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Participatory municipal management and sociopolitic realities in southern communes: Case of the municipality of Porto-Novo in Benin

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to analyze social consultation in the process of updating community projects in Porto-Novo, Benin. Consultation, a privileged tool of the participatory approach, is a springboard for satisfying the right to information in order to feed into development decisions. Thus, to conduct the study, the choice was made to conduct qualitative research with 30 subjects representing the survey unit. The interview guide and documentary research were used as the main data collection tools. Data processing and analysis was possible thanks to the analysis model of Moreau (2013) [15], Dufort (1992) [10] and Brière and Proulx (2013) [5]. Indeed, the results analyzed allowed us to observe that some community projects did not involve the beneficiaries in all stages of the project. This explains the passivity of the target populations in the use and sustainability of the projects. Moreover, the democratic social consultation bodies led by the communities themselves are not yet a reality. It is true that there are grassroots development associations, but their actions are limited and do not allow them to participate in local public affairs.

Keywords: social consultation, participatory democracy, local development, consultation body, community project

Introduction

Since the 1990s, conceptions and development strategies have evolved considerably around the world. Overall, these new conceptions and strategies situate development issues in increasingly complex links of interdependence and cooperation, between territories, and between actors, at all scales (DADL, 2011, p.4). However, any development operation, whatever it is and when it affects local communities, inevitably involves the implementation of mechanisms that can allow the realization of projects and the achievement of the objectives pursued (Anato, 2014, p.7) [2]. In this context, the central state is no longer perceived as the only agent of change. It must now cooperate with other emerging actors who are increasingly asserting themselves in the definition and implementation of public policies (DADL, 2011, p.4).

It is within this framework that regional and local consultations have been deployed to respond to social (St-Louis, 2012, p.7) [16] and cultural problems that are hindering development. This consultation in its global vision is not intended to implement isolated activities that are rarely complementary, but it is introduced into the community approach to strengthen the autonomy and capacity for development appropriation by local communities (Bourque, 2012, p.5) [4] while promoting social and civic participation on a higher scale. Obviously, local communities need public or private programs to develop, and these programs also need ownership by the communities for a better efficiency factor (Bilodeau, *et al.*,

2004; Bisset, 2008 quoted by Bourque) development action will always have to come to terms with the dual need for an efficient bureaucratic organization, involving the identification of privileged interlocutors in the peasant environment, and the participation of grassroots "beneficiaries" involving the mobilization of community resources (Chauveau, 1992, 1994, p.24) [7, 8]. This face-to-face approach, however, calls for a coherent management of the diversity of actors and the plurality of interventions (...) and invites community stakeholders to decompartmentalize their development practice to meet new challenges in order to better support the systems decentralized collective action (ibid.2).

Better still, this practice highlights the willingness of actors to participate in the search for viable solutions in order to improve the response to the needs of projects and populations. But even when the central authorities strive to carry out bottom-up projects with the aim of improving the living conditions of the populations, the results sometimes seem out of phase with what had been planned. On the one hand, most of the projects initiated are confronted with sociological and cultural realities that are little or not at all taken into account, most often leading them to failure. On the other hand, they fail even before seeing the light of day due to an individualistic and bureaucratic approach (Chauveau, 1992, 1994) [7, 8]. As a result, many development assistance projects gobble up significant resources without benefiting recipients.

It is right that the Meltzer Commission in a report indicates that it has recorded 60% of the failure rate of these international development aid projects in recent years. This quantified data comes at the right time to paint the inefficiency of project implementation. Today, there is certainly significant progress in the rural development sector, but it remains nevertheless limited with regard to the significant means used. Indeed, the living conditions of the rural populations of West Africa are deteriorating further and they are confronted with multiple problems (Ouattara, 2003, p.3) ^[14]. This situation suggests that most community projects probably do not receive the support of grassroots populations or receive them only partially, regardless of the level of implementation of the project (Honvo, 2019) ^[12]. From a completely different point of view, the relative weakness of the results obtained in terms of urban management, despite the significant progress observed in the institutionalization by the municipality of democratic mechanisms of participation, even of social consultation for the management of community projects, seems to suffer from "politicality" through the diversion of political action by the mayor against a backdrop of blackmail, intimidation and corruption.

