



Socio-developmental issues of functional literacy in the context of decentralization in Benin

Marius K Vodounnon Totin¹, Appolinaire D Gnanvi², Félix Kossouh³, Abou-Bakari Imorou²

¹ Department of Sociology, Campus of Adjara, University of Abomey-Calavi, Godomey, Benin

² Departement of Sociology, University of Abomey-Calavi, Godomey, Benin

³ University of Abomey-Calavi, Godomey, Benin

Abstract

With decentralization, community participation should constitute not only a lever for steering the process but also a condition for evaluating local governance. Paradoxically, the assessment of the indicators makes it possible to note a lack of involvement of local communities and a weak appropriation of local public action on their part. The reasons mentioned provide information on a lack of translation of development initiatives into local vehicular languages that the literacy of the popular masses would have favored. From this developmental perspective, how can functional literacy be a potential variable for the success of decentralization in Benin? To better define the problem, the methodological materials are based on a literature review combined with a semantic approach to the concepts used. The field survey is based on data collection carried out with 253 actors selected in seven (07) communes of Benin. With regard to the field corpus, it appears that community participation in development initiatives depends on their appropriation, their understanding and their support for local public action. Decentralization, while promoting action-oriented collectivism, must in this context be based on the promotion of functional literacy identified as a grafting net for all actors and their participation in the animation of community life. Decentralization reform would gain more with this option.

Keywords: decentralization, local participation, local public policies, functional literacy, Benin

Introduction

At the end of the 1980s, the assessment of the implementation of public policies painted a deficient picture both in the form of the modes of intervention and in the practices for solving the socioeconomic problems of the last three decades. Overall, the strategies developed were little to improve the living conditions of the populations, and to manage the resources available equitably and sustainably with a view to combating poverty (IRAM, 2019). Public action was at a standstill (M. K. Vodounnon Totin, and A. Gnanvi, 2017) [15]. This situation leads to a development of the unitary State inducing a more accentuated responsibility of the citizens in terms of transformation, change and management of their own territory. This is a new orientation of social development frameworks that favor the participation of local communities in the process of developing and conducting public action. In this perspective, decentralization is seen with the liberal current in the aftermath of 1990 as a tool that is both political and technical for the convergence of the various local forces with a view to social and economic development. Conyers (2007) in talking rightly explains that:

(...). Changes have taken place over the years, and in particular the transition to more democratic forms of local governance, popular recognition of the need for decentralization reform, the gradual establishment of mechanisms for citizen participation and the adoption of accountability. This means that it is relevant to see decentralization, ultimately, as a reform that is part of a long and slow process of state building. p. 28.

Thus, decentralization is seen as a process of mobilizing local actors for the creation and distribution of wealth in a territory (Deberre, 2017). It conveys a strong ideology of

territorial development at the same time as a corpus of mechanisms leading to a supply of equitable and sustainable essential services. A reform that requires the involvement and effective participation of grassroots communities. In Benin, the law on the organization of the municipality specifies in its article 2, the principle of participation and citizen expression. Community participation is therefore associated with the current decentralization policy and is becoming an essential lever for its implementation. For U. Kakumba (2010) [5], the supposed essential argument was that it promotes democratic local governance and local development; which would pave the way for effective local planning and decision-making, as well as the successful implementation of development projects capable of producing benefits for all. Participation has become, in the context of decentralization, the intervention approach around which a consensus seems to be based with regard to the manner of involving the populations in the various socio-community initiatives and in local development. But how can she participate without a minimum of understanding of local action and ownership of it? Better still, it is a matter of questioning the conditions that make this participation possible, which is moreover symptomatic with regard to community practices in terms of involvement in local affairs.

