



## Trajectories of decentralized cooperation in the development process of local authorities in Benin: specific look at the municipality of Dogbo

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### Abstract

In the decentralization process, Benin has identified appropriate strategies for better governance and the fight against poverty. In this context, the municipality of Dogbo has benefited for several years from the many advantages of decentralized cooperation agreements as part of a local development dynamic. This study aimed to diagnose the dynamics of decentralized cooperation in the development process of the municipality of Dogbo. This is a cross-sectional study, carried out in the form of a questionnaire survey of 357 respondents selected according to the non-random method with the technique of choice by volunteer. These respondents are beneficiaries involved in the process of decentralized cooperation in the municipality of Dogbo. The results revealed that all the beneficiaries surveyed know the main cooperation agreements in the commune of Dogbo and the different actors involved in the main areas of intervention of this development process. The actors of the local authorities must work to seek more partnership agreements, to further improve on all levels, the living conditions of the populations. All actors involved in decentralized cooperation will have to work together to achieve this objective.

**Keywords:** local authorities, decentralized cooperation, agreements, Dogbo

### Introduction

Severely tested by the global crisis, a kind of cooperation emerged where states forged links between French local authorities and local Maghreb leaders (Zebaze *et al*, 2020)<sup>[5]</sup>. The cooperation implied by the logic of solidarity, cooperation and research for development (Abrika, 2016)<sup>[6]</sup> has evolved in historical contexts punctuated by processes of change and transition from centralization to decentralization. As a result, the evolution of the implementation of decentralization is not uniform in developing countries, particularly in Africa. However, among the new powers granted to decentralized local authorities, decentralized cooperation aimed to revitalize development cooperation on innovative bases in order to improve the living conditions of populations (Mindja, 2021)<sup>[7]</sup>. In some towns, it has led to the transfer of certain powers from the State to local authorities, which are now responsible for certain key areas of development. In other cities, his level of advancement was later. The implementation of projects and programs by municipalities poses many problems of appropriation at the level of the populations, of management at the level of technicians and of the implementation of strategies by local elected officials. However, in the field of decentralized cooperation, the transfer of models whose knowledge and know-how are remarkable (Marie and Idelman, 2020) is planned.

Moreover, decentralized cooperation is today an essential step in political and legal thinking, given its major contribution to the fundamental reflection on the existential structures of the viability of local authorities (Saya, 2006)<sup>[3]</sup>. The advent of decentralized cooperation was both a means of solving the problems encountered by twinning and

taking into account the needs of local authorities in terms of cooperation (Djefa and Boidin, 2018). Decentralized cooperation therefore contributes positively to municipal investment while being part of a dynamic of local development. Like several African states, Benin is part of the dynamics of good governance and poverty reduction strategies through the decentralization process (Ministry of State in charge of Planning and Development, 2018), with the objective of improve the conditions necessary for comprehensive and sustainable development through implementation in the country's development programs and strategies. Indeed, one wonders about the challenges that decentralization represents in the context of decentralized cooperation, for the new decentralized local authorities (Presidency of the Republic of Benin, 2016). With the beginning of the process of democratic renewal, the need to decentralize the central administration imposed itself on the Beninese political class.

Before the consecration in French law, the conference of the living forces of the nation arrived at the right time in 1990 in Benin to recommend a legal orientation of a self-management of the communes. Decentralization, as designed and implemented, is part of a participatory approach that allows local actors to be fully involved in identifying their basic needs and designing their own projects. Decentralized and inter-municipal cooperation has texts for its establishment and operation; but which are more linked to the various types of grouping of local authorities according to the levels of territorial administration. All the national and local actors have seen in this new policy an opportunity towards a certain and radiant development. Like several other communes out of the seventy-seven (77) in

Benin, the commune of Dogbo has embarked on this overall movement, taking charge of the destiny of its local development.

In Benin, local authorities such as that of the municipality of Dogbo, perfectly master the decentralized cooperation platform for which the National Association of Municipalities of Benin (ANCB) serves as an interface between local authorities, the state and the technical and financial partners (PTF), for the definition of the strategic orientations in a global way. In truth, some actors of decentralized cooperation and grassroots populations in particular, consider themselves as eternal beneficiaries, ignoring the principle of reciprocity which should characterize relations. Otherwise, it will be necessary to succeed in bringing all actors to understand the link between rights and duties in order to encourage a culture of responsibility.

This call is however valid in the life of the partnerships or twinnings between the local communities of the north and the south or those of the south between them. Indeed, the twinning agreement is the culmination of an agreement by which two or more municipalities decide to pool their various means with a view to achieving common objectives (Mindja, 2021) [7].

