COASTAL REDEVELOPMENT IN WEST AFRICA

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Who Benefits from Coastal Redevelopment? Public Improvement, Displacement and Uneven Access in West African Cities

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Abstract:

Coastal redevelopment is reshaping West African cities through projects justified by coastal protection, fisheries modernisation, environmental rehabilitation and public access. Yet these improvements can also redistribute land value, livelihoods and the right to use the waterfront. This paper asks who benefits from such interventions and under what conditions existing coastal users can remain. It compares projects in Lagos, Accra, Dakar and Abidjan through critical analysis of institutional documents, academic research, community and human-rights archives, local reporting and published visual evidence, including satellite-image comparisons and photographs accompanying dated institutional and journalistic reports.

Rather than assuming a single trajectory of “blue gentrification”, it traces differences between official promises, spatial transformation, displacement and subsequent use. In Lagos, coastal protection and real-estate development coexist with documented residential evictions; in Dakar, access to the seafront remains contested; and in Abidjan, productive displacement preceded major phases of the later environmental rehabilitation programme. Jamestown Fishing Harbour in Accra reveals a more ambivalent trajectory: the clearance of an inhabited fishing beach was followed by facilities that formally recognise fishing and trade, although the extent to which displaced residents and workers gained access remains uncertain. We interpret this reorganisation as conditional infrastructural inclusion. Coastal redevelopment, we argue, redistributes not only land and value, but also the legitimacy of coastal uses and users.

Keywords:

Coastal redevelopment; Blue gentrification; Urban displacement; Waterfront access; West African cities; Conditional infrastructural inclusion

1. Introduction: Who benefits from coastal redevelopment?

Along West Africa’s coast, urban improvement often begins with a recognisable problem. Erosion threatens parts of Lagos’s Atlantic shoreline, pollution and flooding affect Abidjan’s Cocody Bay, Accra has sought to modernise fishing facilities, and access to Dakar’s seafront is disputed. Governments and developers respond with coastal defences, reclaimed land, harbours, roads, markets and promenades. These projects can provide genuine benefits. A seawall may protect property, a harbour may support fishing, and environmental works may improve water circulation. Yet each intervention also changes an existing place, raising a question that engineering plans cannot settle: who gains from the improvement, and who bears its costs?

Take the difference between a fishing beach and a fishing harbour. Both serve the fishing economy, but they need not accommodate the same people or activities. Canoe landing can coexist with homes, repairs, processing, trade and social life; a purpose-built harbour divides these functions into designated spaces with rules about access. Research documents successive demolitions of beach dwellings in Jamestown, Accra (Malkoc & Johnson, 2025). The harbour opened in 2024 with new landing, market and processing facilities (Ministry of Transport, 2024a, 2024b). But these facilities did not restore the beach's previous mix of homes, workplaces and social spaces. Fishing was not simply replaced by luxury development; its place in the city was reorganised.

Elsewhere, the relationship between improvement and displacement takes different forms. In Lagos, Eko Atlantic combines coastal defence with the production of high-value reclaimed land. The forced evictions of Otodo-Gbame and Ilubirin, documented by Amnesty International (2017), reveal another trajectory of lagoonfront transformation; these developments must not be collapsed into a single causal chain. On Dakar's Corniche Ouest, conflicts over hotels, walls, construction permits and public space concern the ability to reach and use the coast, not necessarily the demolition of entire neighbourhoods. In Abidjan, plans to rehabilitate Cocody Bay address environmental problems, while early shoreline clearances displaced horticultural and other productive activities. A project can protect a coastline, upgrade infrastructure or clean a lagoon without distributing those gains equally.

These differences are the starting point for this paper. It asks who benefits from coastal redevelopment, who loses housing, access or livelihoods, and under what conditions previous users can remain. The familiar account of an "informal" waterfront becoming a "modern" urban district tells us little about these choices. A shoreline may already be a workplace, a residential area, a market and a public meeting place, even when authorities classify it primarily as land for a new project. We therefore examine how redevelopment changes not only the physical landscape but also the categories through which residents, fishers, traders and other users are recognised as legitimate.

The comparison draws on public project documentation, academic research, human-rights and community archives, local reporting and previously published visual evidence. It follows the distance between what was promised, what was built or cleared, and, where evidence permits, how completed spaces are used. Rather than treating "blue gentrification" as an inevitable outcome, we ask which mechanisms can actually be established: eviction, economic displacement, contested or restricted coastal access, or conditional infrastructural inclusion. Jamestown, in particular, suggests that infrastructure can formally accommodate certain coastal activities without necessarily restoring the access, housing or livelihoods of all previous users. The issue is not only who leaves, but who is allowed to stay—and on what terms.

