

Land, Flows and Authority in Northern Ghana

Territorial Governance, Urban Expansion and Regional Value Chains in Tamale, Yendi and Damongo

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Abstract

This paper examines the interaction between historical territorial systems, customary authority, statutory planning and urban expansion in northern Ghana. It draws on an exploratory development mission to Tamale, Yendi and Damongo in February 2026, undertaken as part of a European Union-funded initiative involving Expertise France and Les Ateliers de Cergy.

The analysis is organised into five movements. The first situates northern Ghana within the historical geography of Sahelian trade and territorial governance. The second examines the interface between customary land allocation and statutory planning institutions. The third considers peri-urban expansion, infrastructure provision and emerging spatial inequalities. The fourth traces regional value chains connecting cities to their wider hinterlands, including food, biomass, construction materials and waste. The fifth identifies territorial questions for further institutional dialogue and spatial planning.

The paper argues that effective planning must engage with the institutional, ecological and economic systems that already organise territory, rather than assume that statutory planning instruments operate independently of them. Drawing on mission engagements, contextual research and spatial analysis, it offers an exploratory interpretation intended to inform collaborative inquiry and planning discussions. It does not constitute a completed empirical evaluation or a formal spatial development plan.

Keywords: northern Ghana; territorial governance; customary land tenure; statutory planning; peri-urbanisation; urban development; regional value chains; Tamale; Yendi; Damongo.

Research provenance

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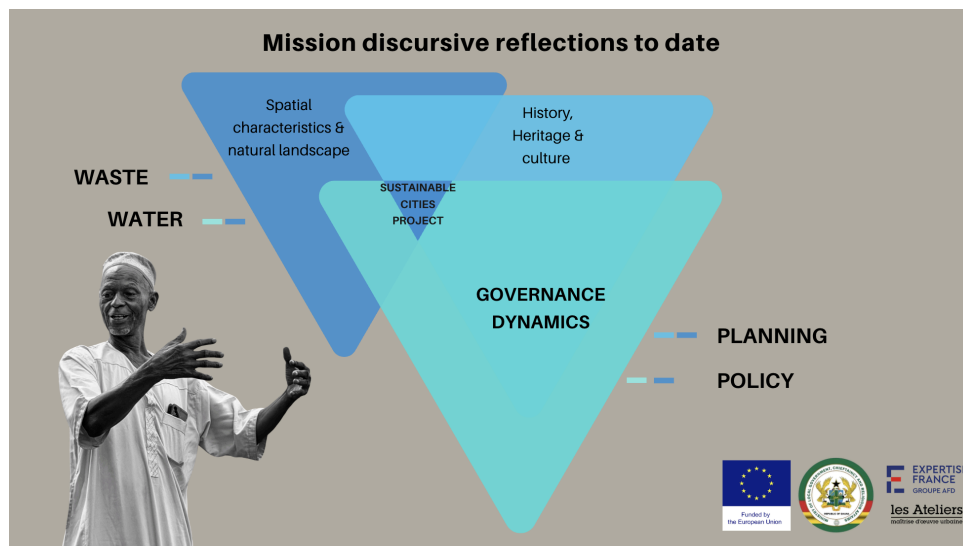
Research status: Exploratory field-based analytical reflection

This independently authored analytical reflection was developed following participation in the February 2026 exploratory development mission to northern Ghana.

The analysis and interpretations are those of the author and should not be understood as official positions or endorsements of Expertise France, Les Ateliers de Cergy or the European Union.

Introduction

This text grew out of the exploratory mission to Tamale, Yendi and Damongo in February 2026, where the objective was to listen rather than prescribe. The visual titled “*Mission discursive reflections to date*” is an attempt to capture how that listening actually felt: overlapping conversations about landscape, history, culture and governance, with waste, water, planning and policy constantly pushing in from the sides. At the centre sits the Sustainable Cities project - one more layer in an already crowded space of expectations and negotiations.



This document is written as a reaction to that experience. It starts from what people showed and told us about territory, authority, value chains and everyday risk, and only then asks what formal planning tools might realistically do within that terrain. It is not yet a plan or a full topic document; it is a first contribution to a shared writing process, offered so that others have something concrete to test, challenge and deepen.

The movements that follow roughly mirror the way my thinking unfolded after the mission. Movement 1 stays with the territory itself and the longer Sahelian histories under the present-day cities.

Movement 2 looks at how customary and statutory authorities actually share control over land.

Movement 3 turns to the urban edge, where population growth becomes territorial change.

Movement 4 follows the food, biomass, construction and waste flows that tie the cities to their wider hinterlands.

Movement 5 gathers these strands into a small set of questions that may help organise our discussions with international placemaking colleagues and local actors in the planned international workshop.

Movement 1

“Geography is the slowest of all historical forces.”

