EMERGENCE AND PERSISTENCE OF THE “ENFANTS MICROBES” PHENOMENON IN CÔTE D’IVOIRE

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ABOUT THE SERIES

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Introduction

As soon as the deadliest armed conflict of its history ended, Côte d’Ivoire plunged in a new form of criminality led by mostly children and youth aged between 10 to 25 years and organized in criminal gangs, known as "enfants microbes." This phenomenon was first observed in the last quarter of 2011 in Abobo, one of the most popular suburbs of Abidjan, the country’s economic capital. It rapidly spread from Abobo to neighboring districts - Adjjamé, Attécoubé, and Yopougon and other more affluent areas and secondary towns such as Bouaké, Daloa, and Bassam. At the very beginning, these delinquent youth gangs were portrayed by the national press as "gangs à la machette" (machete gangs) and later referred to as “microbes.” This new urban phenomenon of youth criminality was labeled based on its social organization, the identity of the youth involved, and their modus operandi. It also related to the social networks that they drew upon for their survival and reproduction. Hence, since the end of 2011, criminal youth gangs have continued to defy the governance and security systems in suburbs of Abidjan, as well as other cities in Côte d’Ivoire. Since its emergence, the “enfants microbes” phenomenon has captured the headlines of local news for their...
extreme brutality and the fear they evoke among members of the public and state authorities. However, one of the characteristics of these violent gangs is their activism¹ notably during the six months of the post-electoral conflicts. They are also able to gain access to, and easily operate small arms and light weapons. In their modus vivendi, “enfants microbes” attack people in public places (women on roads for markets, students, dancing clubs, etc.) and strip them of any kind of valuable goods (money, phones, etc.). Growing attacks from those criminal gangs have increased the demand for security notably due to the perception that government security forces have been unable to overcome the threats they pose to society. Because of the increased feelings of insecurity, many communities have resorted to organizing self-defense groups.

Even though the activities of violent youth gangs have been endemic since the 1990s, its most recent form is more organized and brutal. The end of the post-electoral crisis of 2010-2011 was also marked by the end of the political violence between “Young Patriots-YP” and patriotic militias who defended the former regime of Laurent Gbagbo and pro-Ouattara youth combatants recruited by the Forces Nouvelles. Compared to the activities of those former pro-Gbagbo “Young patriots” and pro-Ouattara “Forces Nouvelles” that have received substantial academic interest, the “enfants microbes” phenomenon remains underexplored in the academic literature. Also, most NGO reports focus primarily on socioeconomic needs that lead to violence (see Indigo Côte d’Ivoire et Interpeace Oct. 2016,² Feb. 2017,³ Nov. 2017⁴). In these reports, the recruitment of children and youth into violent and criminal gangs in Abobo is analyzed as a consequence of a demographic explosion that generated marginalized and abandoned youths in a suburb where a sub-culture of violence and unemployment already exists. Youth violence is therefore understood as a tool for survival in a context characterized by a deteriorating standard of education, poor living conditions, and the breakdown of the socioeconomic system. Honwana⁵ has shown how exclusion from meaningful livelihoods during a prolonged period of time – termed as “waithood” – makes youth extremely vulnerable to potential recruitment into committing acts of political violence in Mozambique, Uganda, and Zimbabwe. According to her, violence becomes an alternative for youth trapped in waithood. In the same vein, the surge of the “area boys” in Lagos, Nigeria, youth gangs similar to the “enfants microbes”, has also been explained along the lines of economic and political crises (see Omitoogun 1994,⁶ Adisa 1994⁷). Adisa for example, portrayed “area boys” as youth who graduate from petty thievery to drug pushing, charged with selling drugs to consum-
ers. They are also engaged in acts of extortion, street muggings, thuggery during political campaigns, and also as bouncers at night clubs, restaurants, and brothels. To sum up, the reasons advanced by scholars for the surge in violent gang-related activities in Africa include political, economic, and social factors.

While we recognize the central role played by socioeconomic and political crises in pushing some youth into organized criminality, we presume that the crises alone cannot sufficiently account for the individual’s readiness to take on the extraordinary risks linked with joining a criminal gang. We hypothesize that the consideration of the role of ‘networks of violence’ may play as recruitment and training structures is crucial for an in-depth understanding of the involvement of youth in organized criminality. This ethnographic study draws on the “enfants microbes” phenomenon to analyze the social determinants as well as the “everyday networks” through which youths’ transit into violent gangs in Abidjan, Cote d’Ivoire. The research also examines the diverse responses in fighting against the phenomenon of youth criminality. Outcomes reveal that beyond socioeconomic and political constraints, the formation of the “enfants microbes” gangs were possible because of the existence of different types of networks of violence that permitted a professionalization of violence. The qualitative data below have been collected from those bands and other actors according to the following questions:

(i) What are the socio-cultural, economic and structural realities in Abobo that have contributed to the emergence of the “enfants microbes” phenomenon?
(ii) In what instance did the trajectories of members of the gangs account for their recruitment into a criminal enterprise?
(iii) What are the networks of sociability or “networks of the everyday life” which underpin of the phenomenon?
(iv) To what extent are the “enfants microbes” and their families in some ways victims of youth-organized violent crime?
(v) What are the limitations of responses by civil society and government to the “enfants microbes” phenomenon?
(vi) What are the most efficient ways one could suggest for addressing the phenomenon by integrating the responses and the challenge in complementary ways?
Contextualizing the study and the social problem

After a decade of crises, including civil wars from 2000-2011 which led to the loss of 3,000 lives and massive destruction, Côte d’Ivoire also had to endure post-electoral violence. The legacies of the war and post-election violence were that the new regime had to operate in a weakened political, economic, and social environment, but had to ensure that the safety of property and people were given priority. National cohesion was deeply impacted by the social cleavages around ethnic and political lines (pro-Gbagbo versus pro-Ouattara). At this particular time, the Ivorian State was confronted with attacks on its eastern and western borders by remnants of pro-Gbagbo forces and the challenge of reorganizing its army and entire security system.

To take on the security challenges, the government paid particular attention to the politics of Security Sector Reform (SSR) as well as the Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) process in order to achieve the socio-economic reintegration of the ex-combatants and the improvement of the security which had seen a decrease in the security index at national level from 3.8 in January 2012 to 1.1 in December 2015. Despite the clear improvement at the national security level, entire territories of the District of Abidjan, such as the sub-districts of the Abobo were held captive by organized criminal gangs termed as “enfants microbes.” They resorted to a new kind of “engineered” attacks that avoided or undermined the classic control systems used by the state’s security apparatus. The term “microbe” was clearly borrowed from the film La Cité de Dieu released in 2002 by Fernando Meirelles and Katia Lund with Leandro Fermino as lead actor. The film is set in a shanty town in Brazil. This film, seen by most youths in Abidjan, portrays youth involved in a struggle to control territories in Brazil’s shanty towns. Zé Pequeno, the hero of this film, is a child of their generation who grew up in extremely difficult conditions and ended up imposing himself on the poor areas of Rio de Janeiro. More precisely, the “microbes” of Abidjan identify themselves with the youngest children of the film (also called “microbes”) who subdued their elders by the sheer weight of numbers. There is nothing metaphorical in the name, thus: it was a straight adoption.

In the Ivorian context, the phenomenon of “enfants microbes” is a new form of youth delinquency. It takes diverse operative forms, using collective action, the street, and public places as spaces of extremely violent intervention: sudden, fast, and aggressive actions, often combined with the cunning
use of stratagems, and a melee of weapons:

“At times, they pretend to beg or ask for information; sometimes, they would orchestrate a fight amongst themselves to attract onlookers and then proceed with the attack. They stab, slash, and strip goods off everyone they meet along their way. They can operate on a space of 200 meters before they vanish into nature just as they appeared. Generally, they operate (on foot). At times, they go as far as hijacking mini vehicles of public transport commonly called “gbaka”, use them as means of transport, and operate in the poorest neighborhoods to avoid being tracked down. The microbes can easily disappear in the mass when confronted by a resistance. They easily disguise themselves as victims. Then they attack those who assist them and run away leaving their helpers in desolation.”

