

Systematic Review

Normative Pluralism and Socio-Environmental Vulnerability in Cameroon: A Literature Review of Urban Land Policy Issues and Challenges

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Abstract: African cities are experiencing rapid, unregulated growth, characterized by high land pressure and growing demand for housing and urban infrastructure. New arrivals often settle in vulnerable areas (wetlands, hills, flood) where land is cheaper and unregulated by public authorities. This type of settlement is accompanied by numerous land conflicts, exacerbated by the coexistence of formal and customary land tenure systems, which struggle to harmonize. In this context, public land regulation policies often remain centralized and ill-adapted, revealing their limitations in ensuring equitable and sustainable management of urban land. Faced with this gap, our systematic study explores the socio-environmental dynamics of this normative pluralism in land governance within Cameroonian cities. Our findings highlight the tensions and opportunities of this complex coexistence, which vary significantly according to city size (small, medium, and large), the colonial heritage (Francophone and Anglophone), and the dominant legal framework (civil law and common law). The analysis highlights the need to take into account historical, linguistic, and politico-administrative roots, which profoundly influence local forms of the institutionalization of normative pluralism and the associated socio-environmental vulnerabilities. This normative plurality underlines the importance of a hybrid system of land governance capable of integrating local specificities while ensuring land security for all. Future research will include comparisons with other African countries in order to understand transferable mechanisms for better land governance.

Keywords: urban land policy; normative plurality; informal norms; socio-environmental vulnerability; PRISMA 2020; Cameroon



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1. Introduction

Rapid urbanization in Africa is one of the most significant challenges of the 21st century. Over the past 50 years, the urban population in African cities has quadrupled and is expected to reach 60% by 2050 [1]. This growth, characteristic of cities in the Global South, raises immense challenges in terms of increasing demand for housing and inequalities in access to land ownership [2]. The literature often attributes these access inequalities to the persistence of land tenure structures inherited from the colonial period. Indeed, colonial land policies favored political and economic elites, who hold vast portions of urban land, to the detriment of poor populations, forcing them to settle in vulnerable areas on the periphery, often lacking basic urban infrastructure and services [3–5]. In these contexts, informal norms and “agile land transactions” (concept developed by Bhanye [6] to show the effectiveness of informal norms in urban peripheries for access to land by Malawian migrants

in Zimbabwe) sometimes appear to be the most suitable for the socio-economic profiles of vulnerable populations [4,7]. It refers to land transfer or appropriation practices that bypass formal institutional frameworks and adjust dynamically to the interplay of actors and legal uncertainties, thus illustrating a form of strategic adaptation to formal frameworks.

This normative plurality, marked by the cohabitation of these two systems of governance—formal and informal—is characteristic of urban land governance in Africa [6,8,9]. The scientific literature already recognizes the weak capacity of the formal land management system to guide urban development in sub-Saharan Africa on its own and recommends the integration of informal and traditional systems, often more adapted to the community level, in hybrid land governance institutional frameworks [10–12]. Unfortunately, the study of the plural socio-environmental impacts of this cohabitation in African cities remains underdeveloped to date.

Indeed, due to the absence of adequate planning, many urban populations, constrained by economic conditions, settle in ecologically sensitive areas (floodplains, unstable slopes, etc.), which are often cheaper but lack appropriate protective infrastructure [13,14]. These areas, useful for flood regulation and climate resilience, are becoming informal settlements (A dominant urban phenomenon in the countries of the South, mainly characterized by the marginalization of its inhabitants, the lack of urban services, environmental vulnerability, and processes of access to land on the margins of state procedures) [7,15]. Despite efforts to develop these areas, the high vulnerability of these populations to natural hazards (flooding, erosion, landslides) must be emphasized, as it continues to worsen with the effects of climate change [16]. A key example of this phenomenon in major African metropolises is Nairobi, the capital of Kenya, where more than half of the population resides in just 1% of the city's land area [17]. These populations, confined to informal settlements, live in extremely precarious conditions under the constant threat of flooding and forced evictions [17]. Are these socio-environmental challenges the same in medium-sized and small cities?

Cameroon, often referred to as “Africa in miniature”, has a complex colonial legacy and a unique bilingual identity, blending Anglophone and Francophone traditions. This distinctive context presents a valuable framework for analyzing the socio-environmental challenges arising from the coexistence of formal and informal land tenure systems. Urban land governance in Cameroon is shaped by three major crises: institutional, social, and environmental. The institutional crisis stems from the conflicting coexistence of formal and informal land tenure systems [18], while the social crisis is driven by the influx of over 485,285 refugees, widespread poverty, and the marginalization of vulnerable populations in decision-making processes [19]. Meanwhile, the environmental crisis manifests through the degradation of natural ecosystems such as wetlands, coastlines, steep slopes, mangroves, and agricultural zones exacerbating vulnerability to hazards like flooding, erosion, and landslides [20,21]. This study examines how the normative plurality of land tenure practices, shaped by diverse socio-cultural and institutional contexts, influences key socio-environmental challenges in Cameroonian cities, including land access conflicts, social inequalities, and environmental vulnerability.

As a buffer state between West and Central Africa, Cameroonian cities exhibit a diverse range of socio-economic and institutional contexts, offering valuable insights for comparing land governance practices across different settings. This literature review aims to explore how normative pluralism in land governance influences land conflicts, institutional regulation strategies, and socio-environmental pressures in urban areas. The theoretical contribution of this study lies in its ability to move beyond fragmented analyses of normative pluralism in Africa, which often contrast formal and informal norms, by demonstrating that the challenges of cohabitation vary significantly depending on colonial legacies, socio-cultural contexts, and city size. By building on the work of [22–24], this

study seeks to shed light on the tensions and opportunities created by normative plurality in urban land governance.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. *Interconnections Between Normative Plurality and Land Governance in African Cities*

Land governance is defined as the set of policies, processes, and institutions that regulate the access, use, and management of land [25]. This definition encompasses land policy development, property rights allocation, land information management, land administration, and mechanisms for resolving land disputes [26]. In urban contexts, land governance includes the management, use, and ownership of urban land [27].

In Africa, land governance is shaped by the coexistence of customary land tenure systems—rooted in precolonial traditions—and formal land tenure systems, introduced during the colonial period. The intersection of customary land rights, which grant collective ownership to local communities, and modern land tenure laws, based on individual land titles, creates a legal duality that complicates urban land management [9,28]. This legal duality is a major source of land conflicts, further exacerbated by delays in land registration, the lack of reliable data, and the inefficiency of land courts [3].