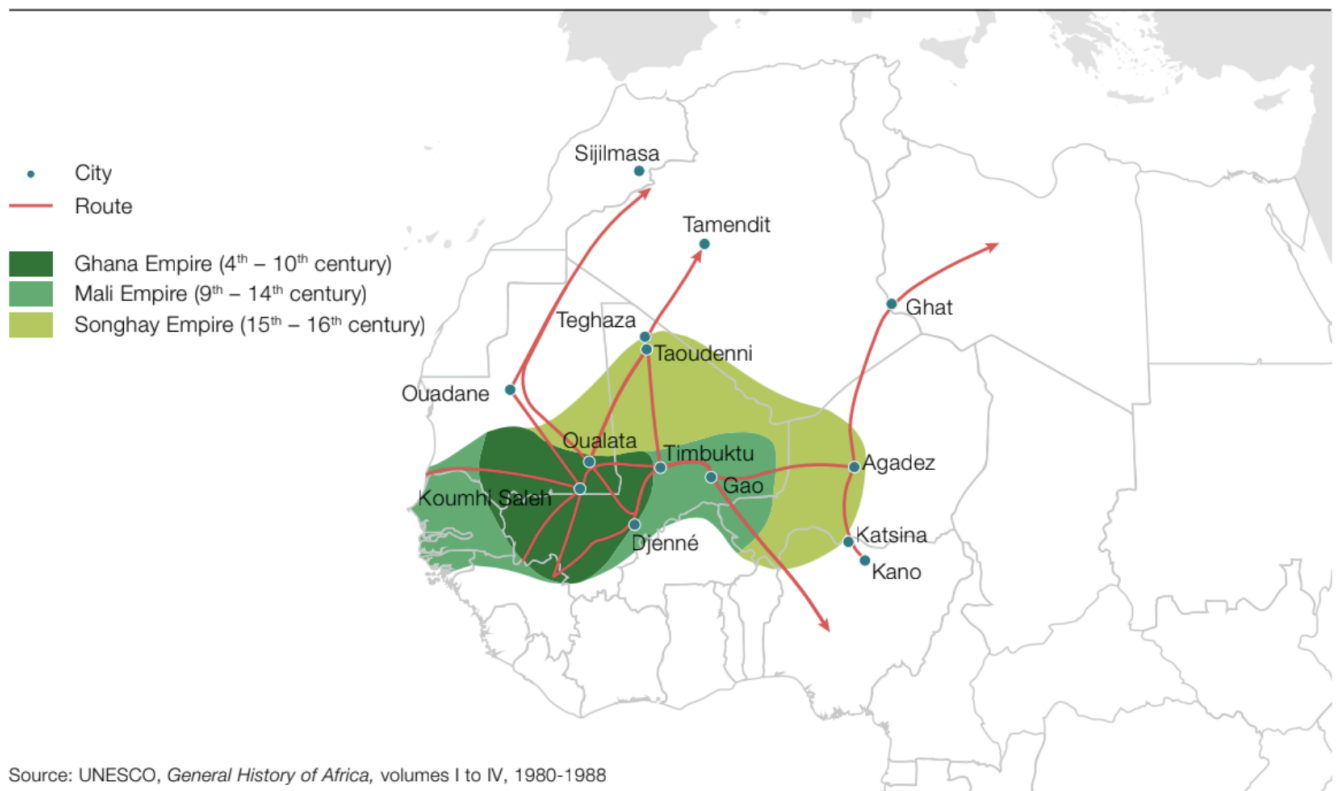
Braudel, Fernand, The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II.

Across the Six Cities initiative, rapid urban growth is often described in demographic and infrastructural terms: expansion rates, service backlogs, spatial footprints and investment gaps. Those lenses are important, but they risk treating land as neutral ground onto which population and infrastructure are simply added. In northern Ghana, and around Tamale in particular, urbanisation unfolds across territory that has been organised, inhabited and governed for centuries.

1.1 Circulation before borders

Map 1.18

Ghana, Mali and Songhay Empires



Long before colonial demarcations, West Africa’s interior was structured through corridors of exchange rather than fixed territorial blocks. Sahelian empires such as Ghana, Mali and Songhay organised authority along trans-Saharan trade routes, where salt moved south from the desert and gold moved north from forest zones.

Cities like Djenné, Timbuktu and Gao acted as hinge nodes in these circulation systems, with power tied to control of routes and flows more than to surveyed boundaries. Tamale lies within this wider Sahelian belt, where territory has historically been negotiated through movement, trade and access rather than enclosure.

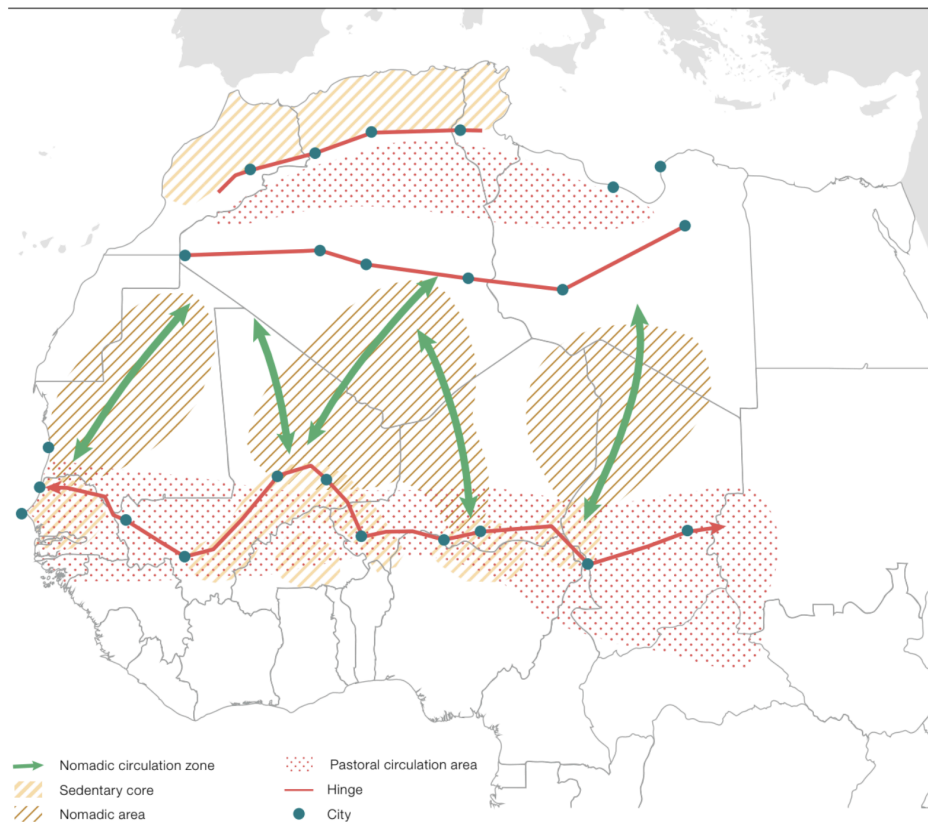
Chronologically:

- 4th–10th century: Ghana Empire consolidates gold–salt exchange networks.
- 9th–14th century: Mali Empire strengthens control along the Niger River corridor.
- 15th–16th century: Songhay Empire scales administrative systems across trans-Saharan routes.

These were structured governance systems managing territory through movement rather than fixed borders. Tamale's present-day urbanisation sits within this broader Sahelian hinge geography defined by circulation and negotiated authority.

