

## Analysis of socio-cultural barriers limiting the participation of women and youth in local decision-making processes: Case study of the communes of Kpomassè and Tori-Bossito in Benin

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**ABSTRACT:** This article examines the challenges hindering the participation of women and youth in local decision-making processes in Kpomassè and Tori-Bossito, Benin. Using a mixed methodology combining qualitative and quantitative approaches, it identifies sociocultural barriers through documentary review, surveys, and consultations with the PADSJ steering committee. The results highlight the impact on the representation and voices of women and youth, emphasizing gender norms, youth perception, patriarchal structures, and limited access to education. The article proposes solutions such as capacity building, promotion of political participation, and institutional reforms to encourage active participation of youth and women in local decision-making processes. Additionally, it underscores the importance of future research and community engagement for inclusive territorial development involving all citizens.

**KEYWORDS:** women, youth, participation, sociocultural barriers, decision-making processes, inclusive development.

### 1 INTRODUCTION

In a context of territorial development focused on social inclusion and citizen participation, the analysis of sociocultural barriers limiting the access of women and youth to local decision-making processes is of crucial importance. As Alain Touraine (1973), a French sociologist, pointed out, "The participation of women and youth in local decision-making processes is not only a question of social equity, but also an imperative for the construction of inclusive and sustainable societies." This statement is echoed by Marie-Andrée Jacob (2008), a Canadian sociologist, who states that "To ensure truly inclusive territorial development, it is essential to understand and overcome the sociocultural barriers that hinder the access of women and youth to local decision-making spheres." Indeed, as Lucien Hounnibo (2017), a Beninese sociologist, points out in his book on "Local democracy in Benin: issues and challenges of citizen participation", "In the Beninese context, the integration of women and young people in local decision-making processes is a major issue for participatory democracy and more equitable governance". These quotes illustrate the crucial importance of including women and young people in local decision-making processes to promote participatory democracy and more equitable governance.

In short, according to these authors, it is clear that the socio-cultural obstacles hindering the participation of women and young people constitute a significant obstacle to the authentic territorial development of local authorities in the southern regions. By extending this reflection in light of development theories, particularly those of social inclusion and citizen participation, it appears undeniable that Benin is still far from solving the enigma of inclusive development.

In the context of this study where the under-representation of women and young people hinders the vitality of territories and where the challenge of their inclusion in territorial development persists, it is imperative to question established norms. Faced with this reality, inaction is not an option. It is with this in mind that we propose to explore in depth the socio-cultural barriers limiting the participation of women and young people in local decision-making processes by entitling this study: "Analysis of socio-cultural barriers limiting the participation of women and young people in local decision-making processes: Case study of the Communes of Kpomassè and Tori-Bossito in Benin", This approach allowed us to grasp the originality of the issue of exclusive territorial development in Benin and to make our scientific contribution to its resolution, thus offering a deeper understanding of this complex problem. Its development focuses on key aspects such as the problem, the methodology adopted, the presentation and analysis of the results.

This study is part of the Inclusive Social Development Support Program (PADSI), which is part of the ACTIF (Action for Citizen Participation and Inclusive Territories) Program-Convention. This initiative, supported by the French Development Agency (AFD) and co-sponsored by several partners including the French NGO Initiative Development (ID), aims to strengthen the capacity of marginalized groups to influence local decision-making processes and promote social inclusion. PADSI focuses its efforts on strengthening the participation of women and young people in local decision-making processes, with a particular emphasis on consultation forums such as "integration frameworks" at the municipal level. Despite the progress recently observed in promoting social participation in Benin, obstacles remain regarding the real inclusion of women and young people. This study aims to identify the systemic barriers and socio-cultural norms that limit their access to decision-making spheres, focusing in particular on the communes of Kpomassè and Tori-Bossito in Atlantic Department of Benin.

The main objective of this study is to carry out an in-depth diagnosis of the constraints encountered by women and young people in their access to decision-making processes at the local level. More specifically, it involves identifying and characterizing marginalized populations, studying the influence of socio-cultural roles and representations on their participation, identifying the obstacles and levers to their access to decision-making spaces, and formulating recommendations to promote inclusive participation. To achieve this objective, this study is based on a mixed methodology, skillfully combining qualitative and quantitative approaches. The objective is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the socio-cultural barriers that hinder the participation of women and young people in local decision-making processes. This rigorous approach integrates stakeholder participation and consultation, highlighting their essential contribution to the research.

The methodology includes an in-depth documentary review, semi-structured surveys, direct observations and regular exchanges with the PASDI steering committee. Specific data collection and analysis techniques are also implemented, such as household questionnaires and interviews with various local stakeholders. By adopting this rigorous methodological approach, our objective is to provide an in-depth analysis of the socio-cultural barriers hindering the participation of women and youth in local decision-making processes. The results of this study will be essential to guide future actions aimed at promoting inclusive participation and strengthening social development in the municipalities studied.

This study examines the challenges of social participation of women and youth in the municipalities of Kpomassè and Tori-Bossito, highlighting gender, age and power dynamics. It includes a contextualization, a problematization focused on these dynamics, a theoretical exploration, an identification of socio-cultural barriers, an analysis of the results and proposals for levers for inclusive development, thus offering a comprehensive view to promote equitable engagement in these specific contexts.