2. Beyond a single model of blue gentrification

At first glance, "blue gentrification" describes a familiar urban transformation. A waterfront associated with fishing, industry or low-income settlement attracts investment, gains new uses and becomes more valuable. The concept is useful because it directs attention to the relationship between water, property markets and displacement. Water can be treated both as an amenity and a risk: improving access to the shore or protecting land from flooding may

create opportunities for investment (Willems et al., 2026). Yet identifying these opportunities does not establish that every coastal project follows the same social trajectory.

The distinction matters for the cities examined here. Reclaimed land marketed to wealthy buyers, a fishing harbour built for artisanal fleets, a public promenade and the rehabilitation of a polluted lagoon are not equivalent interventions. They have different purposes, institutions and users. The literature helps us question who benefits from environmental improvement, but not every facility produces luxury housing or replaces a poorer population with a richer one. A recent review also finds that “blue gentrification” remains inconsistently defined (Becker et al., 2026).

Displacement therefore needs a wider but more precise vocabulary. Residential displacement concerns people forced from their homes, including exclusion from housing opportunities (Marcuse, 1985). Economic or productive displacement occurs when traders, fish processors or cultivators lose the places on which their income depends, even if they continue living nearby. Livelihood reorganisation refers to changes in where and how people work, including relocation to temporary facilities or new arrangements for landing and selling fish. Access displacement refers to a documented reduction or loss of previously available routes, shorelines or everyday public uses. Existing restrictions alone do not establish that such displacement has occurred. Finally, conditional infrastructural inclusion describes situations in which redevelopment provides regulated facilities for certain established activities, while access to those facilities depends on new spatial, administrative or occupational conditions. This does not necessarily imply the return of previously displaced individuals. These outcomes can overlap, yet they are not interchangeable: losing a home is different from losing a market stall, and both differ from being unable to reach the sea.

Two processes help us examine how such changes arise. The first is *reclassification*. A beach understood by its users as a place to live, work and gather may be designated by planners as a project site, a protected zone or an investment corridor. The new category does not make earlier activities disappear immediately, but it can change which claims authorities recognise. As Roy (2005) argues, informality should not be treated as a separate, inherently disordered sector. Coastal practices described as “informal” may have their own established rules and social relations, even where legal recognition is uncertain.

The second process is *formalisation*: organising activities through designated buildings, licences, markets and administrative rules. Such facilities may improve services without guaranteeing their practical use. Ribot and Peluso (2003) understand *access* as the ability to benefit from a resource, which can differ from possessing a formal right. Jamestown illustrates this distinction through disputed market arrangements and cold-storage costs.

Neither reclassification nor formalisation is an inevitable stage of coastal redevelopment. They are questions for comparison: what changed, who authorised it, and which activities remained possible, for whom? This approach allows us to investigate displacement and inclusion together, without deciding beforehand that every waterfront improvement is another version of the same gentrification story.

3. Research design, evidence and limitations

We compare coastal projects rather than cities as if each represented a single model of urban change. The units of analysis are interventions with identifiable locations, public justifications and material consequences. In Lagos, three related but distinct trajectories are examined: Eko Atlantic's coastal defence and land reclamation, the evictions at Otodo-Gbame and subsequent changes around Periwinkle Estate, and Ilubirin's lagoonfront redevelopment. In Accra, Marine Drive provides the wider planning context, while Jamestown Fishing Harbour is followed from beach clearance to operation; Dogo Beach is considered as a site where displaced activities reappeared, not as an independent redevelopment project. Dakar's Corniche Ouest, particularly around Mermoz and Terrou-Bi, and the rehabilitation of Cocody Bay in Abidjan complete the comparison. The cases are examined for variation in redevelopment objectives and documented distributive effects, not as a representative sample of West African coasts. Because their timelines and stages differ, we follow project-specific chronologies rather than impose a common before-and-after date.

The research draws on a documentary corpus, supplemented by a critical reading of published visual material, and is organised around four related questions: what was promised, what changed, who absorbed the costs and benefits, and what happened once the works were completed. For the first question, planning documents, institutional statements and project descriptions establish the purposes claimed by governments and developers, whether protection, modernisation, environmental repair or public access. They are evidence of official objectives, not proof that those objectives were achieved. The distinction matters when announcements describe future jobs or facilities before there is evidence of their actual use. Publication dates and authorship are considered throughout, and incompatible figures are not combined without justification.