1.2 The Sahel as Interface

Map 1.19
Hinges of the Saharan region



Sources: Retaillé D., *Comment lire le contact Sahara-Sahel* 1989a; Retaillé D., *Le contrôle de l'espace : les États sahélo-sahariens* 1989b; Retaillé D. and O. Walther, *Guerre et terrorisme au Sahara-Sahel : la reconversion des savoirs nomades* 2011

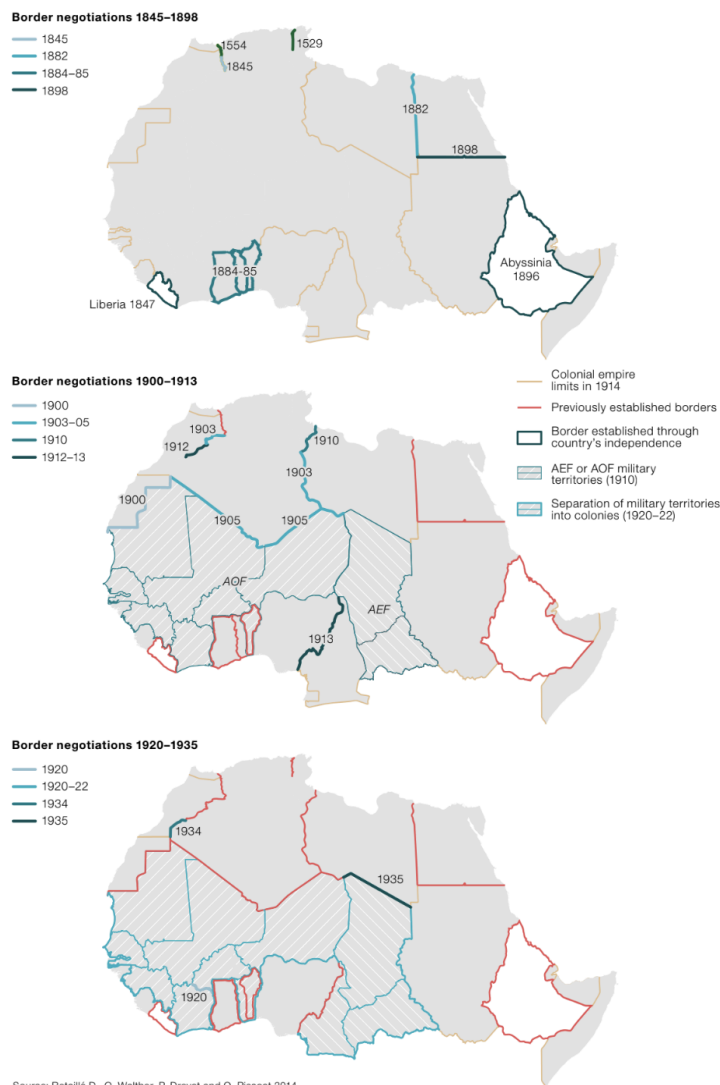
The Sahel functioned as an interface between ecological systems rather than a sharp border. Nomadic and semi-nomadic movements overlapped with sedentary agricultural cores, following rainfall gradients, pasture cycles and river systems.

Land rights were relational and layered, shaped by use, season and social ties. Contemporary customary land governance in northern Ghana is not a leftover from a pre-modern past; it reflects these long-standing territorial logics of negotiation and mobility.

This history underpins the hybrid authority arrangements that still shape land allocation and peri-urban expansion around Tamale today.

1.3 The Hardening of Geometry

Map 1.21
Border negotiations



From the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century, these negotiation spaces were progressively converted into geometric jurisdictions. Colonial cartography and border agreements hardened influence corridors into administrative units, overlaying movement systems with lines on a map.

Customary authorities were reframed within indirect rule rather than replaced. The postcolonial state in Ghana inherits this geometry: local government areas and planning boundaries sit on top of older territorial practices without fully resolving them.

1.4 Settlement patterns and spatial mismatch

Settlement patterns in West Africa cluster along ecological belts, river corridors and historical routes, not evenly across administrative space. The result is a structural mismatch: vast jurisdictions with relatively sparse populations in some areas, and intense concentrations of people, markets and services in others.

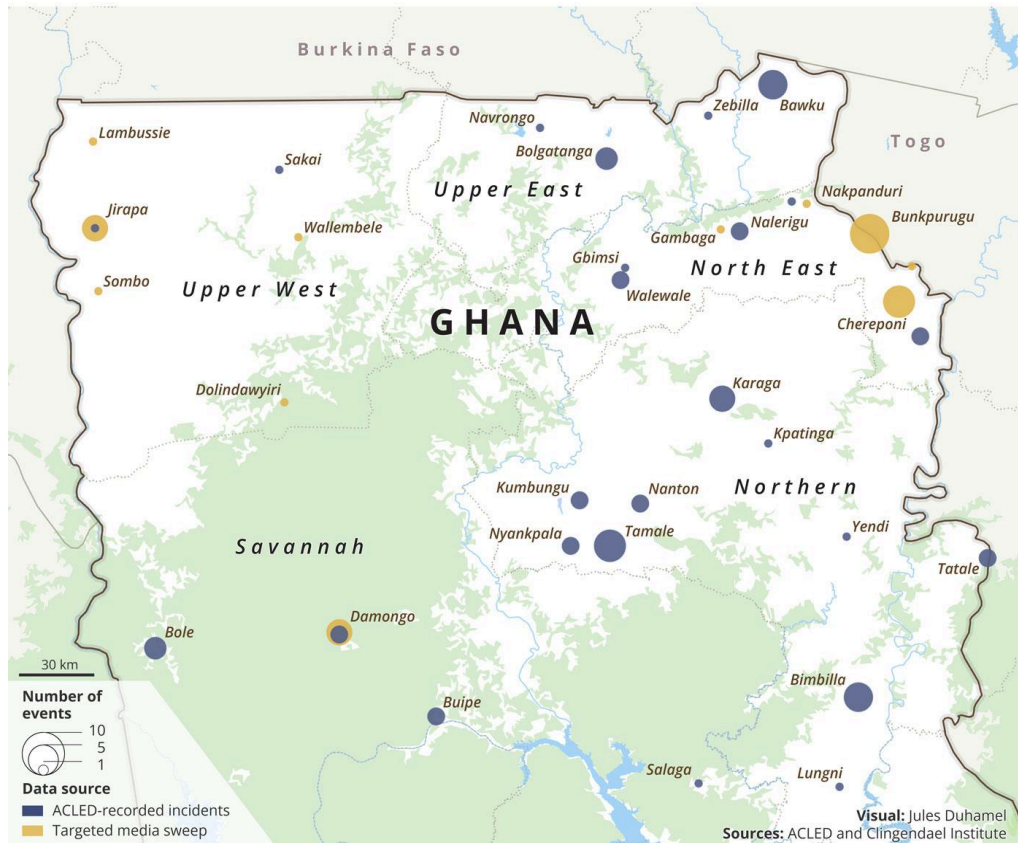
Tamale's current expansion plays out within this distortion. Administrative borders define jurisdiction; ecological systems shape land use; customary governance structures allocate land; and urban growth accelerates across all three at once.