## **2 CONTEXT OF MUNICIPALITY OF KPOMASSÈ AND TORI-BOSSITO**

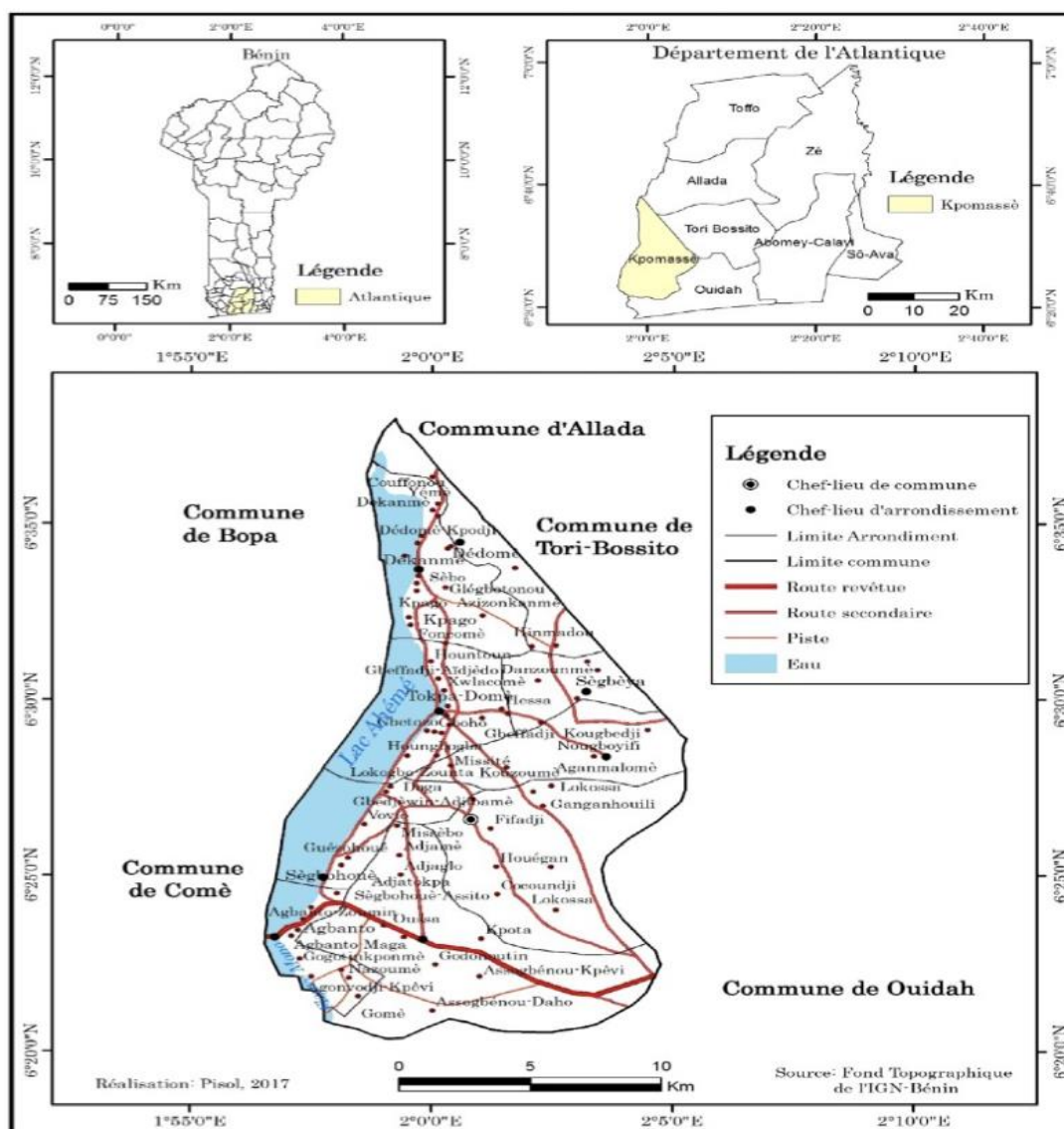
In the socio-economic landscape of the Atlantique department in Benin, the communes of Kpomassè and Tori-Bossito stand out for their striking similarities and shared challenges. Based on the new generation of communal development plans as well as official statistical data, this introduction aims to shed light on the common issues that shape these two local entities. From the predominance of agriculture to the underrepresentation of women and youth in local governance, these communes share a context rich in challenges and opportunities.

### **2.1 PRESENTATION OF MUNICIPALITY OF KPOMASSÈ AND TORI-BOSSITO**

#### **2.1.1 MUNICIPALITY OF KPOMASSÈ**

Located between 6°20'20" and 6°37'59" North latitude and between 1°56'32" and 2°5'18" East longitude, the commune of Kpomassè is one of the eight communes of the Atlantique Department. It is surrounded to the North by the commune of Allada, to the South by the commune of Ouidah, to the West by the communes of Comè and Bopa, and to the East by the communes of Tori Bossito and Ouidah. Covering an area of 305 km<sup>2</sup>, or approximately 9% of the Atlantic territory, it is home to seventy-

six villages spread across nine districts, namely: Agonkanmè, Aganmalomè, Agbanto, Dédomè, Dékanmè, Kpomassè-Centre, Sègbohoulè, Sègbèya, Tokpa- Domè (Figure 1).



**Fig. 1. Situation of the commune of Kpomassè**

Source: PDC Kpomassè, 3rd generation 2023

According to RGPH4, the population of the municipality of Kpomassè is 67,648 inhabitants or 15,280 households for a household size of 4.4. The male population is 33,353 inhabitants or 49.30% and the female population is 50.70%. The share of young people (18-35 years old) in the population of the commune is 45%.

The state of economic activities and promising markets in Kpomassè highlights significant agricultural potential, drawn from its fertile lands and floodplains. The agricultural population is estimated at 54.5% of the total population or 5778 agricultural workers in 2013 including 1013 women. The dominant crops include corn, peanuts, cassava, oil palm and cowpea, as well as market garden products such as tomatoes, peppers and watermelons. Pineapple cultivation is found there, which is considered an emerging crop in the city. The district of Dédomè is the gateway to this emerging crop due to its proximity to the commune of Allada, which is the largest pineapple-producing commune in Atlantic department. The districts of Tokpa-Domè, Agonkanmè and Agbanto are known for their high market gardening production.

In addition, livestock and fishing, supported by the vast AHEME Lake, offer substantial economic opportunities. With regard to livestock, the sector presents a strategic opportunity for the commune in its local economic development policy. By focusing on the promotion of semi-modern livestock farming, particularly goats, sheep and poultry, the commune can benefit from increased valorization of its resources and stimulation of local economic activity. As for fishing, it represents the second major economic activity in the commune, totaling 38.24% of its local economy. The commune benefits from a vast lake, Lake AHEME, extending over 41 km along the western side of the commune, with a surface area of 75 km<sup>2</sup>. This lake is renowned for its wealth in various aquatic products such as shrimp, as well as a wide variety of fish species, both freshwater and marine, thanks to its connection with the sea. It should be noted that Beninese shrimp, particularly those from Lake Ahémé, are among the most prized in the world. The six fishing districts of the commune are Agbanto, Sègbohòuè, Kpomassè, Tokpa-Domè, Dékanmè and Dédomè, out of a total of nine.

