



## NGOs AND DEVELOPMENT IN BENIN: IS IT MYTH OR REALITY?

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### ABSTRACT

In Benin, NGOs play an important role in the development process. The objective of this research is to evaluate the participation of NGOs in Benin's development process. This mixed-method research was conducted in four special-status municipalities in Benin: Cotonou, Porto-Novo, Abomey-Calavi, and Parakou. The sample of this research comprises 45 NGOs from the non-probabilistic technique of reasoned choice. Data collection included the use of reading sheets, interview guides, and questionnaire.

**Keywords:** Developing Countries, Development, NGO, Benin.

### RESUME

Au Bénin, les ONG jouent un rôle important dans le processus de développement. L'objectif de cette recherche est d'évaluer la participation des ONG dans le processus de développement au Bénin. De nature mixte, cette recherche s'est déroulée dans les quatre communes à statut particulier du Bénin à savoir : Cotonou, Porto-Novo, Abomey-Calavi et Parakou. L'échantillon de cette recherche est de quarante-cinq (45) ONG à partir de la technique non probabiliste de choix raisonné. La collecte des données s'est faite à base de la fiche de lecture, du guide d'entretien et du questionnaire.

**Mots clés :** Pays en développement, Développement, ONG, Bénin.

### INTRODUCTION

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) work in various areas such as development aid, humanitarian aid, environment, human rights, peace building, fair trade, protection of cultural goods, etc. (P. Ryfman, 2004, p. 35). Therefore, it's logical for these NGOs to be involved in various sectors crucial for development. In Benin, accurately determining the number of NGOs is challenging, but it's equally difficult to emphasize the significant role they play in local development. Non-Governmental Organizations are central figures in ongoing debates. They are regularly criticized for their legitimacy,

effectiveness, financial and political independence, and the role they have to play in the Beninese contemporary society. The issue of NGO participation in Benin's development is delicate due to various findings. Empirical findings indicate many irregularities in the functioning of NGOs: fictitious existence, inadequacy of projects and social context, misappropriation of projects, corruption in project management, poor governance of human and financial resources, etc. Faced with these alarming and outrageous empirical findings, African political scientists show that the existence of NGOs in some parts of the world can only prove to be an “illusion”. (P. Chabal and JP. Dalloz, 1999, p. 23). It raises the question of whether NGOs in Benin genuinely contribute to local development .

### 1. Materials and method

This research focuses on NGOs’ role in the development process. Three techniques are used to gather information: documentary research, interview and questionnaire. The associated collection tools are: the reading sheet, the interview guide and the questionnaire. The research was conducted in the municipalities with special status, namely: Cotonou, Porto-Novo, Abomey-Calavi and Parakou. In these municipalities, twelve (12) districts were visited. NGOs were examined regarding their role in the development process in Benin.

**Table 1:** Locations covered (Source: 2023 Field's data)

CITIES	DISTRICTS	VILLAGES / NEIGHBOURHOODS
COTONOU	2 <sup>nd</sup> district 8 <sup>th</sup> district 9 <sup>th</sup> district	Kowegbo ; Senande Minonkpo Wologuede ; Agontinkon Fifadji ; Zogbo
PORTO-NOVO	2 <sup>nd</sup> district 5 <sup>th</sup> district 3 <sup>th</sup> district	Donoukin Lissessa ; Koutongbe Akonaboe ; Ouando Avakpa Kpodji ; Zebou Aga
ABOMEY-CALAVI	District of Abomey-Calavi District of Godomey District of Akassato	Agori ; Kansoukpa Atropko-Codji ; Cocotomey Adjagbo ; Akassato- Centre
PARAKOU	2 <sup>nd</sup> district 8 <sup>th</sup> district 9 <sup>th</sup> district	Alaga ; Albarika Banikani ; Zongo- Zenon Guema ; Wansirou

We employed the non-probability sampling technique of reasoned choice. The reasons for choosing this research framework are multiple: field experience, visibility, cooperation with foreign partners and public partnership. A numeric recorder is used to collect the audio data. The statistical processing was carried out using MS Excel The data collected are processed and

analyzed. The verbatim transcripts of the participants are used to support statistically manipulated data.