The vision which tends to evaluate these decentralized cooperations through the volume of contribution in terms of cash or materials is restrictive. Partnerships or twinnings should rather be considered as opportunities, real exchanges, capable of gradually bringing each cooperator to capitalize on the good practices of the other and to truly initiate the development of their territory. In a case study carried out in the Collines department, Houmènou (2019) [8] showed that in Benin, the definition of decentralized cooperation takes into account all the links that a local authority can forge with a foreign structure with a legal personality, also including associations and Non-Governmental Organizations. According to the author, this Beninese perspective follows the logic of involving civil society actors taken in all its diversity. However, in view of the notorious progress made in this area, major questions arise about the trajectory of decentralized cooperation in the process of development of local authorities in the municipality of Dogbo.

**Objective of the Study**

The general objective of this study was to diagnose the dynamics of decentralized cooperation in the development

process of the municipality of Dogbo. More specifically, it was initially a question of identifying the agreements and areas of intervention of decentralized cooperation in the municipality of Dogbo. Secondly, it was a question of determining the actors involved in this cooperation.

**Methodological Approach**

This was a quantitative and qualitative cross-sectional study implemented from mid-October to mid-December 2021 in the commune of Dogbo in the Republic of Benin.

The primary target population was made up of the beneficiary communities, made up of five (05) employees of the service heads of the Dogbo town hall, twelve (12) district secretaries and/or agents collecting birth records, five (05) Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) of the municipality seven agents of the hygiene brigade of the central market of Dogbo, thirty (30) women of the association "Mianondjou" in charge of sweeping the market, thirty-one (31) members of the office of the association of users of the central market of Dogbo (ADM-CD) and two hundred and sixty-seven (267) users of the central market of Dogbo. They were selected using the non-random sampling method with the volunteer choice technique.

The secondary target population was made up of politico-administrative authorities, municipal officials, ministry officials and technical and financial partners, selected according to the non-random method with the reasoned-choice sampling technique.

As part of this study, a survey by questionnaire and interviews made it possible to collect quantitative and qualitative data relating to the agreements and conventions of decentralized cooperation and the actors involved in this process. Questionnaires were completed by some subjects themselves and by interviewers trained for the circumstance for others depending on the level of education of each.

The processing of the data obtained was carried out using the SPSS software (version 27.0.1) which made it possible to obtain descriptive statistics. These statistics served as support for a better analysis of the data collected and illustrated by tables. Qualitative data was processed through content analysis.

**Result**

**1. Agreements and areas of intervention of decentralized cooperation in the municipality of Dogbo**

**Table 1:** Declaration of beneficiaries on decentralized cooperation agreements in the municipality of Dogbo (n = 357) in 2021

Existence and type of decentralized cooperation agreements	Effective	Percentage (%)
Existence of decentralized cooperation	357	100,0
Agreement ROESELARE	357	100,0
Agreement KLEVE	59	16,5
Agreement RIDDERKERK	31	08,7

The table above suggests that all of the respondents are aware of the existence of decentralized cooperation as a mode of management and financing of local development in the municipality of Dogbo. They all also express being aware of the partnership agreement signed between the city

of Roeselare in Belgium and the municipality of Dogbo. They are respectively 59 and 31 surveyed to recognize the partnership agreements with the city of Klève in Germany and the city of Ridderkerk in the Netherlands.

**Table 2:** Areas of intervention of decentralized cooperation in the municipality of Dogbo (n = 357) in 2021

Areas of intervention of decentralized cooperation in the municipality of Dogbo	Effective	Percentage (%)
Marital status	348	97,5
Education	341	95,5
Community Mobilization	345	96,6
Environment	12	03,4
Social	36	10,1
Cultural	47	13,2
Health	270	75,6
Local economy	345	96,6
Hygiene and sanitation	270	75,6
Tourism	20	05,6

The table above presents the areas of intervention of decentralized cooperation in the municipality of Dogbo according to the beneficiaries who participated in the survey. The areas of intervention are essentially civil status (97.5%), local economy (96.6%), community mobilization

(96.6%), education (95.5%), health, (75.6%), hygiene and sanitation (75.6%).

**2. Actors involved in the process of decentralized cooperation in the commune of Dogbo**

**Table 3:** Actors involved in the areas of intervention of decentralized cooperation in the municipality of Dogbo (n = 357) in 2021

Actors involved in identifying areas of intervention	Respondents' responses	
	Yes Effective (%)	No Effective (%)
Municipal authorities involved	318 (89,1)	39 (10,9)
Central state involved	27 (07,6)	330 (92,4)
Partners involved	287 (80,4)	70 (19,6)
Communities involved	310 (86,8)	47 (13,2)

This table shows that on the basis of the declarations of the 357 beneficiaries surveyed, 318 or 89.1% mentioned the municipal authorities as actors involved in the identification of the areas of intervention of decentralized cooperation. They were 310 beneficiaries (86.8%) and 287 (80.4%) respectively to mention communities and partners as other actors involved in the areas mentioned above.

