

Between Institutional Silence and Social Misuse: Green Spaces Tested by the Limits of the Communication System in Abidjan

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ABSTRACT: Green spaces are essential components of the urban environment, providing social, ecological, economic and therapeutic functions (Lessard & Boulfroy, 2008). In Côte d'Ivoire, their integration is regulated by Law 62-253 of 1962 and reinforced by the Environmental Code of 1996. In Abidjan, the creation in 2001 of the Directorate of Parks and Gardens aimed to guarantee their development and maintenance. However, despite this normative and institutional framework, these spaces are subject to strong anthropic pressure, resulting in their appropriation for residential, commercial or informal purposes. The results highlight communication dysfunctions linked to messages, channels and actors; which weaken the social and ecological role of green spaces and encourage their misuse.

KEYWORDS: Environmental communication, Green spaces, Appropriation, Abidjan, Dysfunctions.

1. INTRODUCTION

Green spaces occupy an essential place in contemporary urban life. They are defined as green spaces, developed and open to the public, playing a recreational, social and ecological role (Choay & Merlin, 1996; Jarnier, 2011). Squares, community gardens, municipal parks or playgrounds constitute all places for meeting, relaxation and sociability (Boutefeu, 2007; Rolland, 2009). They thus contribute to the quality of life in the city by allowing residents to break isolation and strengthen social ties.

In Côte d'Ivoire, urban planning regulations have dedicated a place to green spaces since the 1960s, through Law 62-253 of July 31, 1962 and the Environmental Code of 1996. These texts, supplemented by decrees relating to urban planning, define non-constructible zones and impose the creation of green spaces (Pacom, 2004; Wompie, 2012). In addition, the creation of the District of Abidjan in 2001, followed by the establishment of the Directorate of Parks and Gardens (DPJ) in 2005, reflects an institutional desire to strengthen the management of these spaces.

However, despite these measures, Abidjan's green spaces are under increasing human pressure. In several neighborhoods, they have been transformed into commercial areas, places for eating out or even public dumps, compromising their initial function (Nassa, 2009). Geographical and sociological studies highlight two major factors explaining this phenomenon: the urban population explosion and social representations that often perceive these spaces as available land reserves (Tra & Igbo, 2016).

Thus, beyond regulations, the problem lies in the way green spaces are appropriated and managed. In terms of communication, several actions have been carried out to raise awareness about environmental preservation. Since 1993, the "Abidjan plus jamais ça" program has encouraged the promotion of a healthy living environment. Subsequently, the "Abidjan ville propre" operations (2006, 2009, 2015) with UVICOCI, as well as the Health Week (2008), have emphasized urban cleanliness. In 2017, the "Grand ménage" operation, led by the Ministry of Health, mobilized all municipalities around the cleaning and beautification of neighborhoods. Finally, World Environment Day (WED) and the National Fortnight for the Environment and Sustainable Development (QNEDD) are key annual events for large-scale awareness-raising, without specifically targeting green spaces.

However, despite these regulatory frameworks and communication initiatives, these spaces remain faced with persistent vulnerability to urban dynamics and social pressures. In light of this observation, this study questions the limits of the communication system that fuel the misuse of green spaces and weaken their social and environmental role in urban Abidjan. In other words, the aim is to understand how shortcomings in messages, channels and institutional coordination contribute to marginalizing these spaces and hindering their appropriation by the population.

2. METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted in the District of Abidjan, the main urban area of Côte d'Ivoire, which has a population of nearly 6,865,306 (ANStat, 2024). The choice of this location is explained by the major environmental challenges facing the city, including

Between Institutional Silence and Social Misuse: Green Spaces Tested by the Limits of the Communication System in Abidjan

pollution and land pressure, as well as the wealth of green spaces in certain traditional communes, particularly Cocody, Adjamé, Plateau and Treichville (Kouamé & Kouamé, 2012). The target population of the study consists of three categories of actors: state authorities, institutional managers and local residents or community leaders. Purposive sampling (Quivy & Van Campenhoudt, 1995) made it possible to select officials from ministries (Environment, Sanitation, Planning and Development), the BNETD, the Directorate of Parks and Gardens, as well as researchers, environmental associations and concerned residents.