In each of the nine districts, the promotion of crafts is carried out by dynamic crafts associations. These nine associations operate in an organized manner, with a clear hierarchy and remarkable solidarity and community support. The most widespread trades in the commune include hairdressing, sewing, carpentry, welding, masonry and agri-food processing. In addition, the craft of making hunting rifles, a specialty of the Sègbèya district, contributes to the commune's reputation in this field. Thanks to increased support from local authorities and their commitment to strengthening these sectors, agriculture, fishing, livestock and crafts are positioning themselves as the essential drivers of development in Kpomassè, carrying a promising future.

Women's participation in public affairs management in Kpomassè is severely hampered, with only 1.31% of all village councillors being women and no female communal councillors. This persistent underrepresentation is exacerbated by obstacles such as poor positioning on electoral lists and lack of education, leading to only one woman among the seventy-six village chiefs. In communal administration, women are mainly relegated to executive roles, while their involvement in local development planning remains largely insufficient.

At the same time, traditional norms perpetuate the subjugation of women to their husbands, complicating the fight against gender-based violence, mainly physical, and hindering the reporting and reduction of daily abuse, even when some cases are brought to the Social Promotion Center.

In the municipality of Kpomassè, young people face significant underrepresentation in communal affairs, despite an estimated 45% youth population. With less than 15% holding positions in the Communal Council or village councils, their access to decision-making spheres is limited due to obstacles such as the lack of opportunities and representation in electoral lists, as well as the low level of education. This reality accentuates their feeling of exclusion and underlines the pressing need for policies and initiatives aimed at promoting their active participation and responding to their specific development needs. At the same time, the low involvement of women and young people in local governance in Kpomassè reinforces the issues of representativeness and democratic legitimacy. Specific measures, such as awareness-raising, establishing quotas and creating appropriate participation mechanisms, are crucial to foster their inclusion and promote more equitable and inclusive governance.

The municipality of Kpomassè has significant economic potential, particularly in agriculture, fishing, livestock farming and crafts. However, the underrepresentation of women and young people in local governance is a major challenge. To ensure inclusive and equitable development, concrete measures must be taken to promote their active participation and strengthen their presence in decision-making bodies.

### **2.1.2 THE MUNICIPALITY OF TORI-BOSSITO**

The municipality of Tori-Bossito is located in the Atlantique department of Benin. Its territory extends between latitudes 6°25 and 6°37 North and longitudes 2°11' and 2°17 East, with an area of 328 km<sup>2</sup>, representing 10% of the total area of the Atlantique department. Its borders are delimited by the commune of Allada to the north, the commune of Ouidah to the south, the communes of Abomey Calavi and Zè to the east, and the commune of Kpomassè to the west (See Figure 2).

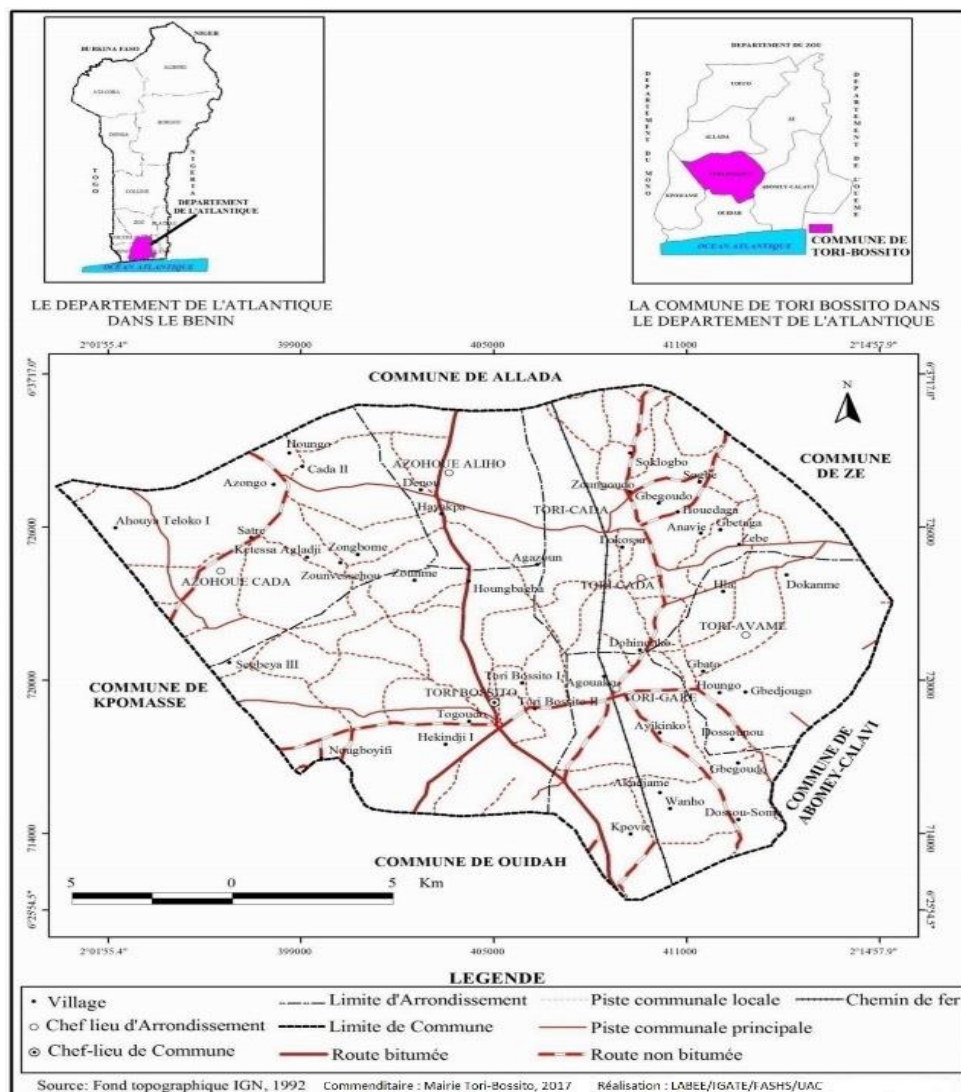


Fig. 2. Administrative map of the municipality of Tori-Bossito

Source: PDC Tori-Bossito, 3rd generation 2023

In 2013, the population of the Commune of Tori-Bossito was estimated at 57,632 inhabitants, according to the RGPH4. This population consisted of 29,348 women, representing 50.92%, and 28,284 men. Young people, aged 18 to 35, represented a significant proportion of 48.15% of the total population.