**3. Citizen participation in decentralized cooperation**

In the municipality of Dogbo, in terms of decentralized cooperation, citizen participation is clearly marked by the existence of an integrating framework and consultation with the actors. This framework is made up of actors from civil society, decentralized State services, religious leaders, natural and legal persons from society, consumer associations, groups of organizations and craftsmen and others. This framework allows local actors to address municipal authorities and partners during their visit on questions of decentralized cooperation. Civil society then plays an important role in the implementation of decentralized cooperation actions in the municipality of Dogbo. It is in this sense that the municipal elected representative EC 2 declared that "the role of civil society is to ensure the proper conduct of cooperation actions and to make the population aware of them if necessary while clarifying to them the logic of implementation of activities. Given that civil society organizations are closer to grassroots communities, it is very essential to involve them in the decision-making and evaluation bodies for decentralized cooperation actions. Their role is therefore advisory and informative rather than technical. This is why one of the civil servants interviewed let it be understood that "local NGOs sensitize and inform communities about the actions of partners in the commune; in a way, they hold feedback sessions on program/project planning and evaluation workshops" (FAC 3). In their respective areas of intervention, these organizations relay information relating

to decentralized cooperation interventions in the municipality of Dogbo. It should be noted that "in the past, civil society was not too involved. Today, there are local NGOs that are in partnership with others on the other side to carry out actions in favor of Dogbo" (FAC 1). Through the latter, we can remember that the CSOs involved in the execution of decentralized cooperation programs carry out internal actions which consist in informing the populations about them. External actions relate to collaboration with their counterparts in the partner municipalities to find solutions to the problems of the communities in a joint manner.

If citizen participation is defined as a means of involving citizens in the development of public policies and in collective decision-making, this definition can also extend to monitoring, to encompass the issue of Citizen Control of Action Public (CCAP). In this sense, the citizen verifies the effectiveness of the existence, implementation or compliance with the regularity and compliance of the technical or administrative standards of one or more policies in a specific context. Some civil society organizations in the municipality of Dogbo work in this direction of the CCAP. However, others in the exercise of these prerogatives vested in them, tend to overflow. This situation is sometimes the source of disagreement between the municipal authority and civil society. The EC 5 interviewee gave testimony of his experience according to which "some NGOs have disappointed me over time in the field. They confuse citizen control of public action with a derisory criticism of the actions of the authority [...]" (EC 5).

We remember at this level that in any society there are always organizations acting as counter-powers but cannot however prevent the authorities in their dynamism for development.

In any case, it is important to remember that individual and collective citizen participation ensures better implementation of decentralized cooperation actions and

strengthens the effectiveness and sustainability of interventions while offering the possibility of social change.

### Discussion

Decentralized cooperation is an observable fact in several countries, especially in these times when the search for development remains a major challenge for nations. It is perceived as a solution to the problems encountered by twinning and especially in taking into account the needs of local authorities in terms of cooperation (Djefa and Boidin, 2018).

From the set of quantitative and qualitative results of this research, it emerges that partnership agreements have been signed and the existence of decentralized cooperation in the municipality of Dogbo. The majority of the beneficiaries surveyed, all categories combined, have a perfect knowledge of the cooperation agreements in the municipality. These conventions, through their implementation through concrete actions, have elevated the municipality to the rank of international cities. These are three (03) "North-South" cooperation agreements and one (01) "South-South" cooperation agreement. In detail, we can retain: the partnership agreement with the city of Tambakounda in Senegal (February 2015); the partnership agreement with the city of Ridderket in Germany; the partnership agreement with the city of Klève in Germany (May 26, 2014); the agreement with the city of Roeselare in Belgium (November 26, 2010) and the partnership agreement with the Netherlands (VNG Internationale).

Through these agreements, the various actors intervened in several sectors of social, administrative, educational and cultural life in the municipality of Dogbo to improve the living conditions of the population. In short, the commune of Dogbo maintains five (05) cooperations of the decentralized cooperation type, that is to say established between two foreign communities that have signed a cooperation protocol between them.

These declarations of the beneficiaries prove their knowledge of the existence of decentralized cooperation as a mode of governance and financing of local development in the municipality of Dogbo. With this degree of knowledge of the communities of the territorial collectivity of Dogbo, the work of De Losada (2017) <sup>[1]</sup> revealed that the strength of decentralized cooperation lies in its territorial and horizontal dimension, which capitalizes on the capacity of local authorities to mobilize a whole set of actors in favor of a process of partnership between territories. Decentralized cooperation remains a relationship between local authorities of a territorial community, through conventions or cooperation agreements, bringing together local actors from partner territories for the implementation of projects (Djossou, 2018) <sup>[2]</sup>.