On a theoretical level, the study is part of a qualitative approach based on the comprehensive paradigm (Mucchielli, 1996) and mobilizes the theory of engaging communication (Bernard, 2006; Girandola & Joule, 2008), which analyzes the link between attitudes, behaviors and environmental preservation practices.

The data collection techniques used combine direct observation of green spaces and their uses, documentary study (legal texts, regulations, master plans and institutional reports) and semi-structured interviews conducted with institutional actors, experts, local officials and residents. The collection took place taking into account the diversity of the actors and made it possible to identify the messages conveyed, the communication channels used and the forms of appropriation observed.

Finally, the data were processed using a thematic content analysis (Paillé & Mucchielli, 2016), which consisted of coding and grouping the units of meaning according to recurring themes, in line with the research objectives. A triangulation between interviews, observations and documents (Denzin, 1978) reinforced the internal validity of the analysis and allowed the emergence of the social and communication logics surrounding the appropriation of green spaces.

3. RESULTS

The analysis of data related to the communication system that fuels the misuse of green spaces and weakens their social and environmental role in the urban environment of Abidjan highlights three main limitations as factors. These are limitations related to the message, limitations related to communication channels and limitations of communication at the level of the actors.

3.1. Message Limits

Research indicates that institutional communications regarding the environment remain too vague, without specifically targeting green spaces in urban areas. Public communication, by focusing on major issues such as air pollution, biodiversity or reforestation, tends to minimize the importance of gardens, green spaces and recreational areas. The lack of differentiation reduces the visibility of these residential spaces and hinders their appropriation by local residents, who do not perceive them as crucial components of the urban landscape. This regulatory gap is also expressed by an official of the Ministry of Construction, Housing and Urban Planning (MCLU) in this extract from a speech taken from the interview conducted with him:

"You know, we have environmental texts, codes, decrees... But when you read them carefully, you realize that they never explicitly talk about urban greenery. There is nothing that requires, for example, the integration of green spaces into construction or development projects. It's as if vegetation in the city was an option, not a necessity." (FL, Manager, MCLU).

As can be seen, this testimony highlights the absence of a binding legal framework for the preservation or integration of green spaces into urban policies. Without a formal obligation, these spaces remain vulnerable and often neglected in planning decisions. In the same vein, an urban planner highlights the direct impacts of this communication ambiguity on the ground:

"In our daily practice, we hear about the environment, yes, but never about green spaces as such. We talk about construction standards, flood risks, waste management... but public gardens or small squares are never at the heart of the discussions. And the result is clear: they are often the first to disappear when a real estate project takes shape. They are perceived as available land, not as common goods to be protected."

This testimony highlights a significant gap between institutional discourse and urban planning practice. Indeed, due to a lack of specific messages and clear rules on their preservation, green spaces are not considered priorities. They then become adjustment variables in urban projects and are frequently sacrificed in favor of real estate densification, which weakens their social and environmental role.

On the public communication side, one architect criticizes the lack of strong symbols and dedicated campaigns:

"There is no National Green Spaces Day, for example. We celebrate World Environment Day, but it remains very broad, very abstract. We talk about climate, pollution, recycling... but never about the place of greenery in our neighborhoods. There is a lack of symbolic promotion, an institutional recognition of these places as essential to our well-being." (HS, Architect)

This observation highlights the weakness of institutional communication, which trivializes the issue of green spaces by drowning it in global themes. The absence of targeted campaigns contributes to their invisibility in the collective imagination. This communication deficit is also reflected in the experiences of citizens, as a resident of the Adjamé neighborhood testifies:

Between Institutional Silence and Social Misuse: Green Spaces Tested by the Limits of the Communication System in Abidjan

"I've lived here for over twenty years. And frankly, no one has ever talked to us about green spaces. Never. What they tell us is to clean the gutters, not to throw garbage in the street. But no one talks about gardens, green spaces. We don't even know if there are any planned in the neighborhood." (BA, Resident, Adjamé)

Furthermore, the public's perspective seems to describe a gap between the messages they receive and the real challenges of preserving green spaces. In such a context, in the absence of clear and accessible information, citizens do not develop an emotional connection or a sense of responsibility towards these places. It is in this context that the study of the collected discourses becomes relevant: by comparing institutional and citizen points of view, it is clear that the lack of communication weakens the collective ownership of green spaces.

Ultimately, the comments gathered converge towards a shared observation: Communication on the environment remains too global and does not devote specific space to green spaces. Institutions, through their texts and campaigns, convey insufficiently targeted messages, while populations feel poorly informed about these issues. This lack of clarity and prioritization contributes to marginalizing green spaces in the urban agenda, which reinforces their vulnerability to economic and social pressures.

3.2. Limitations related to communication channels

Beyond the content of the messages, the dissemination channels used to raise awareness about the preservation of green spaces in urban areas have serious limitations. Indeed, campaigns are often costly, infrequent, and rarely followed by concrete actions. Also, the absence of specialized media or long-term institutional relays prevents continuous and targeted dissemination. Furthermore, a significant portion of the population remains excluded from traditional communication channels, particularly due to illiteracy, which considerably reduces the impact of written materials and messages in French.

In this context, a manager of the Parks and Gardens Department highlights the budgetary constraints which are holding back initiatives:

"We communicate, but not enough, because communication is expensive. And the media we use aren't very appropriate for the target populations." (DF, Former Manager, Parks and Gardens Department)

Analyzing this testimony from this manager of the parks and gardens department, we realize a dependence on financial resources that limits the capacity of technical services to design and maintain sustainable awareness campaigns. Environmental communication, far from being institutionalized, often relies on one-off efforts, without a long-term strategy. This precariousness of resources is also illustrated by the testimony of an architect, who reveals the lack of public support:

"I hosted an awareness program on RTI (national television), but I had to pay out of my own pocket for seven years. This shows the lack of dedicated public structures." (HS, Architect)

Indeed, the latter's remarks highlight the lack of institutional mechanisms dedicated to the promotion of green spaces, forcing professionals involved in this area to bear the costs of raising awareness alone. This structural deficit prevents the creation of a coherent and accessible discourse on the place of plants in the city.

On the side of central institutions, an official from the Ministry of the Environment points out another major limitation:

"We raise awareness, we raise awareness, but the problem is that there are a lot of illiterate people. The messages in French don't get through. Not everyone can read, that's also a problem in terms of awareness..." (DK, Manager, Ministry of the Environment)

This speech by the environmental manager highlights a structural fragility. Indeed, by favoring written French as a means of communication, institutional campaigns exclude a large proportion of residents, particularly in working-class neighborhoods such as Bramakoté (a working-class neighborhood in Abidjan), where oral communication and local languages are the main channels for transmitting knowledge. In other words, the language barrier acts as a barrier to receiving messages and reduces their social impact. As a result, environmental awareness-raising becomes less effective and fails to create a sense of ownership of green spaces among the populations most affected.

Finally, an urban planner highlights the ephemeral nature of communication actions:

"Even when a municipality creates a garden, communication stops at the inauguration. After that, nothing. And then everything happens on TV, and it's only when there's a news report; not everyone watches the news." (YT, Urban Planner, Cocody)

According to this urban planner, two major limitations exist. On the one hand, communication around green spaces stops at the symbolic moment of the inauguration, without educational follow-up or regular actions to maintain the interest of residents. On the other hand, the channels mobilized remain centered on national media such as television, which do not reach the entire population, particularly the working classes or people with low literacy. In the absence of local programs and relays, awareness-raising loses effectiveness and green spaces struggle to be integrated into daily practices. In other words, the discontinuity and inadequate targeting of messages severely limits the social appropriation of urban developments.