The second question concerns physical transformation. We critically examine visual evidence already published by researchers, human-rights organisations, project institutions and news outlets, rather than producing an independently georeferenced satellite time series. Malkoc and Johnson (2025, Figure 1) compare Google Earth images of Jamestown and Dogo Beach from October 2015 and January 2024; Amnesty International (2017) compares a promotional aerial view of Periwinkle Estate with satellite imagery of Otodo-Gbame. Photographs accompanying dated reports on Jamestown Fishing Harbour (Ministry of Transport, 2024a; Incoom, 2026) and Mermoz Beach (La Vie Sénégalaise, 2020) provide supplementary visual evidence, without constituting a systematically assembled photographic series. The publication dates of these reports do not necessarily establish when the photographs were taken. Planning documents and promotional renderings are treated as representations of proposed interventions rather than evidence of completed construction. These materials are read alongside documented chronologies: visible changes do not, by themselves, establish eviction, legal status, realised benefits or causal relationships between developments.

To examine distribution, we turn to peer-reviewed studies, human-rights reports, documented judicial decisions, community archives and local journalism. These sources address what official accounts may leave aside: housing loss, fishing and trading practices, contested rights and relocation. For example, published research on Jamestown documents the beach before the harbour opened (Malkoc & Johnson, 2025), while Amnesty International (2017) records forced evictions in Lagos. Such sources also have boundaries: a community archive may document dispossession without resolving later property

ownership, and research conducted before an inauguration cannot tell us how the completed infrastructure performs.

This leads to the fourth question, operation. Where post-completion material is available, we examine reported maintenance problems, actual use, management arrangements and continuing restrictions. Jamestown is especially instructive: its inauguration in 2024 provides an institutional account of completed facilities, while later reporting raises questions about sedimentation, vessel access and market occupancy. Completion therefore marks another stage of inquiry, rather than the end of the story.

Email exchanges with researchers and local organisations were used for source discovery and methodological orientation, not as semi-structured interviews or independent testimony. They helped identify publications and community archives and showed that documents become available at different moments. No field interviews or original site observations are presented as evidence for this article.

Finally, the evidence is uneven. Jamestown and Lagos have richer academic, community and rights-based records than the material available for Dakar and Abidjan in this review. The absence of comparable correspondence or documentation does not establish an absence of conflict. Nor does a visible change prove a causal connection between neighbouring projects, particularly in the Otodo-Gbame–Periwinkle area. We cannot calculate net changes in income or welfare from these materials, nor can we systematically establish whether individuals displaced from Jamestown Beach subsequently became users of the completed harbour. We therefore keep conclusions proportional to the sources: stronger where displacement is documented, more tentative where the record establishes competing plans or restricted access but not their full social effects.

4. Lagos: protected land and residential displacement

Lagos offers three distinct accounts of coastal redevelopment, and placing them together does not make them stages of the same project. Along the Atlantic shore of Victoria Island, Eko Atlantic creates new land behind a major coastal defence. Farther along the lagoon, Otodo-Gbame was a residential and fishing community subjected to forced eviction; parts of the area were subsequently associated with Periwinkle Estate. At Ilubirin, land reclamation and a state-backed housing project advanced alongside repeated removals of waterfront residents. The common question is distributive, but the relationships between protection, development and displacement differ.

Eko Atlantic begins with a real physical problem. For decades, erosion and Atlantic storm surges threatened the Bar Beach waterfront and parts of Victoria Island. The response was the Great Wall of Lagos, a sea defence whose construction began in 2008, combined with extensive land reclamation. By 2013, project records reported more than five million square metres reclaimed from the ocean; the planned city covers approximately ten million square metres (Eko Atlantic, n.d.-a, n.d.-b). What had been open water was becoming a platform for roads, utilities, offices and residential towers. Coastal protection and real-estate production were built into the same intervention.

This combination is central to its political geography. The wall is intended to reduce exposure to erosion, while the reclaimed land is marketed to investors and high-income residents through a privately developed, state-supported urban project. Ajibade (2017) argues that its resilience claims need to be examined alongside the unequal distribution of risks and benefits across metropolitan Lagos. The point is not to deny coastal danger, nor to claim that Eko Atlantic caused the evictions examined below. It is to ask whose properties and investments receive new protective infrastructure, who can purchase the newly created land, and whose needs remain outside that arrangement.

