City dwellers in central Africa have been going through a long and exhausting phase of post-colonial rupture. The last decades have been characterised by severe social and economic crisis, political turmoil and violence. At the social level, this has resulted in the creation of a host of new livelihood strategies. Psychologically, it translates into an ongoing quest for identity, meaning and definition. Although many new and creative forms of positive social change have been borne of rupture—such as new forms of solidarity, shifts in family and inter-generational relations, re-definition of dealings with authority and the state—its consequences have been dramatic and wide-ranging. It is primarily the urban poor who have had to adapt to crisis and at the same time have become the main protagonists in the process of change. Another implication of this rupture—the one addressed in this chapter—is the way urban populations have reconfigured the complex relations that inexorably link them to their hinterlands. African urban hinterlands are the peripheries of the global periphery, the suburbs of the suburbs. The hinterland concept is consequently best understood as being embedded in the fields of political ecology and political economy. African urban hinterlands are fascinating spaces of imbalance where ordinary people have imagined new constructions of space and time. Peri-urban areas are ‘fringe’ areas because they lie both at the edge of the city and at the limit of the rural hinterland. These worlds overlap and intermingle, making it difficult to establish where the city ends and where the rural space begins.¹

¹ This chapter is based on work carried out in the framework of two research projects funded by the development branch of the European Union. For information concerning the research context and methodology, see annex I.
realms, a dichotomy studied in detail by Cecilia Tacoli (1998). While the latter have made progress in narrowing the gap between these two realms, the former still favour a sectoral approach. It is nonetheless clear today that city and village, from both conceptual and utilitarian perspectives, are inseparable—notably by the people most concerned. The arguments put forward in two once important books (Lipton 1977, Chambers 1983) about ‘urban bias’ now have little conceptual utility in understanding the dynamics of contemporary central Africa. Their arguments about separate rural and urban worlds have lost currency because attitudes and behaviours of city dwellers and villagers increasingly overlap. Both straddle the disintegrating boundaries that once distinguished the two worlds. Moreover, the terms ‘city dweller’ and ‘villager’ are used here with reserve: the naming exercise is nearly impossible due to all the contradictions and ambiguities that it entails. This straddling, or ‘rurbanisation’, can also be viewed in terms of a linguistic paradox. In Lingala, the word ‘city’ does not exist in its own right. The word mboka signifies ‘village’ and mboka ya mundele, translates as the ‘white man’s village’, is used to name the city. Popular expression still opposes what was formerly the European city with the African cité. People say ‘nakai na ville’ (I’m going to town) when they go to ‘downtown’ Kinshasa to work, bargain, take care of administrative or banking business, shop or solicit a friend or a friend of a friend who is perceived as being able to help solve a particular urgency. They say ‘I’m going to the cité’ when returning home. Administrative boundaries also make little sense because cities in central Africa often include rural enclaves or interstices: Kinshasa, for example, has institutionalised the weird notion of communes urbano-rurales. These refer to urban districts (from an administrative mapping perspective) that overlap with rural landscapes on which people engage in village-type activities. This situation supports Kurotani’s (2004: 205) assertion that here is no perfect match between geography and culture or Bryceson’s reference to “the fuzziness of administrative versus operative boundaries” (2006: 4).

Linkages between city and hinterland take various tangible forms. City dwellers have a vital dependence on peri-urban agricultural produce and small livestock. They also need wood (for cooking and building) and non timber forest products (to eat, heal and perform ritual ceremonies). Much of this activity is subsistence but commercial activities are also

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2 Lingala is the main vehicular language used in and around Kinshasa.