CASE STUDY

Côte d'Ivoire

Towards the Just City in Africa

Social Housing and Access to Public Services in Abidjan

Friedrich Ebert Stiftung

Just City Project

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Publisher
FES Côte d'Ivoire
08 Abidjan Cocody 08
info.civ@fes.de

Responsibility for content
Séraphin Kouamé

Contact
Séraphin Kouamé
seraphin.kouame@fes.de

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Background

Abidjan, the leading economic metropolis of Côte d'Ivoire, has undergone rapid urbanization for several decades, driven by population growth, the concentration of economic activity and the appeal of the economic capital. It is home to more than a third (36%) of the urban population of the country and has the highest concentration of inhabitants, with 2,994 inhabitants/km^2. This dynamic has profoundly transformed the urban space, but it has also been accompanied by strong socio-spatial differentiation between central districts, residential areas, working-class neighbourhoods, urban peripheries and precarious areas.

The study "Just City: Access to Public Services and Social Housing in Abidjan" (French original: "Ville juste : Logements sociaux et accès aux services publics à Abidjan"), commissioned by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, addresses this issue. It examines the capacity of the Abidjan metropolis to guarantee all its inhabitants equitable access to housing, essential public services and urban opportunities.

Conducted from 24 to 31 July 2025 in 10 municipalities representative of the urban diversity of the Autonomous District of Abidjan, the study uses a mixed-methods approach combining document analysis, a quantitative survey of 600 households, focus groups, interviews and field observations. Particular attention was paid to women, young people and workers in the formal and informal sectors.

The central hypothesis that emerges from the analysis is that urban injustice does not result solely from a deficit of infrastructure or services: it also stems from their territorial distribution, their economic affordability and the governance arrangements that determine who can actually benefit from them.

1. Conflicts and Challenges

The study reveals a multi-speed city, in which the formal existence of a service does not necessarily guarantee its effective accessibility.

The first challenge is socio-spatial inequality. Peripheral and precarious neighbourhoods suffer more from cumulative deficits in housing, water, sanitation, electricity, public lighting, transport, health and security. The most vulnerable populations thus bear a disproportionate share of the costs linked to where they live.

The second challenge concerns effective access to public services. In health, for example, holding a CMU (Couverture Maladie Universelle) card does not automatically mean access to care: the report notes that 66.8% of respondents hold a CMU card, but that 75% of these cardholders do not use it, notably because of financial constraints and the limited number of facilities that accept this coverage. Access to water also illustrates this gap between theoretical and real access. Although households report being able to access drinking water, metering coverage, continuity of service and the cost of supply create significant disparities between territories and social groups.

The third challenge is urban mobility. The shortcomings of public transport, the growth of informal transport, rising costs and road safety risks particularly penalize low-income households, informal workers, women and people living on the periphery.

The fourth challenge concerns social housing. Despite the State's ambition to develop an accessible supply, eligibility conditions, financing constraints, households' limited financial capacity and low levels of bank account ownership severely limit access for the most vulnerable populations. The report estimates that the current conditions of access to the social housing programme may exclude more than 90% of the population.

Finally, the challenge is also institutional and democratic. The survey reveals that 98.9% of respondents say they have never been consulted on a local project or programme, while 90% do not know how the taxes collected by their town hall are used.

These results reflect a deficit of participation, transparency and accountability that weakens trust between citizens and local institutions.

2. Approach and Solutions

In light of these findings, the study advocates an approach to the just city based on the effectiveness of rights, rather than on the mere existence of public policies or infrastructure.

The first orientation is to rethink social housing policy so that it effectively targets low-income households. This means relaxing eligibility criteria, adapting financing mechanisms, developing public guarantees and taking better account of the realities of informal workers and households without bank accounts.

The second orientation aims to reduce territorial inequalities in access to essential services, by giving priority to peripheral and precarious neighbourhoods in investments in water, electricity, street lighting, health, education, sanitation and mobility.