Chauveau et al. [22], through their framework of normative plurality, highlighted the coexistence and competition between formal and informal norms in land governance in Africa. They argue that urban land governance in African contexts rarely relies solely on the formal framework of the state, which includes legal frameworks, land legislation, and administrative regulations. In addition to customary law, which has been incorporated into the land codes of many countries, new informal practices such as community arrangements, flexible informal transactions, and uncodified local practices have emerged as alternative means for local populations to acquire land, particularly in sensitive areas where formal regulations prohibit settlement [7,29]. This plurality creates “grey zones” where multiple overlapping land tenure systems coexist, each with its own logic, mechanisms of access, and control, shaped by the needs, interests, and strategies of various local actors [23]. This evolving land governance landscape is especially prominent in African cities, where informal land acquisition practices prevail despite ongoing attempts at state regulation [18,30,31].

Studies by [9,32,33] in Ghana and [6] in Zimbabwe have illustrated the consequences of this normative plurality in urban land management, generating appropriation conflicts, areas of institutional ambiguity, and socio-environmental vulnerabilities. They highlight the tensions between the coexistence of several norms (formal, informal, and customary), each with its own mechanisms for land access and regulation. This complexity leads to overlaps and conflicts between traditional rights and state regulation. These conflicts are manifested in cities by the fragmentation of land tenure systems, weak institutions, and endemic corruption [3]. These examples provide ample evidence that normative plurality is not unique to Cameroonian land governance, but that it can take different forms depending on political trajectories, legal systems (common law vs. civil law), and land tenure practices. The analysis of local manifestations of this normative plurality in land governance is particularly relevant, especially in contexts of urban vulnerability and informality.

According to Le Galès and Vitale [34] in “Governing the Large Metropolis”, urban governance in such contexts often unfolds through a multi-scalar, discontinuous process negotiated by various actors with divergent interests. This leads to fragmented regulations and institutional incompleteness. Their contribution is particularly relevant to integrate into our study of land governance forms observed in Cameroonian cities, by focusing on the modes of negotiation and circumvention of local institutions in the face of competing legitimacies. In these contexts, customary and informal norms are often recognized as

being the most locally appropriate for poor populations, as they allow for rapid and flexible transactions that operate outside the formal framework [7,11]. This co-production, although the result of a conflictual cohabitation of land tenure norms, offers a unique opportunity to appreciate the “twilight institutions” resulting from specific local reconfigurations in African cities. Indeed, Lund [23] has grouped under this concept all the processes of land regulation initiated by ambiguous institutional actors that emerge locally in these gray zones between legality, legitimacy, and efficiency.

Many studies on land governance in urban areas in sub-Saharan Africa have already focused on the legal implications of this normative pluralism, without dwelling extensively on the socio-environmental issues of this often-conflictual cohabitation for vulnerable populations. Our study thus serves as a practical case that highlights both the common features and the specific characteristics of Cameroonian cities.

2.2. Socio-Environmental Vulnerability of Populations

Combining both social and environmental factors, socio-environmental vulnerability in urban areas has been conceptualized by [32] as the limited capacity of an urban system or population to cope with environmental disturbances such as climate change, natural disasters, and ecosystem degradation due to various socio-economic and institutional factors. Beyond exposure to risks, it is also shaped by the sensitivity and adaptive capacity of systems or populations in response to disruptions [33]. In urban areas, land governance is intrinsically linked to socio-environmental vulnerability [34]. Poor land management in Africa often leads to the destruction of critical ecosystems [wetlands, mangroves, and green spaces], exacerbating climate vulnerabilities and social inequalities [20,35]. The latest report by [36] highlights Africa’s heightened vulnerability to climate change, with increased risks of floods, landslides, droughts, and storms. In the absence of proper urban planning, many residents driven by economic constraints settle informally in environmentally sensitive and low-cost areas, further increasing their socio-environmental vulnerability and complicating land use control and tenure security [7,34,37].

The diversity of land practices and systems in Africa continues to pose many challenges for good land governance in urban areas, including the growth of informal settlements, the pervasiveness of land conflicts, and high vulnerability to risks [38,39]. Among the important challenges, issues of gender inequalities and community participation must be carefully addressed to promote the adoption of more inclusive policies and meet the needs of all stakeholders [23,40]. Indeed, large disparities persist in access to land between men and women in most regions, despite the progress made [41]. This marginalization also extends to local communities whose customary land rights are not recognized or integrated into the land policies of certain countries [42]. However, the issue of their integration must be addressed carefully, in order to avoid an increase in existing inequalities [38,43].

Figure 1 below illustrates the complex relationships between normative pluralism, land conflicts, socio-environmental vulnerability, and land governance in African cities. Far from being a simple state of affairs, normative pluralism here appears as a dynamic that produces vulnerabilities, thereby justifying the call for hybrid governance frameworks that integrate both local arrangements and multi-level institutional realities. Thus, socio-environmental vulnerability in African cities cannot be reduced to a simple consequence of infrastructural deficits or resource scarcity [44–46]. It must also be understood as the result of active co-production, shaped by institutional ambiguity and by selective recognition dynamics inherent in multi-normative, multi-actor land governance [47]. By focusing on the plurality of local contexts, this study provides a relevant analysis of the similarities and divergences linked to the coexistence of land norms in African cities.