In Benin, despite the laws on decentralization, in particular law 97-029 of January 15, 1999 on the organization of municipalities in the Republic of Benin and instructing the populations to participate in local public affairs in order to encourage their own development, the various sectors of development at municipal level is struggling to take off. In Porto-Novo, the evaluative estimates of the Municipal Development Plan 2016-2020 reveal that out of 100% of planned projects, only 8% have been completed while 39% have been rolled out and 59% have not even been started (p.112).

The evaluative report of the Municipal Development Plan 2016-2020 also indicates that out of 100% of the planned programs (11 in total), only 17.03% of average success rates are recorded, while 27.48% of the activities are in progress. of achievement. Program 2 relating to the qualitative and comfortable development of the city and program 3 in connection with the construction of the city's infrastructures and equipment come to certify it respectively with a physical completion rate of 7.69% and 23.80%. (Municipal Development Plan 2021-2026, p.24). These statistics show that MDP activities have not been carried out effectively and efficiently.

We deduce from this fact that the methodological approach to the implementation of development projects does not sufficiently take into account, on the one hand, a certain number of factors such as the active involvement of the beneficiaries at all stages of the project, the socio-demographic and cultural changes of the localities concerned and the political context which would exclude, on the other hand, the updating of the projects/programs. Since surveys have stated that they have not been involved in the implementation of the projects, therefore do not know of any measures for the sustainability of the achievements (Municipal Development Plan 2021-2026, p.24).

However, any monograph is developed taking into account the updating of needs at various levels. Whether it is a new project or a recycled project, the implementation requires the updating of needs, since society is dynamic and the needs expressed are evolving. But how to explain the non-operationalization, the inefficiency, even the failure of

certain community projects if indeed all the planned projects received the adhesion of their implementation during the elaboration of the municipal development plan.

This poses a real problem that deserves to be elucidated. Could this be due to the non-involvement of beneficiaries in the conduct of said community projects or to the non-existence of consultation bodies or local development committees? Since obviously, the revitalization of consultation frameworks at different levels of a project helps to limit inconsistencies and seek complementarities (C. Ouattara, 2003, p.7) ^[14]. It is an approach that aims to solve community problems on the principle of a participatory process involving social actors and citizens (Comeau, 2007 cited by Bourque, 2012) ^[4] at all stages of a project (p.5). This approach is part of participatory democracy in the strict sense, which allows the politicization of ordinary citizens and their intervention in decision-making (Haegel *et al.*, 2000, p6).

But from a completely different point of view, can we attribute the failure of community projects to a lack of action strategy based on the mobilization of interests, the empowerment of actors and institutional stabilization (Delville, 2015)? ^[9] Since the observation of bitter experiences of repeated failures of community projects in the local communities of the south in particular, in the Beninese communes provides an empirical justification of the need to study and measure their success. For all practical purposes, it would be redundant to invest in research on the success of community development projects without addressing the key success factors of a project, including its relevance and consistency with national development policies and strategies.

It is to understand this state of affairs that the resolution is taken to conduct an investigation in the capital city of Benin (Porto-Novo) with a view to analyzing social consultation in the process of updating community projects. in difficulty, thus allowing the various actors to deepen many aspects of the current debates in Benin on social consultation, and consequently of participatory democracy in developing countries.

The implementation of social consultation and its uses in the city of Porto-Novo, therefore represent a privileged place of observation, an indicator of the implementation of participatory democracy, particularly its appropriation and translation into the local context. in a tradition of dialogue and collective work. But it would be wise to ask how is this tool of social transformation perceived and received locally? Better, how have its principles been translated into the updating phases of community projects? What are the results in terms of the empowerment of populations and the construction of a vision, local development thinking taking into account the living environment, conditions and solidarity at the municipal level?

To analyze the research problem, the following central question is asked: how to better value the updating of community projects in difficulty as an innovative grassroots development approach for better municipal management? Among other words, the study aims to address the state of consultation in community development in Benin, participatory management, without forgetting the context justifying their emergence on the sidelines of national development policies. What is the relevance of promoting consultation in supporting projects to improve the living conditions of populations in a municipal context? Finally,

the study will analyze what changes should be made to the current forms of updating projects in order to better guarantee the success of community development projects in difficulty in the city of Porto-Novo?