Otodo-Gbame presents a different, more directly documented form of displacement. Long before luxury housing expanded across Lekki, the lagoon shore supported an established community of residents, fishers and small traders. Homes, jetties, canoes and businesses occupied a space that was both residential and productive. In 2016, a government campaign against waterfront settlements brought demolition threats to Otodo-Gbame, and residents turned to the courts. Protective orders did not stop the clearance. Demolitions and violent evictions continued between November 2016 and April 2017, leaving people without homes, possessions and access to the activities on which their livelihoods depended (Amnesty International, 2017).

The legal outcome makes the sequence especially revealing. On 21 June 2017, the Lagos State High Court found in favour of affected waterfront communities and ordered resettlement, yet the ruling did not restore their former homes or fishing grounds (Justice & Empowerment Initiatives, n.d.). Meanwhile, land in the former settlement area was being prepared for property development. Amnesty International (2017) compared promotional aerial imagery of Periwinkle Estate with satellite images of Otodo-Gbame and identified the same area. This is evidence of spatial overlap between the cleared waterfront and an advertised high-value development, not a complete parcel-by-parcel account of title, investment or responsibility for the evictions. The distinction matters: the dispossession is firmly documented, while the full chain linking particular developers to particular decisions still requires stronger records.

Ilubirin shows another connection between reclamation, public housing ambitions and removal. Near Lagos Island and the Third Mainland Bridge, lagoon-edge residents used a changing shoreline for dwelling and fishing while sand-filling expanded the developable area. By 2015, the Ilubirin Foreshore Housing Estate was being presented as a 15.1-hectare housing project, with work already underway (Oyebade, 2015). The community, however, did not enter this planned future on equal terms. Amnesty International (2017) documented repeated forced evictions affecting 823 Ilubirin residents between March 2016 and April 2017, together with the loss of homes and fishing-related livelihoods.

The housing project has since been marketed as a mixed-use waterfront neighbourhood of apartments, cafés, shops, offices and landscaped promenades (Ilubirin, n.d.). Promotional descriptions indicate the intended users and investment model; they do not measure the benefits delivered to those displaced. Nor did reclamation begin only after the evictions: construction, filling and the pressure to move overlapped. The result was not simply a switch from an informal settlement to a completed residential district, but a longer process in which the lagoon edge became increasingly available for planned development while earlier occupants lost room to remain.

These trajectories reveal three different distributions of coastal value: protection and new marketable land at Eko Atlantic, documented residential eviction and subsequent property development around Otodo-Gbame, and housing-led reclamation accompanied by displacement at Ilubirin. They belong to the same metropolitan political economy without constituting a single causal chain. Lagos therefore shows why the analysis must follow particular projects, decisions and users rather than apply one label to every transformed shoreline.

5. Accra: from fishing beach to regulated harbour

The central seafront of Accra has been imagined as a place for tourism and monumental development for decades. The Marine Drive Tourism Investment Project promises hotels, cultural facilities, public promenades and new commercial space between Osu and the historic centre. Yet the project remained under review in 2026, with preparatory works and new efforts to secure investment still under way (Obeng, 2026). Marine Drive matters as a broader horizon of coastal valorisation: even before completion, plans can recast familiar shoreline activities as temporary uses of land intended for something else. It does not, however, establish a causal explanation for the clearance of Jamestown Beach. The fishing harbour followed a distinct programme of infrastructure construction.

Before the harbour, Jamestown Beach was neither an empty site nor simply a place where boats landed. Canoes arrived with fish; traders bought and sold the catch; others processed it, repaired equipment, cooked food or maintained small businesses. Homes stood among these workplaces, alongside places for education and social activities. The beach supported an everyday network in which living near the water was bound up with working on it. Malkoc and Johnson (2025), drawing mainly on research carried out in 2019, describe this as a socially connected settlement whose inhabitants claimed a “right to the beach”: not merely the freedom to occupy land, but access to fisheries, livelihoods, collective life and a say in future development.

That claim was contested long before construction began. From 2015, repeated demolition exercises removed dwellings and unsettled the beach economy, while the promised harbour remained largely in the future. Residents often rebuilt with smaller structures and salvaged materials that could be dismantled or replaced at relatively low cost. Malkoc and Johnson (2025) call this practice “dis/incremental dwelling”. It was a response to repeated destruction, but it was hardly a secure way to live. In May–June 2020, the final major demolition cleared the remaining settlement for construction, affecting approximately 450 residents after at least four rounds of demolition. The loss involved housing, trading space and social infrastructure, not only structures recorded as informal buildings.