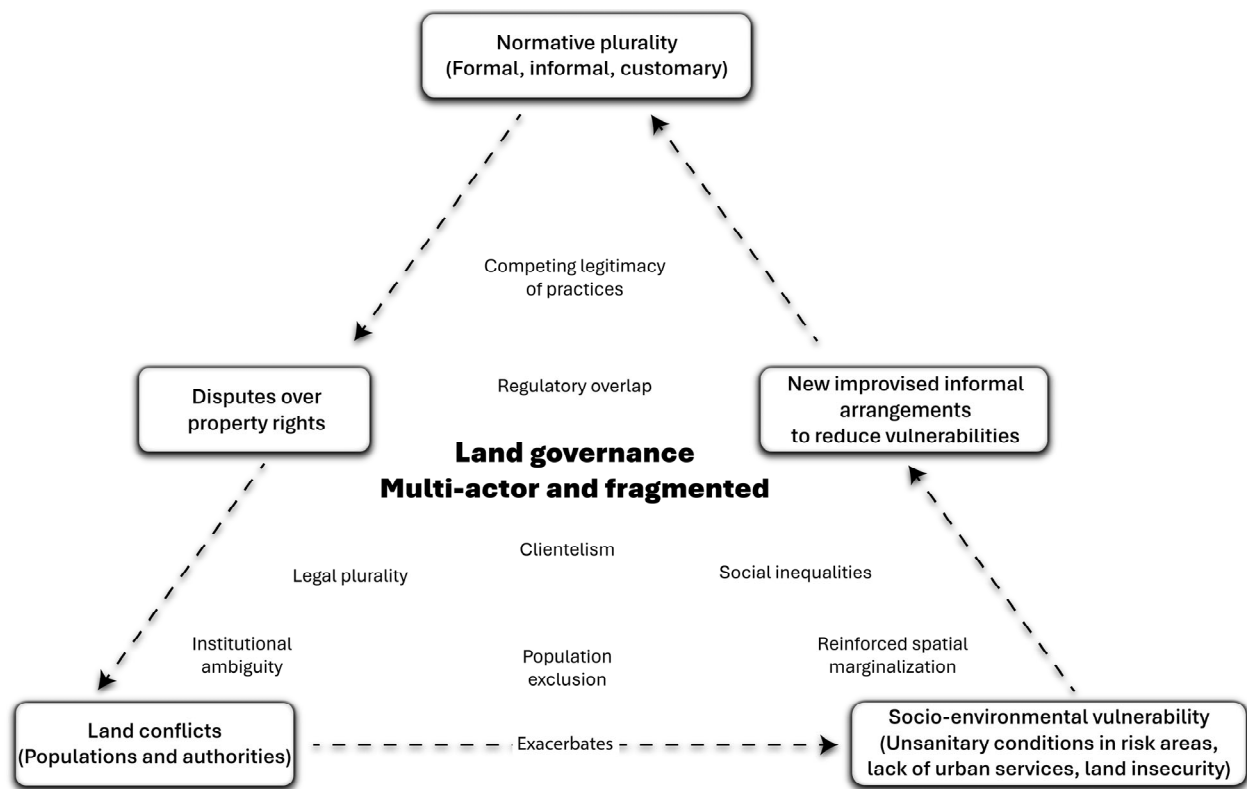


Figure 1. The theoretical framework of the study, characterizing land governance in African cities.

3. Method for the Systematic Review of the Literature on the Issues and Challenges of Urban Land in Cameroon

The PRISMA method was used in this study to conduct a systematic review of the relevant literature on the complex dynamics related to urban land governance in several Cameroonian cities. This systematic literature review was conducted in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 guidelines [48]. It was intended to focus on the interactions between actors, normative systems and socio-environmental impacts. The cities were chosen in relation to the available scientific literature and in order to have contrasts between the sizes of cities (large, medium, and small), colonial legacies, administrative structure (civil law and common law), and linguistic zones. This method allowed us to synthesize the existing theoretical and contextual knowledge on the issue in Cameroon. In this logic, we first explored the existing literature in depth through a systematic review, including 496 scientific articles, published in the database Semantic Scholar. Some scientific databases commonly used in systematic reviews, such as Web of Science or Geobase, were discarded for this study due to the low availability of articles directly related to our theme, i.e., urban land governance and normative pluralism in Africa. We therefore opted for the Semantic Scholar database, which proved more relevant for identifying works targeting the African context and the specific issues of urban land regulation. This methodological choice aims to maximize the relevance of sources while helping to fill a gap in the scientific literature on these issues, which are still little explored in classic Western databases. Semantic Scholar was last consulted on 25 February 2025.

The boolean query was formulated as follows: ["urban land governance" OR "urban territory" OR "urban land administration"] AND ["normative pluralism" OR "juridical pluralism" OR "normative diversity"] AND ["socio-environmental challenges" OR "socio-ecological issues" OR "social and environmental challenges"] AND ["Cameroon" OR "Republic of Cameroon"]. The selection was made by a senior reviewer (the first author),

without automation tools. A double manual reading by the second author confirmed the relevance of each article according to the established criteria. The inclusion criteria were peer-reviewed scientific articles published between 2005 and 2024, focusing exclusively on Cameroonian cities. They had to address the social, institutional, or environmental aspects of urban land governance. Texts were excluded if they did not specifically concern Cameroon, did not address the subject of land governance or were duplicates or incomplete documents. An initial total of 496 articles was identified, reduced to 109 after removing duplicates and first reading the titles and abstracts. A further 50 articles were retained after full reading. Of these, 24 were excluded as not dealing with specific urban cases, for a final total of 26 academic publications on six Cameroonian cities (Table 1).

Table 1. Number of studies selected by size of Cameroonian city.

	Large Cities [$p > 1,000,000$ Inhabitants]		Medium-Sized Towns [$150,000 < p < 500,000$ Inhabitants]		Small Towns [$p < 150,000$ Inhabitants]		Total
	Yaounde	Douala	Bafoussam	Bamenda	Limbe	Kumbo	
2005–2009	1	2					3
2010–2014	2	1			2		5
2015–2019	2	2				1	5
2020–2025	6	6	2	4		1	19
Total	11	11	2	4	2	2	32

Some texts conducted inter-urban analyses, notably [20], who compared the cities of Yaoundé, Douala, Bafoussam, and Bamenda, as well as [49–51], who focused on both Yaoundé and Douala. In order to remain consistent with our comparative framework based on city types, these texts were broken down by territorial unit. As a result, although 26 texts were selected, the number of entries per city in the analytical tables exceeded this total, reaching 32 cases, with each relevant section of the text analyzed separately according to the city concerned.

To the 26 scientific articles selected were added six legal texts relating to land governance in Cameroon (laws, ordinances, decrees), seven reports from international organizations (UN-Habitat, World Bank, Amnesty International, etc.), and 49 theoretical or comparative articles on urban land governance in Africa, in order to broaden the discussion and strengthen inter-contextual comparability (Figure 2). Data were extracted manually, structured by theme (normative systems, types of conflict, environmental vulnerabilities), then synthesized in the form of a comparative table. No meta-analysis was carried out, the aim being a qualitative, exploratory, and structuring review for future empirical and comparative research. The analysis paid particular attention to the diversity of disciplinary approaches, legal contexts (common law vs. civil law), and the transversality of socio-environmental issues. No tools for assessing the risk of bias were used, as the review did not focus on quantitative data from comparative or clinical trials.

As a first step in a vast research program on urban land in Africa, this systematic review of the literature on several Cameroonian cities constitutes for us an effective way of approaching this complex problem, based on previous reference works (for example [22,29,43,52]). This comparison aims to highlight the similarities and divergences of this normative plurality, particularly with regard to the coexistence of land standards, the nature of land conflicts, the intensity of pressures, institutional regulation mechanisms, and socio-environmental vulnerability. In this sense, Cameroon positions itself as an emblematic terrain, when we know that it was colonized by several former colonial powers, each

introducing its own land management system in the country. Our study then proposes a critical synthesis of the debates on the normative pluralism of urban land governance and its implications on the socio-environmental vulnerability of populations. The aim is to be able to establish a solid basis for guiding future works and to formulate practical recommendations adapted to plural realities.