1. Search Strategy

The purpose of this part is to highlight, on the one hand, the framework of the research and, on the other hand, the different elements of the empirical protocol.

1.1 Research framework

The municipality of Porto-Novo is a city with a special status which houses community social facilities in difficulty that do not contribute to the development of the economic activities of its inhabitants. Better, this equipment does not correspond to the needs of the populations.

Indeed, the subject object of the research is carried out with the institutions and officials responsible for the implementation of projects in the municipality of Porto-Novo, in particular: the Town Hall, the Technical Services Department, the Porto-Novo Rehabilitation Agency, Novo, civil society, the districts and neighborhood delegates.

1.2 Type of research

The approach used in this research is qualitative in nature. The objective is to analyze social consultation in the process of updating community projects in difficulty. Specifically, it is a question of describing the process of updating community projects in difficulty and the quality of interactions on the one hand and identifying the social consultation bodies and their involvement in the updating of community projects in difficulty. on the other hand.

To do this, two data collection techniques were deployed, in particular documentary research and the interview guide. The survey population is made up of six main targets, namely: the Executive Secretary of the town hall; the Head of Local Development and Planning; the Cooperation Officer; the Head of the Building and Housing Department of the Technical Services Department; the District Heads; the delegates; representatives of Civil Society Organizations; the Secretary General of the Porto-Novo Rehabilitation Agency; the Head of the Planning Department of the Porto-Novo Rehabilitation Agency. To determine the size of the sample, the non-probability sampling method was chosen coupled with the principle of reasoned choice and the snowball, thus making it possible to have 30 subjects.

For the analysis of the empirical data, a theoretical alignment was carried out with the models of Moreau (2013) ^[15], Dufort (1992) ^[10] and Brière and Proulx (2013) ^[5]. According to these models, it appears that the birth of a project takes shape when the actors show a need. The need highlighted translates the idea of a demand which also implies an intervention. The intervention therefore reveals a "dimension of intentionality" and calls on an operational process which necessarily takes place over time and is not a one-off action, but a voluntary journey decided collectively. Most often starting from a problem posed by the applicants, the intervention is part of a "helping relationship" marked by a "transformative orientation rather than an orientation towards the production of knowledge".

2. Description of the process for updating community projects in difficulty and the quality of interactions

Anecdotal evidence shows that any project that has been delayed in execution for whatever reason must systematically restart the implementation process. In this sense, one respondent stated that: "What you need to know with a project is that you can decide to carry it out in year n , but for various reasons you decide to postpone it to year $n+1$ or $n+2$. A project that is already behind in its execution phase must resume the design process, since men are not sedentary for life". (D.G, Delegate, June 2022). It emerges from this speech that the reassessment of needs is a necessary step to update a community project that has been delayed in its implementation phase. It is obvious that not all the projects contained in the annual investment plan will be implemented on the scheduled date for various reasons. What must be emphasized in this context is that the delay in the execution of a project sometimes creates an unfavorable and systematic effect in the minds of the populations. This is often one of the causes that explains the demotivation and refusal to participate of beneficiaries, and by extension the inoperationalization of community social facilities. In this logic, (Cleland and Gareis, 1994; Youker, 1999; Muriuthi and Crawford 2003; Madaule, 2005; Ramaprasad and Prakash, 2003; Lilin, 2009) quoted by S. Brière and D. Proulx (2013) ^[5] point out that the lack of a shared vision and commitment to the project by the team and the stakeholders, an ill-defined, unrealistic and unupdated planning, a deficient analysis of risk factors, an approach that excludes local knowledge for the realization of a project gave rise to inconclusive development operations (p.171). Bringing stakeholders together to discuss matters that concern them is an important step for the success of a project. Another actor indicates that:

"Before updating a project, the needs must first exist and what made the project not work in order to correct the limits of this project. For this, we will rely on a diagnostic tool which is the SWOT or SWOT tool. It is this tool that will make it possible to analyze the weaknesses of the project in order to propose solutions. But it is necessary to associate the beneficiaries at the diagnostic level for the correction of the problem". (K.B, Municipal agent, June 2022).