Between Institutional Silence and Social Misuse: Green Spaces Tested by the Limits of the Communication System in Abidjan

Finally, limitations related to communication channels reflect a structural weakness in the environmental awareness strategy. They reveal a lack of resources, suitable relays, and inclusive formats, which hinders the dissemination of messages and their reception by the populations concerned. This communication deficit contributes to the invisibility of green spaces in the urban agenda and weakens their social appropriation.

In this perspective, it becomes necessary to question another equally determining factor in the management of green spaces: the limits linked to the actors (transmitters and receivers) who directly influence the coherence, continuity and effectiveness of interventions on the ground.

3.3. Limits of communication at the actor level

In analyzing the limitations of communication around green spaces, attention is focused on the diversity of perceptions expressed by stakeholders. On the one hand, institutional actors, including former managers and technical executives, and on the other, community stakeholders, represented by local leaders and residents. Comparing these perspectives highlights contradictions and discrepancies that undermine the public's appropriation of green spaces.

On the institutional side, a former head of Parks and Gardens emphasizes that the destruction of green spaces often results from administrative decisions themselves. According to him, the construction of the Cocody town hall or the Angolan embassy took place on gardens or green spaces designated in the cadastral map of the commune of Cocody. In this logic, we see here the highlighting of institutional non-verbal communication, which demonstrates that by occupying these spaces, the administration sends a contradictory signal that delegitimizes any official discourse of environmental protection, as reflected in this interview excerpt:

"Contrary to what some people think, it's not the population that destroys green spaces; it's often the administration itself. The Cocody town hall was built on a green space. The Angolan embassy opposite the RTI station was built on it, too. When the administration itself occupies the gardens, how can you expect the population to respect these places? It sends the wrong message, a kind of non-verbal communication that legitimizes the occupation." (DF, Former manager, Parks and Gardens Department)

Still on the institutional front, another Parks and Reserves official emphasizes the influence of cultural representations. According to him, in villages, grass around houses is considered dirt, while in cities it should be valued as decorative elements. As formulated, this opposition reflects a symbolic divide between rural and urban norms. In this context, the interviewee recommends educational work starting in primary school in order to sustainably transform these representations at the grassroots level. This is also reflected in this verbatim excerpt from the interview with the latter:

"There's a real problem with cultural communication. In the village, when you see weeds around the house, you say it's dirty. You take a machete to clean it up. Here in Abidjan, on the contrary, we say you have to plant flowers for decoration. People live in two different worlds. If we don't start teaching this to children from primary school onwards, we won't be able to change these perceptions in the long term." (SR, Manager, Parks and Reserves Department).

However, while the perspectives of institutional actors primarily highlight administrative contradictions and cultural divides, the perceptions of community actors reflect a different reality. Their perceptions are indeed rooted in the daily living conditions of local residents. The local leaders and local residents interviewed emphasize less the regulatory or symbolic dimension than the social and practical issues that guide the reception of environmental messages conveyed by institutional registers.

On the one hand, on the community side, a leader from the Biafra neighborhood in the commune of Treichville points out that social priorities determine how messages are received. For residents living in precarious situations, finding housing takes precedence over preserving green spaces. In his remarks, he demonstrates that environmental communication lacks social legitimacy because it does not sufficiently take into account the daily realities of the population.