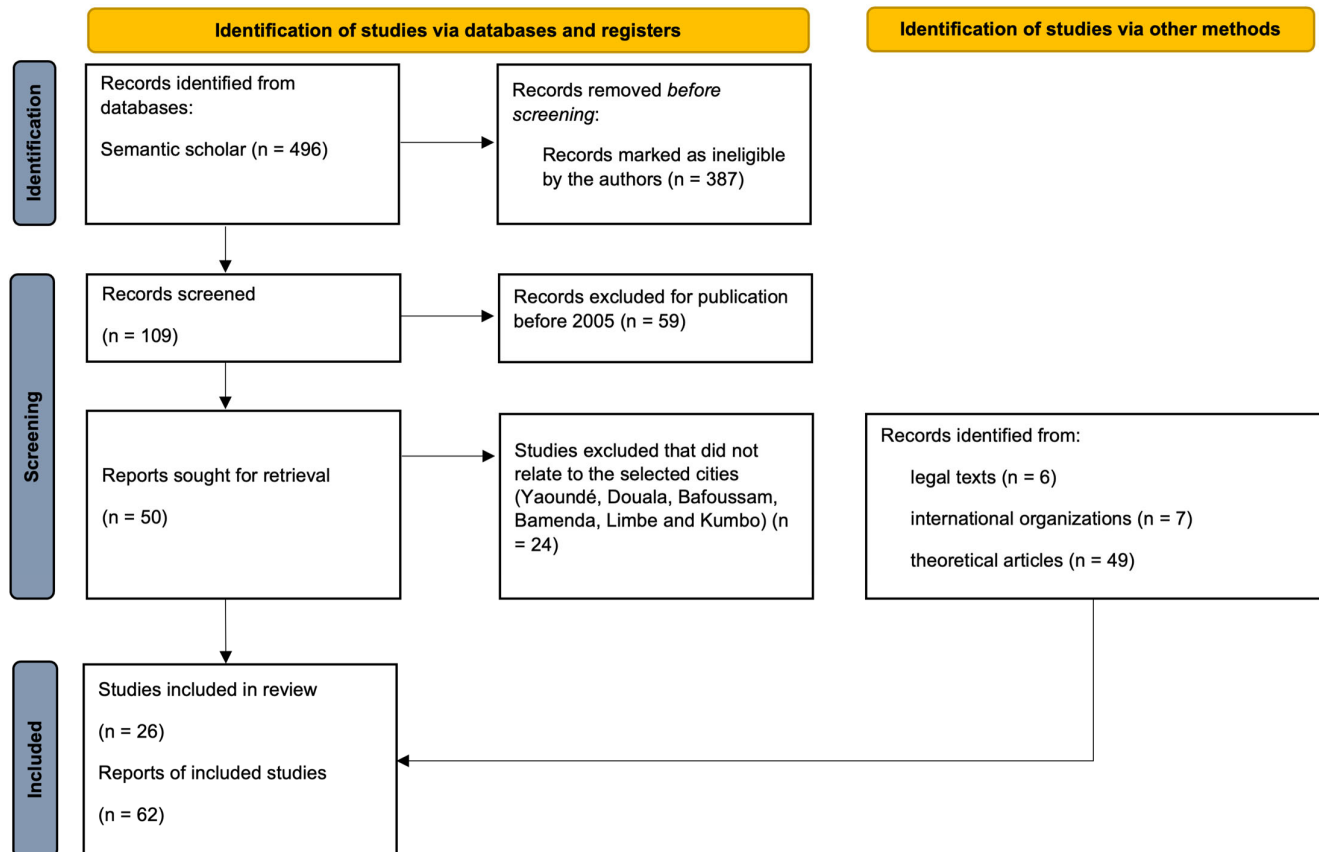


Figure 2. The PRISMA matrix of the systematic review of the literature on Cameroonian cities.

4. Cameroonian Cities: A Landscape Marked by Tensions Between Two Land Systems

Often referred to as Africa in miniature, Cameroon, like many African countries, is facing increasing urbanization with 59% of its total population living in cities in 2023 and a spatial growth of 5% per year [19,53]. Its mainly two-headed urbanization (Yaoundé and Douala) is followed by a network of secondary and tertiary cities (Figure 3), marked by uncontrolled expansion that poses enormous socio-environmental challenges in terms of land governance. To promote good land management, several state structures were created, including the *Société Immobilière du Cameroun (SIC)* in 1952, the *Mission d'Aménagement et d'Équipement des Terrains Urbains et Ruraux (MAETUR)*, and the *Crédit Foncier du Cameroun (CFC)* in 1977. Working in synergy, these institutions have the role of promoting the construction, rental, and sale of social housing, technically preparing urban and rural land for future appropriation and financially supporting real estate investment in Cameroon. The country had everything to successfully develop the housing sector in the country until the arrival of the economic crisis of the 1980s and the Structural Adjustment Policies (SAPs), which slowed down the production of housing by the state and opened the way to private and informal actors.