Indeed, the analysis of the degrees of community participation in the context of decentralization reveals insufficient ownership of local development tools by social actors and a lack of understanding of the content, issues and purpose of the interventions. However, according to the glossary of sustainable development (2001), « participation is effective when group members have sufficient and equal opportunities to put issues on the agenda and to express

their preferences regarding results as part of the decision-making process... » (p36). This conceptualization resituates the question of local language policies and their importance in the success of local projects. Mass literacy then becomes an essential tool for making local public action better understood by citizens and for them to participate in a concerted manner in the management of affairs.

In the self-development advocated by decentralization in a perspective of the fight against poverty, functional literacy as a contribution to the liberation of man (UNESCO, 2007) seems, in the current context of refusal of participation, an instrument of adhesion of the communities to the ideals of local development. But in practice, how can it ensure this function of potential variable for the success of decentralization in Benin? It is, through a combination of theoretical approaches, to analyze the developmental issues of local functional literacy on decentralization in Benin. For this, a methodological approach was followed which led to results discussed in the light of the authors summoned.

Methods, materials and analysis model

Identifying the implicative problem of functional literacy on the success of decentralization in Benin amounts to constructing discourses of meaning, to observing certain indicators of weak community support and to investigating the factors of lethargy in local development.

To this end, the approach is based on the assumption that poorly exposed and poorly understood local public policies justify the low level of community support for development initiatives. From there and in a deductive way, the optimization of these local public policies depends on their appropriation.

Appropriation facilitated by literacy. To appreciate the juxtaposition, the methodological approach starts from a conceptual and semantic construction of the notion of functional literacy. Then, field surveys are carried out with various actors in seven (07) communes of the departments of Benin.

Literacy rates are indicators for assessing ownership of the decentralization process. The table below gives an overview of the sampling.

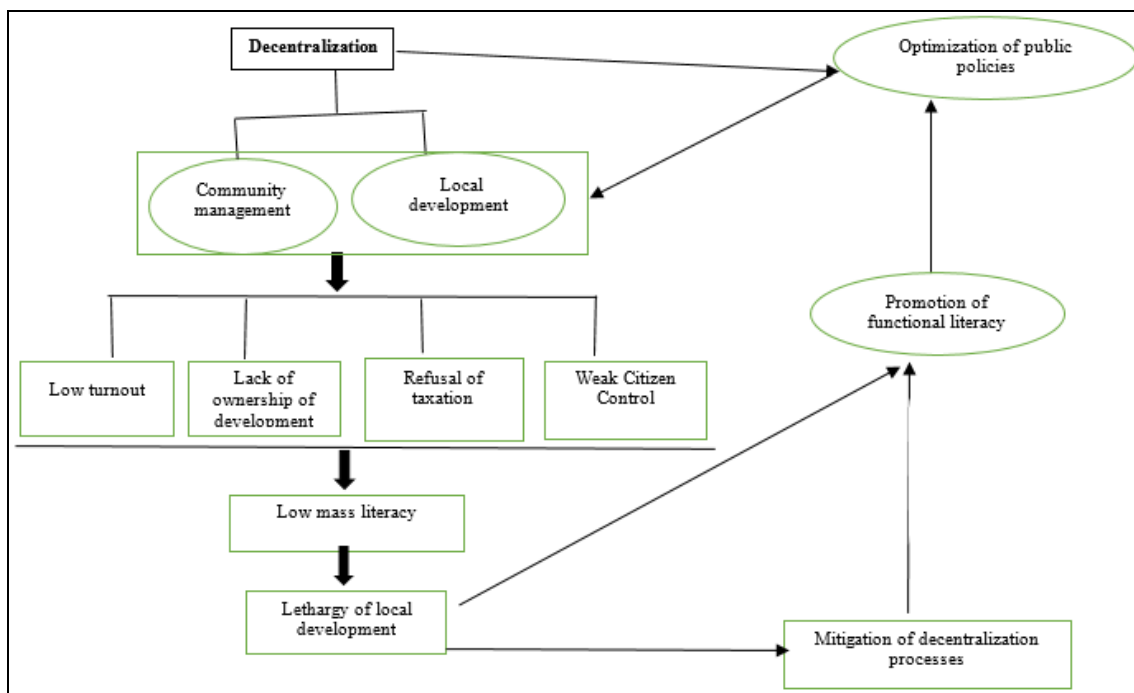
Table 1: Statistical distribution of the sample