It is clear from this extract that the existence of a need and the association of stakeholders are essential for the actualization of a project. Indeed, it would be superfluous to engage in a development operation without the existence of a need that justifies the process. It is the need that brings actors together around the same table to discuss development actions. To go further, an interviewee adds that: "To implement a project, the municipality is obliged to refer to local actors to discuss development issues". (Z.T. Municipal agent, June 2022). This extract indicates that the participation of local actors in the realization of a project constitutes a base and a springboard for development. A project exists because there are actors who have thought about it taking into account the problems that undermine their daily lives. The project does not only solve a social problem, but it is also a framework for the exercise of citizenship and participatory democracy. This translates very well the principles of decentralization where the administration is brought closer to the population in order to be able to carry out development. Yung and Zaslasky (1992) abounded in this direction by indicating that "the fate of any project or any public development policy depends, in the

last resort, on the various actors for whom they are intended".

This is why, according to Absil (2016) ^[1], participation is an essential element nowadays since it is at the heart of the community approach. The processes created by community approaches are moving, changing dynamics, specific to each neighborhood, each territory, anchored in places of "democracy" where other networks of supports, of citizenship can be reinvented. It is about creating spaces for debate, shifting the representations and ways of acting of each other through confrontation, negotiation, but also conflict, and moving towards collective proposals. To consolidate grassroots actions, one respondent indicated that:

"When we determine the causes that explain a project in difficulty and we decide to relaunch it, the diagnosis will be based on these elements to update the project. For this, all actors and beneficiaries must work together. But usually that's not what happens. We carry out surveys, we decide on the new location of the project without really involving the beneficiaries. For these cases of projects, it is necessary to let the beneficiaries become the pilots and the municipality plays the role of guide". (TP, Municipal agent, June 2022)

This excerpt shows that local actors and target populations must work together around a project in difficulty. Indeed, teamwork is fundamental for the management of a project. This approach translates very well the principles of social consultation and the participatory approach which are intended to be the discussion of territorial action allowing to lead to a co-decision of the actors present. In this dynamic, it is certain to have a better efficiency and coherence of this action which aims at the recognition by all of a common interest (GRDR, 2009). These results corroborate with the conclusions of the work of Moreau (2013) ^[15] who considers the individual as a reflexive actor. However, to recognize the reflexivity of the actor is to recognize that he possesses the intelligence of his action. It is to affirm that he is competent to take a look at what he does, to measure the conditions of emergence and in part the consequences of his actions. Another topic states that:

"In each neighborhood or district, we must have associations that will take part in the meetings to carry out the projects. Often, the authorities say that we had a day of dialogue with the stakeholders, but in the end, it is insufficient as an action. We do not dig; we do not go to the bottom to understand the real intentions of the populations".

The authorities pretend. (G.O, Municipal agent, June 2022). It appears from this extract that the authorities of the municipality often do not carry out permanent dialogues with the actors for the understanding of the real intentions of the populations. If there is one thing that is often advocated by grassroots development models, it is indeed the permanent dialogue between stakeholders and grassroots populations. This development approach is recommended because of its ability to better understand the aspirations of stakeholders and this in the greatest transparency. It is in no way a question of leading discussions with the aim of informing the population about the implementation of a development operation, but of immersing oneself in their world to effectively understand what the populations are missing and how find ways to solve them.

It is in this sense that R. Chambers (1990) suggests that "all those who deal with combating underdevelopment do not see, do not know the environment in which they work".

They only visit villages accessible by road, and then only when it is not too hot and it is not raining. Their interlocutors are not the "real poor". Those who have the right to speak are among the privileged. Thus, they hardly see in what conditions the deprived populations really live and understand even less what their poverty consists of. Too often, the knowledge of poor rural people is completely ignored or even disregarded.

These results corroborate with the conclusions of the work of Moreau (2013) ^[15] when he considers that the interveners must immerse themselves in a situation to analyze it from the inside, as close as possible to the actors. Most often starting from a problem posed by the applicants, the intervention is part of a "helping relationship" marked by a *"transformative orientation rather than an orientation towards the production of knowledge"*. In this regard, one of our interviewees expressed himself in these terms, *"Discounting is a concept that is not yet well developed in our institutions"*. (C.D, Municipal agent, June 2022).