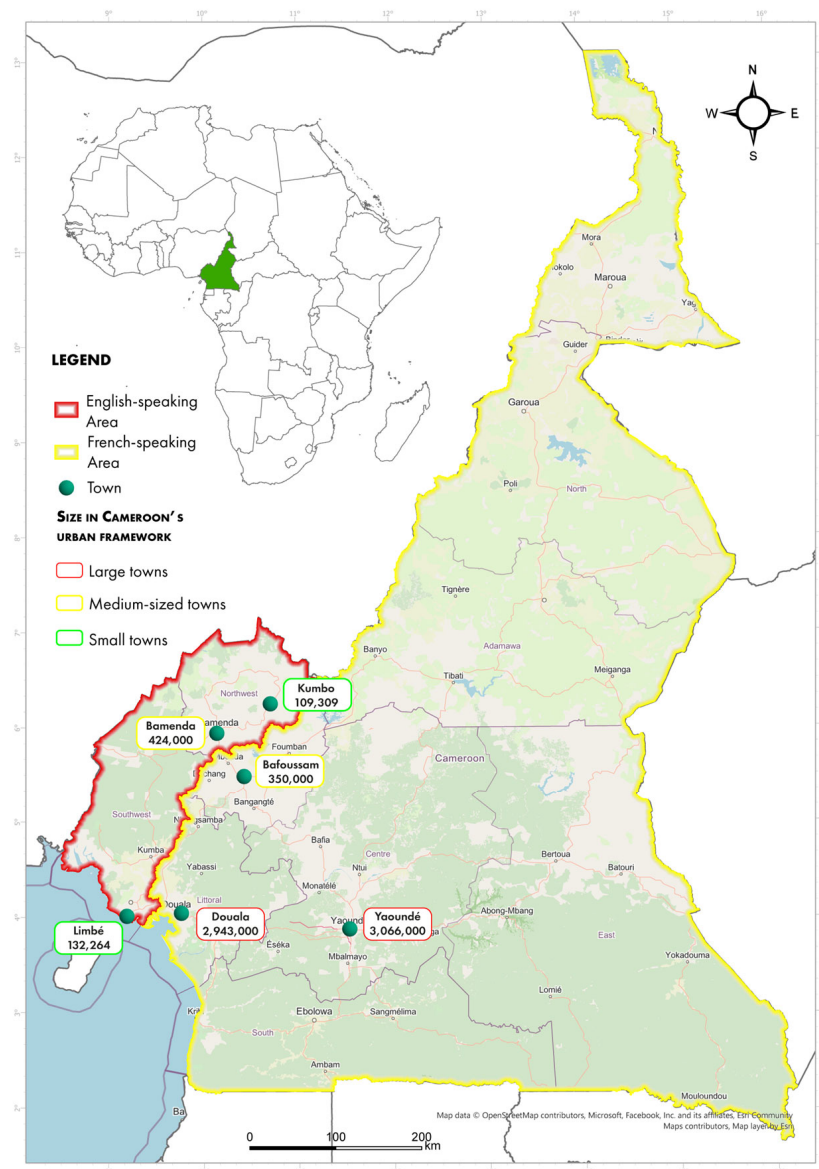


Figure 3. The situation of the six selected Cameroonian cities.

A fundamental element of urban development, urban land governance is of particular importance in Cameroon. Indeed, the country's urban land landscape has been shaped by historical, political, economic, and social influences [54,55]. Colonized in turn by three European powers (Germany, France, and Great Britain), each colonial administration introduced its land policy in the country while allowing the precolonial customary management of land to exist [56,57]. According to World Bank data, only 10 to 15% of land in Cameroon is registered and more than 33% of the urban population lives in precarious neighborhoods [19]. This strong recourse to informal practices can be explained by a cumbersome and costly land registration procedure, which limits access to land for the poorest and hinders the possibilities of secure investment in urban real estate [54,58,59].

5. Results and Discussion

5.1. Formal Framework for Urban Land Governance in Cameroon

Constantly adjusted since the colonial era, land governance in Cameroon is based on a complex structure combining institutions, regulations, and legal texts (Table 2) [60,61]. This legal framework governs the acquisition, use, management, and transmission of

land in urban areas. However, a major challenge noted in the literature is the conflicting coexistence between the customary land system and the modern system [61]. While unregistered lands are governed by customary and informal practices, they do not benefit from the guarantees offered by land titles, such as their inalienable and unassailable nature. In these contexts, traditional leaders are the legitimate guarantors of community lands, exercising discretionary power over their allocation or withdrawal. However, the 1974 Land Ordinance states in its first article that the state is the guardian of national lands and must ensure rational land management through the ministry in charge of the Land Registry and its delegations.

Table 2. Legislative and regulatory instruments on land management in Cameroon.

Text and Laws	Description and Application of the Legal Land Framework in Urban Areas in Cameroon
Order No. 74-1 and 2 of July 6 1974 [62], which establishes the land and property regime	Constituting the backbone of the legal framework for land in Cameroon, this text aims to regularize and secure land ownership through the allocation of land titles. It imposes a 25 m easement around risk areas and classifies them in the public domain of the state. On the ground, these ecologically sensitive spaces find themselves occupied by populations [20]. The application of this text is then compromised by limited resources of local authorities and ineffective governance [61].
Decree No. 76–166 of April 27 1976 [63] sets the terms of management of land in Cameroon	This decree regulates the procedures for registering and organizing consultative commissions for the settlement of land disputes. It defines land registration procedures and clarifies the distinctions between different types of land: private land, national domain land, and public and private state domain land. Cadastral authorities can use this text to regularize occupations according to political and economic interests, thus favoring certain actors over vulnerable populations [64]. This perception is exacerbated by the initial centralization of the procedure at the Ministry of Lands, Cadastre and Land Affairs (MINCAF), now decentralized to the level of the prefectures, where a lack of communication and transparency remains problematic [43].
Law on expropriation for public utility and compensation arrangements 1985 [65]	Article 3.1 of this decree provides for compensation provisions. As such, no compensation is provided for populations occupying marshland areas. Although this law is designed to secure transactions for the benefit of public services, it is often criticized for its complex and formal procedures which, far from guaranteeing fair compensation, generate a feeling of injustice among the affected populations [66]. Also, some political actors sometimes use the argument of public utility to justify land reallocation, without necessarily respecting the legal compensation procedures [58,67].
Law No. 2004/017 of July 22 2004 [68] on decentralization	By redefining the roles of the actors involved in land management, this law transfers to decentralized local authorities [municipalities and urban communities] certain key skills in planning and regulating land use. Thus, the Ministry of State Property, Cadastre and Land Affairs (MINCAF) and its delegations remain responsible for regulating the national cadastre, as well as issuing land titles, while decentralized local authorities now control urban development through the preparation of urban planning documents, urban planning operations, and the granting of building permits [60].

Table 2. Cont.

Text and Laws	Description and Application of the Legal Land Framework in Urban Areas in Cameroon
Law No. 2004/003 of April 21 2004 [69], which governs urban planning in Cameroon	This law governs the general rules of urban planning and the construction standards necessary for the preparation of urban planning documents and the obtaining of various urban planning acts (building permits, certificates of conformity, etc.). “These instruments have not been appropriate to avoid the problems of proliferation of shanty towns and the sprawl of cities” [53].
Urban planning documents and urban planning operations	The Urban Master Plans (PDU) and Land Use Plans (POS), resulting from the 2004 Urban Planning Act, are essential urban planning documents, drawn up by decentralized local authorities (urban communities and district municipalities) to define the main development guidelines. These plans manage urban expansion and protect land against inappropriate uses, while defining non-buildable zones in collaboration with the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development (MINHDU). They prohibit the occupation of risk zones, some of which are located on land belonging to customary communities. These plans are criticized for their regulatory weakness in implementation and their inability to regulate urbanization [53,70].

5.2. Analysis of Land Dynamics in Cameroonian Cities Based on Colonial Legacies, the Legal System, and the Linguistic Zone

Cameroonian cities display diverse land dynamics influenced by their size (large, medium, and small), their socio-economic role, and their legal context (civil law and common law). By analyzing the studies referenced for each city, we observe both similar dynamics of coexistence between formal and informal land norms, as well as significant divergences in socio-economic vulnerability. Anglophone cities have been less studied in the literature (Figure 4), possibly due to the ongoing armed conflicts in that region of the country.