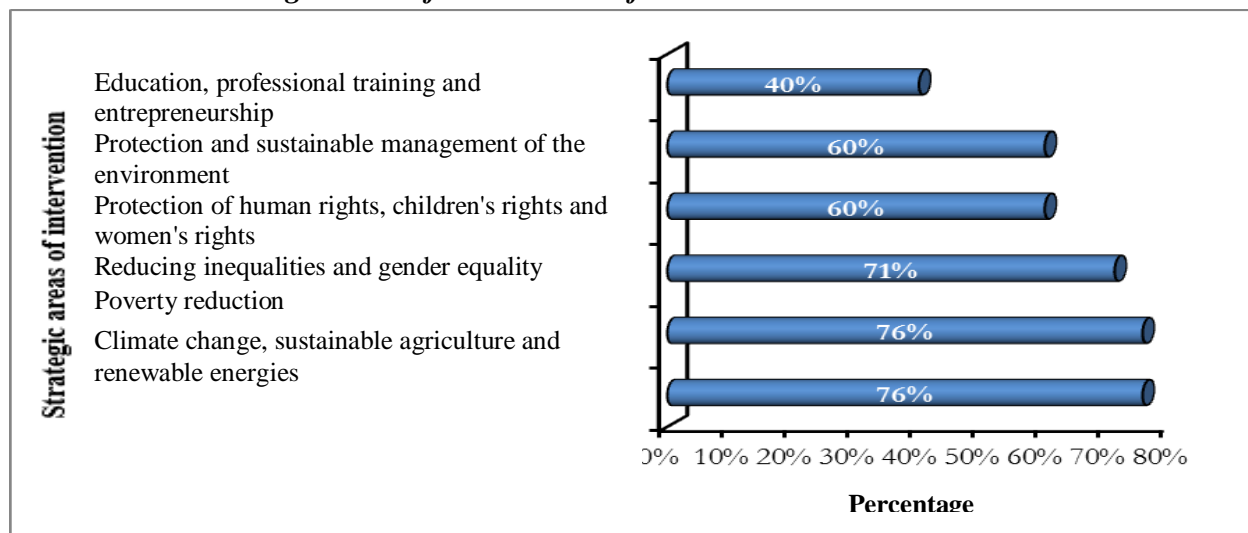
## 2. Results

The field investigation has yielded significant results. Such results take into account: the characterization of non-governmental organizations, the impact of projects funded by foreign partners on the development of Benin, the governance of resources and the forms of Government support to the functioning of NGOs.

### 2.1. Characterization of non-governmental organizations

All organizations searched for as part of our research have been officially registered in the Republic of Benin. On average, they have a duration 12.2± years on average: the oldest was recorded in 2003 and the most recent has an official registration in 2019. However, It's worth noting that these organizations are often well active in the field before their official registration. As a non-governmental organization, they are non-profit and non-public solidarity associations whose mission is to provide a service to identified groups or to support actions to be carried out in their favor. They all emphasize their willingness to contribute to development in one way or another.

### 2.2. Vision and strategic areas of intervention of NGOs



**Figure 1:** Distribution of NGOs according to strategic areas of interventions (Source: May 2023 field's data)

The vision of NGOs determines their action on the ground. The organizations visited are meant to intervene in very diverse fields such as: issues related to the protection and

sustainable management of the environment; climate change, sustainable agriculture and renewable energies; education, vocational training and entrepreneurship; issues connected to poverty reduction; reduction of inequalities, in particular those related to gender; human rights protection, children’s rights, women’s rights; etc.

Their ambition leads us to emphasize that, at this level, they function more as service-providing development organizations rather than militant or advocacy NGOs. Most organizations’ structures include a board of directors and an executive management with a permanent team and project teams formed as and when needed.