Strategically, an operation led by “microbes” gives rise to the invasion of certain cells in the neighborhood, markets, transport stations, or even residential terrains. A band of youths carrying “melee” weapons (knives, machetes, blades), and clubs or catapults, moves in to strip the population of their goods. Their attacks often lead to injuries and the loss of lives when victims resist. Since its emergence, the phenomenon of “enfants microbes” has made the headlines on a daily basis, exposing the danger that they represent, while urging the authorities to address them as an emergency that must be dealt with efficiently. However, as the number of victims among the vulnerable population increases, the state’s security apparatus has not been able to effectively handle this new type of criminality. Its reliance on outmoded, conventional resources, and the wider need for rehabilitation in the post-emergency crisis facing the state, explains why the “gangs of microbes” have continued to dominate news headlines in Abidjan in the five years since they first emerged.

The “microbes” phenomenon has successfully resisted the actions of the police to curb the menace. The gangsters have also resisted community self-defense efforts, either spontaneously or conducted by vigilante committees. Re-education and re-socialization approaches initiated by the state, the “Hearing” approaches and socio-professional insertions conducted by non-government organizations (NGOs), have largely led to ‘blind alleys’ that are currently difficult to evaluate. Either way, the “enfants microbes” seem resilient (or at least less sensitive) to the diverse responses they evoke. How can we understand the emergence of this production of youth violence in
the urban contexts of Abobo? How do youth of Abobo’s sub-districts become “microbes”? How has the “microbe” phenomenon been addressed? And how can its persistence be understood? These questions constitute the problem that this research seeks to address.

Our approach

With regards to data collection, we chose ethnographic and biographical data, as well as direct observation. The data was collected over a period of three months, (July to September 2017) a favorable period of time during which the debate on the “enfants microbes” become particularly crucial. The vitality of discourses over “microbes” was due to the fact that the government initiated some vigorous military and police actions termed “operation épervier 2” in May 31, 2017, during which over 591 individuals were arrested. The data collection included interviews and focus group discussions with 60 informants selected from a wide range of various stakeholders: 18 members of “enfants microbes,” 12 members of community self-defense groups, and 30 various stakeholders (national police authorities, religious leaders, municipality workers, and state authorities in charge of the socio-economic reinsertion of the “enfants microbes”). We also spoke with people with long term attachments to the Abobo youths who have been, or still are implicated in the “microbe” phenomenon in order to get the maximum traction. We then went and collected life histories and conducted formal interviews guided by semi-directed precursors. Progressively, some interviews turned into group discussions where it became possible to finally understand the ways in which youths are also affected by armed violence and to assess their views on the diverse responses aimed at changing them in a positive way. Beyond youth “microbes” and the members of their biological families, we interviewed a number of officials in the municipalities and police, as well as social centers’ leaders and NGOs that have worked on the phenomenon. We also interviewed members of the secular and spiritual communities involved in the struggle against the phenomenon (Imams, neighborhood watch leaders, etc.). For the choice of the research informant categories, we were aware of their diverse backgrounds, of the divergence of their interests as well as their level of responsibility in relation to the phenomenon. The final step was to triangulate information collected from the informants cited above. The choice of Abobo town followed, based on the fact that all the information collected in the field confirmed that the phenomenon originated there.
The experts who informed the study put forward many reasons with regard to the agitation of these children (minors, pre-adolescents, and young adults). These included: manifestations of masculinity, particular expressions of violence stirred by an urban subculture, the proliferation and consumption of drugs, the circulation of weapons, the generalized pauperization and youth unemployment, the failure to study, the difficulties youth face in inserting themselves socio-professionally, the irresponsibility of family leaders, the dislocation of family, the absence of the community’s control, insufficient social action aimed at supporting youth from state and civil organizations, lack of efficiency of the police forces, the collusion between sponsors of “enfants microbes” and agents of political actors, the lack of adaptation of the justice system, etc. In sum, the explanations given regarding the phenomenon endeavored to link various factors to its emergence, its manifestation and persistence despite various responses and actions.

We would like to suggest an analysis of the phenomenon based on the assumption that this form of delinquency is a product of the practices, norms and values expressed daily by youths of intersecting spaces and who try on the daily basis to escape from the classic regulations of the society. We hypothesize that the “microbe children” come from particular backgrounds and with social journeys influenced by networks which shape their perceptions and actions in violence. Our approach is to examine the everyday life of “enfant microbes” youths and their social networks, rather than assuming that this is spontaneous behavior.

**Abobo: the social, economic and cultural origins of the phenomenon of “enfants microbes”**

The phenomenon of youth criminal violence originates in Abobo. The trajectories which are socio-historical, demographical, economic, and political can help identify the characteristic of the original home of “enfants microbes.” This can help distinguish the mobilizing factors in order to make sense of the emergence of this new form of “media headliner” criminal violence.

**Explosive demography.** With its location, Abobo is one of the entrance ports in the north of Abidjan through which rural populations as well as migrants enter to engage in commercial activities. The neighboring town of Adjamé has scores of markets, and employment can be sought in the three industrial zones of Treichville, Vridi, or Yopougon. On its 120 square km surface area
Abobo has welcomed a continuously growing population which has jumped from about 143,000 in 1975 (RGPH 1975), to a community of over a million in 2010. Besides the migration influx there is also a high birth rate, although not as high as the national average. The fecundity index for Ivoirian urban areas in 2011 was estimated at 3.7 children per woman, against a national average of 5.4 in 2011. Today, with a population of 1,030,658, Abobo is the second most populated town (right after Yopougon) of the Abidjan District. The Abobo town is, in relation to others, a melting pot of people of diverse origins. With its role of being a “first stop” dormitory zone, the town is progressively becoming home to people with low income. The principal economic activities of its inhabitants are in the informal sector, mainly in local commerce and precarious artisanal activities.

**Identity stirring against a background of tension.** The community environment of Abobo remains shaped by autochthonous villages that still hold to their traditions, versus the spontaneous development of neighboring migrant towns. In fact, in its spatial development, the towns developed from informal urbanization activities around the railway station, on land donated by the people of the autochthonous villages Ebrié and Attié. The trade and transport sectors have attracted large numbers of northern Ivorians, as well as Malians, Nigerians, Togolese and Burkinabe migrants, among others. They have developed into the informal leaders of all those people living together, despite their various origins. In time, because of the ways in which electoral politics works and a certain logic in which it portrays identities, the history of cohabitation and the ongoing mixing of diverse cultures in Abobo gave rise to political tensions. Most recently, Abobo has been seen as a pro-Ouattara stronghold where foreign communities allied with Ivorian people from the north in opposition to autochthonous Ivorians who are said to support his defeated local opponent Gbagbo. Moreover, the foreign identity which became visible at that moment through political debates was also challenged in economic spaces and on the issue of youth violence.

Furthermore, we show how this cohabitation is marked by polarization and identity tensions in specific sectors, including transport and the political mobilization of opponents: two fields that have become related to the phenomenon.

**Socio-ecological indicators of insecurity.** Insecurity in some suburbs of Abobo can be seen in their space of organization and in the nature of its population. It has 28 neighborhoods, including 19 identified as “danger-
ous.” Its ramshackle housing provides for 60.7% of its population, organized in common courtyards. The reason for this physical structuration is that Abobo town has not sufficiently benefitted from the public social housing undertaken by the state’s social housing department since the 1960s. This project declined in the 1970s-1980s before it reached Abobo, and the previous state housing initiatives or the viability of urban spaces were also put on hold because of various economic and political crises. Consequently, the town endured privately initiated informal urbanization which is expected to give rise to about twenty unsafe neighborhoods. Its antiquated sewage system serves as drainage for no more than 11% of Abobo and only 26.5% of the population have access to water-flushed toilets to evacuate the sewerage (UN HABITAT 2008). In this unhygienic environment, “common courtyards” are built for the remaining 85% of all types of housing in Abobo.

The cohabitation within a “common courtyard” consists of sharing a very small space, with a common kitchen and the unhygienic toilet described above. Living close to one another in crowded conditions may at times give people the false impression that they are living in harmony. The Abobo image, therefore, relates to a poor income, informal economic activities, the absence of political protection and a stigmatizing unvalued identity, all symbolizing the social hardship of the households. The physical environment is therefore an element in structuring the social ecology that initiates or reinforces the delinquent youths in adopting a “microbe” image. They are the products of that unsafe, dirty, and degraded urban space and have to try to make use of it in the best possible way. Sociologist F. Akindes describes the links between those “children” and how their space speaks to the ecosystem dimension of the phenomenon:

“When one goes to those sub-districts such as Bocabo, Colombia in Abobo, the real base of production of microbes, one quickly realizes it is one of those spaces that even the forces of order find extremely hard to access. Those youth and children know that when they are being tracked down, there are environmental limits that police forces are constrained with... Hence, it is in those spaces that they prosper.”