The state of economic activities and professional sectors in the Commune of Tori-Bossito highlights a predominance of the primary sector, which absorbs 58% of the activity, followed by the tertiary sector at 23.9% and the secondary sector at 17%. This predominance of agriculture, mainly focused on perennial and annual crops such as corn, cassava and sweet potato, constitutes the main source of income for the population, representing 94.6% of activities. Perennial crops, such as teak, oil palm and acacia, occupy a significant share of cultivated land, highlighting the importance of preserving forest resources.

Regarding rural crafts, although little developed, it focuses mainly on the transformation of forest products into artisanal products, with a notable presence of seamstresses, masons, carpenters and wood carvers. However, disparities exist in terms of supply and demand for certain trades, which highlights the need for better adaptation to market needs. Regarding livestock, poultry, goats and pigs dominate, while livestock breeding is limited due to social constraints and the availability of grazing areas. However, small-scale livestock farming, particularly small ruminants and poultry, is showing an upward trend, while non-conventional forms of livestock farming remain less well-known and require better promotion and popularization. Finally, although the municipality is relatively poorly watered, the marshy lowlands offer opportunities for fish farming, highlighting

the potential for diversification of local economic activities. Promoting this sub-sector is therefore an interesting avenue for boosting the income of agricultural households and promoting local economic development.

The representation of young people in the municipality of Tori-Bossito is also limited, despite the creation of the integrative framework for multi-stakeholder consultation. This framework, bringing together various socio-professional groups, does not include significant representation of young people, which hinders their active participation in local decision-making processes. Unlike women, who are largely absent from decision-making bodies, young people face similar challenges in terms of political and civic representation. Among the 13 elected officials making up the Communal Council, none specifically represent the interests of young people, and no young person holds the position of District Chief or Village Chief. This lack of youth representation can be attributed to various factors, including prevailing cultural norms, the lack of awareness among decision-makers and men on the importance of including young people in decision-making processes, as well as barriers related to access to education and political training. To foster more inclusive and representative citizen participation, it is crucial to put in place specific mechanisms to promote youth engagement in local governance and ensure their equitable access to decision-making positions within the commune.

The municipality of Tori-Bossito, located in atlantic department of Benin, is characterized by a dynamic population and an economy largely dominated by agriculture. However, despite initiatives such as the integrative framework for multi-stakeholder consultation, the representation of women and young people in decision-making bodies remains largely insufficient. To ensure more inclusive and representative local governance, it is imperative to implement specific measures aimed at promoting the inclusion of women and young people, as well as promoting their active participation in the decision-making processes of the municipality.

## **2.2 SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL FRAMEWORK**

The socio-economic and political framework of the communes of Kpomassè and Tori-Bossito is intrinsically linked to their rural character and the predominance of the agricultural sector. These communes are strongholds of agriculture, where agricultural activities constitute the cornerstone of the local economy. This economic dependence on agriculture is reflected in a significant concentration of farms, both perennial and annual, which provide the main source of income for the population. However, despite this obvious agricultural potential, challenges persist and hinder the full development of these communities. One of the main challenges is access to markets. Although agricultural production is robust, local farmers often face difficulties in marketing their products. Transport and logistics infrastructure is often underdeveloped, making it difficult to transport products to regional and national markets. This situation limits income opportunities for farmers and hinders the economic development of the regions.

At the same time, infrastructure development remains a major challenge. Rural roads are often in poor condition, hindering not only the movement of goods and people, but also access to basic services such as healthcare and education. Electrification and access to drinking water also remain challenges, compromising the well-being and productivity of residents.

Politically, these municipalities face challenges of representativeness and citizen participation. Local governance structures are often dominated by traditional elites or businessmen, to the detriment of the voices of women and youth. This exclusion limits the diversity of perspectives and hinders the implementation of inclusive policies and programs. Yet, the participation of these demographic groups is crucial to ensure policies that meet the needs of the entire population. In addition, natural resource management is a major challenge. With the expansion of agriculture and increasing population pressure, deforestation, land degradation and water pollution are becoming urgent concerns. A sustainable approach to natural resource management is essential to preserve the environment and ensure the long-term viability of local communities.

In conclusion, although the communes of Kpomassè and Tori-Bossito have promising agricultural potential, they face complex socio-economic and political challenges. To overcome these obstacles and unlock their full potential, it is essential to invest in infrastructure development, promote inclusive governance and implement sustainable agricultural practices. Only a holistic and concerted approach will transform these challenges into opportunities and foster equitable and sustainable development.

## **2.3 COMMUNITY-SPECIFIC SOCIO-CULTURAL DYNAMICS**

Based on data from the General Population and Housing Census (RGPH) 4, several socio-cultural trends specific to the communities of Kpomassè and Tori-Bossito emerge. First, these regions are distinguished by their ethnic and linguistic diversity. They are often home to several ethnic groups, each with their own traditions, customs and languages. This diversity enriches the social and cultural fabric of the region, but can also present challenges in terms of harmonization and social cohesion.

Secondly, RGPH 4 highlights the plurality of religious practices in these communities. In addition to the majority religions, such as Christianity and Islam, traditional religious practices often persist, testifying to a rich tradition of religious syncretism. These religious practices shape the values, beliefs and behaviors of the inhabitants, influencing various aspects of daily life, including rites of passage, festivals and social interactions. Regarding social organization and family structure, RGPH 4 reveals extended family structures and robust kinship networks, which play a central role in social and economic life. Gender norms and family roles are also revealed, offering insights into the distribution of responsibilities and power within households and the community. Education and literacy data provide insights into access to education and literacy levels in these communities. They highlight disparities between genders, urban and rural areas, and age groups, which can have important implications for social and economic development.

