



Neighborhood committees in urban governance in Bouaké: Ideologies, uses and issues

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to understand the functioning and uses of neighborhood committees by analyzing the relationship between residents and governors in public management. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, direct observation and focus groups. The analysis shows that the establishment of neighborhood committees is governed by a politico-administrative logic designed to promote political socialization in the service of local power. It then shows that these neighborhood committees select activities and actions essentially designed to build systematic relationships of loyalty between residents and local elected officials. Finally, the analysis shows that neighborhood committees are reconverted into political tools for consolidating local power.

Keywords: Neighborhood committees, participation, public management, residents, Bouaké

Introduction

Following the example of countries that have adopted decentralization, participatory democracy has gradually gained ground in Côte d'Ivoire as a mode of urban governance since the 1990s. This innovative model for the social development of cities is based on the principle that the effectiveness of public action depends on the involvement of populations in the public management of local affairs (Blondiaux, 2001; Carrel, 2013).^[3, 5] Its originality lies in its ability to compensate for the shortcomings of a representative democracy monopolized by local elected officials (Rangeon, 1999)^[10], by encouraging a recomposition of relations in favor of residents, without however calling into question the legitimacy of leaders (Rangeon, 1999).^[10]

This institutional prescription is reflected in the creation of so-called "participative" bodies, including neighborhood committees and councils. A symbol of urban governance, they are presented as forums for the promotion of citizen opinion, or as forces for citizen proposals. As such, they are positioned in the public arena as counter-powers through which residents interact with decision-makers in order to better understand local public management issues and influence local power (Lefebvre and Nonjon, 2003; Carrel, 2013).^[5, 9] In fact, the existence of neighborhood committees means that residents' expertise is now becoming indispensable for thinking about public action and neighborhood management (Bacqué, Rey and Sintomer, 2005).^[11]

The fervor aroused by the promises of participatory democracy, coupled with the global context dominated by 1st sustainable development, contributed to the creation of the Ministry of the City in 2018. Its aim is "to put residents at the heart of city governance". This political will helped accelerate and update the process of setting up neighborhood committees in cities between 2019 and 2020. Officially, neighborhood committees are locally presented as symbols of inclusive urban governance policies in Côte d'Ivoire. Yet, after more than two decades of existence, very little is known about how they operate and their impact on urban governance. Indeed, there are very few local studies

on participatory prescriptions, unlike in other political contexts where this issue has been the subject of abundant work (Rangeon, 1999; Blondiaux, 2009; Carrel, 2013).^[5, 10] Most local works on decentralization and local governance have focused on relations between the state and local authorities or between territorial entities (Soumahoro, 2015; Koutoua and Kouakou, 2019), on governance of the water sector (Yao, 2010), on waste governance (Djé, 2010). The low level of scientific interest in this issue reflects the relevance of this study.

Based on the case of the city of Bouaké, the study aims to understand the functioning and uses of neighborhood committees by analyzing relations between residents and elected officials. To this end, three axes are addressed. These are: (i) identifying the ideological underpinnings that govern the operation of neighborhood committees; (ii) describing the dynamics of interactions between elected officials and residents based on the activities and practices legitimized within neighborhood committees; (iii) highlighting the issues that structure the uses of neighborhood committees.

The methodology used is divided into two main points: the first presents the scope of the study, and the second defines the data collection and analysis tools, as well as the targets surveyed.

Methodology

1. Scope of the study

The field survey took place over the period from July 2020 to February 2021 among two neighborhood committees of the "zone" district in the city of Bouaké. The second largest city in Côte d'Ivoire, Bouaké is centrally located around 300km north of Abidjan (the economic capital) and 95km north of Yamoussoukro (the political capital). With an estimated population of 69, 4841. The choice of the city is based on the rhetoric of inclusive participation that has been in vogue and resounding in the discourse of local public authorities over the last decade. Indeed, the commune's neighborhood committees (precisely 51) were installed in November 2013 during a solemn ceremony presided over by the mayor, Nicolas Djibo. The study targets are

neighborhood committee leaders and members, leaders of youth and women's organizations, neighborhood elders including religious guides, and municipal agents in charge of sanitation and neighborhood development projects.