**Poor and socialized into violence youths.** Statistic data on youth unemployment in Abobo are either rare or inaccessible. However, the study by the National Institute of Statistics [NIS] (surveys on living standard of households, 2012) highlights an increase in the unemployment rate in their location: that
rate has gone from 20.1% in 2008 to 20.5% in 2011. In 2008, 16.8% of Abo-
bo’s population lived on a very low annual income, on the national poverty
threshold. Given the high demand for housing, about 60% of the households
are deprived as described above and in a very advanced state of poverty
(NIS, surveys on living standard of households, 2012). Thus, we must re-
alize that the youth who constitute an important portion of this population
are also among the poorest. The official statistics on national level indicate
that the rate of unemployment among active population has risen to about
20%, totaling 4.5 million unemployed, four million of them being relative-
ly young.\footnote{18} If they encounter socio-professional integration difficulties, the
latter are automatically perceived by Abobo youths as the reason for their
degraded social status. Some informants stressed that the Abobo town did
not have industrial zones and did not offer job opportunities like other towns
such as Yopougon, Port-Bouet, Treichville, or Koumassi, among others.

Against this backdrop of poverty and limited socioeconomic opportunities,
there is a form of resilience emerging among socially challenged urban
youths in Abobo just as in other Abidjan neighborhoods. In 1980-90, there
was the “yobs” or “ziguéhis” promoting a counterculture that many youths
adopted. This involved clothing and language: diverse gangs emerged in the
sub-districts of Treichville, Marcoy, Yopougon, and Abobo town, with certain
clothing fashions and a reinvented language (the Noutchi). They promoted
the concept of fending for oneself to achieve social mobility and regulate
violence within or between gangs. The phenomenon that was sweeping
across urban Abidjan was embraced in poverty-stricken Abobo which soon
emulated other towns with spaces of violence controlled and organized by
notorious kingpins. These ‘gangsterized’ spaces where delinquent profiles
were promoted, were also the spaces for the diffusion of an urban sub-
culture that valued young yobs. Their “war effects” attracted many other
youths from poor social and family backgrounds, who were either aban-
doned or lived on the streets.

Unpacking the structure of the “ziguéhis,” reveals that territories formerly
controlled by or influenced by certain gang lords are now in new hands,
those of transport “syndicates.” Yesterday’s juniors – godfathered by reput-
ed yobs – are now becoming the “leaders” of an economic sector struc-
tured around one’s capacity to deploy violence. These are the ones that the
youngest refer to as “Vié-pères” (“elder/godfathers”). The early structure of
this gang has slowly settled in the transport sector, which present the youth
with the easiest point of access to socioeconomic success. In this sector of
high economic potential, the “vié-pères,” in complicity with the syndicalist leaders, rule over the “good little ones” as the providers of informal jobs. In exchange, these youths will make themselves available for mobilization anytime that there is a need to defend the territory of the “vié-pères” who are the keepers of the wellbeing of the syndicate. Later we will also see how the transport sector – as the provider of “chap-chap money” (quick money) – constitutes a network of connection between the spaces of violent youths and the social routes of the “enfants microbes.”

**Self-perception of a shared identity of marginalized violence.** Participants who were interviewed in this research revealed how they were often reminded of their poverty when they interacted with people living in what was seen as the better social conditions of towns like Cocody, Treichville, and Marcory. They displayed the image of stigmatized people just by living in their deprived neighborhood. The identity of “abobolais,” according to others, was that of second-class citizens who were seen as potentially violent. Abobo youths at times reinforced this by referring to their neighborhood as a “ghetto” but also admitted being subject to “bosses” and having their own “laws”. Some used the term “law of the jungle” or “nourishing chains” as codes for their organization and its own relationships. During the second violent post-electoral crisis, Abobo town reputed to be an electoral stronghold of the RDR of President Alassane Ouattara took on its political rivals in a hard-fought second round of the presidential election. After two months of curfew imposed on the commune, the emergence of self-defense patrol committees, then armed commandos in the sub-district of PK 18, things ended in a full-scale rebellion. This was harshly dealt with by the regime in power. Part of its youth became militarized against emerging neighborhood bomb attacks. Abobo, in the final moment of the crisis became a theatre of true war scenes:

> “Even when you go in another town, when people say to you that you are from Abobo you yourself feel ashamed. But it is not like you have stolen or done something else [...] for example if it is (for) paper-related matter that brought you there, they will neglect you. They will consider you a little thug.”

Progressively, Abobo youths developed the sense of having been abandoned. Some recalled their ex-combatant days in the violent post-electoral crisis of 2010-2011. Together, they said, abandonment and an unsatisfactory “deal” were behind the violent atmosphere of the town.
“What touched me the most, what marked me the most, is that in Abobo, we went through ten years of crisis. And, you know the political relationships, they always play a role in economic relations. Abobo was considered the threshold of the RDR. What hurts us the most is that during the crisis, the youths of Abobo fought for the President of the Republic to get into power. Despite what people say, some sacrificed their lives so that this man can be where he is today. And what upset us the most, me particularly..., what breaks our hearts, is the fact that today they dare to say they do not understand the “microbe” phenomenon. But it is very easy to understand.”

Youths, through claiming their identity of the marginalized, justify their actions as a de facto consequence of the social order that pressured them to fend for themselves in order to survive. For them, violence is a legitimate means to escape from the rule imposed by their spaces. Hence, we heard, during the interviews, the expression “the one who is violent, is the one who eats the most.”

“...when people see that Abobo youths are dangerous, they are not... It is not our fault if we are that way. In the life we live today, without a man, a man is nothing. But if you do not have support to help yourself then you will be obliged to do all you can to live better.”

“It all depends on the way you live. You have come to find brother who came before you, they are there, well...they are not working. It is at the train station where everyone fend for himself. You are also obliged to do the same thing to feed your family. You see? But where you stand today, if there are two factories or even three, you will see that all this will come to an end. Because if you work there, you will not leave it to put yourself into this. Therefore, it is better that you do all you can, so you can eat. That is why there is violence in Abobo. It cannot end (it) like that (with hunger) in the mouth.”

In the characterization of Abobo, the cradle of "enfants microbes," among other factors, the principal markers include: (i) deep hardship caused by poverty and a lack of facility, (ii) the uncertainty of opportunities with the transport sector as their only economic option, and (iii) a shared culture of being social outcasts who legitimize the choice of violence.
Social path toward the “microbes” gangs

Between a state of hardship and the uncertainty of socio-economic mobility, the socialization of many youths of Abobo, apart from being acquired from family ties, is also tied to networks in which violence is a strong element. The street, networks of friends and drug trafficking, the transport sector, the networks of mobilization, etc. are all alternative moments and spaces of where delinquency and criminal violence are reinforced from an early age, according to the young people who took part in this research. In this paper, we clarify the links between those spaces and the “enfants microbes” phenomenon and explain why and how much younger people are now becoming involved. The life histories of the youths, moving through such violent spaces, lead to the “microbe phenomenon” in Abobo. Although each history is unique, there are points in life linking to the delinquent socialization of every “microbe,” and the networks of the phenomenon.

After family failures: the street

In all the life-histories, there was either parents who struggled to provide for and educate their children or a reshuffling of the nuclear family. The weakening financial capacity of parents is the first explanation and the point where parents begin to lose control over their children.

“In general, parents have the biggest responsibility in children’s education. Obviously, parents are not the only ones to educate children, there is also the social environment. […] But I think that parents have failed in their mission…because they have lost their authority. There is problem of unemployment. No matter the kind of education one will give to his child, if you have no means of sending your child to school, you have no means of feeding your child, there is nothing that can be done, no matter what you will say, your child will end up in debauchery.”

Secondly, “microbes” come from one-parent families living in poor neighborhoods where there are economic and social hardships. That dimension related to the social origins of the “microbes” children connects to the malinké or dioula cultural space in which they live, with polygamous matrimonial relationships between a man and multiple wives. Consequently, the original nuclear families of the youths encompass many other needs of these children that the father’s income cannot handle. The children are
also on chaotic schooling paths surrounded by others in similar family situations. Other factors (divorced parent, death of one of the parents, job loss, failure in school, etc.) come together to accelerate the process of family disintegration and risk-taking behavior to overcome this situation, leading to the re-socialization of street life and gangs. We often noted that a lack of education and disintegration of the family led to a loss of perspective on the future.