1.5 Peace, authority and territorial tensions

In discussions with local stakeholders, issues of peace and social cohesion, succession disputes and periodic unrest surfaced alongside more technical concerns about land, housing and infrastructure.

Chieftaincy conflicts in Dagbon and neighbouring traditional areas, as well as farmer–herder tensions and boundary disputes, were described as part of the lived context within which planning decisions are interpreted and contested.

These dynamics do not define everyday life in the northern cities, but they form part of the background against which authority over land is exercised.



The incident map of northern Ghana and the Savannah Region draws on conflict and media data to visualise this landscape of contention. Each circle on the map represents one or more recorded incidents, with circle size indicating the number of events.

Tamale, Yendi and Damongo appear within a wider belt of activity stretching across the Northern, North East, Savannah and Upper East regions, rather than as isolated hotspots. For this topic document, the map and stakeholder reflections are read as a contextual reminder rather than as a conflict diagnosis.

They underline that territorial governance is embedded in a wider field of political authority, historical claims and security concerns, and that decisions about layouts, serviced land and infrastructure can be read as supporting or undermining particular actors and claims.

1.6 Layered territory as starting point

Contemporary Tamale is not a city that emerged from an empty rural hinterland. It is a Sahelian hinge geography shaped by circulation, a corridor territory governed through trade and negotiated authority, a colonially abstracted administrative unit and a postcolonial urban node expanding outward within a wider region where questions of authority and succession remain sensitive.

Land here is political, ecological and cultural: it is the interface where historical governance systems, contemporary statutory planning and concerns about peace and cohesion collide.

This layered territorial archive is the starting point for the movements that follow. It frames how we could approach hybrid governance and peri-urban land dynamics (Movement 2), how we may interpret value chains and market circuits (Movement 4), how we approach urban growth as territorial recomposition (Movement 3), and how we begin to think about territorial considerations for future planning discussions (Movement 5).

Movement 2

Hybrid Authority and the Governance of Land

2.1 Customary Authority as Territorial Governance

In Tamale, land carries history and obligations. It sits inside layered systems of chiefly authority, family claims and social obligation that have taken spatial form over generations.

In Dagbon, the notion of “skin lands” expresses this directly: land is vested in the skins, held in trust by chiefs, and allocated through processes that bind households to chieftaincy structures rather than to individual titles alone.

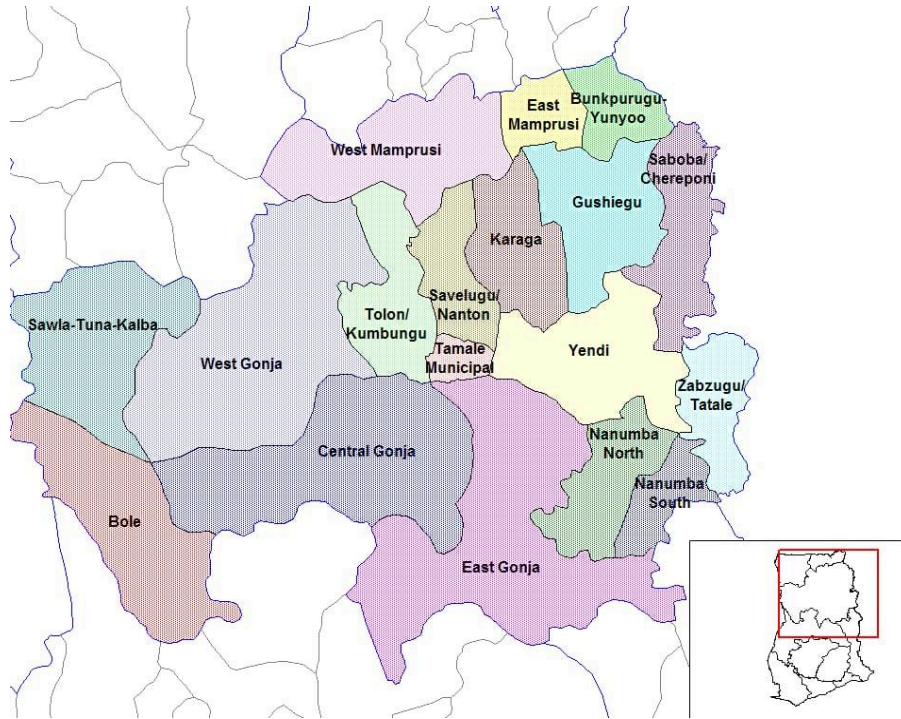
In northern Ghana, chiefs are enskinned, symbolically seated on animal skins, while in much of southern Ghana chiefs are enstooled, symbolically seated on stools.

Across much of the north, the figure of the tindana, often translated as earth priest or land priest, appears alongside chiefs. In many communities the tindana is understood as a descendant of the first settlers and as the person who relates directly to the spirit of the land, responsible for sacrifices, rain and harvest rituals, and the care of shrines that mark first occupation. Historical accounts describe tindamba as the main authorities for appropriating land, with later shifts in political power and state law moving much day to day allocation into the hands of chiefs and government, while leaving earth priests with enduring spiritual and mediating roles.

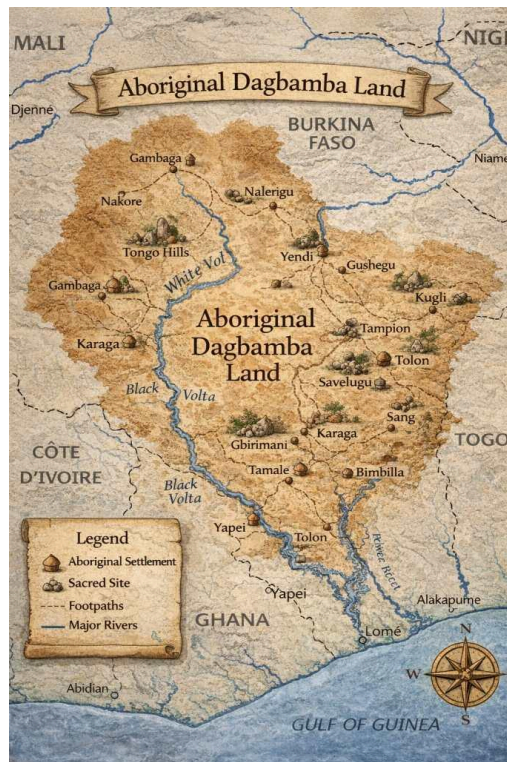
Land allocation is both a spatial and a political act. Residential expansion at the metropolitan edge often begins with intra family negotiations and development petitions to local chiefs for the conversion of agricultural plots into house plots, long before any formal layout is surveyed or registered.