2. Data collection and analysis

The survey protocol consisted of semi-structured interviews, focus groups and direct observation. Discussions focused on three themes, with the aim of comparing the stated objectives of neighborhood committees with the ideologies, actions and practices observed in their operation. The first theme concerns the ideologies underlying the establishment of neighborhood committees in urban policies. This theme enables us to test the political promises of population inclusion, particularly in terms of the idea and the institutional conditions for raising awareness of citizen expertise, the power of collective action, and satisfying residents' curiosity about the challenges of public management.

The second theme concerns the conditions under which committees are set up, the types of activities they legitimize and the relationships they help to generate between the local population and municipal authorities. This involves describing the process by which committees are set up, the nature of their activities, and whether they serve the interests of local residents or reinforce the power of decision-makers. For example, the activities and practices of these committees help to ensure that the people's voice is heard by municipal leaders. We refer to deliberations concerning the choice of neighborhood projects and political decisions that affect residents. The third theme concerns the issues underlying the political uses of neighborhood committees.

The targets are five (05) leaders of residents' associations (presidents or members of the ruling circle) who are members of neighborhood committees, the main coordinator of the activities of the committees studied, five (05) leaders of the two neighborhood committees, including the two (02) focal points; two (02) municipal agents in charge of neighborhood sanitation projects, and fifteen (15) residents who are more or less active in neighborhood activities initiated by the committees. Active residents include representatives of neighborhood women's and youth organizations, neighborhood elders, and community leaders with varying degrees of involvement in public life and neighborhood activities. In all, twenty-nine (29) semi-structured interviews and two (2) focus groups were conducted. Discussions lasted between 35 and 60 minutes.

All the information gathered was subjected to thematic content analysis. The data were grouped by specific objective, then categorized according to similarities or divergences in the discourse of the categories of actors. This methodological protocol yielded the results presented below.

Results

1. A political-administrative tool for promoting political socialization at the service of local power

The ideological basis of urban governance is to promote citizens' interest in public management and create the conditions for improving their critical faculties through information and debate. The challenge of setting up neighborhood committees is therefore to turn residents into competent players, whose expertise will be indispensable in

resolving neighborhood problems. In practice, however, the neighborhood committees studied operate in a completely opposite ideological register.

In fact, the neighborhood committees studied operate within a regulatory framework that is entirely subject to the municipal government. These set the terms and conditions of their operation, the missions assigned to them and the roles of the parties involved. Residents, who are supposed to be partners in this process, are not involved in defining the political role assigned to each of the parties, and know very little about the political issues associated with these entities.

The prevailing ideology in these committees obeys a logic of systematic disqualification of citizen expertise in public management. The idea that the social properties of local residents make them less competent to think about public problems on their own is circulated. In fact, it is imperative that they be guided by public authorities as to what is legitimate to be qualified as a public problem and what is not. This disqualifying view of residents' expertise is inculcated as a normative representation of "participation". For municipal elites, to "participate" is to adhere to the municipal conception of public problems. According to this conception, public problems are, as it were, a set of social needs selected and prioritized according to the agenda of the public authorities, and not according to the priorities of the social forces experiencing these problems. Legitimized public problems concern educational and health infrastructures, safety, the environment and so on. As a result, forms of local solidarity, festivities and reunions, which are the priority social needs of the inhabitants, are qualified as trivial and secondary. By simply relaying the municipal conception of public problems, neighborhood committees are in a position to discredit any social needs that don't fit into this institutional approach. In this regard, K.A., one of the focal points of the neighborhood committees, had this to say about the non-alignment of residents with the institutional conception of public problems: "The problem here is that people don't think about development, they like to have fun, do the little things like tontines, organize weddings, christenings and birthdays. But when we talk about insalubrity or planting trees, for example, they're not interested".

By describing certain needs prioritized by the local population as "fun", the neighborhood committees are demonstrating the illegitimate nature of these needs. Because they don't fit into donor-funded agendas. The activities at the heart of these agendas are generally presented as a reference standard for public action and therefore legitimate social problems. As a result, it is adherence to these normative references to neighborhood problems that distinguishes the "good" citizen concerned with development from the "bad" citizen who does not. In other words, "getting people involved" is guided by the idea that local residents need to learn the "right" ways of thinking about public problems in their neighborhoods. After all, they don't yet have the skills and abilities to take part in neighborhood development projects, let alone contribute to public decision-making. As a result, they need to be guided first and foremost by competent citizens.