“I, my father and also my mother, both two are divorced. Well if your dad and mom are divorced it is like you –the first born –who is suffering. That is what brought me to the transport station. At the station, at night we stay in groups. When I am hungry, I am obliged to go rob. If I did not go to rob, then I will follow my ‘blood-brothers’ and we will go ‘gamer’. We can ‘fall on someone’ [to harass someone]...because if we do not do that, that is not good even for me myself.”

“If all was going well in the family, I personally, I would not be in the street. Because I schooled...up to six years of high school. But money problem emerged and so I could not continue. My dad is actually sick, he cannot work. There is my elder brother who is actually there. He too is fending for himself and he cannot take care of us. There is my young sister, she has to continue schooling, she is a woman, she needs to be taken care of. If she is not taken care of, she will take a wrong path and it is more dangerous than me taking a wrong path.”

All microbe life histories link their landing on the street with the family and community structures that have fallen apart, negatively impacting on their early education and leading them to dangerous practices. These youth then reinvent themselves in an alternative way with “vieux-pères” [godfathers] as their role models for the codes and attitudes that mark their life on the street, including violence.

The network of the agents of transport and its culture of violence

In the trajectory of a “microbe” child, bus stations remain the principal point of socioeconomic insertion. Seen by the illiterate or uneducated youths as an opportunity for earnings, the bus stations and other transport centers are natural destinations for the majority of the youth from the district of Abobo. The transport sector welcomes them and offers them jobs. These youths hope to rise through the ranks from conductors, learner-drivers, to
vehicle owners via valued jobs such as a driver or a transport station manager. However, these spaces are syndicated and there is tough competition for control of the financial resources that are generated by this sector and the transport stations.

The youths who continuously stream toward the transport stations are in this scenario no longer formally employed in the formal sector. They are employed by the transport syndicates who use them to gather the contributions from the drivers and when possible, make use of violence to impose control over the money generated. Given the worsening situation of unemployment even educated or qualified youths resort to this violent syndicalism to survive:

"Me I am qualified. Me, I did a bit of accounting. I was in school XX, [...] It is after studies that I arrived at the station. Then again, the syndicalism is not like it is a bad job. Today, we can afford to feed our families. But people must find a way of organizing this space because today, many confuse being in the transport and being in the syndicate; you think it is people who start machete violence. But it is because there is no...there is no job, [...] that we are obliged to chop one another...because of that...because of...because of...so we can be able to eat."²⁷

There is no doubt that the transport stations provide an opportunity, but there are great risks:

"Well, we know that the job is not decent enough, but we are obliged to do it because...one cannot steal. One cannot go somewhere else to do it. I, for example, hold a High School Certificate. I was qualified for university...well who will buy me books? You know there it is very hard one cannot go there without money it is not like High School. Well...here I find myself at the station but here too it is risking but one must accept it."²⁸

Violence between syndicates in transport spaces occurred in the 1990s, which means it preceded the “microbe” phenomenon. However, microbe children are not new in transport station spaces and their relationships with syndicalist organizations at first took the shape of discretely mobilized networks in the competition over the control of violent spaces of the stations. Before the post-electoral crisis, groups of juniors now termed to as “microbes” were usually visible at different transport stations when they made...
themselves available as porters and survived from the proceeds of petty theft. Because they were too young, they could not officially be employed in the organization of the transport sector. Transport stations quickly showed limited capacities to insert all those unemployed youth. After the crisis, in 2011 when the main transport route station of Abobo was closed, these bands of youths without school qualifications and others without any other economic opportunities would try to become learner-drivers.

The bands of children who roamed the transport stations have been easily manipulated by other senior groups called “balanceurs” and “gnam-boros.” The urban syndicates of transport, although denying any links to them, regularly resorted to engaging the services of “enfants microbes” during their bloody and sometimes deadly confrontations. The testimonies of our interviewees demonstrated that the mobilization of “microbes” by the syndicates of transport happened regularly. They disclosed that the confrontations could help expand their zones of operation and attacks on new victims could provide self-rewards.

**Life-history of entering the street**

“In 2004, the old man (his father) got sick. We were first to send the old man somewhere for treatment. We had money problems. That is how I came to the transport station. Then it coincided that the next day the syndicate was to come to Adjamé. Those I came to ask for help, they said: “ha! This is nice because tomorrow there is a movement at Adjamé, we need to get there. So, if you come with us, you will certainly get [money for your father’s treatment].” We went, I cannot lie, we got a lot. We had money and so when I returned to take my father for treatment, to take the old woman and the old man to go to the village. Already at that time I have already quarreled with machetes. Therefore, I knew I will be back to carry on, to look for money for the old man’s treatment, I mean in that moment when I returned. I started looking for medication in a problematic way. I looked for it a bit then I went back. Slowly, slowly, at that time, there was no one to give me an advice. Who will advise you? The old man is sick, the old woman is there, in a thing where you earn money, the old woman will not tell you to stop!”

- D.Y. former “enfant microbe”
The networks and connections with violence in school spaces

In Abobo, schools are also prone to collective violence. The rhythm of school years is counter-pointed by violent actions organized by pupils of public and private institutions in order to close for holidays or to feed “rivalry” between institutions. We must keep in mind that pupils are often members of child-gangs and often engage in incursions on schools for various reasons, for example to avenge an attack on a peer, to intimidate a rival band, or to disrupt classes and exams.

The connection between the “microbe” phenomenon and school institutions is established by pupils whose schooling leans more and more to the street, to bands of unschooled friends, to spaces of drug trafficking and the consumption that ‘smoke houses’ engage in. In fact, many of the smoke houses are near schools.

The drug trafficking networks and their relationship with microbe phenomenon

Abobo has a reputation of being a center of drug trafficking. The “microbe” children who are frequent users of smokehouses are also often consumers of drugs and other substances. The number of smokehouses found in their neighborhoods, often in places inaccessible to the police, is used as their headquarters and place of refuge. The leaders of the microbe gangs can assume the function of the manager of the smokehouse.

In substance trafficking spaces, just like in transport sector, the “microbes” are mobilized in a war for control over the smokehouses. Police raids against microbe children often end in these sanctuaries being dismantled by addicts. A recent microbe mobilization in the war between dealers occurred on August 21, 2017. For many days, these children armed with machetes invaded and held siege over the Deux-Plateaux neighborhood, of the crested Cocody town. The children wanted to get a piece of some of the action in the struggle between rival gangs that controlled the smokehouses in that neighborhood. Before police intervention, the people living in that neighborhood were harassed and robbed of their properties, something the “microbes” excelled at. It became clear that, acting well out of their zone of operation, the “microbes” were now involved in attacking some of the most dangerous criminals and taking on a new role in urban banditry.
The networks of political mobilization

Because of the violence they were capable of, the “microbes” were being mobilized by entrepreneurs of violence in the transport sector, the syndicates, in the struggle to control the smokehouses as well as by political actors. Youths we interviewed confirmed having intervened in public political meetings at the request of politicians (without proving their direct association with those politicians). In fact, their mobilization was done through their “godfathers” who belonged to syndicalist associations. The latter worked with “microbes” through the intermediary of their “bons-petits” (good little ones) who played the role of front-line bosses. The opportunity of an intervention was appreciated by “microbes” in relation to their own operational mode: an open space offering many loopholes and the presence of many people who could be assaulted. Thus, these youths were found leading or disrupting political protests, syndicalist protests, or festive ceremonies. Their interventions in these cases had always concealed the manipulation behind them. The opposition press identified “microbes” interventions in political protests, but often linked these to the regime in power, but with no proof to support their reports.