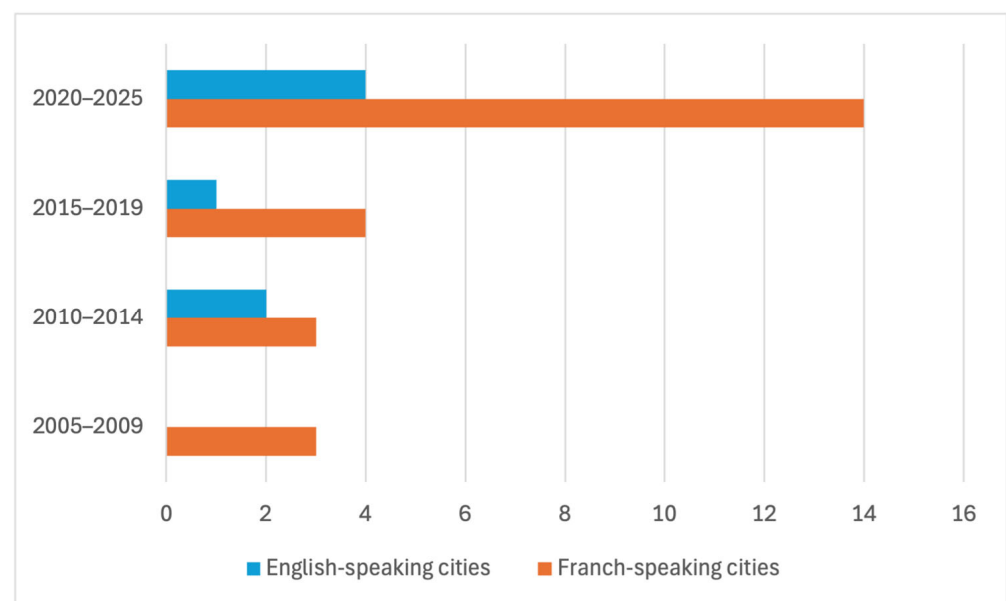


Figure 4. Distribution of selected articles according to type of city [French-speaking or English-speaking].

The analysis of the texts reveals significant contrasts between Cameroonian cities with different colonial legacies and legal frameworks. Indeed, while Francophone Cameroonian cities (Yaoundé, Douala, and Bafoussam) are historically governed by civil law inherited from the French model, the common law tradition of British inspiration still prevails in Cameroonian cities located in the Anglophone regions of the North-West and South-West (Bamenda, Limbe, and Kumbo) [14,20,71]. While common law tends to formally incorporate local customary practices, civil law, which dominates in Francophone cities, marginalizes these practices and centralizes land regulation structures around public administration.

These legal framework differences profoundly affect mechanisms for land access and land dispute resolution in each city. In Anglophone cities such as Bamenda or Kumbo, land disputes are often mediated locally by traditional chieftaincies [14,71,72]. Studies thus show forms of normative pluralism that are more institutionally accepted, even though they remain exposed to community tensions and identity-related conflicts [73]. In contrast, civil law in Francophone cities weakly integrates alternative mechanisms for land access and regulation. Here, land disputes must be handled directly by administrative courts, which are often perceived locally as opaque and inaccessible to the poor. This situation may explain the strong reliance on informal norms in cities like Yaoundé, Douala, and Bafoussam [13,30].

5.3. Analysis of Land Dynamics in Cameroonian Cities According to the Size of the City

Most of the articles analyzed are recent (2020–2025), with a strong representation of large cities (Douala and Yaoundé) (Figure 5).

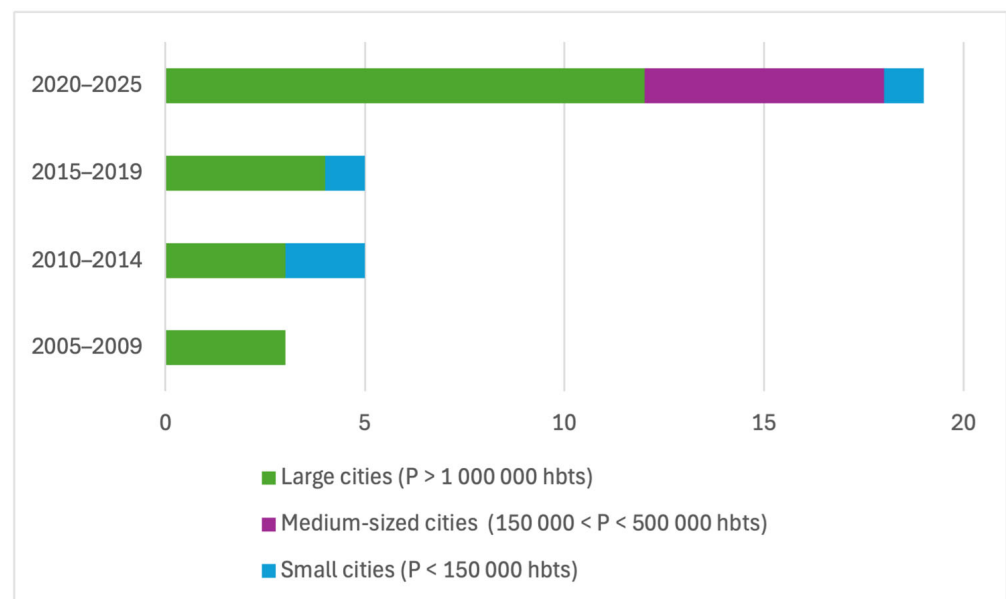


Figure 5. The distribution of the selected articles according to the size of the city in the national urban framework.

5.3.1. Similar Dynamics: A Normative Dualism Between Formal and Informal Norms

In Cameroonian cities, whether large, medium, or small, the coexistence of formal and informal land standards is a constant that shapes urban dynamics. Indeed, the formal land system, governed by the state, coexists with customary standards rooted in local traditions. This duality results in part from the colonial legacy that has given way to hybrid legal frameworks, still not harmonized. This increased pressure on available land is fueled by rapid population growth, coupled with an influx of allochthonous and refugee populations towards the country's main urban centers (485,285 refugees in Cameroon in 2023) [19,74].

As an illustration, the number of requests for social housing in Douala and Yaoundé alone is estimated at 80,000 per year, and the state supply of social housing in 50 years at 20,000, or approximately 400 housing units built per year. There is currently a deficit of 2.5 million housing units in Cameroon [75].

In large cities such as Douala and Yaoundé, although formal norms tend to dominate, informal norms remain prevalent in peri-urban areas and informal settlements [18,30]. Similarly to the urban dynamics of Lagos and Nairobi, land pressure in these cities is particularly high due to increased demand for land for large state projects and private investments [76,77]. This pressure encourages intense land speculation on viable land and makes access to housing increasingly difficult for the most deprived populations; who then turn to informal solutions [13,78].