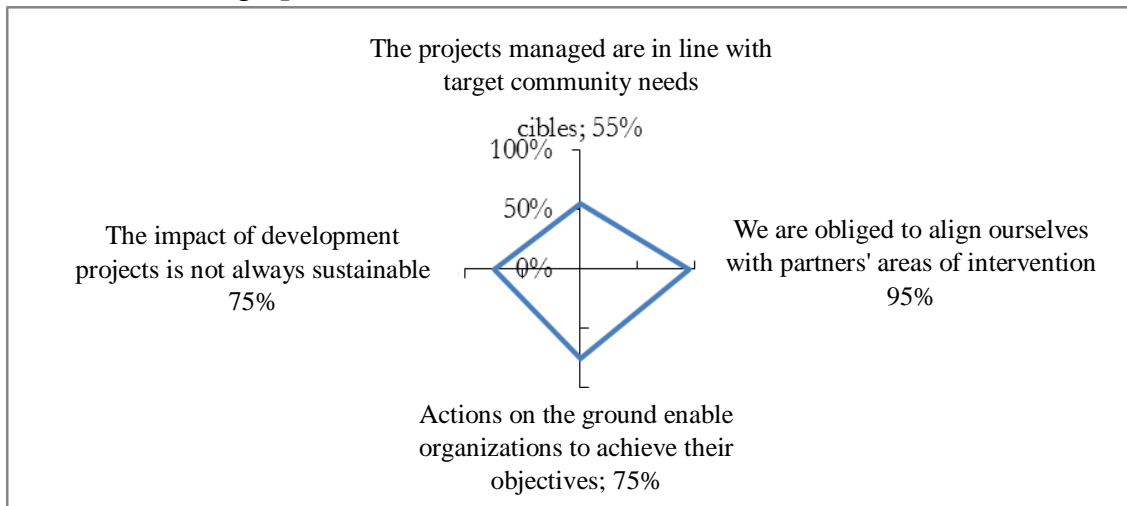
**Box 1: Vision formulated by some NGOs**

*"Improve the living conditions of vulnerable populations for sustainable development in Benin and the sub-region".*  
*"To be a leader in promoting entrepreneurship and helping to improve the living conditions of vulnerable groups".*  
*"Help build a poverty free world and contribute to environment protection and human rights compliance"*  
*"Contribute to food security, adaptation to climate change, environment protection, renewable energy promotion and sustainable management of fragile ecosystems in partnership with other organisations through participatory research-action and capacity building for vulnerable women, men and communities".*

Source: May 2023 field's data

**2.3. Impact of projects funded by foreign partners on the development of Benin**

NGOs seek funding for projects that they initiate. Indeed, When projects cannot be financed from their own funds or with support from the Benin Government, NGOs seek assistance from foreign partners.



**Figure 2:** Characteristics associated with NGOs’ field actions (Source: May 2023 field's data)

The encountered NGO leaders during the interview say that the projects run by their organization are in line with the needs of the target communities. "According to them, human needs are multidimensional and whatever the project, they provide a response to the expressed needs. However, It's a fact that NGOs, in order to secure external funding, are obliged to align their areas of intervention with those of their partners. The question is whether these areas of intervention align with Benin's development priorities. The encountered leaders of NGOs, for example, quoted the implementation of concrete actions on projects aimed at:

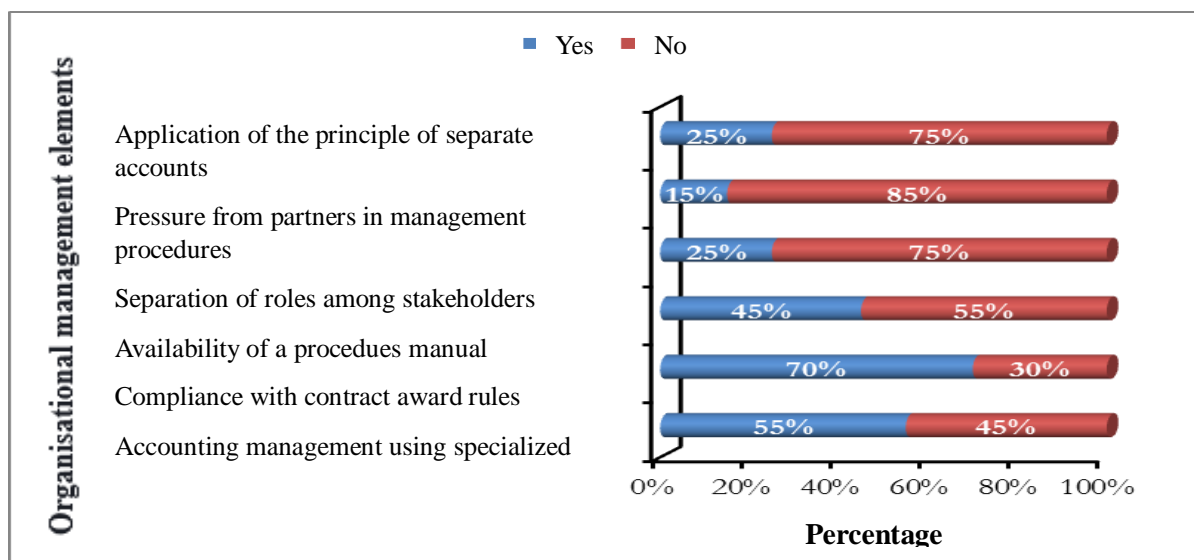
- Implementation of well drilling projects to facilitate access to drinking water for various communities.
- Promotion of socio-economic empowerment and resilience of women.
- Improvement of resilience and competitiveness of the soybean sector in southern Benin.

