



IS THERE AN URBAN VILLAGE?

During the pilot research phase of the *Ouagadougou Initiative*, based at the Unité d'Enseignement et de Recherche en Démographie (UERD) at the University of Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, a cross-sectoral research team grappled with understanding the urban, and more specifically, the *Ouagalais*, context. Before formulating questions on the *Initiative's* themes of health, education, and habitat, we asked ourselves the following questions: How is the city fundamentally different from the village, or is the city a collection of "urban villages"? What implications do these potential differences in the social fabric of the urban environment have for research and intervention efforts? **What are the most appropriate ways to develop research and intervention strategies in the urban setting?**



Taabtenga market, Ouagadougou. Photo: Stephanie Baux, UERD.

The urban context presents challenges to research and intervention by its sheer size,

and by its heterogeneity. In the rural environment at the village level, the population in question is finite, population mobility and behaviors tend to follow definable patterns, and heterogeneity is similarly identifiable. In sum, the village can be described in a coherent fashion. Is this true for the city? Or is the city an almost random assortment of individuals and families, each with different patterns of behavior? On the other hand, the city could be a collection of small, identifiable groups of people with similar behaviors and histories. This would be the case if, for example, new migrants to the city always settled near their village families and friends, or if ethnic, religious, or linguistic groups tended to settle together within certain neighborhoods in Ouagadougou. These hypothetical scenarios imply different strategies for research and interventions.

Is there an urban neighborhood?

Our preliminary field research shows that the urban context is different from the village experience, and in addition that there are differences *within* the city as well as between the city and rural areas. Different neighborhoods in Ouagadougou exhibit different patterns of socialization, mobility, physical environment, economic status, health seeking behavior, and school attendance, for example. Urban heterogeneity extends even to within neighborhoods, but some generalizations can be made at the neighborhood level. However, this in turn begs the following question: what is an urban neighborhood? Is it akin to an urban village, or something different? How do urban dwellers define their space? Once again, the answers to these questions imply different sorts of approaches to research and intervention activities.



A street in Wemtenga, Ouagadougou. Photo Blair Darney, Population Council/UERD.

protocol for the *Ouagadougou Initiative* and its partners.

--Blair Darney Yale
University Population
Council UERD

Is there an urban methodology?

The *Ouagadougou Initiative* is developing answers to these questions in the context of a current pilot study of community-based health interventions in co-operation with SAVE the Children, Netherlands. This study will test the appropriateness of transferring rural strategies proven to improve health behaviors and outcomes in villages to the urban setting. With an understanding of some of the differences, similarities, and challenges of the urban context, the pilot study design has been adapted to better respond to the realities of Ouagadougou. The *Initiative's* initial *Contextual Mapping* and preliminary research phase, funded by the Rockefeller Foundation, has provided our research team with relevant results to aid in such an understanding.

Approaches and techniques exist for working in the rural context. We need to know whether the urban context is at all similar. If so, our methods may be transferable, but if not, we need to develop entirely new methods. Research and intervention activities in the urban setting require tools to describe the physical, social, and economic realities of the urban environment. Another focus of the *Ouagadougou Initiative's* current exploratory research is to develop the instruments needed to describe and quantify the urban context. This new methodology will inform the development of a long-term research and intervention

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