Actors Communes	ONG/PTF	Population	Local government officials	Devolved services concerned	Locally elected	Literacy teachers	Literate	Development association	Others
Kandi	01	12	01	01	04	01	08	01	15
Kérou	01	07	02	01	03	01	07	01	
Ouèssè	01	16	02	01	05	01	12	01	
Tori-Bossito	01	23	04	01	09	01	16	01	
Bopa	01	09	02	01	05	01	09	01	
Aguégués	01	08	02	01	05	01	08	01	
Sô Ava	01	11	02	01	08	01	11	01	
Total	07	86	15	07	38	07	71	07	253

Source: field data, 2022

A total of 253 actors were approached. In addition, the literature review also made it possible to justify the conceptual framework of the research. The latter correlates

different concepts and indicators and attempts a schematic explanation of the problem.

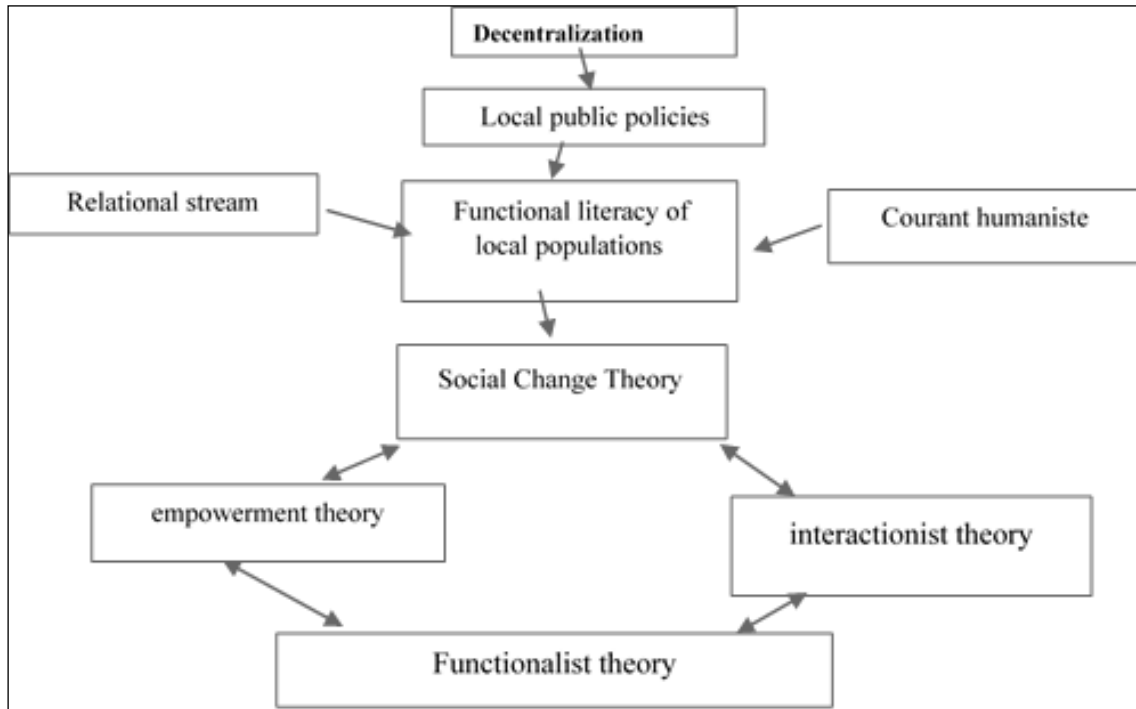


Source: VODOUNNON TOTIN K. Marius & al., 2022

Fig 1: Conceptual Framework

Moreover, a set of paradigms makes it possible to justify the theoretical perspective of the problem. The diagram below gives an

overview of the consistency of the explanatory models.