As a result, the underlying ideology of participation is structured around the need to train and enlighten residents to become "competent" citizens. Against this backdrop, the idea is to manufacture the resident citizen, accepting the disqualification of his or her expertise in defining and

resolving the public problems that concern him or her. This is because the citizen is subjected to the idea that he or she is incapable of thinking through social needs on his or her own. Only the public authorities are more competent in this respect. So how do these ideologies play out in relations between residents and municipal players?

2. Spaces for the construction of systemic loyalty relationships between residents and local authorities

2.1. Selection and legitimization of activities essentially dedicated to promoting the political priorities of elected officials.

While resident populations are presented as partners of the municipality in local public management, in reality they remain a systemic rival whose emancipatory ambitions are disturbing. This is why the content of neighborhood committee activities is meticulously selective, with the aim of reinforcing residents' systematic support for the political vision of local power.

In fact, neighborhood committees are strictly political constructs, as they have neither the roots nor the social legitimacy to unite people around neighborhood problems. Originally set up by the municipality outside the social forces (youth and women's organizations, neighborhood elders, community and religious leaders, etc.), they are defined by a set of strictly propagandist activities in favor of the local authorities. There are two reasons for this: firstly, the people who run them are directly or indirectly appointed by the local authorities, and they are responsible for socializing residents to take part in public actions that have already been predefined as public problems in the neighborhoods. Secondly, the eminently political meaning of these activities can be identified by the fact that their success does not depend on mobilizing residents around a shared ideology of the need to develop their neighborhood. Rather, their success depends on a one-off, not necessarily extraordinary, mobilization, whose successful media coverage is enough to make it a success and a benchmark for the municipality's political action. In this way, what is negotiated in these spaces is less a question of the structural conditions of citizen mobilization as a social force of proposition, but of political propaganda on the pre-constructed political successes of local decision-makers.

For elected officials, it's not so much the enthusiasm generated by the committees' activities among the local population that's important, but rather the communication that can be made of them for political gain. In other words, the logic that guides the use of these activities is to use images of activities (very often one-off events) to which people are invited to reconstruct them as political trophies (actions to benefit the neighborhoods). For example, videos and images are taken during and at the end of activities in the company of municipal officials or representatives, to immortalize these moments, with a view to using them as proof of municipal action. From this point of view, the municipality has no interest in arousing public enthusiasm for neighborhood committees. This justifies the absence of a communications policy for the neighborhood committees, and consequently the lack of enthusiasm among residents for meetings and other activities. For example, the average number of participants at the meetings observed was between seven and fifteen, including presidents of associations whose members were absent. Yet the low level of participation by residents in neighborhood committee

meetings is downplayed. This is because the decisions taken are reconstructed as reflecting the opinions of all local residents.

But democratic legitimacy aside, the decision-making process within neighborhood committees can be described as absurd for two reasons: the first is that meeting agendas focus solely on activities according to the municipal definition of public problems and pre-established agendas of municipal priorities. The second is that the conditions for speaking out are not easy for the residents who attend these meetings. These residents are not equipped to speak in public, and speaking out at meetings is less a matter for ordinary residents than for more seasoned municipal intermediaries. As a result, decisions do not reflect the will of the populations concerned.

As far as public management is concerned, there is no provision for an exchange mechanism on the effectiveness of the municipal government's policy choices. Similarly, no program has been identified for residents to meet and debate with elected officials or other municipal representatives. As a result, the residents experiencing the most difficulties (those most exposed to political decisions) have no opportunity to be represented in exchanges with elected officials, to speak out and make proposals. Similarly, residents have no opportunity to express their opinions or demand accountability on project choices, or on the results of previous decisions and projects. Still less are they able to criticize municipal strategies and make proposals during meetings. In short, there's no sharing of essential information on neighborhood management, nor the necessary exchanges on the social relevance of development projects and the institutional conditions for their realization, and so on. Worse still, the participatory budget, which is the essential tool for developing and implementing priority neighborhood projects from the residents' point of view, is not known to them at all. This is because it is not communicated to residents in the neighborhood committees. And yet, any exchange linked to the participatory budget could have been a significant step towards informing and consulting local residents on projects that affect their daily lives, and still remain highly taboo. This setting demonstrates the well-orchestrated selection of activities that actually serve to weaken the conditions for a strong, critical citizen ideological base.