Despite the fact that the social paths are not homogenous, the life history of our respondent CM helps to establish the types of relations and spaces into which the youths evolve when family relations become distant, without being completely broken. The above case of CM gives us that illusion.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>From self-spoken...</th>
<th>... To the self-construction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I was studying, I did CE1...CM2. I stopped studying.</td>
<td>Course of studies prematurely interrupted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And then, they put me behind the cattle. In the village, in Mali in xxx.</td>
<td>Estrangement of the biological family and the difficult experience of herdsman child.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I spent four years there. In fifth class, my mom came to find me, she says come. Well, we came here, we are in the neighborhood. I was a tailor, I earned nothing.</td>
<td>Return to Abobo. An attempt of unsatisfactory socio-professional insertion through tailoring. “The job does not feed its man.” Money does not come in “chap-chap” (quickly).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was now selling in the ghetto. I was selling drugs. There! I saw now that this too, the <em>gbans</em> (policemen) are chasing us there, it means it is not a good thing. I left it.</td>
<td>Re-composition in the drug trafficking space. A valued responsibility of the manager of the “smokehouses.” Good earning but huge risk. Going to prison</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well! It is syndicalism I do. <em>Gbri gbrin</em> (the little money) I make there, it is enough for me, I come home, I am satisfied.</td>
<td>Re-composition in the transport space. Function: “encaisseur” (money collector) in the lines that are managed by the syndicates. Function build-ups in the traffic of drug and the transport. Always mobilized to participate in fights for the control of “smokehouses” (ghettos) or for political reasons. Profile of a good mobiliser in the space of youths of his neighborhood (capacity appreciated by the “syndicate” chiefs).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I returned as an “encaisseur.” It was therefore enough for me I could no longer get involved in fights. I don’t care. There is no, there is no way they will say that we have been involved in fight here and that I am injured. No!!! If you see me today, I am hurt somewhere, it is the ghetto fights. If it is not ghetto fight, it is political fight. In the syndicalism I was taken in because I know many people in it.</td>
<td>Mobilize the symbolic capital of a son of a charmer witch.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Many people know me..., if he is there, he can do this (remarkable actions, “brave” actions). Me my father consults (he practices the arts of divination and occults), he does a lot of things for men (his clients). So...we say: “the bird cannot jump (being able to fly) and then its child (fledging) who will run on the ground.” (...) I am a warrior in my own way. That is what God gave me.</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

Other factors promoting violence

Other components of the socio-cultural environment of the sub-district of Abobo also contribute to the propensity towards violence among its youths. Their relationship with the microbe phenomenon is more or less explicit. It is about the existence of a certain magico-religious belief which also accompanies the youths on their journey into violence. It is also a socially codified ritual of masculinity-through-violence.

“To be a good syndicate, you need to know how to fight, you need to have the medications against the machetes, against the metals, even when they are shooting at you to not get into your body. If you have that, if they shoot at you in front of the children, in front of the public and it does not penetrate your body, they will all be behind you. You become their God now. It means when there is a little argument, they will come look for you. You too will go; you will confirm again. Once you have confirmed, all of them, every day even when you have a problem, it is not who will go settle your argument, they will send the machetes [to defend you]. That is how it is.”

We note in the history of some youth microbes the importance of acquiring means of protection or occult preparations to become invulnerable to weapons or to possess supernatural powers, to terrorize their opponents. These dimensions of the trajectory not only emerge from a shared imaginary space, they also structure the paths and the social ascension of a youngster into that delinquent space. We note that in markets, fake “traditional healers” and “witch doctors” sell their diverse preparations that are supposed to make people invulnerable. Markets for charms and other herbal mixtures of protection regularly take place at the margins of public ceremonies of traditional hunters (dozos). After acquiring the supposed protective charms or herbal mixtures, the general tendency for young men is to look for an opportunity to engage in violent confrontations so that to test their efficiency.

The economic constraints and the families’ disintegration are constantly evoked as a structural factor that push youths into the streets. This shifts the socialization of street youths into the spaces of delinquency and criminal violence. For those children, the use of armed violence in an organized gang presents itself as a means to survive in the streets. Their easy integration in
the group of children and youth of similar profile and experiences, encourages their socialization outside the family. This new sphere of sociability is led by entrepreneurs of violence who use youths as instruments: the means of their survival or acquisition of material goods are offered in exchange for them perpetrating acts of violence. However, “microbes” are not passive idiots who let themselves be manipulated by elders. They have their own capacity to decide on objectives, away from the networks of influence. The trajectory “family --> street --> transport center --> smokehouses” should not be considered as pre-determined. Some alternatives have been provided to some of them through structured interventions/actions of state, community and NGO actions.

State and community responses to “enfants microbes”: strengths and weaknesses

Since its emergence, many agents have attempted to address the “microbe” phenomenon in different ways. Hence, different actions of fighting against the phenomenon have been proposed by three categories of agents: community actors, state actors, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

a. The community responses

Response of religious leaders. This response to the phenomenon is a set of actions and discourses: the actions of the religious leaders, community leaders, and the committee of vigilantes have become known collectively as “microbe hunters.” Given the insecurity brought about by the “microbes” youths in the neighborhoods, the religious leaders, especially Imams have reacted through increasing their sermons directed to youths and their parents. The Imams and the Christian religious leaders have also come together during official ceremonies to try to reach the youth involved in this new form of delinquency. The presidents of associations, traditional leaders, and community leaders have since 2013 come together to raise mass awareness under the religious flag. For example, the Imams of the Bocabo and Plaque sub-districts have referred to raising awareness among youth, during their teachings:

“Well here, one moment, even if things are not well at home, often we go to them. Often around five in the evening we go to them. There is a group, which is specially formed by them. We go to them. In their “grin” often at home. If they are not there, we leave a message. We
try to chat with them: “come to the mosque, we have a message to give.” Often, we start at five in the evening. Before six, the mosque is full.”32

The religious leaders remarked that the children involved in this form of criminality were mainly from Muslim families. For this reason, according to our interlocutors, the COSIM [high council of Imams] decided to give more responsibility to Imams in Abobo. To do so, the municipal territory was divided into seven (7) zones under the responsibility of local committees. These involved Imams to co-ordinate with those of the COSIM, and to make them more readable by the populations and different groupings.

“Toward Colombie, with 14th, that is zone three. The other side of Banco, that is zone one. PK is zone seven, Houphouët Boigny is zone five. So, we divided more or less like that. So, the president [of COSIM] has put the file on the table. We spent a month debating that. So Colombie, we have not yet quite mastered, but they have calmed down.”33

The respondents interpreted the actions of the Imam as satisfactory because their various neighborhoods were no longer a regular target of youth “microbes.” Even though the question of security and the “microbe” phenomenon constantly followed days of meetings and religious teachings, they had managed to note bigger resistance to violence in some sub-neighborhoods. This involved the Marley and Colombie neighborhoods, still among the most active centers for the microbe gangs. Elsewhere things could be different, possibly because microbes now chose targets far away from their place of residence.

The community vigilante committees: a violent response by the communities. Given the duration and persistence of the phenomenon, victims of regular attacks blamed it on the poor police response, either because they were exhausted or just failed to mobilize, given their own limitations. Sharing the same territory with the gangs or living under permanent fear of their attacks caused growing insecurity and led to community initiatives, known as vigilantes or the “microbe hunters.”

“(…) when we look at the structure that the state has put on to ensure the security of goods and persons, it is the police. There are police there, there cannot be a committee of defense, committee of surveil-
lance, committees of vigilance. Where there are police!? None of that stuff is there.”

The post-electoral crisis had for a long period, made Abobo a no-go zone, without structures or representatives of the state. The phenomenon made it easier to take a stand in some sub-districts, rather than in others. Given the violent actions of these youths and the delay in the public response, the people of the most affected sub-districts, feeling unprotected by the state, took matters into their own hands. They created their own type of surveillance to protect their properties and people. Elsewhere, away from bigger operations such as “épervier 1 et 2” happening during the given periods, with more agents of the forces of order, the ratio of police per habitat remained weak:

“But when we have a ratio of one policeman for a habitat of 10 miles with a failing logistic, the population will not wait for that one policeman [...] to save such situation. Hence, the population fed up with the delay in police response has decided to take its destiny in to its own hands by defending itself against the aggressors. This has emerged as a unique reaction to microbe phenomenon.”

The community responded to the barbarism of the “microbes” and met violence with violence. To get there, they used strategies which ranged from systematic execution, to the identification of microbe groups so that they could ”amputate the head.”

“In a microbe group, it is enough, it is two, maximum three, minors... and the rest are followers, and as we say in Africa, when you chop the head off, the remaining [part] becomes a whip. If for example we are dealing with a follower, it is easier to scare a follower than to scare a leader. That is why we often need more violence for some than others. Often we need to know who is the strongest.”

This general community protection gradually gave way to a community surveillance system known as community vigilance committees. These committees comprised young people from the community (including many bosses, the real entrepreneurs of violence who engage in syndicalism!), who protected property and people on a voluntary basis. They patrolled at night to stop the infiltration of the “microbes” groups in their environment. Several cases of clashes and reprisals were reported. There were even threats
against members of the committee and their families from microbes. There were reports of casualties in the ranks of committee members and deaths of microbes as a result of beatings.

