influence land transaction prices. These prices are constantly rising, with no legal basis for indexing land prices. This is a threat to social order, and calls into question the responsibility of governments in land management.

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M.K.N. and T.S.; methodology, G.N validation, M.K.N., K.M.N., T.S. and G.N.; formal analysis, K.MN. investigation, M.K.N.; resources, C.C.A.; data curation, M.K.N.; writing—original draft preparation, M.K.N. writing—review and editing: K.M.N., T.S., G.N. and C.C.A. visualization, M.K.N.; supervision, G.N.; project administration, M.K.N.; funding acquisition, M.K.N., T.S., C.C.A. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.”

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12. KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Land market: Monetarized exchange of land

Small town: Refers to a town of between 5,000 and 100,000 inhabitants with a minimum of public and urban services.

Social relations: A relationship based on personal acquaintance between two or more actors.

ⁱ Law No. 71-141 of 24 January 1971 setting land prices is not only outdated, but in its application, it was limited to the city of Lomé and does not affect secondary cities.

ⁱⁱ For more explanation, see Ragot, X., 2004, "*Une théorie de l'inflation optimale fondée sur les contraintes de crédit*" éditions Presses de Sciences Po, vol. 55, p. 469-478, DOI 10.3917/reco.553.0469