In this respect, there is a clear incompatibility between the expressed intention to promote citizen opinion in the committees and the actual realities of the conditions for speaking out, debate and permanent information. In fact, contrary to what we might have hoped from the promises of participatory prescriptions, neighborhood committees do not work to create proximity between elected representatives and residents, but rather compete to proscribe any emancipatory aspirations on the part of residents.

2.2. Tools for the political control of associations and the structural failure of residents' collective action

Neighborhood committees are tools for undermining the unity of neighborhood residents. This failure is the result of a strategy of political division that is reflected in the social configuration of neighborhood associations, some of which operate under the tutelage of local authorities. Indeed, the strength of citizen opinion is measured in its unity and its ability to position itself as the defender of the interests of

local residents. The structural basis for such ideological positioning of associations depends to a large extent on their level of autonomy from local government. However, this autonomy is undermined by the political control of part of the local associative world, with neighborhood committees playing an important role. This is a classic *modus operandi*, with municipal leaders investing in the creation and/or sponsorship of associations as a means of political leverage. In fact, some of the local associations (whether created or sponsored) remain subservient to local power. As a result, they lose all critical sense and function as propaganda channels for municipal policy on neighborhood committees. This submission to municipal paternalism gives them easier access to certain public resources (including the networks of local elites).

Politically speaking, this system constitutes both a civilian line of defense for municipal participatory policy and the main instrument for undermining the unity of residents as a force for negotiation and control of public management of neighborhoods. The challenge to civic unity is reflected in the divisions that arise as affiliated and non-affiliated associations compete with local authorities. Tensions between pro- and anti-government associations allow dissenting voices on participatory prescriptions to be outvoted, and provide the "democratic" cloak legitimizing the dominant thinking in neighborhood committees. In turn, this well-orchestrated system reduces the chances of a strong, concerted, contradictory opinion emerging from residents. This configuration of the structure of relations between residents and the municipal institution runs counter to the stated aims of making residents an autonomous political force of proposition.

3. Neighborhood committees as political tools for consolidating the monopoly of local power

Based on the factual operation of neighborhood committees, presenting them as a symbol of city governance is akin to an urban comedy. For, in both form and substance, these committees in no way meet the requirements of governance. In terms of form, the committees do not operate on the basis of clear standards defining roles, operating mechanisms and shared objectives. In substance, the activities and content of the committees are not designed to facilitate exchange and confrontation between the governing and the governed. Rather, they reflect a policy of excluding the local population from the management of neighbourhood affairs. As a result, residents have limited knowledge of the institutional processes of civic relations, and of the administrative and institutional procedures of public management. These indicators show that upgrading residents' skills, particularly in understanding the challenges of public management, is neither a priority nor even a secondary objective for neighborhood committees. As a result, the residents who take part in committee activities are generally unaware of the institutional and administrative realities in which they are invited to participate. As a result, the competence and expertise of citizens are not only disqualified, but the knowledge we claim to provide is a farce.

The lack of information shared with residents is borne out by the fact that their representation of public management of neighborhood affairs is scarcely distinguishable from that shared in the popular imagination. For example, the interviews show that for some of them, the elected official is systematically seen as solely responsible for all the shortcomings of the decentralization system. Similarly,

some residents are convinced, rightly or wrongly, of the systematic availability of financial resources to solve neighborhood problems. Some, out of ignorance (or a crisis of confidence), exclude the possibility of institutional malfunctions that could short-circuit project funding. Such eventualities are interpreted as diversions invented by elected officials to divert people's attention. It's a conspiratorial, but above all simplistic, reading that speaks volumes about their limited knowledge of the institutional workings of public service provision and the financing of neighborhood projects.

Although these accusations of misappropriation of public funds are not unfounded, they remain highly simplistic and attest to the lack of information sharing and exchange likely to enlighten residents about the structural realities of neighborhood management. The lack of transparency regarding local institutional and administrative realities (procedures, procedural and technical difficulties; participatory budgeting) is reflected in residents' lack of understanding of how decentralization works. A situation which also contributes to complicating relations between residents and public authorities. It feeds prejudices that are detrimental to constructive collaboration between residents and public institutions. These prejudices can be seen, for example, in the overestimation of decision-makers' ability to solve neighborhood problems. This overestimation generates unnecessary tensions with public authorities, further erodes residents' trust in them, and leads to a systematic questioning of public discourse.