There was no single community position on the project. Some fishers and local representatives welcomed the prospect of a better harbour and considered other beach residents to be unauthorised occupants. Others, including people who had lived and worked there for years, questioned who had been consulted and whose claims were recognised. As Malkoc and Johnson (2025) show, support for modernising fishing did not necessarily mean consent to eviction. The dispute was also over who counted as a legitimate user and who would be allowed to benefit when the harbour eventually opened. These differences matter

because a project aimed at a fishing community need not benefit every person connected to its economy.

The completed project was commissioned on 13 September 2024. Supported by Chinese government financing and constructed by CRCC Harbour and Channel Engineering Bureau Group, the complex brought a harbour basin, fish market, cold storage, processing areas, a maintenance workshop, offices, commercial spaces, a crèche and waste-treatment infrastructure (Accra Metropolitan Assembly, 2024; Ministry of Transport, 2024b). This was a substantial material change. The promise was not to remove fishing and replace it with waterfront apartments, but to equip artisanal fisheries with facilities that the former beach did not have. Official accounts, however, tell us what was built and intended, not how evenly its benefits were distributed or how much of the former beach community could return.

The distinction became clearer after commissioning. In March 2026, the transport minister acknowledged that the breakwater was too short to prevent recurring sedimentation in the harbour basin. According to Dankwah (2026), dredging could lose effectiveness within three to six months, and accumulated sediment prevented boats from reaching a designated repair area. An October visit by journalists also documented shallow water, limits on access for larger fishing vessels and plastic waste, alongside modern facilities and ongoing fishing activity (Incoom, 2026). The harbour therefore cannot be described simply as either a success or a failure: its operation has required continued maintenance and adjustments.

The fish market reveals a different friction. Although a purpose-built building was available, a number of women continued selling fresh fish on the shoreline in October 2026. Some considered the shore more convenient for receiving and selling the catch and raised concerns about drainage and odours inside the market. Harbour managers disputed those criticisms and defended the new facilities on sanitary grounds; other traders were already using the building (Ahovi, 2026). The disagreement is revealing because both sides refer to the same activity—selling fish—but organise it differently. For traders, proximity to the landing place can matter; for the authorities, a designated market promises hygiene and order. A facility may improve conditions without fitting established working routines.

The cold store reveals a further conflict over the practical use of the completed facilities. On 27 October 2026, Jamestown’s chief fisherman reported that fishers could not use it to preserve surplus catches. He also said that municipal objections had stopped some fishers from drying excess fish along nearby streets (Okine, 2026). The following day, harbour management disputed the claim that access was being denied, arguing that fishers should cover electricity costs and agree on a monthly payment (Tiwaa, 2026). These competing accounts do not establish whether the equipment was technically functional. They do show how the availability of infrastructure can depend on unresolved operating costs, while alternative practices face restrictions.

The people displaced from the original beach did not all disappear from the coast. After the 2020 clearance, Dogo Beach, near the Korle Lagoon outfall, was designated as a temporary fishing and canoe-landing area. Some displaced residents built dwellings there, while fish processing and other activities reappeared in a place exposed to renewed uncertainty. Malkoc and Johnson (2025, Figure 1) document a partial demolition in 2021 and reproduce Google Earth images from October 2015 and January 2024 showing the subsequent

expansion of dwellings and fish-processing facilities at Dogo Beach. The municipal authority ordered fishermen to leave the Jamestown construction site for Dogo in 2021 (Accra Metropolitan Assembly, 2021). In September 2026, it gave occupants of Dogo a one-week notice to vacate ahead of a planned demolition, describing the area as a temporary landing site rather than an authorised permanent settlement (Accra Metropolitan Assembly, 2026). The notice documents a further threat, not proof that the announced demolition took place.

Jamestown thus reveals a mechanism different from simple replacement by elite consumption. We describe it as conditional infrastructural inclusion: the redevelopment displaced a heterogeneous beach community while creating facilities that formally accommodate fishing, processing and trade. Yet the conditions of use changed. The designated market, disagreements over sanitation and unresolved cold-storage costs show that new infrastructure can recognise established activities without making every service straightforward to use. This is selective recognition of coastal functions, not evidence that previously displaced residents and workers returned to the harbour. Their individual access remains undocumented, as do the longer-term effects on housing, livelihoods and social relations. A project can therefore support fishing while leaving other coastal uses excluded and its benefits unevenly realised.