According to the decentralized cooperation guide, cooperation between two local authorities can have different origins such as the prior existence of a twinning between territories or the crush of an elected official for a particular foreign region. But within the framework of the cooperation agreements signed between the municipality of Dogbo and its partners, it is difficult to know the exact origins of each of them. The territorial administration's archiving service keeps written traces of the cooperation agreements, but the research was unable to identify more precisely the opportunities and methods for the emergence of cooperation.

However, the results of this study have identified, on the basis of the declarations of the respondents, several main actors involved in the areas of intervention of decentralized cooperation.

Decentralized cooperation actions can only be analyzed from their areas of intervention in local communities. It emerges from the work of Husson (2000) <sup>[9]</sup> that in terms of decentralized cooperation actions, local authorities intervene above all in the fields of "solidarity aid" (sending of objects in kind: books, medical equipment, transport equipment, etc.) and for the financing of infrastructure (wells, schools, health centers, etc.). According to the author, others act more frankly on the register of municipal development by supporting the management of urban services, the setting up of industrial zones, the improvement of the quality of health services, the removal and treatment household waste, etc. Referring to Decree No. 2005-764 of December 9, 2005 on the definition and modalities of Decentralized Cooperation in the Republic of Benin in its article 7, the main areas of intervention of decentralized cooperation are: institutional support, development local, exchanges of expertise, exchanges of a social, cultural and sporting nature, protection of the environment and improvement of the living environment.

In the same logic, the results of the field work of this research in the commune of Dogbo revealed that the majority, that is to say 97.5%, affirmed that decentralized cooperation intervenes in the field of civil status, the educational field, the community domain, the environmental domain, the social domain, the cultural domain, the health domain, the local economy, hygiene and sanitation and the tourism domain. The analysis of these results clearly shows that the actions of decentralized cooperation affect all areas of the social and economic life of the municipality. This is consistent with the work of Guinet (2005) <sup>[10]</sup> who organizes the different areas of intervention of local authorities into eight themes: "cultural development, youth and sport", "health and social action", "the education and initial training", "hydraulics", "rural development and agriculture", "urban development and management", "economic development" and finally "support for governance and society civil". Although the fields are identified in collaboration with the local authorities, it sometimes happens that these fields of intervention are imposed on the partners by the municipal political leader according to the needs of his community. This is evidenced by the words of a local elected official interviewed who expressed:

Often when I go to see the partners, I impose myself on them, I don't give them time to choose a sector of intervention, I impose myself on them. I forced them to support civil status, I forced them to intervene in the field of health, I forced them to create the group of firefighters of Dogbo which today benefits the entire department of Couffo [...] in front of the partners, I pose my problems, that is to say the needs of my community. In general, I tell them that we have to explore all possible areas (E1).

These are respectively municipal authorities, communities, partners and the State. The areas of intervention of decentralized cooperation in the municipality of Dogbo identified are essentially: civil status, local economy, community, education, health, hygiene and sanitation.

The actors involved in decentralized cooperation in the municipality of Dogbo very often work together on projects and programs in order to improve the daily life of the

populations in the areas identified. This territory-to-territory cooperation is the result of local authorities' own initiatives with collaboration with economic and social actors who have potential. In the logic of decentralized cooperation, the transfer of knowledge and know-how models are made to facilitate the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of projects and programs in local authorities (Marie and Idelman, 2020).

The analysis of the results obtained following this study suggests that decentralized cooperation also involves the dynamism of elected officials and administrative officials of local authorities in terms of defending the interests of their community in international action. This dynamism constitutes a source of leadership that they use for the purpose of valorization, promotion and advocacy for the development of the territories for which they are responsible.

Considered as an essential step in political and legal thinking (Sayah, 2006) <sup>[3]</sup>, decentralized cooperation aims in the Republic of Benin to support community development actions with unwavering support for good governance (ANCB-MDGLAAT, 2014) <sup>[4]</sup>. For Djossou (2018) <sup>[2]</sup>, these decentralized cooperation agreements have become real levers for improving the living conditions of the Beninese population through the decentralized territorial communities. Based on the budgetary constraints imposed on them and the requirements in terms of expenditure accountability and visibility, it is important to redefine cooperation strategies around more coherent partnerships and more sustainable actions (ANCB, 2017) <sup>[4]</sup>.

## Conclusion

The objective of this study was to diagnose the dynamics of decentralized cooperation in the development process of the commune of Dogbo. The results revealed that all the beneficiaries surveyed have a perfect knowledge of the main cooperation agreements in the municipality. They identified municipal authorities, communities, partners and the State as actors involved in the main areas of intervention of decentralized cooperation: civil status, the local economy, the community area, education, health, hygiene and sanitation. It seems useful for local authorities to strengthen the achievements of decentralized cooperation in the municipality of Dogbo, through the implementation of appropriate public policies for a real improvement in the living conditions of the populations.

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