Source: VODOUNNON TOTIN K. Marius & al., 2022

Fig 2: Diagram of consistency of theories, field survey, 2022

Results

1. The issue of community participation in grassroots initiatives

Decentralization brings institutions of power closer to citizens. In the ideology of its birth, it is seen as a way of sharing power, resources and responsibilities with the population. In this perspective, it makes it possible to geographically bring decision-making closer to underprivileged populations, or even to make them participatory (Schneider, 1999) [4]. By encouraging public institutions to come closer to the populations, it makes them more easily accountable for their management and thus allows local control of public administrations. Through proximity, decentralization also improves the participation of the population and its ability to contribute to the good management of local affairs, whether it intervenes to promote local control of public decisions or whether it allows learning collective decision-making procedures.

Participation thus appears as a strategic option in favor of local development. It seems to designate all the times that an agent is present in an economic entity and that this presence gives him a role. Fox and Meyer (1995) quoted by U. Kakumba (2010) [5] define citizen/community participation as:

« the participation of citizens in a range of activities in the formulation of administrative policies, including the determination of service levels, budget priorities and the acceptability of physical construction projects in order to focus government programs on the needs of the community, build public buy-in and foster a sense of cohesion within society ». (p. 20)

The implementation of municipal public action underlies the participation and involvement of the actors who live there. This assumes that the latter are upstream and downstream of the process of designing and operationalizing said policies.

P. Hamman (2011) [3] maintains that public action from the perspective of citizen participation in local decision-making immediately refers to taking into consideration the perimeters of competence and reference spaces of the actors. The participation of local communities presupposes the consideration or enhancement of democracy and, by extension, local democracy. It is materialized in Benin by the constitution of development associations in the localities as shown by the words of this respondent:

Within the framework of a local development project, the participation of the populations in the management of development actions goes through the establishment of village management committees. Indeed, each physical achievement provides for the creation of such a committee whose role is to ensure its maintenance and sustainability. SD, local government official, interview recorded on 03/06/2022

These are associations that are built in territorialities for exchanges in relation to local development issues. The interventions of the populations on local community radios in the communes in the form of telephone calls is another form of participation of the populations for the improvement of governance and local democracy. This form of participation has developed since the 1990s, with the advent of the demonopolization of the airwaves and the installation of local public radio stations in certain municipalities.

Moreover, even if it is obvious to notice a progress in terms of the involvement of the populations in this dynamic of animation of the communal life, it is however necessary to note constraints to the full participation of all the living forces in the initiatives of local development. The implementation of development actions is based on a certain number of requirements, one of which is its good knowledge and its appropriation by all citizens. Paradoxically, total participation is lacking in almost all

municipalities. Such a situation does not therefore favor the appropriation of communal action by grassroots communities.

“We refuse to participate in the actions of elected officials because we do not understand anything they do. We do not understand anything and it is only when the elections are approaching that we are called to give us an update on what they have achieved. Instead of keeping us informed of the actions they plan, of explaining to us the documents in which these actions are registered, they do everything among themselves there. I have always dreamed of participating in everything related to the development of my municipality but here, we just observe them doing it. »

Mr. M, citizen of the commune of Bopa, interview recorded on 06/06/2022

These remarks relate to those of most respondents who justify the refusal to participate by the low visibility of the results of governance. A governance that should work to identify the appropriate mechanisms for collective membership. The denial of mass participation justifies a crisis of confidence and legitimacy of the elected official who, not because he is unworthy in the function, but because of the lack of an approach that would reconcile mobilization and the development of collective skills. Many empirical data in the context of decentralized governance in Benin highlight the games of elected authorities and their delegitimation by their population. In the relative comparison with other experiences of local governance, Sintomer (2007) ^[12] explained: a « crisis of representation » (p. 17) which goes hand in hand with a « loss of confidence of citizens vis-à-vis their political leaders ». Rosanvallon (2008) for his part justifies a “delegitimation” of administrative powers which very often overshadows the relational methodologies of participatory management (p. 111). In practice, the conservation of local power, the control of political interests, the manifest will of communal and municipal elected officials to maintain their influence on the territory and the quest for rents from the management of power prevail much more over the requirements of governance at the service of local development. So many counter-indications of decentralization which constitute obstacles to the involvement of the populations in the animation of communal public life.