6. Dakar: public improvement and contested coastal access

Unlike the forced evictions documented in Lagos, the main conflict on Dakar's Corniche Ouest concerns access to the sea. The coastline is a place for walking, fishing, exercising and gathering, but also an attractive location for hotels, residences and leisure facilities. Its legal status makes this tension particularly significant. Senegal's Code du Domaine de l'État, amended in 1985, includes the shoreline and a 100-metre strip measured from the highest tidal limit within the natural public domain (République du Sénégal, 1985). This designation does not guarantee unrestricted access everywhere, but it establishes that the coast cannot simply be treated as ordinary private land.

Since the 2000s, construction along the Corniche has progressively changed the relationship between the city and the ocean. Hotels, residential developments, walls and enclosed plots have occupied parts of the waterfront. In 2014, protests against a proposed wall surrounding the Turkish embassy site led the government to suspend construction after campaigners challenged the obstruction of coastal views and access (Bozonnet, 2014). Around Mermoz, photographs of a fenced construction site prompted renewed allegations of beach privatisation in 2020, although these reports did not establish the legal status of the development (La Vie Sénégalaise, 2020). Terrou-Bi offers a clearer example of controlled access: the hotel advertises a private beach where non-residents can enter under paid and restricted conditions (Terrou-Bi, n.d.). These examples document different forms of restriction and controversy, but do not establish how public access changed at each location over time.

The state has also intervened in the opposite direction. Declared of public utility in 2021, the Corniche Ouest redevelopment programme was presented in June 2022 as a ten-kilometre project intended to return the waterfront to Dakar's residents (République du Sénégal, 2021; Ministère de l'Urbanisme, du Logement et de l'Hygiène publique, 2022). Its proposed improvements included public promenades, sports facilities, the rehabilitation of Soumbédioune's fishing market, recreational spaces and coastal protection works. These

interventions respond to genuine urban needs. Yet the promise of public access raises another question: whether new facilities restore everyday connections with the sea or establish different conditions for using the waterfront.

The controversy continued under a new government. In May 2024, authorities suspended coastal construction temporarily and established a commission to review land titles and occupations within Dakar's maritime public domain (RTS, 2024). The measure confirmed that the legality of coastal development remained disputed, without establishing that every building was unlawful. Nor can earlier private developments be attributed to the public redevelopment programme announced before 2022.

Dakar therefore illustrates contested coastal access rather than documented mass residential displacement. Walls, restricted entrances and paid facilities establish that access is controlled at particular locations, but demonstrating access displacement would require evidence of how those same places were used before the restrictions appeared. The available sources do not provide a consistent historical reconstruction of those changes across the Corniche. What we can establish is the tension between public claims to the coastline, existing restrictions and state programmes promising to restore access. The question remains who can reach and use the waterfront, where, and under what conditions.

7. Abidjan: ecological rehabilitation and productive displacement

In Abidjan, Cocody Bay illustrates a different kind of coastal transformation. The intervention began with a genuine environmental problem. Wastewater and solid waste entered the lagoon from surrounding districts, while sedimentation, poor water circulation and flooding affected the bay and the nearby Indénié junction. By 2013, government documents were already describing sanitation and flood-control works as necessary to restore the lagoon (Government of Côte d'Ivoire, 2013). Cleaning the water was therefore a public concern, not simply a justification invented to attract investors.

The solution, however, became much more than environmental repair. Early design proposals treated the bay as a new urban landscape; the wider rehabilitation programme launched through Ivorian–Moroccan cooperation in 2015 connected drainage works and depollution with promenades, leisure facilities, commerce and a marina (Government of Côte d'Ivoire, 2015). In 2016, the next phase was intended to include dredging, a new channel to improve water exchange, bank stabilisation, hydraulic filling and preparations for the marina (Government of Côte d'Ivoire, 2016). The Alassane Ouattara Bridge, inaugurated in August 2023, subsequently connected Cocody and Plateau across the bay and added a prominent mobility landmark to the waterfront (Islamic Development Bank, 2023). Environmental improvement and metropolitan development advanced within the same programme, though not always on the same timetable.