“There is a young man whom because of aggression he was beaten up. The mother cared for the child; she took him to Colombie [where microbes still rule as bosses]. Today, they have killed him! Drogba, if you see that Drogba has left the neighborhood, it is because of us, because of aggression. He does not aggress here anyone. He does not do any violence here, Drogba, is outside.”

It must be said that the sanction varies according to perceived loyalty of the young person to the group and according to his neighborhood of origin. A simple follower will be less severely punished than a leader of the group. The objective of the strategy was to show microbes that committees have a greater capacity in exercising violence.

“Before, even in day light, you could not sleep. There are 12-year-old children who were breaking into people’s house to take cell phones. Today, even if they do it, they are far from that company. Even if they machete each other. For now, those in the office here [the members of the committee] when they hear that they ”are macheting” one another, they go out immediately. Even if it does not stop completely, it helps a bit.”

For some members of the community, committee members are real heroes, rescuers who must be celebrated. To them, the action of the committees seems legitimate. All the initiators of these vigilance committees start from the observation that their neighborhoods are not protected effectively by the police force. They consider that they have the right to substitute the State which has failed in the protection of persons and their property. Young leaders have thus federated other young people in the different neighborhoods of Abobo to impose an equal response to the height of the violence exerted by the gangs of microbes:

“’O bé nan nan!’ [Malinke for ‘they are coming!’] When they say ’O bé nan nan’ there, everybody says ’O bé nan nan’. No one wants to stop. […] they will run into the field. It means we have done a little, a little to the extent that ’we took the heart’ [to have courage]. Hence, thank God, our youth who are here, really, they have heard us. They say, ’it
is us who must save our old men from this’. They recruited themselves. It worked, until now, it has worked with the approaches, until now, it is a bit fine. “39

These vigilante initiatives have met the support of the community. This was justified by the intensity of the attacks perpetrated by the “microbes” in various neighborhoods. The vigilante committees have dynamics that vary from one district to another but in common, they are well structured with offices and recognized members. Their functioning is supported by means mobilized in material and cash from the community. Neighborhood youths involved in these committees are volunteers. Methods of collecting funds from the community make it possible to support the committees. For example, in the district of Bocabo, the concession owners pay 500 FCFA each month while the tenants contribute with 200 FCFA per month. The committee sometimes benefits from larger donations made by generous people.

The committees are recognized by the municipal authorities as associations. The police district and police station officials recognize and sometimes collaborate with their members during some security operations. The presence and action of the vigilante committees, balancing the power relations, have helped reduce the frequency of attacks by microbe gangs in neighborhoods that are monitored:

“Yes, we have achieved more than we hoped for because since we started more than a year ago now the microbes have not come back; from 21:00, 22:00 those who stayed until late could not return. But today up to 2:00, 3:00 when we are outside, we can see people going out. Youth of the neighborhood we mobilized are responsible for that action.”40

Once again, we emphasize that this result is deceptive to the eye because “microbes” children have moved only from the places targeted by their attackers. It can therefore be said that vigilante committees have helped to distract some neighborhoods from the intervention areas of “microbe” children. The committees also understood that the use of violence against “microbes” children was not enough. Indeed, it appeared to them that dissuasion would not put an end to the phenomenon if the socio-economic conditions of these youngsters were not addressed by more specific actions.

“With time, we realized that it could be good to tell the children to
stop aggressing, but we needed to suggest something else to them. We tried to get close to them. At first, it was because they fear us... the aim was not that. We understood that we needed to get close to the children in order to help them otherwise. That is how the social side came in.”

When we met the vigilante committees, they were going through a mutating phase in the security approaches and in particular the ways in which they maintain and sustain it. Thus, after the period of repression, some initiatives of socio-economic training could be put in place among well-structured committees. Overall, this was about a development of informal social safety nets for the economic support of young people. Examples involved financial support for girls to undertake small economic activities (fruit sales, catering, etc.) and apprenticeships for young boys.

“We organized meetings with some of them, boys as well as girls. We discussed with them, we helped them to reopen their small businesses. For the boys, we wanted to help some of them get back to their workshops in the garage. At the same time, there are cases of sickness, so we help them in that area too. That is where it is complicated there were cases in which we were obliged to come face to face with some very poor families. Families of children...because these are experiences, we tried some things to see what it could lead to. Often, we were obliged to heal the wound from the roots. There was also the coming of CCSR. It helped us.”

With the vigilante or auto-defense community committees, we have realized that they themselves are aware that their relatively satisfactory response will not eliminate the “microbes” phenomenon. Elsewhere, by glimpsing the socio-economic approach to improving the social conditions of children and their families, committee leaders realize that they lack the capacity to provide effective responses of this nature. Several young committee members work in transportation and at bus stations where they experience daily violence. When they return at night to monitor the neighborhoods, the committee only keeps these young people in another network of violence socially accepted in this case compared to the violence they exert at the station. We have also been informed that the collection of money from populations and its management have already led to brawls within certain vigilance committees.
b. State responses

The Ivorian state has also mobilized against the phenomenon of “microbes” children from its onset. While a first structural response was the mobilization of police forces with the option of repression, the political authorities also set in motion other structures under different ministries to find a definitive solution to the security problems. Thus, the state response to the phenomenon is visible through police repression followed by criminal procedures, the establishment of re-socialization process, social reintegration, social assistance, and the development of specific dedicated programs. These opposing or proposed responses have been met with varying fortunes depending on their formulations and the effectiveness and efficiency of the obtained results, but overall, they have not apparently put an end to the phenomenon. Speaking of state actors, the research team refers to the national Security Council (security forces, CCSR) in the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of the Family (social workers of socio-educational complexes and the PPAV).

Mobilization of the forces of security and services of the justice for children

At the level of the security forces, due to the regularity of the attacks by youth “microbes” first in Abobo and then in the District of Abidjan, repression was agreed upon as one of the quick and effective solutions to stop the phenomenon. The National Police and the police stations have been constantly alerted. In collaboration with the police, a real intelligence network has been developed involving some religious leaders and community leaders who, in the long term, have evolved into a special structure to coordinate all links with the “microbes” phenomenon.

A collaboration between religious leaders and forces of order

“Here at the commissariat, the 32nd commissariat and the gendarmerie, we work together and even the other: the commando camp. They told that when there is a problem, you must tell us and then we need someone to know. Because if people know, others will say ah! You don’t know it is the imam who did that, it means it will go and you or your parent will be the target. If they attack your wife or your daughter, it is you! Thus, if there is a problem, those who know it among the old elders, they will say ah imam, it is you who are the leaders, what can we do. Therefore, me too, I stand and say I am going to the shower,
I will call and then thirty minutes later or fifteen minutes later, there you [will] see gendarmerie or commando camp. So that is what happen with those children’s situation these days.”
- Testimony of an Imam

The government has reinforced the rolling stock, security arsenal, and communication technology of the security forces, to step up its own “strong arm” response. The District of Abobo Police was strengthened by the support of CCDO (Centre of Coordination and Operational Decisions), a mixed body of police, gendarmes and military originally created to combat organized crime. The police actions were thus reinforced by establishing legal operations by a generalized rake-over of military “types.” This was the case of operations in “épervier 1 and 2.” During these operations several smokehouses were destroyed in the municipality of Abobo and the rest of Abidjan, and security raids were conducted.

**Police operation “épervier 1”**

Ongoing since May 17 (2016), the operation “épervier” launched by the national security forces has already helped in three days, to apprehend nearly 500 suspects whose age varies from 12 to 30 years. The large-scale hunt for young delinquents and thugs, which are particularly rampant in the communes of Abobo and Yopougon, was quick to bear fruit. 300 people were arrested on the first day, 174 the next day, dozens of knives (machetes, knives, scissors, etc.), 266 cannabis balls and a large number of seized tablets, 21 closed smokehouses rooms, etc. (were seized)
- Source: extract from “La grande offensive de force de sécurité” in Fraternité Matin n° 15,434 of 21-22 May 2016, p 5.