Finally, RGPH 4 provides insights into migration and mobility patterns in these communities. It reveals internal and external migration flows, as well as the socio-economic and environmental factors that underlie them. Understanding these migration dynamics is essential to anticipate housing, employment and social service needs. In conclusion, RGPH 4 provides a solid basis for exploring the specific socio-cultural dynamics of the Kpomassè and Tori-Bossito communities. Using these data as a starting point, decision-makers, researchers and practitioners can develop better-informed interventions and policies that take into account the unique realities and needs of these diverse and dynamic communities.

### **3 STATE OF THE PROBLEM**

In a context where the political participation and representativeness of women and youth remain persistent challenges, it is imperative to closely analyze the socio-cultural dynamics that underlie these realities. The RGPH 4 data provide a solid basis for understanding these socio-cultural barriers by revealing the demographic, socio-economic and cultural trends specific to the communities of Kpomassè and Tori-Bossito.

#### **3.1 FINDINGS**

In Benin, as in many countries in Africa and around the world, the issue of socio-cultural barriers hindering the participation of women and young people in decision-making processes, particularly at the level of ordinary municipalities, arises with alarming seriousness. With each change of regime or municipal team following elections, the same observations are made: a notably low representation of women and young people within municipal councils. This situation is becoming so worrying that many voices are questioning local democracy by seeing it as an institution that, instead of promoting the inclusion of gender and youth, only perpetuates the privileges of political and economic elites. Seen from these angles, the concept of territorial development through participatory democracy seems to be moving away from its primary vocation. Instead of being a space where citizens actively contribute to political life to build inclusive development, it is increasingly perceived as a platform at the service of corrupt politicians and those who seek to maintain their domination. This reality raises profound questions about the legitimacy and effectiveness of local democratic institutions.

The fundamental problem lies in the chronic under-representation of women and young people in decision-making processes within communities. This systemic exclusion undermines the very legitimacy of local governance, by marginalizing entire sections of the population who should nevertheless play a vital role in building a more equitable and prosperous society. In other words, participatory democracy, supposed to be a tool for the emancipation and representation of citizens, is diverted from its primary objective to serve the narrow interests of a minority in power. This reality highlights the urgent need to adopt concrete measures to promote more equitable participation of women and young people in decision-making and local governance processes. It is essential to address the socio-cultural barriers that hinder their access to political spheres and to establish more inclusive representation mechanisms. Without this, participatory democracy risks remaining an empty shell, unable to meet the needs and aspirations of the entire population.

In this light, it appears that local decision-making bodies no longer fulfill their primary function as forums where democracy is fully exercised, with the fundamental principle of the participation of all citizens, regardless of their demographic profile, in the management of territories. However, it is widely accepted that participatory democracy is a pillar of territorial development and fundamental rights. This is why, throughout the world, governments place it at the forefront of their sovereign duties. However, today, many young people and women are questioning this fundamental notion, leading to a depreciation of its value. Informed observers are no longer certain that participatory democracy ensures a better future for committed actors, such as women and young people, who invest in this process of contributing to the common good.

This development raises deep concerns about the health of our local democratic systems. It highlights a growing gap between democratic ideals and the reality on the ground. If local decision-making bodies fail to ensure fair and inclusive

representation of all strata of society, they risk losing their legitimacy and their ability to respond to the needs of their citizens. It is therefore imperative to reaffirm the importance of participatory democracy and take concrete steps to restore citizens' trust in these institutions that are crucial to the democratic life of our communities. Indeed, since the 1990s, citizen participation in decision-making processes has often been seen as a guarantee of good governance and sustainable development." - Kofi Annan (1999). This position of the diplomat reflects our view on the importance of citizen participation in the effective functioning of democracy, which can only function effectively if citizens are actively engaged in political decision-making and in the life of their community.

Furthermore, according to Robert Dahl (1971), one of the main theorists of democracy, "the active participation of citizens is essential to the vitality and legitimacy of a democratic system." Robert Dahl's quote underlines the crucial importance of citizen participation for the sustainability and legitimacy of a democratic system. It highlights the fundamental role of citizens in the governance process, emphasizing that their active engagement is essential to ensure that political decisions truly reflect the interests and values of the population.

In this regard, we will borrow the following words from John Stuart Mill who argues that: "Democracy is not only a system of government, but also a political culture in which each individual is encouraged to participate actively in public life for the good of society." John Stuart Mill (1861). In other words, this perspective reinforces the idea that democracy can only truly flourish when citizens are fully invested in decision-making processes and actively participate in the political life of their community. Today, everything suggests that participatory democracy is the foundation on which the legitimacy and effectiveness of political decisions are based. By promoting the active engagement of citizens from all strata of society, it ensures fair and inclusive representation, essential to meet the needs and aspirations of the population. This dynamic approach transcends simple electoral mechanisms to create a space for dialogue and co-creation, where the diversity of perspectives enriches collective decision-making and strengthens the democratic foundations of our society.

The research question that emerges is: To what extent does the influence of socio-cultural barriers on the participation of women and youth in decision-making processes in the municipalities of Kpomassè and Tori-Bossito in Benin impact the legitimacy and effectiveness of participatory democracy in these communities?

Faced with such a problem, we postulate that the chronic under-representation of women and youth in local decision-making bodies, due to persistent socio-cultural barriers, compromises the legitimacy and effectiveness of participatory democracy in the municipalities of Kpomassè and Tori-Bossito, thus limiting the diversity of perspectives and weakening the capacity of local institutions to meet the needs of the entire population. This hypothesis was formulated in order to subject the framework developed to the test of real facts.

## **4 METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH**

The methodological approach followed in this research combines an in-depth documentary study with a field survey to analyze the socio-cultural barriers to the participation of women and youth in local decision-making processes. This approach includes the design of data collection tools such as reading grids and survey questionnaires, as well as a mixed qualitative and quantitative methodology. It also integrates the participation of stakeholders, as evidenced by regular exchanges with the steering committee. Data are collected using various techniques, such as household questionnaires and interviews, and then rigorously analyzed to provide an in-depth understanding of the obstacles encountered by women and youth in their participation in local decision-making processes.