What appears, on a statutory map, as a block of peri urban subdivisions is, in practice, the spatial outcome of reciprocal arrangements, interventions by community members, and ongoing claims that remain partly open. Similar logics were visible in exploratory engagements in Yendi and Damongo, where customary custodianship structures continue to shape who can access land, on what terms, and with what expectations of future renegotiation, even when statutory planning instruments exist on paper.

Customary authority is one of the systems that actively produces urban space.



Northern Ghana administrative districts, showing Tamale Municipal, Yendi and the Gonja area where Damongo is located, situating the workshop cities within their contemporary statutory territory.



This map represents how Dagbon remembers its territorial reach over time, rather than a precise administrative projection.

2.2 Statutory Planning as Territorial Ordering

Alongside these customary regimes, Tamale is governed by a statutory planning architecture defined by the Land Use and Spatial Planning Act 2016 (Act 925) and operationalised through the Land Use and Spatial Planning Authority (LUSPA), and the Metropolitan and Municipal Assemblies.

The Act establishes a three tier system of Spatial Development Frameworks, Structure Plans and Local Plans intended to guide land use zoning, infrastructure sequencing and development control across national, regional and local scales.

This statutory system rests on a distinct territorial logic. It assumes that territory can be stabilised through plan led sequencing, legally enforceable zoning and formal development permitting, and that space can be rendered legible, codified and regulated through mapped layouts and administrative procedures.

In the Greater Tamale area, Spatial Development Frameworks and Structure Plans set out growth corridors, nodes and land use designations that translate national and regional policy into metropolitan spatial strategy. Local Plans provide detailed parcel layouts, zoning categories, street naming and development control standards that are intended to support building permits, infrastructure coordination and property rate mobilisation.

The same statutory framework applies in Yendi and Damongo, where the Sustainable Cities project seeks to update or prepare Spatial Development Frameworks, Structure Plans and Local Plans within the assignment period, although existing planning coverage, staffing capacity and technical resources differ between the cities.

2.3 Parallel Authority Structures over Land

In northern Ghana, land sits under two parallel chains of authority. In Dagbon, the Ya Na (King) is the overlord at the apex of the chieftaincy system, with paramount and divisional chiefs responsible for areas such as Tamale, Yendi and their surrounding settlements.

Below them, sub chiefs, village chiefs and tindamba interact directly with families and buyers to allocate plots, resolve everyday disputes and uphold customary claims.

Alongside this sits the statutory local government structure.

At national level, the ministry responsible for local government and LUSPA set the legal and technical framework for planning. At regional level, Coordinating Councils oversee implementation.

At city level, Metropolitan and Municipal Assemblies such as Tamale, Sagnarigu, Yendi and Damongo, together with their Physical Planning, Works and Finance departments, prepare plans, issue permits and collect property rates.

These two hierarchies meet over the same land.

Families and developers negotiate access and allocation through chiefs, while also needing layouts, permits and services from the Assemblies. Reading this shared decision making space is a core part of territorial intelligence.

2.4 The Interface Between Allocation and Regulation

In practice, urbanisation in Tamale unfolds at the interface between these two systems. Customary authorities and family heads allocate peri urban land according to established social and political logics. The Metropolitan Assembly and LUSPA are responsible for regulating land use, approving layouts and issuing development permits in these same areas.

The customary system allocates land before regulation. The statutory system regulates land after allocation.

Empirical work on Tamale shows how this interface operates in local planning practice.

Chiefs or caretaker chiefs formally request the preparation of local plans for their customary lands. Planners and surveyors from the Physical Planning Departments then visit the site, prepare base maps and draft layouts, and present these to the Technical Sub Committee and Spatial Planning Committee for approval.

Once the plan is approved, chiefs engage surveyors to subdivide the land and install boundary beacons, which then becomes the practical basis for parcel sales and allocations.

When public departments are slow, under resourced, or simply overtaken by the pace of conversion, chiefs often appoint private planners and surveyors to produce layouts, then submit those completed or near completed plans to the Assembly for checking and retrospective approval.

This arrangement helps land delivery keep moving, but it also shifts control, sequencing and participation towards landowning authorities and whoever they commission.

This timing produces parallel allocation pathways. A plot may be allocated and even built upon through customary processes long before it appears in an approved Local Plan and long before it is captured in digital land information systems or property rate rolls.

To bring these paths closer together, planners and chiefs rely on regularisation practices such as layout approvals after the fact, partial incorporation of customary layouts into statutory plans and negotiated enforcement when buildings diverge from planned uses.

Planning officers in Yendi and Damongo described similar patterns of overlapping mandates, ad hoc coordination and case by case accommodation around expanding settlement fronts, which points to a regional pattern in northern Ghana's urbanisation rather than a Tamale specific exception.

These conditions give rise to an urban form that is patterned through negotiation more than through comprehensive plan led control. Expansion in Tamale is produced by two systems operating with unequal power and uneven capacity, across land that already carries deep historical structures, rather than by a single planning authority with full reach.

Movement 3

Urban Growth as Territorial Recomposition

3.1 Demographic Expansion

Tamale has shifted, within a few decades, from regional town to metropolitan node. Census and survey data indicate its population roughly doubling since the early 1990s, with growth rates consistently above national urban averages and reinforced by migration from surrounding rural districts and smaller towns in the Northern and Savannah regions.

This growth is uneven across space.

Younger households, recent migrants and lower income groups are concentrated in peripheral neighbourhoods where land is still accessible through customary channels and entry costs are lower.

Yendi and Damongo show similar dynamics at a smaller scale. Their roles as administrative centres and market nodes draw people from surrounding rural areas, adding steady pressure to peri urban belts governed through the same hybrid land systems described in Movement 2.