Despite this vigorous intervention, the phenomenon of “enfants microbes” apparently become more structured and visible in other areas. This incapacity of state’ forces to overcome the phenomenon generated a suspicion between civilian population and Police forces that were accused of complicity with delinquents:

“Often, policemen arrive, they chase them. They destroy the smokehouses and two months afterwards they (the delinquents and the “microbes”) will come back. It is those in high positions who sell drugs. It is those who feed those smokehouses who benefit from them. Given that, the police action is not efficient, because even if they catch them, they will be give money and then they will set (the
microbes] free. They know where they are, they come to take their share and leave."

The activation of the judicial system for imprisonment led to the trial of several of the apprehended “microbes” and who had reached the age of criminal majority, which is 18 years. Several are held in the premises of the House of Arrest and Correction of Abidjan (MACA). They were prosecuted, tried and imprisoned for armed robbery, murder or for criminal conspiracy when they were arrested in a group. In the specific case of minors, they were placed in the rehabilitation center for children in the MACA.

From a repressive approach towards a socio-economic reintegration of “microbes” seen as youth victims of the post-electoral crisis

The second dimension of the state’s response has been the attempt to reintegrate these young people economically through re-socialization centers. From 2014 to 2015, supported by the Programme for the Protection of Vulnerable Children and Adolescents (PPEAV), a program housed within the former Ministry of Family, Women, and Children, led a first initiative that has helped to take care of 60 “microbes” youths in the rehabilitation centers of Dabou and Bonoua near Abidjan.

One year after this experience, the National Security Council (CNS) has taken over the issue of reintegration and re-socialization. Thus, since December 2016, a vast program of reintegration of a thousand youth “microbes” has been underway in the reintegration center of M’Bahiakro, used by ex-combatants in central Côte d’Ivoire when we conducted this study. A first wave of 345 children graduated from the program at the center of M’Bahiakro in July 2017. We have analyzed the social trajectories of children who completed their time in the center and who were reintroduced into their original social environment.

To close this section on state responses, we must point out the absence of specific actions by the Abobo City Council. Indeed, the municipal authorities have only verbally expressed their support for the police actions against the phenomenon. Community leaders, vigilance committees, and social workers of Abobo socio-educational complex highlighted the lack of collaboration by the communal authorities who had not as yet approached them.
The response of the NGOs: A brief synthesis of the Indigo experience

Indigo is the local partner of the international NGO Interpeace, an organization that specializes in peace consolidation. Valuing an intergroup dialogue, Indigo conducted a pilot process in the municipality of Abobo for over seven months, which ended in May 2016. In fact, through this pilot project, Indigo brought together various components of society in a process of collective reflection around the dynamics of violence. This also involved young people, in the search for durable solutions to mitigate the “microbes” phenomenon. Forty young people from Abobo were direct beneficiaries of this project, which was initiated by Indigo. Thanks to the dialogue, there has been a strong commitment from the communities, some state structures, and from the private sector for the social support needed for the youth and to try to end the violence. Unfortunately, this has not been replicated by any other civil society organization. There are certainly actions directed at “microbes” but carried out by individuals who do not have the capacity for the intervention and monitoring adapted to this problem. In this case, we can cite the example of the NGO Vivre Ensemble, directed by a woman whose actions are limited to social animation (outings, organization of sports competitions, etc). The Indigo NGO’s collaboration with the State of Côte d’Ivoire as part of its pilot project was aimed at finding an innovative solution in 2015 to fight the “microbe” phenomenon and it has been able to draw on the skills of social workers for community support for some “microbes” targeted by the national NGO. Before the action of this NGO, the workers of the socio-educational complex had not dared to take charge of the problem of “microbe” children. In terms of lessons learned, this collaboration demonstrates the possibility of synergy between the State and civil society in the quest to find a durable solution.

The persistence of the phenomenon

The different reactions or responses discussed above have impacted the “microbe” phenomenon in various ways without making it disappear from the daily life of Abidjan people, at least not at the moment. There is no doubt that the challenges posed by “microbes” is forcing society as a whole to change the norms, practices, and discourses of security and socialization. Each type of response to combat the progression of the phenomenon calls for its strengths and weaknesses, to understand how and why for almost five years, “enfants microbes” persisted as a major challenge to the security environment.
Beyond community violence, indicators of a need for solidarity and social inclusion. The violent opposition of a community’s to the criminal violence of the youth “microbes” had a short-lived success and it revealed or accentuated the social fractures within populations that had only coexisted in the urban space without real efforts to co-operate on building solid relationships to protect the young. In fact, neighborhood populations are beginning to question the use of violence against “microbes.” These children did not initiate the breakup of the family bond; in some cases, in reversed roles, they had ended up as the breadwinners for fathers and mothers who were devastated by poverty. The “microbe” child – who in some families is also the provider – cannot continue to be the target of popular ransom without his family being indexed and placed on the margins of the community:

“In all it is a sloppy terrain: you can say that your friend’s child steals. That will lead to an argument, then she speaks faster with you… hence the thing that the committee is doing, even if you are happy about it you cannot talk about it, otherwise they will identify you.” [An unnamed woman from Binkinin]

Moreover, during the first actions of the police that led to the arrest of hundreds of children, it was their parents who marched to police stations to demand their release.

“The police [officer] is doing [their] his job. Yes but when we see that it is our own children, when the police come it is to kill our children, but as it is our own children, if the police arrest the children, we will come and say no, no, no, my child did nothing. The policemen will say what? The commissioner will say what? They arrested my child while he was doing something and I go to the police station, I present myself to the station, no, my child did nothing. Him, what will he do! That is what led to the police’s powerlessness.”

At the neighborhood level, after the fear inspired by the “microbe” phenomenon had passed, committee members understood that “microbes” were still members of the community or children of known parents, and that a dialogue was needed to find a lasting solution. This flexibility in the committee practices is noted when they considered that a “microbe” child could stop participating in gang activity. The use of violence against children as a “normal” practice in their education, replacing the parent who had failed to use “educational violence” to “properly educate” a child was in order, be-
cause after corporal punishment came a second chance:

“Our role is not to send children to the police or in prisons, the “mi-
crobe” is a child of a neighbor, a brother of someone we know in the
community, with whom we pray. If we send his or her child, how will
we look (at him or her) later?”

Vigilante committee members knew that the preservation of social and
community cohesion was paramount, and that they needed to adapt the ini-
tial violent community response to the young criminals. Even while waiting
to transform these committees into tools of community cohesion and sup-
port for the social integration of the youths, many children from these poor
neighborhoods were still joining violent gangs.

The lack of adaptation of legal frameworks in the intervention of the po-
lice forces. Police officers noted that young offenders, when apprehended,
always claimed to be under 17 years old, and therefore exempt to the more
severe penalties for violent crime reserved for adults, those over 17 years.
Young offenders exploited this. To counter this, only big operations such as
“épervier 1 and 2” worked with such a limited ratio of police officers per
inhabitant in Abobo. Apart from these interventions, people did not feel pro-
tected by their police:

“But when we have a ratio of one policeman per 10 thousand inhabi-
tants with a logistics that is failing, the population will not wait for the
only policeman there [...] to come and save him from such a situation.
So, the population, exhausted by the slow reaction of the police, de-
cided to take control of their destiny by defending themselves against
the attackers. This specially came in response to the “microbe” phe-
nomenon.”

At the beginning of the “microbes” phenomenon, the Ivorian government
was accused of carelessness and even of ignoring the reality of the problem
posed:

“I greeted the arrival of Guei (Head of State between December 1999
and October 2000) because he solved a problem that the population
had raised, it was organized crime. The power in place is not incapa-
ble when it has the will. We are struggling with this because [current]
power does not have a will to end it. If they had a will to end it, in no
time it was going to finish."\textsuperscript{47}

While this lack of will power was denounced by the "microbes" target population, the political opposition justified the poor police mobilization by the fact that Abobo while being the home of the young microbes, was also the electoral base of the coalition of ruling parties. The governing power would avoid turning its back on its electoral stronghold if it used a more muscular police intervention. In June 2016, the government asked people to stop referring to these young people as "microbes" by rather proposing the term "vulnerable young people in an emergency phase." Part of the public response was that this was further proof of the denial of the phenomenon by the rulers:

"Regarding the police itself, when the phenomenon appeared ... The Police structure did not accept the phenomenon at first. It has never accepted the phenomenon. [...] The politic did not accept the phenomenon so much that they found the term "microbe" was too strong. And to sweeten the term they found something that is softer [...] they preferred to say a child in conflict with the law. [...] But all because they did not want to bring the appropriate answers to the phenomenon."\textsuperscript{48}

Changes in terminology to describe these young offenders did not really impact the progress of intervention against the "microbe" phenomenon. Indeed, their delinquent experiences became increasingly valuable in the underworld. Legal frameworks had not been updated to adapt to the new phenomenon, and this allowed the microbes to flourish:

"The phenomenon?! ... The police did not follow; the legislator did not follow. Nobody followed. Everyone is hiding. Nobody wants to face the problem. [...] which means did the police had to deal with the problem? Since they have machetes and we have pistols. They are attacking people, what am I supposed to do? As a policeman I cannot bring a machete with me when I go there. If I use my fire, myself as a police officer, I am guilty of a criminal offense. [...] what do I do? ... Since it is my role to defend the population."\textsuperscript{49}

\textbf{Adaptability and mutations of the microbe phenomenon.} We noted that the profile of young group members was changing. Although the gangs still had a significant number of minors, many of them were now in their late twen-
ties. They were marrying each other and becoming parents and this phase of social reproduction brought with it a lot of risk for the rest of the population.