### **4.1 DESIGN**

The design phase was marked by an in-depth documentary compilation on the issue studied. This compilation has made it possible to gather relevant information on the subject, thus facilitating a detailed analysis of key concepts that highlight the originality and current relevance of the issue addressed.

### **4.2 NATURE OF THE RESEARCH**

This research adopts a mixed methodological approach by combining an in-depth documentary study with a field survey. This combination allows for a comprehensive analysis of the socio-cultural barriers hindering the participation of women and youth in local decision-making processes. The design of data collection tools, such as reading grids and survey questionnaires, reflects this mixed approach by allowing the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data. In addition, the integration of varied techniques such as household questionnaires and interviews with various local actors further underlines this mixed approach. By combining stakeholder participation and regular exchanges with the steering committee, this methodology



ensures a holistic perspective, combining the strengths of qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide an in-depth analysis of the obstacles encountered by women and youth in their participation in local decision-making processes.

#### **4.3 DATA COLLECTION TECHNIQUES AND TOOLS**

Data collection is a critical step in any research study, providing the information needed to answer the questions asked and achieve the objectives set. This section explores the techniques and tools used to collect data, as well as the sample composition and the field survey methodology.

##### **4.3.1 DATA COLLECTION TECHNIQUES**

Data collection relies on the combined use of desk reviews and field surveys. The data collection tools used during the field phase include: (i) A household questionnaire, (ii) An interview guide for civil society organizations (CSOs) / grassroots community organizations (CBOs) representing women, youth and people with disabilities, (iii) A questionnaire for local elected officials and municipal agents, (iv) A questionnaire for traditional chieftaincy, (v) An interview guide for decentralized state services (Departmental Service of National Education, Social Promotion Center), (vi) An interview guide for integrative managers.

##### **4.3.2 SAMPLE AND FIELD SURVEY**

Our total sample consists of 170 participants, covering a diversity of perspectives and roles within the community. It includes 70 households, 30 representatives of civil society and community organizations, 25 local elected officials and municipal agents, 20 traditional leaders, 15 executives from decentralized State services, as well as 10 people occupying integration manager positions.

The field survey included the 34 villages of the two target municipalities, thus covering their entire territory. A total of 95 questionnaires were distributed to the stakeholders concerned, with a distribution of 55 for households, 15 for civil society organizations, 15 for elected politicians, 5 for agents of decentralized state services and 5 for integration executives. This approach benefited from effective communication via telephone exchanges and direct contacts to clarify the process. To reach residents of the most remote villages, the questionnaires were sent by email, via WhatsApp pages, or delivered by vehicle drivers. The other stakeholders were involved through interview guides, focus groups, direct observations and regular exchanges with the PASDI steering committee.

## **5 SOCIOCULTURAL BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION IN THE MUNICIPALITIES OF KPOMASSÈ AND TORI-BOSSITO.**

In this article, it is closely examined, from the theoretical framework called up above, the socio-cultural barriers hindering the participation of women and young people in the decision-making processes of the Communes of Kpomassè and Tori-Bossito. It is a question of exploring the gender norms and traditional roles that limit the power of women, as well as the way in which youth are perceived in these processes. It also analyzes the patriarchal structures and social hierarchies that maintain these barriers in place, as well as the specific obstacles related to education and resources.

In order to better understand the weight of these socio-cultural constraints in decision-making processes at the local level, it is useful to start with a quick overview of gender norms. Gender norms are social and cultural expectations that dictate the behavior, attitudes and roles attributed to individuals according to their sex. In many societies, these norms have historically placed women in domestic and maternal roles, often confining them to limited spheres of influence. These expectations weigh heavily on women, encouraging them to conform to pre-established models of femininity that can be restrictive and demeaning. Traditional roles assigned to women often reinforce these gender norms. For example, in many cultures, women are expected to be primarily responsible for household chores and childcare, which limits their participation in the public and professional spheres. These traditional roles perpetuate the idea that women's true power lies in their ability to care for others, rather than in their ability to exercise their own autonomy and leadership.

In the municipalities of Kpomassè and Tori-Bossito, gender norms are deeply rooted in cultural traditions and practices. Women are often assigned to domestic and subordinate roles, responsible for taking care of the home, family, and household chores. These social expectations limit their access to public and political spheres, relegating them to positions of less power and authority. Furthermore, these gender norms perpetuate the idea that men are better qualified to hold leadership positions and make important decisions, thus reinforcing gender inequalities and patriarchal structures. Other factors, such as unequal

access to economic and educational resources, must also be taken into consideration, which contribute to reinforcing gender inequalities in the Communes of Kpomassè and Tori-Bossito. It must be acknowledged that, paradoxically, in the communes of Kpomassè and Tori-Bossito, women and youth are recognized as privileged actors of development. For example, traditional chieftaincy and learned societies sometimes grant them a consultative role in the management of local affairs and community development initiatives, often emphasizing their inclusion and active participation.

However, despite this informal recognition, formal power structures often continue to exclude them or limit their influence in decision-making processes, thus highlighting the need for deeper reforms for truly equitable and inclusive political participation. When it comes to youth, social expectations can be particularly constraining. Young women often face a double pressure: on the one hand, they must conform to traditional gender norms imposed on them as women, and on the other hand, they must navigate the often-changing expectations of youth, which can value conformity to standards of beauty and superficial behavior. This creates a breeding ground for anxiety, lack of self-confidence and body dysmorphia in young women, thus keeping them away from realizing their full potential.

As for the general perception of youth, it is unfortunately often tinged with unfavorable prejudices. These prejudices are based on a false association between the age of young people and a supposed lack of experience, maturity and competence. This perception has significant repercussions on decision-making processes, where young people are regularly marginalized. Their voices are often relegated to the background or even ignored in decision-making bodies. This systemic exclusion of young people from spaces of power and governance is detrimental, as it hinders their active participation in political and social life. However, young people have undeniable potential as well as innovative ideas that deserve to be heard. The marginalization of young people compromises not only democratic development, but also social inclusion as a whole.