These relevant initiatives are all priorities for sustainable development in view of the challenges posed by the different components of the Sustainable Development Goals. According to the interviewees, field actions enable organizations to achieve the targets set. They affirm the satisfaction of beneficiaries and the implementation of an evaluation operation. This operation can take place up to three years after the end of the project. It depends on the availability or no of a budget line. It is at this level that concerns are noted as it is not always easy to conclude on the sustainability of impacts. Indeed, the interviewees also believe that sustainability is essentially dependent on the level of awareness among beneficiary populations; which requires more or less sensitization operations. These awareness-raising operations cannot continue once the projects are over, even if there were residual balances in project accounts. The principle of separate accounts hinders post-project actions and residual funds are left dormant in banks.

#### ***2.4. Factors Slowing NGOs' Participation in Benin's Development***

##### ***2.4.1. Difficulties in organising, running and managing NGOs***

All the stakeholders we met recall that the functioning of their organizations includes a board of directors and an executive management. Executive management is the operational arm of the organization. In most cases, NGOs that have sufficient financial resources allocated to operate have a permanent team. In addition to this operating team, complementary human resources are recruited on projects for the duration of their execution.



**Figure 3:** Distribution according to management elements of organizations (Source: June 2023 field's data)

The financial management of NGOs is carried out according to the principle of separate accounts. As regards activities pertaining to the NGO's proper running, a budget is adopted at the beginning of each fiscal year.

The organization is responsible for mobilizing the necessary funds for its implementation. In addition to this action strategy, stakeholders highlight the opportunities offered by calls for projects, which are a valuable tool for mobilizing resources for field actions.

Depending on requirements of the partners on the projects they are implementing, NGOs acquire accounting management tools ranging from simple MS Excel spreadsheets to the use of specialized software such as PERFECTO, SAGE, SAARI, etc. The stakeholders argue that in the management of contracts on a project, depending on the amount allocated, it may be necessary to implement a procurement procedure. Therefore, most organizations have a procurement plan and a procedures manual. However, foreign financial partners on various projects, as fund owners, impose specific fund management methods. They expect NGOs to provide supporting documents on all expenses.

Besides, foreign partners are increasingly inviting NGOs to apply for calls for projects in the form of a consortium. According to the respondents, this improves the quality of interventions and the management of mobilized resources. However, it is not uncommon to note the existence of conflicts between actors within consortia during the execution of projects. The main challenge in such conflicts is the allocation of resources:

minor organisations are often discarded. There is competition between organisations within consortia for a purpose of visibility, gaining trust and new partnerships with donors.

In addition, some interviewees revealed that there is a misappropriation of the funds allocated to the project because projects financed through Government structures demand to be paid a percentage. Such percentages are unknown to the donors. It is clear that corruption does not spare the NGOs environment. A number of Government structures, and sometimes even NGO managers in their own amidst, demand payment of percentages from the various service providers. All these shortcomings within NGOs still prevent them from effectively meeting the targeted goals

### Box 2: Interaction between players

*"In partner-funded projects, there is a separation of roles: the partners are not involved in the management: all they want is proof of expenditures. XX, aged 42, Executive Director*

*"Expenditure doesn't pose a problem: all you need is proof of expenditure (TOR, bank statement, memos and discharge from suppliers). It should be noted that compliance with the standards imposed by the donors creates a climate of trust and improves relations between the stakeholders". AX, 30, assistant accountant*

*"The financial management of projects funded by financial partners in our country means that projects are not carried out well, or are only partly carried out, because the managers in the organizations are not in the right conditions to carry out the projects. AB, aged 44, Executive Director*