The third is to strengthen the economic empowerment of women and young people, notably through municipal funds supporting entrepreneurship, microcredit mechanisms, training centres, communal incubators, economic zones with moderate rents and the development of the social and solidarity economy.

The fourth orientation concerns the overhaul of urban governance. The study notably recommends the creation of communal citizens' councils involving civil society, women and young people, as well as the development of participatory digital platforms enabling residents to access budget information, follow projects and raise their concerns.

Periodic public audits, the publication of budget execution reports, an urban transparency portal and regular community forums could also strengthen local accountability.

The challenge is therefore to move from governance that informs the population to governance that genuinely involves it in decision-making.

3. Results

The results of the study can be summarized around six structuring findings:

- → **Abidjan is a deeply differentiated metropolis:** Place of residence is a major determinant of access to services, facilities and urban opportunities.
- → **Formal equality does not guarantee real equality:** The theoretical availability of a service – CMU, water, social housing or transport – does not mean that people have the economic and territorial resources needed to actually benefit from it.
- → **Vulnerable households bear a disproportionate urban burden:** Women, young people and informal-sector workers are particularly exposed to the cumulative costs of housing, transport, water, health and education.
- → **Housing is a powerful factor in the reproduction of inequalities:** The shortage of affordable housing, rental costs, the conditions of access to social housing and solvency constraints keep a significant share of households in a precarious housing situation.
- → **Urban governance remains insufficiently participatory and transparent:** The near-absence of consultation with residents, the limited knowledge of how municipal resources are used and the inadequacy of redress mechanisms point to a relationship between institutions and citizens that is still very top-down.
- → **Urban injustice is multidimensional:** It is simultaneously spatial, social, economic, institutional and gendered. It therefore cannot be corrected by building infrastructure alone: it requires a transformation of how the city is planned, financed, redistributed and governed.

4. Key Takeaways

The following can therefore be concluded:

- A just city is not simply a city that builds infrastructure. It is a city that guarantees equitable access to resources and opportunities.
- The major issue is no longer only the existence of services, but their real and effective accessibility, continuity, cost and territorial distribution.
- Social housing must be designed on the basis of households' real economic capacities and not solely on administrative and financial criteria.
- Peripheral and precarious neighbourhoods must become a priority of urban investment policies.
- Women, young people and informal workers must be considered full actors in urban policy and not merely beneficiaries.
- Citizen participation must take place before, during and after the delivery of projects, and not once decisions have already been made.
- Budget transparency and accountability are essential conditions for trust between local authorities and citizens.
- Making Abidjan a Just City requires moving from a logic of formal equality to a logic of territorial equity and the effective realization of rights.

5. Messages for Local Actors and Partners

In view of these findings, the study recommends moving beyond a strictly sectoral approach to public action in favour of a genuinely integrated urban justice policy. This should notably be based on:

For the State and national institutions

Make urban justice a cross-cutting principle of public action. Housing, transport, health, education, water, electricity and employment policies must be designed in a coordinated way and targeted as a priority at the most vulnerable territories and social groups.

For the Autonomous District of Abidjan

Better territorialize public action. Investments must take greater account of disparities between communes and between neighbourhoods, notably in essential services, mobility, lighting, sanitation and housing.

For the town halls of Greater Abidjan

Move from a logic of management to a logic of governance. Citizens must be involved in identifying priorities, monitoring projects and evaluating results. Citizens' councils, community forums and grievance mechanisms can be concrete instruments of this transformation.

For technical and financial partners

Support programmes that combine infrastructure, economic inclusion and participatory governance. The funding of a facility should not be separated from strengthening local capacities, citizen participation, transparency and the assessment of its social and territorial impact.

For the private sector and urban operators

Contribute to a more inclusive urban offer. Real estate development, transport, essential services and economic activities must better integrate the needs of low-income populations and the requirements of territorial equity.

For civil society and citizens

Make participation a genuine lever of urban transformation. Citizen oversight, access to information, dialogue with the authorities and the monitoring of public policies must become normal components of local governance.