Similarly, medium-sized (Bamenda and Bafoussam) and small (Limbe and Kumbo) towns show a strong reliance on customary norms, particularly in the management of agricultural and peri-urban land [71,72]. Indeed, customary practices still have strong social legitimacy in these cities [particularly in English-speaking cities], while formal norms can offer more standardized regulatory frameworks in city centers. This Cameroonian observation is consistent with the thinking of several authors including Chauveau et al. [22], then Lund [24], that land management in Africa is based on a dualism between formal norms—embodied in state laws—and informal norms, rooted in customary and community practices. One of the main lessons of the cases studied is that the opposition between formal and informal norms is not only a source of conflict, but also an opportunity for complementarity if it is well managed [18,72].

5.3.2. Divergent Dynamics: Contrasting Socio-Environmental Challenges

Land Pressure and Environmental Risks

Cameroon's rapid population growth represents a considerable challenge in a context of rapid urbanization and non-compliance with urban planning documents [53]. This growth, when not controlled, leads to strong pressure on urban land. This pressure is greater in large cities such as Douala and Yaoundé, due to strong internal migration, a scarcity of urbanizable areas, and the weakness of social housing policies in the face of real needs. Thus, many informal neighborhoods are developing in ecologically sensitive areas (coasts, marshy areas, flood plains, unstable slopes), often located in peri-urban areas [21,79]. This informal occupation exposes populations to increased risks of flooding, pollution, and landslides [20,57,79].

In medium-sized towns such as Bamenda and Bafoussam, land pressure is often linked to the rapid expansion of peri-urban areas, where flood plains and steep slopes are gradually converted into residential areas [70,71,73,80]. In smaller towns like Limbe and Kumbo, urbanization is slower, but with land pressures on the conversion of community agricultural land for the development of industrial and tourism projects [72,81]. This land pressure considerably degrades sensitive ecosystems and exposes populations to environmental risks [20]. It appears important to integrate natural ecosystems into the land management of Cameroonian cities in order to strengthen their capacity to adapt to environmental risks.

Social Tensions and Land Conflicts

An in-depth analysis of the origins of land conflicts in Cameroonian cities presents us with dynamics that vary according to their size and the socio-economic issues specific to each of them. In Douala and Yaoundé, these conflicts are mainly motivated by competition for control of land between the state, private investors, indigenous people, and non-indigenous people [66,78,82,83]. This competition promotes "land grabbing" by

private and state actors, following the mass evictions of vulnerable populations in informal settlements [49,64]. For medium-sized towns (Bamenda and Bafoussam), conflicts are fueled by the conversion of peri-urban land into new residential developments, which generates recurring tensions between customary communities and new occupants [71,73,80]. In small towns like Limbe and Kumbo, competition for access to customary agricultural land sometimes leads to land conflicts between customary and state authorities [14,72,81]. This competition is particularly important in Limbe because of the opportunities offered by its maritime facade for the implementation of tourist and industrial projects [81].

The relationship between individuals and land in Cameroon transcends simple economic issues to take on a profound cultural and identity dimension. Land, perceived as an intergenerational heritage in the customary system, embodies the security, continuity, and identity of local populations [66,84,85]. This intimate connection of populations with the land complicates land reforms, particularly when ownership is transferred to the state in the formal system during urban development projects, risking generating social injustices if the populations concerned are not adequately involved in decision-making processes [86,87]. This coexistence of land systems in the cities studied sometimes gives rise to social tensions, when formal norms—often perceived as rigid—come into conflict with customary mechanisms, which are more flexible but not legally recognized. These social tensions today create a land management environment where land conflicts are frequent, both between residents (native and non-native) and between residents and the public administration [45]. By analyzing the causes of the conflicts observed in Cameroonian cities, we noted that centralized or unilateral land management of the formal system accentuates social and ethnic inequalities [88]. This is because changes in land use contribute to exacerbating social tensions between the central state, customary authorities, indigenous people, and non-indigenous people, thus creating a climate conducive to corruption and fraud in land transactions [13,86].

Institutional Regulatory Mechanisms

The involvement of multiple levels of public authorities—local, regional, and national—is characteristic of land governance in Africa. Unfortunately, the lack of coordination frequently creates conflicts of competence and institutional inefficiencies [31]. Along the same lines, the Cameroonian cities studied illustrate a desire for excessive and unilateral centralization, which often limits the capacity of local authorities to respond effectively to the land challenges specific to their cities [30,78]. However, this state centralization is gradually deteriorating from large to small cities, leaving more room for informal and customary regulations.

In large cities like Douala and Yaoundé, land regulation is dominated by robust state structures, though this centralization is often marred by dysfunctions stemming from corruption and clientelist practices. In Douala, state authorities, in collaboration with private actors, play a significant role in land allocation; however, this management remains fragmented and contested by the population, particularly in informal settlements that partially evade state control [18]. This observation is also the same in Yaoundé. Indeed, land decisions are also taken by the central state, although the rapid expansion towards the peripheries and risk areas escapes the control of formal institutions, which accentuates the tensions between informal and formal norms [30,78]. Formal regulation is increasingly seen in these cities as favoring only economic and political elites, to the detriment of vulnerable populations [13,67,89]. This deficient formal regulation of large cities contributes to “informalization” (process of multiplication of informal districts in urban areas outside the legal framework), growing land occupation processes and the strengthening of social inequalities. The cities studied are practical cases that explore

how vulnerable populations develop informal mechanisms of institutional regulation to secure their access to land or limit their vulnerability to environmental risks. These informal regulation mechanisms often take the form of strong social networks, community alliances, and mutual aid [18,50,71]. These local regulatory strategies must be recognized and integrated into land policies, as they often reflect a more detailed knowledge of the territory and the associated risks.

In the medium-sized and small cities studied, customary chiefdoms play a more prominent role in land regulation mechanisms. This is especially evident in Anglophone cities such as Bamenda, Limbe, and Kumbo, where traditional chiefdoms remain central to land allocation, particularly in rural and peri-urban areas. As custodians of customary land management, they provide the most secure and accessible means for vulnerable social groups to resolve land disputes [90]. However, the strong presence of chiefdoms in land governance sometimes leads to conflicts with local and state authorities, which seek to impose formal regulations [72,73]. In Bafoussam, traditional chiefdoms have a more marginal role in the city center but retain influence in rural outskirts [80]. While this institutional duality is significant in medium and small cities, it generates recurrent conflicts over the legitimacy of land allocation and the effectiveness of regulatory mechanisms. Establishing participatory land management frameworks, where customary chiefdoms, state authorities, and local populations collaborate, could be a valuable approach to developing land governance plans tailored to local contexts.