In the municipalities of Kpomassè and Tori-Bossito in Benin, the perception of youth is tainted by unfavorable prejudices, which affects their participation in local decision-making processes. For example, when planning development projects at the communal level, young people are excluded from discussions and decision-making due to the preconceived idea that they lack relevant experience or skills. However, concrete examples of young Beninese demonstrate the error of this perception. For example, in the field of social entrepreneurship, young people from Kpomassè and Tori-Bossito have launched innovative initiatives to solve local problems such as access to drinking water or education. Despite these commendable efforts, their voices and ideas are not always taken into account in decision-making processes at the communal level. This marginalization of young people hinders local development and compromises social inclusion in these communities. Indeed, by neglecting the potential and unique perspectives of young people, local decision-makers are missing out on effective and sustainable solutions to the challenges facing the communes of Kpomassè and Tori-Bossito.

Beyond gender norms and the unfavorable perception of youth, the Communes of Kpomassè and Tori-Bossito are also influenced by patriarchal structures and social hierarchies that further restrict the participation of women and youth in decision-making processes. These traditional structures often grant disproportionate power to men, thus reinforcing gender inequalities and preventing the emergence of alternative voices within governing bodies. In these communities, political and social decisions are often made by a male elite, who exercise control over resources and opportunities. Women and youth are often excluded from these circles of power, their perspectives and needs being neglected in decision-making processes. In addition, social norms that value male domination and the preservation of the established order reinforce these hierarchies, making it difficult for women and youth to challenge existing structures and claim their rightful place in society.

As a result, these patriarchal structures and social hierarchies act as additional barriers to the equitable participation of women and youth in community affairs. To promote more inclusive and democratic governance, it is essential to challenge these oppressive structures and create spaces where marginalized voices can be heard and taken into account in decision-making processes. This requires a strong commitment to gender equality, social justice and the promotion of human rights for all community members.

In sum, the Communes of Kpomassè and Tori-Bossito face profound challenges related to restrictive gender norms, negative perception of youth and patriarchal structures that hinder the equitable participation of women and youth in decision-making processes. To move towards more inclusive and democratic governance, it is imperative to challenge these socio-cultural barriers, recognizing the value and potential of women and youth in local governance. Hence the interest of an intersectional and inclusive approach to create spaces where all voices can be heard and taken into account, thus allowing women and young people to fully contribute to the development of their community as agents of change and progress.

## **6 PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF THE RESULTS**

The results of the study reveal several major challenges hindering women and young people's access to decision-making spaces in the communes of Kpomassè and Tori-Bossito, as well as some potential opportunities to promote their participation.

Among the obstacles to women and young people's access to decision-making bodies, control exercised by husbands is frequently cited. Many women report that their spouses prevent them from participating due to jealousy or the desire to control their activities, which reflects an unequal distribution of power and a limitation of their autonomy. In addition, some women and young people tend to self-limit, underestimating themselves or fearing the consequences of their participation. Lack of self-confidence is also a major barrier, as is ignorance of rights, which limits civic engagement. Language barriers, particularly in Tori-Bossito, also restrict access to information and the ability to contribute to discussions.

In addition, several obstacles hinder women and youth from accessing decision-making spaces. Cultural and social norms often perpetuate traditional roles, relegating them to subordinate positions. The lack of formal opportunities favors older men, marginalizing women and youth. In addition, the lack of training and resources limits their ability to engage effectively. Finally, the lack of recognition in decision-making spheres reduces their ability to influence local policies and programs. Overcoming these barriers would help foster more inclusive and equitable participation of women and youth in local decision-making processes, thereby strengthening democracy and representativeness at the municipal level.

The diagnosis identified some levers such as awareness-raising and education on women's and youth's rights, active promotion of their participation through the creation of equitable opportunities and incentive programs, the establishment of support networks offering mentoring and resources, as well as institutional reforms such as the establishment of gender quotas and awareness-raising among political leaders. By capitalizing on these opportunities, an enabling environment for active participation can be created, thus strengthening local democracy and promoting inclusive and sustainable development. In summary, these obstacles and opportunities highlight the need for policies and programs aimed at overcoming structural and cultural barriers, in order to promote inclusive and equitable participation of women and youth in local decision-making processes.

The analysis of the results highlights the complex challenges faced by women and youth in their access to decision-making spaces at the local level. Male dominance, rooted in cultural and social norms, significantly limits women's participation, reinforced by control mechanisms exercised by spouses and self-limitation resulting from a lack of self-confidence and awareness of rights. Similarly, young people face barriers such as lack of formal opportunities, disinterest in public affairs and unemployment, which distance them from decision-making processes.

However, these challenges also offer opportunities for transformation. Awareness-raising and education on women's and youth's rights, combined with active promotion of their participation, can address restrictive social norms and encourage their civic engagement. Creating support networks that provide mentoring and resources can strengthen their confidence and capacity to engage in local decisions. In addition, institutional reforms, such as establishing gender quotas and sensitizing political leaders, are essential to ensure equitable representation in local governance bodies. It is crucial to recognize that promoting the participation of women and youth is not limited to one-off actions, but requires a holistic and integrated approach. This involves multi-level interventions, including both awareness-raising and individual empowerment initiatives, as well as structural and institutional reforms aimed at creating an enabling environment for inclusive and equitable participation. By capitalizing on these opportunities and overcoming these challenges, it is possible to strengthen local democracy and foster sustainable and inclusive development at the communal level.

The content analysis of the responses regarding the term's "participation", "citizenship", "governance", "inclusion" and "rights" in Kpomassè and Tori-Bossito reveals similar perceptions as well as nuances specific to each locality. Regarding participation, both localities, according to the results, emphasize the importance of contributing to local development, the inclusion of all segments of the population, community engagement and political involvement in Tori-Bossito. In Kpomassè, the emphasis is on financial or material contribution and community involvement. For citizenship, respondents highlight civic duties and rights, good behavior, commitment to development, respect for authority and laws, as well as national belonging and community involvement.