In addition to these limiting factors, there is the non-convertibility of the plans with the perception of the actors who are mostly illiterate and for whom only a translation of development priorities into understandable and accessible languages would lead to ownership of the process by all. However, in the glossary of sustainable development, Brodhag (2001; p 36) presents a typology of participation at eight processes or even levels classified from least to most participatory.

- *Information: act of giving (unilaterally) information*
- *Consultation: action of seeking an opinion*
- *Consultation: action of exchanging opinions (pre-established) and seeking a compromise*
- *Dialogue: action of mutually and fairly exchanging points of view and proposals*
- *Involvement: action of engaging in a process or taking responsibility for it*
- *Participation: action of actively associating oneself with a process*
- *Appropriation: action of taking ownership and taking ownership as a stakeholder*

- *Adherence: action to unite and fully share the objectives*

In the assessment of the nomenclature, G. Simard, (2008) ^[2], explained: « if access to information is fundamental, however, it appears that the last three levels have proven to generate a real integrated process of participation » (p 11).

Literacy is therefore of primary interest to local authorities for this purpose.

2. Functional literacy: an essential asset for local development.

In 1970, UNESCO defined functional literacy as an integrated component of education. It is specialized training, usually of a technical nature directly related to development. It is part of social and economic priorities, planned and carried out as an integral part of a development program or project aimed at achieving specific social and economic objectives by preparing men and women to welcome changes and innovations by helping them to acquire new skills and modify their attitudes whereas learning to read and write only gives access to written information, functional literacy seeks to instil illiterate adult a more complete education linked to his role as producer and citizen”.

So-called functional literacy is therefore a form of adult education which enables them to reflect critically on the process of acquiring writing and reading in progress, leading them to acquire new intellectual knowledge from their own production of knowledge. The local inhabitants, that is to say the local populations, in particular women, can therefore assume functions and responsibilities, it is enough simply to give them some skills and knowledge in the field of intervention.

Functional or non-functional literacy raises the issue of language, societies and development. Implicitly, any analysis of literacy processes requires taking into account the culture and related values of the populations for whom local development policies are intended. It is introduced into the daily life of local actors and therefore reveals enormous social issues. First, it is presented as a means or an instrument which promotes social recognition of the development action to be implemented in that it conveys the values specific to local actors, their way of apprehending daily reality. And on the strength of this, the local language, cement of community life and social participation. In doing so, literacy contributes to community awakening by promoting respect for human rights through language, an instrument for acquiring knowledge and knowledge par excellence, as shown by the comments of this respondent, Literacy has improved our skills and life skills. It allowed us to understand several realities of our surroundings, to redirect our needs and those of our territory. Literacy allowed me, for example, to be ahead of some people with regard to our duty in the development of our municipality. FG, literate farmer, interview carried out in the commune of Ouèssè on 07/06/2022

More perceptibly, the literacy of women contributes to strengthening their role as mothers in that they no longer have an erroneous conception of the education of their children. They are no longer an obstacle to the education of their children, especially their daughters, since they have experienced it. Beyond this aspect, women become potential actors at all levels of the development system. In the process of decentralization, they were the most absent and the most

marginalized. Their pronounced “ignorance” of the components of decentralization and local development diminishes their propensity to participate. Conversely, building their capacities and increasing their potential for open integration are advantages of the decentralization process. From this perspective, the existing literature provides ample information on the advantages of literacy in that it strengthens women's ability to act and identify themselves. It is then a lever of social development contributing, through its objectives, to revealing the strengths of women, to reducing the rate of poverty, to accelerating the demographic transition and to having a strong impact on the decline in infant mortality and to improving the health status of the population.