It therefore appears that discounting is a new concept for the municipality. With the large number of projects to manage, authorities often do not have the time to re-examine a project in difficulty. This most often reflects the abandonment of certain community projects.

3. Identification of social consultation bodies and their involvement in updating community projects in difficulty

The social consultation bodies represent inclusive spaces for a diversity of actors at the service of public action. They come to legitimize and reinforce the mandate of the municipal council through a system of participatory democracy. They are therefore essential for carrying out projects in general and for updating community projects in difficulty in particular. It is in this sense that an actor remark that:

"Social consultation body, do these things exist with us? Elsewhere, yes, but in our context, I don't think so, maybe it's translated in another form. Uh... our case is the board of directors or the municipal council, made up of the mayor, councilors, commission presidents, CAs, CQs, etc. who are responsible for making decisions. All the CAs and CQs do is mobilize people to receive information on the implementation of the project. They can sometimes make proposals on the location of the project". (Y.T, Municipal agent, June 2022)

It emerges from this extract that the social consultation bodies are a new concept for the actors of the municipality. It is therefore the district council which is the body responsible for decisions at municipal level. Indeed, the municipality has a district council or the municipal council which is the decision-making and deliberative body, composed of the mayor, the municipal councilors, the presidents of the permanent committees, the heads of the district, the heads of districts/ towns. It is this body that deals with issues of development of the municipality. According to the new reforms of the territorial administration code, it is nowhere mentioned that village development committees took part in the councils of the commune. However, in accordance with the principles of participatory democracy, grassroots actors are also development actors, since they are part of the levers of development thanks to their ability to generate local economy. That said, social consultation bodies are essential

for public action and their absence would be one of the factors that would explain the low participation of populations in public affairs and the refusal to cooperate.

It is in this wave of idea that Ouattara (2003) ^[14] thinks that the revitalization of consultation frameworks at different levels of a project helps to limit inconsistencies and seek complementarities of public actions. Comeau (2007) quoted by Bourque (2012) ^[4] adds that it is an approach that aims to solve community problems on the principle of a participatory process involving social actors and citizens. These results are in line with the conclusions of the work on symbolic interaction by Dufort (1992) ^[10], for whom a person's participation in a social group largely depends on their understanding of the group's symbolic environment and their ability to function. with this system of symbols. A respondent points out that: *"The populations do not take part in the implementation of the projects, since there are technical aspects that they do not master. When we collect their needs, we compare them with our data to determine the technical specifications of the project before submission"*. (G.F, Municipal agent, June 2022).

It emerges from this passage that the beneficiaries do not intervene in the implementation phase of the project, and therefore do not take on any role. A project designed and developed with the population should normally involve the beneficiaries in the project implementation phase. A project that involves stakeholders has a better chance of succeeding. For Ramaprasad and Prakash (2003) cited by Barakat and Bendou (2013), and Brière and Proulx (2013) ^[5], many international development projects result in failures given the perspective "top down" of the funder who often excludes local knowledge for the realization of a project.

These results are in line with the conclusions of the work of Dufort (1992) ^[10] who indicates that role taking is at the base of society because this process of cooperation is necessary for the maintenance of any organized society. The role provides an initial frame of reference for interactions, allows individuals to develop their identity and provides them with a framework for evaluating their conduct. The notion of role and the processes that surround it need to be clarified and integrated into a broader conceptual framework than that of interactions. The roles are not fixed and perfectly determined, but negotiated through interactions. In fact, the individual organizes and interprets the different social expectations according to his own goals and opinions and directs his behavior according to this process of interpretation and complex organization. The role becomes as a result of this process a set of shared meanings. From the same perspective, one of our subjects' states that:

"Sometimes community projects simply fail because not all stakeholders have been effectively involved. And this happens in most cases for lack of consultation. When I take the case of commercial equipment in the municipalities, sometimes the realization of these projects does not take into account the opinion of the good ladies. The decision is made at the top and we identify the site directly from the ministry's office there, because we think it's a good location. (Sic) It's at the edge of the track, it's not bad and the area there will be developed. This decision is taken without consulting the people who must use these community social facilities, without involving the beneficiaries at the base. We say to ourselves that it was we who initiated the project and we know better what can work and what the populations need". (H.G, Delegate, June 2022).