*"The reluctance of partners to fund projects run by single organizations now means that consortia have to be set up to apply for calls for projects. However, within these consortia, the NGOs with the most clout keep smaller organizations out of financial management matters. AF, aged 42, Chairman*

*"We received external funding from the government of our country. Out of a total amount of 100 million, the state structures demanded a percentage of 20 percent, i.e., 20 million. We're forced to employ people without paying them what they're owed in order to honor these commitments" TX, aged 45, Project Manager*

#### 2.4.2. Forms of Government support and monitoring for NGOs

The Government is a special actor in NGOs' field of action. It is the one who sets the rules of the game, the one who is supposed to regulate the action, and at the same time can be a partner on the implementation of certain projects. NGOs and the Government compete in the social field. With its role as a regulator of the actions of NGOs, the latter are sometimes controlled. In addition, NGOs benefit from public administration

guidance when applying for projects. It can be noted in this context the accompaniment for group registration, the provision of skills for raising awareness sessions, etc.

**Box 3: Monitoring of NGOs' action**

*"With the reforms introduced by the Government, when an NGO is in good order, it can operate without any major problems. As an evidence, checks on account movements led to our accounts being blocked because we were suspected of money laundering, but after evidences were provided, we had our accounts unfrozen" XX, aged 42, Executive Director.*

*"We have received support from the Departmental Directorate of Agriculture, Livestock and Fisheries for the registration of women's groups, and we have also received support from the Ministry of Social Affairs for awareness-raising sessions" AB, aged 44, Executive Director.*

### 3. Discussions

The ultimate goal of NGOs is to meet the essential needs of populations, often from rural but also urban areas. (P. Buijsrogge, 1989, p.63). Populations' support, the definition of their own community project, their participation in the different stages of the project, the satisfaction of their needs are the fundamental principles of any "developmental" practice. (J. Zimet, 2006, p.42). NGOs promote among disadvantaged populations the conditions of access to a process of development, i.e., self-development. They are involved in most areas of development: hunger fighting, food, health, agriculture, drinking water and sanitation, livestock, credit to small (agricultural, commercial, crafts, assistance to women's groups, etc.). Others specialize in emergency operations of all kinds: epidemics, famine, floods, refugees, etc. Beyond their extreme variety, one must recognize that the NGOs contribute to development, thus sharing a common discourse. The principle of NGOs is to respond to local demand and stimulate the participation of beneficiary populations in project decisions. For her part, Perouse de MONTCLOS (2015, p.15) points out that within NGOs, there is a nebula. This nebula refers to their merchandising, their institutionalization, their political instrumentalization, their impact, the quality of their actions and how to evaluate them. Moreover, "when we look at the history of NGO decisions and actions, we see that they rarely back a pre-existing project launched by the population. On the contrary, the NGO creates its own project, draft it, follows its own stages, and insufficient knowledge of the area of intervention can prevent the action from benefiting the most disadvantaged (landless peasants, socially marginalized groups, women...)" (B. Husson, 1988, p.12). As a result, despite the numerous projects of NGOs, the needs of the most vulnerable populations face difficulties on the ground. In addition, it should be remembered that poor resource governance by NGOs is one of the factors limiting NGOs' actions. All this



makes it difficult for the community to take over action once the NGO has left. The [...] Too often, stopping intervention means stopping action. Even when the issue of training is settled, it remains that of the villagers' ability to maintain and renew all the equipment that has been set up: this is the very problem of inheritance of recurring expenses. (S. Freud, 1988, p.47). In this same perspective, J-J. GABAS (1989, p. 19) states that NGOs have very low operating costs. Funding has failed and there have been severe failures due to cultural factors.

## CONCLUSION

Given the principal role of NGOs in the development process of Benin, it is important to note that this sector needs a reform. NGOs finance development projects using their own funds or with foreign funding such as from the European Union, ECOWAS, UNICEF, the World Bank, etc. For these projects to truly contribute to the development of Africa, their implementation must comply with the contractual clauses with the donors. However, it is noted that there are obstacles to the achievement of the objectives of these projects: corruption, inadequacy of projects with socio-cultural realities, non-sustainability of projects, etc. In addition, poor resource governance hampers their participation in local development. The Benin State also needs to reform the functioning system of civil society to enhance its mission's structural performance.

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