Through literacy, women can develop their talents and skills, build or strengthen their economic independence. Learning to read and write the language of the territory is also the possibility of being aware of its real values and of defending them, of participating and interacting around local projects. Literacy is vital for promoting women's rights, boosting their empowerment and their full participation in socio-community initiatives. It is thus revealed as a lever for the empowerment of marginalized populations, and in particular women, in various sectors, allowing them to become actors of social change themselves. It is thus a logic of empowerment (strengthening of power).

Literacy therefore induces more transformative change at all levels of life than in education alone. For each literate actor, it works to transform the perception of the world; raises the degree with a fundamental impact on the mastery of all social fields of action. It therefore turns out to be a tool for gaining autonomy and an essential condition for development, as demonstrated by the following comments from a respondent.

Before, when we had set up our cooperative, we had recourse to someone who mastered a little French because none of us had such an education. But with the literacy program we manage, for example, to go to the bank and do certain papers alone. Literacy has also allowed us not only to develop other skills and abilities that have helped the association evolve, but also to participate in important meetings organized at the town hall and at the ATDA.

SD, literate, member of a cooperative in Klouékanmè. Interview carried out on 07/06/2022

Literacy thus presents, in its practical form, potential assets for local development. Its territorialization is therefore a condition for optimizing the objectives of decentralization.

Discussion

Decentralization has appeared since the early 1990s as a political and economic issue in most developing countries and especially in Benin. In several works devoted to its merits, decentralization is analyzed according to different considerations. In addition to those related to the optimization of the production of collective goods, analyzes of decentralization highlight considerations such as the transfer of power to local actors, the strengthening of local capacities, learning about participatory governance, the fight against poverty... According to the World Bank (2011):

A system of administration in which the decision-making power is exercised both by the State and by autonomous legal persons subject to the control, in principle of equality, of the State authorities which implies the transfer of

attribution of the State to communities or institutions different from it and benefiting, under its supervision, from a certain autonomy of management.

It is based on the principle that in order to initiate local and participatory development, it is necessary to grant a certain power to local communities recognized by the constitution or the laws. To this end, Laws No. 97-028 and 98-007 of January 15, 1999 respectively on the organization of territorial administration and the financial system of communes in the Republic of Benin recognize the right to free administration of territorial communities endowed with a legal personality and financial autonomy governed by elected bodies. In its political conception, decentralization is above all a reform that satisfies the will of both the government and the citizens to widen the scope of democracy. R. Adjaho, (2002) in talking about decentralization rightly explains as follows:

“Decentralization is also a technique of administrative organization by which the State grants to other legal persons under public law the task of administering themselves. It is for the State to create other infra-state entities (regions, departments or municipalities), and to grant them, within the framework of the law, the right to manage their own affairs. These infra-state entities are decentralized territorial communities”.

According to K. Badiane, (2020), it is both political and technical. From a technical point of view, it responds to a concern for good management and therefore implies the administration of local affairs by people from and residing in the area and having a certain sensitivity to the local situation. From the political point of view, decentralization makes it possible to achieve a breakthrough in democracy insofar as it establishes a participation of the members of the community in the elaboration and execution of decisions affecting their collective interests. But how can it succeed in its mission if the local communities do not take ownership of the initiatives and invest in their realization?