But what occupied the lagoon edge before these works? The shore was also a place of employment. Teixeira (2017, pp. 66–67) draws on an October 2012 socioeconomic impact assessment prepared for an earlier development proposal. It identified 52 individuals and one business operating in the study area. Of those individuals, 46 cultivated and sold flowers, while four worked as artisans. These figures describe economic activities before the later Ivorian–Moroccan programme, not the number of people displaced in 2013. Horticulture

depended on two advantages that were difficult to reproduce elsewhere: access to water and proximity to customers in Cocody.

To understand what happened afterwards, Teixeira interviewed former lagoon-edge users during fieldwork in 2017. One horticulturist, Souleymane, dated his removal to 2013 and described re-establishing his activity along Boulevard de France, where he had less growing space and faced higher charges (Teixeira, 2017, pp. 69–70). Her research also describes other growers who relocated nearby, moved into gardening-maintenance work or left horticulture. These accounts document productive displacement, but do not establish that all 46 horticulturists recorded in 2012 were removed in the same year. Crucially, the reported early clearance preceded the 2015 Ivorian–Moroccan cooperation agreement and later major construction phases, which therefore cannot be presented as its immediate cause.

The legal treatment of the shore added another layer. In 2015, the Ministry of Economic Infrastructure described the lagoon margins as public land, said that occupants had been asked to leave and announced compensation (Ministry of Economic Infrastructure, 2015). That statement establishes the government's position; it does not, by itself, demonstrate that every affected worker was adequately compensated. Similarly, the opening of the bridge did not mean the entire environmental programme was complete: reporting in 2026 described unfinished facilities and persistent pollution (Diarra, 2026).

Cocody Bay therefore illustrates economic and functional displacement within a longer process of environmental and metropolitan transformation. Better drainage and mobility can benefit the wider city, while growers and small operators lose access to the particular shoreline on which their livelihoods depended. Ecological rehabilitation and displacement are not mutually exclusive, even when they occur at different stages of redevelopment.

8. Comparative discussion: what redevelopment makes conditional

The same stretch of coast can be described as a danger to be contained, an investment opportunity or a place where people live and work. Each description makes some priorities more visible than others. Across the projects examined, governments and developers promise improvements while deciding which existing uses can remain. To compare those decisions, we return to five analytical dimensions: public-good justification, reclassification, formalisation, displacement or exclusion, and redistribution. They are questions to investigate, not stages through which every project necessarily passes.

The first finding is that public benefit does not have one meaning. Coastal protection at Eko Atlantic addresses erosion; Jamestown offers facilities for artisanal fisheries; Cocody Bay responds to pollution and flooding; Dakar's Corniche programme promises public access; and Ilubirin combines housing with lagoonfront development. Marine Drive adds tourism and investment to this vocabulary. These purposes differ, and some respond to well-documented needs. The distributive problem begins when a project's declared beneficiaries are treated as if they include everyone who previously used the site. Protecting valuable property does not establish protection for all coastal residents, just as building a market does not mean all traders can use it.

Reclassification helps explain the gap. Before redevelopment, a beach may accommodate homes, boats, fish processing and trade, whereas a plan identifies a harbour site. A lagoon edge used for horticulture becomes a rehabilitation zone, while a seafront used for walking may be mapped as a tourism corridor. The new classification becomes a distributive decision when it determines which activities receive space, legal recognition or compensation. In Otodo-Gbame, a longstanding settlement was cleared despite legal challenges (Amnesty International, 2017); in Cocody, a productive shoreline was increasingly governed through the requirements of environmental works (Teixeira, 2017). Administrative categories are part of the transformation, not merely labels applied afterwards.

Formalisation is less consistent across the projects. At Jamestown, its instruments are identifiable: a landing basin, a market, processing spaces and management rules. Fishing remains a recognised function, while dwelling and other beach activities do not recover the same place. Disputes over market use and cold-storage costs show how new facilities reorganise everyday practices and make access to certain services dependent on rules and financial arrangements (Ahovi, 2026; Tiwaa, 2026). Elsewhere, we find property development or regulated access without comparable evidence that previous users have been incorporated into new facilities. A formally planned landscape is not the same as the formalisation of existing livelihoods.