5.3.3. Summary of Land Dynamics in Urban Areas in Cameroon

The socio-environmental challenges linked to the normative plurality of land governance vary considerably in the Cameroonian cities studied (Table 3), depending on their colonial heritage, socio-cultural diversity, and urban pressure. In large cities, the domination of formal norms and urban pressure linked to major projects and high immigration accentuate land conflicts, social inequalities, and the eviction of marginalized groups. On the other hand, in medium-sized and small towns, particularly those in English-speaking regions, land regulation is still strongly influenced by traditional chieftaincies, leading to other types of social tension, but also to forms of local legitimacy. This plural normative configuration reinforces the need for a hybrid approach to land governance, adapted to the socio-spatial realities of each territory. However, beyond the regulatory imbalances, this multi-scalar and fragmented governance also produces symbolic effects of exclusion. Indeed, the most vulnerable populations—often living in areas deemed “informal” or “irregular”—are subject to implicit delegitimization, manifested in institutional silence, chronic infrastructural neglect, and a lack of legal recognition [13,14,49,67].

Thus, certain neighborhoods have become lawless areas where institutional ambiguity allows authorities to justify inaction, evictions, or neglect, reinforcing both moral and legal marginalization. These mechanisms of territorial exclusion operate not only at a material level (lack of services, increased vulnerability to disasters) but also at a symbolic level. To overcome this marginalization, responsible and inclusive land governance is essential [37]. This governance model will not only have to integrate customary norms and community logics of land management [11,91], but also actively combat the forms of moral exclusion that weaken the socio-territorial rights of urban populations. Such a commitment would guarantee secure access to land and housing for all, as set out in the preamble to the 1996 Constitution of the Republic of Cameroon. It would also strengthen the social resilience of populations in the face of environmental risks and the uncertainties associated with rapid urbanization.

Table 3. Divergences of socio-environmental challenges of land management in Cameroonian cities.

	Land Standards	Land Conflicts	Land Pressures	Institutional Regulation	Environmental Risks	Proposed Governance Solutions
Large cities (Yaoundé, Douala)	Cohabitation with a domination of formal norms	Competition between actors for land control	Very strong [migration, major projects]	Strong state centralization, but informal regulation exists	Strong [marshy areas and hills at risk]	Decentralization of certain land powers to metropolitan authorities, digitization of registers, multi-stakeholder consultation prior to setting up structuring projects, and granting of provisional occupancy titles to informal populations.
Medium-sized towns (Bamenda, Bafoussam)	Balanced cohabitation between formal and customary norms	Urban expansion and incompatibility of uses	Medium to high [peri-urban expansion]	Balanced between formal regulation and customary regulation	Medium to high [exposed peri-urban areas]	Integration of customary authorities into urban planning processes, clarification of communal and customary power boundaries, and strengthening of land mediation mechanisms.
Small towns (Limbe, Kumbo)	Strong dominance of customary norms	Conflicts over customary agricultural land	Moderate except in Limbe [tourist and industrial pressure]	Regulation dominated by customary chiefdoms	Low to medium [erosion and coastal pressure in Limbe]	Local codification of customary land use, legal recognition of chiefdoms, and land use plans drawn up in consultation with local stakeholders.

6. Conclusions

The coexistence of formal, customary, and informal norms in the Cameroonian cities studied—Yaoundé, Douala, Bafoussam, Bamenda, Limbe, and Kumbo—creates contrasting socio-environmental challenges, but also offers opportunities for institutional innovations in land regulation, provided it is properly managed. The manifestations of this normative plurality vary according to city size within the national urban network (small, medium, and large), colonial legacies (Francophone and Anglophone), and the prevailing legal framework (civil law and common law) [59]. Cameroon thus represents a unique setting to grasp these variations, especially given its colonial history under both France and England, each with its own land management system.

This systematic review highlights that socio-environmental vulnerability does not solely stem from infrastructural deficits or limited access to resources, but is primarily co-produced through institutional ambiguity and selective recognition inherent in multi-normative land governance [22,23]. It is therefore necessary to identify the structural logics behind this co-production of vulnerabilities by focusing on the economic dynamics linked to land allocation and incentive-based regulation [91].

The analysis underscores the importance of considering the historical, linguistic, and politico-administrative foundations that deeply influence local forms of institutionalization of normative pluralism and the associated socio-environmental vulnerabilities. To enhance the analytical depth of this systematic review, the findings were compared with analyses of the legal framework governing urban land governance in Cameroon (Section 5.1), as

well as with field reports from international institutions such as UN-Habitat and the World Bank. This triangulation helps validate several trends identified in the literature and better ground the conclusions in practical realities.

The study then emphasized the need to promote hybrid land governance, integrating formal, informal, and customary institutional regulations already in place [11,91]. This hybrid and collaborative model, supported by the study, would help reduce social tensions among stakeholders, improve equitable access to secure land tenure, and address environmental challenges. Furthermore, our study highlights the importance of incorporating the systemic expression of neoliberal urbanism and its incentive-based regulatory mechanisms into the design of urban planning policies [47,92,93]. These policies should no longer be limited to simple standardized institutional or legal reforms, but should recognize and articulate the diversity of local regulations resulting from the normative pluralism specific to African contexts. Future land policies must take into account economic incentives, rent mechanisms, and informal regulatory practices, which are often more suited to local territorial dynamics. This study thus paves the way for more contextual land governance, capable of aligning with local hybrid structures and avoiding the technocratic biases often associated with universalist urban planning models.

It should be noted that our analysis focused solely on Cameroonian cities. This geographical focus may introduce a contextual bias, limiting the applicability of our conclusions to other cities with different socio-cultural and legal contexts. Furthermore, future research could make use of systematic tools such as the *Atlas of Urban Expansion* and its updated databases. These resources offer valuable contextualization of spatial growth dynamics, urban sprawl patterns, and infrastructure deficits in peri-urban areas, complementing the institutional and socio-legal analyses conducted in this article [94]. Future work on normative pluralism in Africa should therefore conduct additional research to test the transferability of our findings to other African urban contexts through comparative studies across countries or regions. Finally, it would be advisable in the future to reinforce and expand the results of this study by integrating primary data (interviews, field observations, focus groups, GIS mapping of land conflicts, policy analyses) to consolidate the hypotheses put forward in this review. This research would then contribute to the development of a comparative theory of local manifestations of normative pluralism in urban areas, identifying the structural factors that condition the coexistence of norms and their influence on land governance dynamics in a variety of institutional environments across the continent.

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