It emerges from this passage that most of the decisions relating to the implementation of the projects are taken by the authorities and managers in charge of the development of the communes without involving the target populations. However, under the laws relating to decentralization, the populations have the right to be involved in the management of local public affairs. These results testify not only to bureaucratic management by leaders, but also to the total exclusion of beneficiaries from participating in local public affairs. All this really shows that there is a lack of collaboration between actors and beneficiaries.

This is moreover what Zinsou (2007) ^[19] discusses, who believes that this mode of management leaves room for armchair or office planning that could only see things in a technical way. Haegel *et al* (2000) observe that participatory democracy in the strict sense must allow the politicization of ordinary citizens and their intervention in decision-making. Dionnet *et al* (2017) for their part think that for there to be consultation, the work of the participants must necessarily have an impact on the decision-making process. Decision-makers must therefore be ready and open to consider all proposals from stakeholders in response to this problem, even if these are in tension with their own expectations. Finally, an interviewee hints at the fact that: *"If you want a project to succeed, you cannot ignore endogenous factors. It's impossible!"* (H.D, Civil Society Agent, June 2022).

This extract shows that socio-cultural factors are essential for the success of any project. Indeed, all spaces do not have the same characteristics and each space is home to a community with an experience, its customs, its mores, its rites and its culture. The discussion of the territorial action must necessarily include these factors for the success of the project.

These results are justified by the work of Munns and Bjeirmi (1996); Muhirwa (2008) quoted in Barakat and Bendou (2013) who stipulate that the performance of the projects had suffered greatly from a needs analysis that did not sufficiently take into account the realities of the stakeholders.

These results corroborate the conclusions of the work of S. Brière and D. Proulx (2013) ^[5] who believe that project performance is the result of a set of three basic conditions (technical specifications, time and costs):

- satisfaction of needs and collaboration between stakeholders;
- the achievement of the real impact of the project;
- taking into account local cultural sensitivity and the performance of the project team.

Furthermore, the results obviously show that the municipal power of Porto Novo, in a whole new context of legitimization through decentralization, has adopted new instruments of participation and municipal management with questionable effectiveness despite their relevance for social actions and their consistency with the national participatory management policy.

Conclusion

The issue of development is a recurring debate that a priori hangs on almost everyone's lips. Initiating such a process in a developing country, particularly at the local level, is a complex methodological approach that requires flexible strategies that can be adapted at each level. In this approach, sustainable development therefore presupposes the participation and involvement of the beneficiary populations

in the entire process of formulation and appropriation within the framework of a collective dynamic of positive transformation of their environment (D.A.D.L, 2011, p.3) hence the importance of social consultation. But the approach of social consultation in the actualization of community projects is experienced differently, that is to say that the mechanisms of concerted governance in the context of decentralization and local development are both diverse and complex. However, in a global vision, decentralization policies base their principle on broad consultation between different families of actors (ibid.3). The lack of a consultation framework at the local level therefore explains the inoperationalization of certain development projects.

Having become a recurring problem, community projects, due to their failures, seem not to fully meet the expectations of the beneficiary populations. In order to understand the quality of interactions and the involvement of beneficiaries in the updating of community projects, qualitative research was carried out on "social consultation in the process of updating community projects in difficulty. in Porto Novo". To this end, it was important to highlight the process of updating updated projects, but also the identification of consultation bodies and their involvement in the process of updating community projects.

In the light of the above-mentioned objectives, the hypotheses formulated for the study, in particular the weak social consultation would explain the abandonment of updated community projects and the non-existence of democratic social consultation bodies would explain the non-operationalization of updated projects. found to be confirmed by research. The analysis of global data was carried out through the filter of the concepts of intervention sociology by D. B. Moreau (2013) ^[15], symbolic interaction by Dufort (1992) ^[10] and the performance analysis of research projects. (Briere and Proulx (2013) ^[5]).

The results of the research have shown that the weak social consultation and the non-existence of democratic social consultation bodies in the process of updating community projects in difficulty are subject to their inoperationalization. Decentralized territorial authorities must be able to take into account the diversity of interests of the different actors of the community in order to build responses in accordance with shared values.

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