Urban growth here has a territorial signature. It concentrates along specific corridors and edges where customary authority, statutory jurisdiction and livelihood strategies meet.

3.2 Peri-Urban Conversion

Demographic expansion becomes territorial change most visibly at the urban edge. Studies of peri urban Tamale document rapid conversion of agricultural land into residential plots, with contiguous swathes of farmland subdivided into small parcels for housing, often without prior integration into formally approved layouts.

Customary landholders, including chiefs, tindamba and families, respond to demand by selling or leasing land in incremental transactions that gradually reshape the rural urban interface.

Hybrid planning research describes how these conversions unfold in practice. Chiefs call meetings to announce a decision to plan the land and convert it to urban uses. Planners and surveyors then prepare layouts and place beacons on individual plots, often with limited involvement of ordinary residents in decisions about land uses or proceeds. For many peri urban dwellers, participation arrives late in the sequence. People are shown boundaries after key decisions have already been made.

Farmers whose fields fall within expanding belts encounter mixed outcomes. Some reinvest proceeds in rental housing or trade. Others move further outward to farm. Many combine residual agriculture with urban employment. Similar conversion patterns are visible around Yendi and Damongo, where road improvements, markets and administrative facilities have

encouraged speculative and incremental subdivision along approach roads and in formerly rural communities now drawn into town or city orbits.

3.3 Infrastructure Lag

The speed and pattern of conversion outstrip the capacity of statutory systems to extend infrastructure in a coordinated way. In Tamale, built up area has expanded more rapidly than the provision of piped water, sewerage sanitation, engineered drainage and all weather roads.

New settlements emerge beyond the reach of existing trunk lines and service grids. Solid waste analysis show that peripheral communities often lack regular collection, relying on informal dumping or burning. Storm water runoff is channelled through ad hoc drains that follow plot boundaries more than planned networks.

Comparable patterns are reported in Yendi and Damongo, where limited budgets, fragmented land information and small technical teams constrain the ability of Assemblies to guide expansion at the pace of private building.

A consistent sequence follows. Land allocation is followed by construction. Regularisation follows construction. Infrastructure arrives later, if at all, and unevenly across space.

3.4 Socio-Spatial Patterning

Over time, this sequence produces structured patterns of inequality in the urban fabric. In Tamale, vulnerability to flooding, heat and service shortfalls is concentrated in low lying, densely built peri urban neighbourhoods where rapid construction has occurred on marginal land with limited drainage, tree cover or formal infrastructure.

In the event of heavy rains, when water collects in the low points, access roads become difficult to pass, and households rely on improvised drains that follow plot boundaries rather than a planned network.

Access to piped water, regular waste collection and all weather roads remains higher in older, more central areas and in selected corridors where statutory planning and investment have been more fully implemented. Newer fringe settlements depend on boreholes, informal waste disposal and improvised access routes.

Similar socio spatial patterning is visible in Yendi and Damongo, where peripheral communities bear disproportionate environmental risk and service gaps while absorbing much of the region's population growth.

Urban form reflects the interaction between hybrid land governance and rapid demographic pressure described in Movement 2. Who can mobilise which authority to secure land, and when, shapes long term exposure, access and opportunity.

Movement 4

Urban Economies and Value Chains

4.1 Urban Nodes and Regional Value Chains

Tamale, Yendi and Damongo are not only administrative centres. They also function as nodes in regional value chains that move food, biomass fuel, materials and waste across northern Ghana.

Cereals. Ghana's aggregate cereal harvest reached roughly 6.2 million tonnes in 2024. The Northern Region alone produces an estimated 230,000 tonnes of maize per year and around 300,000 tonnes of paddy rice, making it one of the top producing regions in the country. Much of this output passes through Tamale, which acts as an aggregation and transit hub. Cereals are collected from small producers and village markets in the surrounding districts and shipped in larger volumes towards Kumasi, Accra and other urban centres in central and southern Ghana.

Yams. Ghana produced approximately 10.5 million tonnes of yam in 2023, second only to Nigeria globally, with production concentrated in the Northern and Bono regions. Flows converge on Yendi and Tamale from production belts along the eastern corridor before some consignments continue south. At the same time, Tamale and Sagnarigu import many fruits and vegetables from central and southern Ghana, along with processed foods and manufactured goods, which then circulate through local and regional markets.

Livestock. Northern Ghana holds roughly 75% of the national cattle population and around 60% of sheep and goats. Livestock markets in Savelugu, Tamale and Buipe serve as collection and sorting points. Traders cull lower quality animals for local butchers and truck the rest to terminal markets in Techiman, Kumasi and Accra, where beef prices can be double those in Tamale. Cross border animals from Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali also pass through the same corridor.

Shea. Ghana produces between 130,000 and 150,000 tonnes of shea nuts annually, almost entirely from the savannah zones of the north, where an estimated 94 million shea trees grow wild. Over 600,000 women are engaged in collection and processing. Shea value chains link collectors and processors in and around Sagnarigu and Kumbungu to domestic processors and export markets through formal and informal trading networks. In 2023, shea exports earned Ghana an estimated 90 to 100 million USD.

Biomass fuel. Biomass accounts for roughly 38% of Ghana's total energy consumption. Nationally, some 30 million cubic metres of firewood and charcoal are consumed each year, and an estimated 70,000 hectares of forest are cleared annually for charcoal production alone. Charcoal and fuelwood produced in savannah woodlands of the Northern and Savannah regions are transported by intermediaries to Tamale, Yendi and Damongo, where they remain major household fuels. In these chains, men tend to dominate logistics and transport, while women are prominent in production, wholesale and retail stages.

Solid waste. In Tamale, where the metropolis generates an estimated 150 to 180 tonnes of waste per day, formal collection by Zoomlion does not reach all neighbourhoods, especially on the expanding fringe. Informal waste pickers recover recyclable plastics, metals and organics from streets, markets and dumpsites and sell them through intermediaries to recycling and composting operations. Nationally, the informal waste sector involves an estimated 16,000 waste actors and provides livelihoods for around 200,000 people.