According to its operational conception, decentralization has a multi-stakeholder process. This pluralism of actors challenges the foundations of the participatory approach. In practice, decentralization has allowed the emergence of new types of actors in the determination and conduct of local public policies. Also, local authorities have become major players in economic, social and cultural life. With it, public action has been enriched and democracy has progressed, even if appropriation and integration into development ideals are still lagging behind. The most striking aspect of this process is the "participatory" and iterative planning which was established upstream and which caught the attention of enlightened citizens able to express themselves, propose and decide so that each community, based on their own vision of their territory, or endowed with a development programme. However, these advances in the decentralization process have come up against persistent difficulties due to the failure to take into account the principles of the approach. Participation first assumes appropriation and acceptance and therefore understanding and adherence. If the ownership indicators seem to show poor performance, this is definitely due to a lack of ownership of local public policies by local actors; which would have been favored by functional literacy.

The analysis of literacy issues in the context of decentralization in Benin calls for the analysis and interpretation of a body of data relating to the effects of

literacy on the development of a territory; then to the participation of local communities in the animation of communal life. To this end, several paradigms have made it possible to grasp the many theoretical contours of the problem. Empowerment theory, in its relative link with well-being, attempts to justify the contribution of literacy to the emancipation of the masses. It refers to principles, such as the ability of individuals and communities to act to ensure their well-being or their right to participate in decisions that concern them, which guide research and social intervention with the populations concerned. In understanding the functions of literacy and its contribution to the decentralization process, functionalist theory connects the advantages of literacy to an indicator of good appropriation by local actors. It appeals to interactionism which puts at the center of the explanation of collective phenomena, the objective analysis of social interactions and the meanings that social actors give to the games of time. According to this interactionist perspective, mass literacy would induce a dynamic of decentralization. It becomes the indicator of induction of the animation of the life of the local communities. It appears as a promising fact with a potential impact on local development, through collective education and general awareness of territorial priorities. The social change advocated by decentralization is at the cost of a collective movement favored by an overall understanding. Under its nominal conception, functional literacy is an adult educational trend that goes beyond the simple learning of reading, arithmetic and writing to integrate a restorative dimension of the gaps of classical education. It is accompanied by the acquisition of skills and aptitudes useful for life in communities. Functional literacy allows beneficiaries to redefine their status, know how to interpret social codes, and get involved in actions that concern them. It implies a readjustment of aptitudes on the part of the individual; which gives him more autonomy and therefore an open-mindedness. For 100% of respondents, literacy, especially in rural areas, presents a major challenge for decentralization. For them, the botun-up finds its full meaning in a comprehensive approach where all social strata invent and pilot their own projects. The synergy of all skills and their convergence towards a common territorial vision is only profitable through the common definition and appropriation of public action. If for T. Koufecou (2002) ^[14], local public action can only be more effective when the citizen who is the beneficiary does not recognize himself in it and does not understand its usefulness, the fact remains that unless this beneficiary has the necessary skills to decipher, understand, participate and demand accountability. Citizen control depends on community insight.

In the search for the effectiveness of decentralization, local authorities must therefore invent formulas allowing them to involve grassroots actors. Among other things, it will be a question for them of grafting themselves onto the national literacy policy to define a communal vehicular language. This will serve as a channel to popularize the texts and laws of decentralization as well as local development plans, and to translate all development actions into local language accessible by the communities. There is therefore a need to induce a reform of decentralization that integrates the issue of human capital and options for equitable access to opportunities and participation in community development initiatives.

Conclusion

In short, the optimization of the decentralization policy, community participation in local development initiatives, citizen control of local public action and general appropriation of development ideologies converge in the name of the principle of good governance towards a sense of belonging and fair access to the offense which is cemented by dominating accessibility. If the adhesion of local communities to the orthodoxies of local development remains weak, the predominant variable stated remains the lack of understanding of local public actions, for lack of their translation into territorial discourses, understood and accepted. Literacy, by serving as a unifying framework, is now emerging as a lever for rationalizing strategic options for grassroots development. By combining decentralization and literacy, the potential gains are irreversible. The developmentalist universe is open to fair games of participation and the opacity of governance is revoked. The ongoing decentralization reform must go hand in hand with the promotion of functional literacy to the great benefit of general development policy.

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