"If you talk about green spaces to Biafrans, they will tell you: we are looking first for a space to live in. How can you expect them to be interested in preserving a garden when they live in precarious conditions? For them, the priority is housing, daily food. It is a question of social legitimacy of the recipients of the message." (KB, Community Leader, in Biafra)

On the other hand, a community leader interviewed in Cocody highlights a contradiction in the local management of green spaces. According to him, although town halls sometimes develop them, they often prohibit residents from accessing them. This restriction considerably reduces their social utility and creates a feeling of exclusion among local residents, who do not feel concerned by these spaces that are supposed to belong to them. In his view, only inclusive communication, directly involving residents in the management and use of these places, would restore their meaning and legitimacy. This is evidenced by this excerpt from the interview with the latter:

"Even when town halls create gardens, they often prohibit public access. We see benches installed, but people can't enter. As a result, green spaces become useless to local residents. If we want these spaces to be respected, we need clear and inclusive communication that truly involves residents in their management." (GP, Community Leader, Cocody)

Between Institutional Silence and Social Misuse: Green Spaces Tested by the Limits of the Communication System in Abidjan

Overall, the categorical analysis reveals that institutions convey messages weakened by their own contradictions and the absence of cultural pedagogy, while communities express resistance linked to social emergencies and exclusion in management. Thus, communication limitations are less due to a deficit of discourse than to structural inconsistencies, symbolic fractures and a lack of social inclusion, which together weaken the sustainability of green spaces.

4. DISCUSSION

The analysis of data relating to the communication system on the regulation of green spaces in urban Abidjan highlights three main limitations which explain their misuse and weaken their social and environmental role.

First, the limitations related to messages. The analyzed results show that institutional discourses remain too general, focused on pollution or reforestation, without directly targeting green spaces. As Wiener (2014) and Collet (2004) point out, in this logic, an inappropriate, imprecise message or one that is out of step with the representations of the recipients loses its effectiveness and fails to generate support. These inadequacies produce a communication "noise" that prevents local residents from developing a sense of responsibility towards these places. Then, the limitations related to channels were noted in the analysis of the data in this study. Indeed, the analyzed data reveal that the media used are often expensive, one-off and not very accessible. Thus, as the conclusions of the observations of Caron-Bouchard and Renaud (2002) mention, mass media diffusion remains superficial and excludes a large part of the illiterate population. Under these conditions, the lack of local relays and interpersonal communication further reduces the reach of awareness campaigns dedicated to this purpose. Finally, limitations at the stakeholder level were also noted in the results of this study. According to the study's findings, institutional behaviors themselves, such as the administrative occupation of gardens, send contradictory signals that lead local residents to colonize green spaces. This is also highlighted by the perspective of Watzlawick et al. (1972), who show that all behavior is communication. The authors note that these practices delegitimize official messages. In addition, social insecurity pushes some communities to prioritize housing or employment, subsistence resources, relegating the preservation of green spaces in the background.

Thus, as the results of this study note, the communication system, far from strengthening citizen appropriation of green spaces, paradoxically contributes to their marginalization.

5. CONCLUSION

To the question of *"What are the communication elements that explain the persistence of the appropriation of green spaces in the District of Abidjan?"*, the results of the study highlight three main limitations of the communication system: messages that are too general, focused on the environment in the broad sense but poorly adapted to local realities; unsuitable, costly, one-off dissemination channels that are often inaccessible to illiterate populations; and finally, actors who are the bearers of contradictions, whose institutional practices (administrative occupation of gardens, lack of follow-up of actions) undermine the credibility of official discourse. These dysfunctions explain why populations remain weakly involved in the creation, maintenance and management of green spaces.

It thus appears that Abidjan's urban planning prioritizes the logic of growth and densification to the detriment of the ecological and social role of nature in the city. In other words, the territory is conceived as a built and infrastructural space, which permanently marginalizes green spaces.

The study therefore confirms the initial hypothesis: the appropriation of green spaces is largely linked to communication limits. Echoing Watzlawick (1967), who points out that "one cannot not communicate," the results demonstrate that only clear, participatory communication adapted to cultural and social contexts can strengthen citizen appropriation and promote sustainable management of these living spaces.

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Between Institutional Silence and Social Misuse: Green Spaces Tested by the Limits of the Communication System in Abidjan

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