These aspects reflect a common understanding of citizenship in both localities. Regarding governance, the responses show a similar vision of public affairs management, accountability, good resource management and citizen involvement. However, respondents from Kpomassè emphasize efficient city management, while those from Tori-Bossito emphasize more the involvement of the population in the development process. As for inclusion, responses from both localities highlight the idea of bringing together all people without distinction, community involvement and social harmony. Love, unity and respect for each individual are shared values. Finally, regarding rights, the responses show a variety of understandings, including as a set of rules and norms, a power to act, fundamental rights, civic duties, property, and variability depending on the situation. The nuances lie in the relationship between law and the state in Tori-Bossito

The presentation and analysis of the findings highlight the significant challenges faced by women and youth in accessing decision-making spaces at the local level, while highlighting potential opportunities to foster their participation. Barriers such as spousal control, restrictive cultural norms and lack of self-confidence hinder the full participation of women and youth. However, these challenges also offer opportunities for transformation through initiatives such as awareness-raising and education on rights, active promotion of participation, creation of support networks and institutional reforms. Capitalizing on these opportunities and overcoming these challenges can strengthen local democracy and promote inclusive and sustainable development. This analysis also highlights similarities and nuances in perceptions of key terms such as participation, citizenship, governance, inclusion and rights in the localities studied. These findings highlight the importance of a holistic and integrated approach to promote active and equitable participation of women and youth in local decision-making processes, thus contributing to building more just and resilient communities.

## **7 DISCUSSION**

The study presented offers a rich and nuanced analysis of the socio-cultural barriers to women and youth participation in local decision-making processes in the Kpomassè and Tori-Bossito communes in Benin. Drawing on the theoretical framework of intersectionality, developed by feminist authors such as Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins, it highlights the complex interactions between different forms of discrimination, including gender, age, social class and power structures that marginalize these groups. The results of the study confirm the relevance of the intersectional approach to understanding the barriers to women and youth participation in local decision-making processes in the Kpomassè and Tori-Bossito communes in Benin. Indeed, the study highlighted the role of restrictive gender norms that limit women's access to education, economic opportunities and the public sphere. These findings are consistent with Crenshaw's analysis of the marginalization of black women, who face both sexism and racism. Similarly, the study highlights the negative perception of youth, often associated with a lack of experience and maturity, which excludes them from decision-making processes. These findings corroborate Hill Collins' work on the experiences of young black women, who face both sexism and ageism.

The study goes beyond simply confirming existing theories by proposing concrete solutions to promote more inclusive participation. The different actors met during the study suggest awareness-raising and education initiatives on the rights of women and young people, the creation of support and mentoring networks, as well as institutional reforms such as the establishment of gender quotas. These proposals are in line with the recommendations of other intersectional feminist authors, such as Hooks (1981) and Anzaldúa (1987), who advocate multidimensional approaches to combating discrimination.

While the study offers a valuable contribution to understanding the challenges and opportunities related to the participation of women and young people in local decision-making processes, it also presents some limitations. The first limitation of this analysis is that it is based mainly on qualitative data, which limits the generalizability of the results to other contexts. A more in-depth quantitative analysis would confirm the observed trends and measure the impact of different forms of discrimination on the participation of women and young people. The lack of a comparative analysis is a limitation of the study, restricting its scope and its ability to identify general trends. A comparison with other contexts would have made it possible to identify whether the obstacles are specific to the municipalities studied or whether they are more widespread in other developing countries. The study does not focus enough on economic factors that can also influence the participation of women and youth. It would be interesting to analyze how poverty, access to resources and economic opportunities can affect the ability of women and youth to engage in public life.

Despite these limitations, the proposed study constitutes an important starting point for future research on the participation of women and youth in local decision-making processes in developing countries. The results of the study inform the development of policies and programs aimed at promoting more inclusive and equitable governance. As far as we are concerned, it is imperative to continue research on the themes of the intersectionality of discrimination, economic factors and intervention strategies in order to deepen our understanding of the obstacles that hinder the participation of women and youth in local decision-making processes. This will make it possible to develop more efficient intervention strategies in local authorities in countries of the South, particularly in the Beninese municipalities that have embraced decentralization for two decades. Deepening the analysis of intersecting discriminations and economic factors is essential to decipher the obstacles that hinder the participation of women and young people in local decision-making processes. This informed understanding, we believe, will make it possible to design more efficient intervention strategies that are better adapted to the specific realities of African and Beninese contexts.

## **8 CONCLUSION**

The analysis of socio-cultural barriers limiting the participation of women and youth in local decision-making processes, through the case study of the Communes of Kpomassè and Tori-Bossito in Benin, reveals profound challenges and crucial opportunities to promote more inclusive and equitable participation. By examining the theoretical framework, we found that gender norms, age-related perceptions and patriarchal power structures play a determining role in the marginalization of women and youth in these decision-making processes. These socio-cultural barriers, as detailed in our analysis, include gender norms and traditional roles, the perception of youth in decision-making processes, patriarchal structures and social hierarchies, as well as limited access to education and resources for women and youth. The analysis of the diagnostic results highlighted the specific obstacles encountered in the Communes of Kpomassè and Tori-Bossito, as well as the impact of these socio-cultural barriers on the representativeness and voice of women and youth. By comparing the two contexts, we identified significant similarities and differences, highlighting the importance of taking into account local realities in designing inclusion strategies.

To overcome these barriers, several potential levers were identified, including capacity building and rights education, promotion of political participation, awareness raising and community mobilization, as well as inclusive institutional and policy reforms. These measures offer promising avenues to foster active and equitable participation of women and youth in local decision-making processes. Summarizing the main findings of this study, it points to the critical importance of promoting inclusive social and political participation to ensure democratic governance and sustainable development. The study also makes recommendations for future action, including the need for policies and programs to overcome socio-cultural barriers, as well as the importance of community engagement and awareness-raising to catalyze change. Finally, future avenues for further research have been identified by the study, with proposals for practical actions to overcome these challenges, highlighting the importance of community engagement and awareness-raising to create an enabling environment for inclusive and equitable participation of women and youth in local decision-making processes.

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