Displacement also takes different forms, and the evidence is not equally strong for each. Otodo-Gbame and Ilubirin provide documented residential evictions, with losses extending to fishing and trade (Amnesty International, 2017). Around Cocody Bay, the removal of horticultural activities is principally productive and economic; its early chronology prevents attributing every loss to later works. Along Dakar’s Corniche, walls, controlled entrances and paid facilities document restrictions and disputes over coastal access, although the available evidence does not establish a systematic historical loss of public access. Eko Atlantic illustrates selective protection and high-value reclaimed land, but does not establish that the project caused evictions elsewhere in Lagos (Ajibade, 2017). Even around Otodo-Gbame, the precise property-development chain requires stronger parcel evidence. These are related distributive processes, not interchangeable outcomes.

Jamestown complicates this comparison because displacement was followed by the formal incorporation of certain coastal activities into new infrastructure. The cleared beach was replaced by facilities intended for fishing and trade, not elite residential consumption. Contemporary reporting documents the use of some facilities, but does not establish how many users had previously lived or worked on the demolished beach. We call this conditional infrastructural inclusion: recognised activities gain designated infrastructure while their organisation becomes subject to new rules and spatial arrangements. This mechanism does not demonstrate the individual reintegration of displaced residents, nor does it erase lost homes or the continuing insecurity at Dogo Beach (Malkoc & Johnson, 2025).

This leads to the central finding. Redevelopment redistributes not only land, property value and physical access, but also legitimacy: the practical recognition of a person’s claim to remain, work or use the coast. A fisher identified as a harbour beneficiary, a flower grower treated as a temporary occupant, a resident contesting demolition and a beach user facing a controlled entrance occupy different positions in the redeveloped waterfront. Legitimacy describes which claims public decisions recognise. It does not, by itself, establish legal

entitlement or the ability to benefit from coastal resources (Ribot & Peluso, 2003). Deciding who counts as a legitimate coastal user can be as consequential as constructing a wall or clearing a site.

Timing matters too. At Jamestown, the inauguration recorded completed facilities, while later reports documented siltation and partial market use; neither archive alone explains the harbour's effects. Dogo Beach shows how displacement continues beyond the cleared site. In Abidjan, horticultural removals preceded later rehabilitation phases, while Dakar's enclosure controversies predated the 2022 public programme. A market on a project plan cannot establish traders' everyday access to it, just as a promise to reopen the seafront cannot establish that every route is open. Promise, transformation, distribution and operation are therefore useful points of observation, not an inevitable sequence.

These findings remain bounded by unequal documentation, especially for Dakar and Abidjan, and cannot establish a comparable net balance of benefits. They nevertheless change what we should ask of a waterfront project: not only what it builds or restores, but who is recognised as its beneficiary, who can actually use it, and what it removes, relocates, restricts or makes conditional.

9. Conclusion

Who benefits from coastal redevelopment? The comparison does not offer a single answer. A seawall can protect land from erosion, a harbour can improve fishing facilities, and environmental works can address pollution and flooding. Public space projects can also reconnect a city with its coastline. These benefits should not be dismissed. But neither should their existence settle the distributive question: who receives protection, who gains access to new infrastructure, and whose established uses of the coast are no longer recognised?

The evidence reveals several mechanisms rather than one transition from an "informal" shore to a modern waterfront. Eko Atlantic combines coastal protection with the production of high-value land, while Otodo-Gbame and Ilubirin document residential eviction alongside lagoonfront transformation. Cocody Bay illustrates productive displacement within a longer environmental redevelopment process, while Dakar's Corniche illustrates contested public access without evidence of comparable mass residential eviction. These processes differ in their causes, actors and consequences, even when they share the language of urban improvement.

Jamestown makes this distinction particularly clear. After demolitions on a beach where people lived, worked and maintained social ties, a new harbour provided infrastructure for the fishing economy. Fishing was not simply replaced by luxury property. Instead, recognised fishing and trading activities were accommodated within regulated facilities, while other residential and economic uses lost their former place. We describe this as conditional infrastructural inclusion: access to the new infrastructure depends on the organisation and recognition of particular activities, without necessarily restoring the position of those previously displaced. This mechanism helps explain Jamestown without becoming a universal model for the other cities.

The comparison is limited by unequal documentary coverage, particularly for Dakar and Abidjan, and cannot establish comprehensive changes in income, welfare or long-term access. Even where construction is documented, a completed facility is not proof that it functions as promised. Jamestown's post-opening difficulties show why analysis must continue beyond inauguration, when official ambitions encounter everyday practices. The promise, physical transformation and actual use of a waterfront may tell different stories. Coastal redevelopment must therefore be assessed not only by what it builds, but also by what it removes, relocates, restricts or makes conditional.

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