These are all indicators that residents find themselves lost in bodies whose entire operating logic escapes them, because they are built outside them. So, behind the appearance of openness and attentiveness (a place for the expression of democracy) that the setting up of neighborhood committees reveals, lies a strategy for preserving a long tradition of domination, giving elected officials *carte blanche* to govern without being accountable, while appearing legitimate in the eyes of the population. This strategy can be summed up as the dismantling of formal participation mechanisms in favor of a well-developed informal process of dispossessing residents of the political tool (neighborhood committees) intended for them as a means of controlling public action. This dispossession is part of a process of preserving historical civic relations, according to which elected officials have a tradition of governing on conquered ground. The fact that they have traditionally benefited from a "super-elite" status embodied in the myth of local power (cult of personality), makes any public control or evaluation of their management of local public affairs improbable and unacceptable. In other words, accepting to include residents in the deliberation process would be to embark on a process of deconstructing the myth of the power of elected representatives. This is because residents' collectives, set up as an opposition force, could now hold them to account for public management. Consequently, allowing neighborhood committees to operate within a consensual framework may represent a potential political threat, given that they are formally intended to serve as an instrument of power for the benefit of residents. As a result, placing them under guardianship is a way of converting them into an allied and harmless body, which can be mobilized for the political communication strategies of elected officials.

Discussion

The results of the study highlight three main findings: firstly, the establishment of neighborhood committees is

guided by a political-administrative logic, according to which they are intended to serve as a framework for political socialization in the service of local power (promoting a model of the subservient citizen who has lost all sense of criticism). Secondly, in practice, they are selective in terms of activities likely to foster systematic loyalty to local power on the part of local residents. Finally, they function as political tools that serve to consolidate the domination of local power.

These responses present similarities and divergences with those of works on participatory democracy in the African and Western contexts. In the African context, the similarities are both ideological and structural. In the French context, on the other hand, there are ideological similarities but significant structural divergences.

In the African context, the work of De Sardan and Abdoua (2000) on village water management in Niger shows the informal nature of village pump management committees. The authors point out that this informality reduces the chances of transparent management and community control. The analysis thus highlights a conception of a good for public use combined with informal forms of management that are far removed from community illusions. In the Senegalese political context, Goudiaby (2009)^[7] highlights the ambivalence of the implementation of participatory mechanisms. This implementation is torn between the imperative for public authorities to respond to the injunctions of participatory democracy on the part of donors, whom they need to seduce, and their interest in containing the growing activism of civil society. The conclusions of these studies show that the local environment is dominated by defensive postures aimed at conserving power.

In the Western context, and in France in particular, the studies consulted indicate that the frameworks for promoting citizen opinion as a social force of proposition exist in form. However, there is still resistance to taking their proposals into account in the decision-making process. For example, Sotison (2006) points out that, in the French context, resident experts are nevertheless called upon to formulate proposals for consultative purposes, particularly in short-term projects, since the decision always rests with elected representatives. Similarly, Carrel (2003)^[5] points out that, even if it only reduces inequalities, there are public arenas in which different types of knowledge and legitimacy come into conflict in the definition and resolution of public problems.

Blondiaux (2001)^[3] shows that participatory frameworks are realistic in the French context, but that there are many inequalities to be corrected. To this end, he shows, for example, that the solemn nature of residents' participation in participatory frameworks is a handicap for non-intellectuals. This is because participatory mechanisms only take into account the most socially integrated and intellectually well-educated populations. These studies show that neighborhood committees function as a source of proposals, but they do not yet guarantee that these proposals will be taken into account in the decision-making process. The resistance of elected representatives to controlling the decision-making process remains strong.

From the above, the particularity of the local context studied is that neighborhood committees are still far from being social forces of proposal even before evoking their proper proposal. These committees are still essentially political instruments serving the interests of local elected officials.

Conclusion

In view of the way they operate and the way they are used in the local political sphere, neighbourhood committees remain a kind of political diversion masking a political strategy for the caporalization of power. For behind the rhetoric of urban governance lies the reality of sidelining residents and reinforcing the monopoly of elected representatives. The use of neighborhood committees is motivated by the fear of local decision-makers, based on the idea that enhancing the political competence of residents would be a form of tolerance to the emergence of a strong citizen opinion, capable of setting itself up as a powerful political adversary. Moreover, the ability of local elected representatives to divest the population of a political instrument intended for them is an even clearer indicator of the fragility of the foundations of decentralization, as has been noted in many African contexts (Le Bris and Paulais, 2007; Touré, 2011).^[8, 13]

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