Value chain	Main products	Typical source zones	Key urban nodes (within your area)	Main onward destinations	Dominant transport modes	Main actors (by node)	Ecological / social externalities
Food staples	Maize, rice, sorghum, millet	Rural hinterland of Tamale and Sagnarigu; wider Northern and Savannah regions; small-town markets within ~50 km	Tamale wholesale market and warehouses; urban and peri-urban retail markets in Tamale, Yendi, Damongo	Central and southern Ghanaian cities; local urban consumers	Medium and large trucks; small trucks and pickup vans; minibuses and motor tricycles	Smallholder farmers, village assemblers, wholesalers, market retailers, truckers	Land and water pressure in producing zones; sensitivity to rainfall variability and price shocks; congestion and loading pressure around wholesale markets
Roots and tubers	Yam, cassava	Eastern corridor and Yendi-area production belts; other yam-producing districts	Yendi and Tamale markets as consolidation points	Southern Ghanaian markets; local consumers	Trucks, smaller freight vehicles, minibuses	Farmers, itinerant traders, wholesalers, retailers, transport unions	Soil fertility decline and land-use change in production belts; post-harvest losses; roadside and market waste

Fruit and vegetables	Leafy greens, okro, tomatoes; oranges, papaya, banana, cabbage, avocado	Peri-urban fields around Tamale; central and southern Ghana for many fruits and vegetables	Urban markets and neighbourhood kiosks in Tamale, Yendi, Damongo	Local consumers; smaller secondary towns	Trucks; minibuses; motor tricycles and motorcycles	Peri-urban farmers, wholesalers, retailers, street vendors	Competition for land and water at the urban edge; pesticide and fertilizer runoff; vulnerability to heat and water stress
Livestock and meat	Live cattle, sheep, goats; beef and mutton	West African pastoral zones; northern grazing areas; markets such as Savelugu and Buipe	Livestock markets and holding grounds; urban slaughter slabs and butchers in Tamale and other towns	Urban consumers in Tamale and beyond	Long-distance trucks; smaller trucks; on-hoof trekking over shorter distances	Herd owners, traders, butchers, market authorities, transporters	Rangeland pressure; waste and effluent management around slaughter areas; animal-health and food-safety
Shea	Shea nuts and butter	Parklands around Sagnarigu, Kumbungu and wider Northern/Savannah regions	Urban and peri-urban processing clusters; aggregation points in Tamale and nearby towns	Domestic processors; export markets	Trucks and smaller freight vehicles	Women collectors and processors, traders, aggregators, processing firms	Tree cutting for charcoal and land clearing; women's labour burdens; climate sensitivity of parklands

Biomass fuel	Charcoal and fuelwood	Savannah woodlands in Northern and Savannah regions, including Damongo-adjacent areas	Charcoal yards, roadside depots and markets in Tamale, Yendi, Damongo	Households and small enterprises in the three cities and other towns	Medium trucks and pickups; tricycles within cities	Producers, transporters (largely men), wholesalers and retailers (many women), market associations	Woodland degradation and loss of shea/dawadawa; contribution to emissions and indoor air pollution; livelihood dependence.
Construction materials	Cement, steel, roofing sheets; locally extracted sand and gravel	Cement and manufactured materials from central/southern Ghana; sand and gravel from peri-urban and riverine sites	Building-materials yards along main roads; urban construction sites	Local building sector; secondary towns along corridors	Long-distance and regional trucks	Importers, wholesalers, retailers, contractors, sand miners, drivers	Riverbank and land degradation from sand mining; dust and noise along haul routes; informal extraction on customary land.
Solid waste and recycling	Mixed municipal waste; recyclables (plastics, metals, glass); organics	Households, markets, institutions and small enterprises in the three cities	Streets and transfer points; formal dumpsites/landfills; informal recovery sites	Regional recycling industries; local re-use; residual waste to dumpsites	Handcarts, tricycles, trucks	Informal waste pickers, formal waste companies, intermediaries, municipal authorities	Pollution from uncollected waste and open burning; health and safety risks for pickers; but also reduced waste volumes and provision of secondary raw materials.

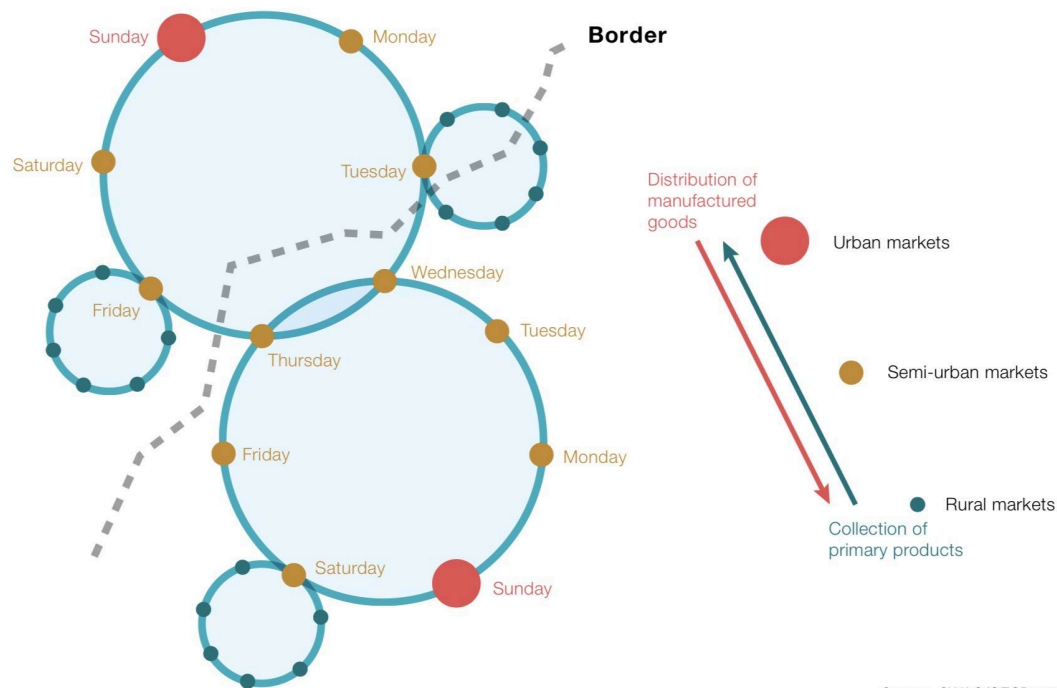
4.2 Markets in Motion and the Caravan Economy

These value chains are organised in time as much as in space. Weekly and seasonal market calendars determine when and where goods, people and services concentrate, producing a rotating rhythm across rural, semi urban and urban markets. In northern Ghana, Tamale and district towns such as Yendi and Damongo host major weekly markets and play a similar role within these circuits, even when the trade is not cross border.