"It is a space that reproduce itself on its own social bases. The microbes marry more and more between themselves and make children. The children born of these unions take the names of members of the late gangs who died in the "field", following a popular ransom or a tough intervention of the police. And they hope that these kids, growing up, will make sure they will be even more successful when their time of being operational comes."\(^{50}\)

As we showed earlier, the "microbes" who were no longer young children had changed their ways of operating over time. They had learned to anticipate police action and seemed well informed about the operations of security forces. As proof, during the recent operation of "épervier 2," as of May 31, 2017, out of 591 individuals arrested only eight were minors. When the attacks resumed during June and July 2017 at the rate of at least two attacks per week, they had moved to other sub-districts.

The "microbes" have climbed the corporate ladder of the transportation world, and no longer worked for the "vié-pères". They could attack other young people without being ordered to do so. In the management of "smokehouses", they were no longer occasional employees but were now mobilized to attack and control the territories of others. Ultimately, they had acquired greater autonomy. This would make them more attractive to the younger ones, where the structuring factors such as poverty and violence in the transport sector remained the same for many young people, because the crime networks had not yet been addressed. All actions to fight against the phenomenon were thus of limited significance in Abobo town.

**Conclusion**

This case study shows what happens in a society that progressively excludes people who are struggling and does not transmit the right values to younger generations. The urban space of Abidjan, with its diverse population made up of people from diverse ethnic and national origins that need to be integrated in the physical, demographic, and infrastructural spheres are under severe pressure by increasingly visible socioeconomic factors. With the conquest of the partisan forces during recent political and military
crises, niches of poor households have evolved, but this has also left scores of young people who are forced to take social paths that lead to massive unemployment within a moral crisis. Public policies to address these issues of poverty and the inability to protect citizens are but developments since the economic crisis of the late 1980s. No social safety nets have been put in its place despite the significant growth rates observed at the end of political crisis. Abobo is therefore an emblematic community of the state’s inability to provide poor people with basic social services and to reduce the precariousness of their living and economic conditions.

Youth “microbes” are metaphorically the product of how the situation has deteriorated and gradually excluded the poorest, whose offspring try to survive by violent means. The daily patterns of the microbe youths buckle under family settings of parental poverty and include friends who have dropped out of school early to re-socialize to a life of survival in the streets. These children comprise groups who are learning alternative survival strategies in which violence is the prime means of survival. This is enforced by entrepreneurs running illicit economic networks such as transport unions or drug trafficking. In this ghetto the successful figures pose as model. These are the “vié-pères” – the reputable sponsors of these fields of illegality who take the children under their “protection” transforming them into urban “warriors.” On this journey from petty larceny to organized assaults, parents are powerless as they gradually witness their abandoned young child’s growing delinquency. Too young, with no professional competence, probably under the influence of narcotics, the children of poor households have only the bus station, small craft trades, and the informal sector as options for survival. Eventually, their diurnal experience makes them fit as a group into the workings of the urban underworld where their role models are located.

The responses to the microbe phenomenon have impacts that cannot currently be objectively estimated in terms of either a quantitative or qualitative reduction of the phenomenon. The violent responses of the communities and the police repression on the one hand and NGO-led initiatives based on re-education or the social and economic reintegration on the other hand have not succeeded so far. To explain this, we have emphasized the fact that if the structuring factors of the everyday life of the “microbes” youths are not really addressed, the work of change focused on children will not have much effect. Everyday social spaces in Abobo remain focused on criminal networks while the various initiatives by government and civil society are achieving rather limited results.
Added to this is the fragmentary and poorly coordinated interventions, because these responses (Ministries, NGOs, civil society organizations, rehabilitation centers, etc.) are either not aware of each other, or in competition with one another, diverting attention from the very real underpinnings of the phenomenon. An integrated approach of all the actions currently in progress is crucial to achieve palpable results: the creation of a citizen space of dialogue between all the actors would lead to the formulation and implementation of public policies adapted to address the many problems of life in disadvantaged areas, as highlighted in several studies conducted in Abobo. The nature of the problem and the motivations of the various actors involved or related to the “phénomène microbe” are known. What is most needed is to conduct concerted and integrated actions to better protect society’s youngest and poorest members.
NOTES

1. The “enfants microbes” have in common to have been some auxiliaries of the pro-Ouattara combatants of the “Forces Nouvelles” during their offensive to control Abidjan when Laurent Gbagbo refused to leave the power after he lost the election in 2010.


8. The public administration as well as part of private enterprises were looted. The judicial system had to totally rebuild the broken prisons’ courts. The ONUCI announced that until May 2012, the impact that the conflict had had on the performance of the judicial system, and more especially the evasion of about 12 000 who had been detained in 22 houses of arrest and correctional centers had pre-occupied its actions during the post-electoral
crisis of 2010-2011.

9. The security environment was currently characterised by a fragmentation of armed forces and a chaos due to the new regime’s lack of control over a large number of the armed men. The nature and number of the combatants [militias, mercenaries, auxiliaries from all over, traditional hunters locally called dozos, armed pro-Gbagbo ex-forces, last hours’ civilian combatants, etc.] were not known while in the south zone newly conquered by the FAFN who meanwhile have become FRCI, the management of domains was being transposed just like in the old rebellion. At the end of the post electoral crisis in 2011, more than a thousand military and paramilitary men went on exile in neighbouring countries together with other civil refugee populations.


15. According to the data collected on the quality of life of households, (2008), that rate is higher than Abidjan city’s (48.3 %).


19. From 31 October 2010 to January 2011, the inhabitants of the commune were forbidden to circulate from 19:00 to 6:00 in the morning.

20. S. I., man, 36 years old, shipper at Gbaka, Focus of 23/01/2015.

21. S. I., man, 34 years old, computer scientist, Focus of 23/01/2015.

22. B. A. K, 32 years old, shipper at Gbaka, Focus of 23/01/2015.

23. S. I., man, 36 years old, shipper at Gbaka, Focus of 23/01/2015.

24. X anonymous participant of Focus group discussion of 18/01/1015.

25. C. N. 14 years old, Focus Group Discussion, Abobo Plaque, 24/04/2015.

26. C. M. 18 years old, Focus Group Discussion, Abobo Plaque, 24/04/2015.

27. D. C., Syndicat, 32 years old, Abobo, focus group discussion with balanceurs and drivers, 23/01/2015.


29. “Balanceurs” related to young men who assist drivers in urban public transport cars. They have in charge to assist the driver by collecting transport bill from passengers.

30. “Gnamboros”: at first, gnambros were composed of young men who were disseminated at various bus stations. Over time, they became auxiliaries of syndicates asked to oblige drivers to pay a kind of tax for their union.

31. K.M., Vendor, 31 years old, Abobo, participant of the Focus Group Discussion with the victims, 17/01/2017.


33. Ibid.

34. Solo, President of the committee of vigilance of Bocabo, 12/04/2017.
35. Z. Police officer in Abobo.

36. X, committee member of Bocabo.

37. Member of comitee of Binkinnin.

38. X. a Clouétcha neighbourhood resident.


40. Ibid.

41. Interview conducted on 13/04/2017.


43. X, anonym member of the commitee of self-defense.

44. X, a community leader.

45. X, member of the surveilance commitee of Clouétcha.

46. Z, Police officer in Abobo.

47. S, Imam of Abobo.


49. Francis Akindès, Interview granted to Fraternité Matin n° 15 434 of 21 22 May 2016, p 6.

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