On specific market days, cereals, yams, livestock, shea, firewood and charcoal are brought into town markets from surrounding villages. Traders return with manufactured goods, processed foods and money.

Map 7.3

The working of border markets



Stylised illustration of weekly market circuits along a West African border corridor, showing how traders rotate between rural, semi-urban and urban markets on different days, moving primary products one way and manufactured goods the other.

Much of this movement depends on informal and semi formal arrangements, shared trucks and minibuses, small freight operators, motorcycle networks, rotating savings groups and trust based credit between traders, transporters and producers. This caravan economy is part of the everyday infrastructure of the region.



An outlying Friday market near Damongo, empty on Saturday 7 February as traders move to Damongo's larger Saturday market as part of the weekly circuit.

4.3 Ecological Externalities and Climate Stress

The spatial imprint of these value chains is ecological as well as economic. Charcoal and fuelwood supply chains that feed Tamale, Yendi and Damongo contribute to degradation of savannah woodlands and add pressure on shea, dawadawa and other multipurpose trees.

Food chains interact with climate change and water stress. Rainfed farming systems that supply cereals and yams are exposed to rainfall variability and rising temperatures, while peri urban vegetable production around Tamale competes for land and water with housing expansion.

As climate shocks and market volatility increase, cities like Tamale may rely more on long distance food imports, shifting the geography and risk profile of their supply chains.

Waste chains have their own environmental signature. Where formal collection is weak, especially in expanding fringe settlements, informal dumping and burning degrade soils, contaminate water bodies and add to local air pollution, even as informal pickers reduce waste volumes and supply secondary materials.



Pile of firewood stacked under a shade tree outside Damongo, a typical biomass stock either for nearby households or for loading onto vehicles and transporting along the corridor towards Tamale.



Zoomlion waste skip on the fringe of Greater Tamale, overflowing and ringed with burnt rubbish, illustrating how weak formal collection and open dumping turn household waste into a visible environmental hazard.

4.4 Planning with Flows

Existing spatial plans and infrastructure investments only partially acknowledge these moving systems. Wholesale markets, fuel depots, charcoal yards, shea processing clusters, agro processing sites and informal recycling hubs often emerge in locations that make functional sense to traders and transporters, at junctions, along corridors, near water points or at the edge of residential areas. These locations do not always line up with designated land use zones or planned infrastructure networks.

For Tamale, Yendi and Damongo, planning for sustainable urban growth means engaging directly with value chains. That includes reserving and servicing space for markets, truck parks and logistics activities, protecting strategic agricultural and woodland areas while supporting greener biomass chains, and integrating informal waste pickers and recyclers into solid waste strategies.

The workshop that this document prepares is one of the few spaces where customary authorities, Assemblies, traders, utility providers and residents can look at these flows together and ask what territorial adjustments are needed. Territorial intelligence here means seeing origins, routes, nodes and externalities, then bringing that visibility into urban strategy.

Movement 5

Territorial considerations (for discussion)

The preceding movements suggest a number of questions that may be useful as the planning and design work takes shape. These points do not anticipate specific spatial proposals. They outline issues that workshop discussions may want to keep in view, read through the themes of governance, waste, water, planning and policy.

Movement 5 focus	Governance	Waste	Water	Planning and policy
5.1 Corridors and market rhythms	Who actually governs movement along these routes day to day, from chiefs to unions to Assemblies, and how can their roles be recognised in spatial decisions.	Where do waste hotspots appear along corridors and at markets, and what land or contracts are needed for skips, transfer points and recovery hubs.	Which crossings, low points and creek lines along corridors are already under pressure, and how routing choices affect flood and supply risk.	How can Structure and Local Plans, transport plans and sector policies be aligned so incremental decisions along corridors add up to a coherent territorial strategy.
5.2 Woodlands, farms and floodplains	Which authorities and custodians must agree when sensitive landscapes are converted or protected, and what forms of joint decision making are realistic.	How do informal dumping and burning currently use these landscapes, and where should formal waste services or controls be located to relieve pressure.	How do these areas contribute to recharge, storage and safe overflow, and what minimum protection is needed under more variable rainfall.	Which planning tools and national environmental or climate policies can ring fence or guide change in these zones without freezing out livelihoods.
5.3 Spaces for value chain activities	Who authorises and benefits from markets, truck parks, processing sites, charcoal yards and waste facilities, and how are conflicts handled when settlement fronts arrive.	How can waste from markets, abattoirs, shea processing and recycling hubs be turned into inputs, and which locations are no longer tenable as the city expands.	Where do these activities affect water quality or drainage, for example abattoir effluent or charcoal related catchment degradation.	What zoning, buffers and land reservations in Local and Structure Plans are needed to keep space for logistics and processing as cities grow.

5.4 Governance arrangements	Which land and service decisions can be negotiated within current customary–statutory relationships, and which require new agreements or legal clarification.	How do waste contracts, site choices and enforcement practices alter power relations between communities, chiefs, Assemblies and private firms.	How will planned water investments, rationing regimes and protection of source areas be negotiated on customary land.	How can Act 925 instruments and sector policies be adjusted so that they reflect actual hybrid practices rather than assuming a single chain of authority.
5.5 Climate, risk and uncertainty	Who can legitimately trigger changes in land use or service priorities when shocks occur, and how are more vulnerable groups heard in those decisions.	How can waste systems be upgraded so that heavier rains and heat do not turn dumpsites, blocked drains and burning into chronic hazards.	How will water scarcity and extreme events interact with existing supply gaps, and which territories need priority protection or investment.	How can spatial options, service plans and legal tools be stress tested against multiple climate and market futures, rather than assuming continuation of current patterns.

Conclusion

The movements in this document attempt to frame a simple claim. Technical planning tools will be most effective in northern Ghana if they are read through the territorial conditions within which they operate.

The cities that form part of this project sit in a Sahelian hinge geography shaped by centuries of movement, layered authority and ecological constraint; their present growth is produced through hybrid land governance, accelerated peri urban conversion, infrastructure lag and patterned inequalities, all intertwined with regional value chains in food, biomass, materials and waste. Planning instruments under Act 925, and the sectoral projects that accompany them, enter this terrain rather than replacing it.

