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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**ELEMENTS FOR A REDESIGN OF DECENTRALIZATION IN BENIN**

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**Abstract**

Initiated in Benin in the 2000s, decentralization has emerged as a major pillar of institutional reforms aimed at bringing the administration closer to citizens and strengthening local governance. However, its evaluation reveals persistent challenges that call for an overhaul of the current model. This research is approached from the perspective of the sociology of public action and social change theory. It draws on a review of the literature and empirical data to offer a critical reading of institutional mechanisms and processes of social transformation, highlighting conflicts, ruptures, and continuities. The analysis is structured around four complementary themes. First, the overall objectives pursued by decentralization—citizen participation, efficient public services, and balanced territorial development—appear to have been partially achieved due to political and financial constraints. Second, the institutional framework, marked by a complex legal and administrative architecture, suffers from a lack of coherence between the different levels of power, limiting the real autonomy of municipalities. Thirdly, structural advantages, such as proximity to decision-making and the emergence of local initiatives, face significant limitations: insufficient resources, low professionalization of actors, and increased dependence on the central government. Finally, the reasons for a profound reinvention of the model today lie in the need to adapt decentralization to socio-economic changes, the requirements of democratic governance, and the imperatives of sustainable development. The planned overhaul should include a clarification of powers, a strengthening of the financial and human capacities of local authorities, and better coordination between local and central institutions. This work highlights the urgent need for a multidimensional and pragmatic approach capable of transforming decentralization into a real lever for inclusive development and democratic consolidation in Benin.

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**Introduction:-**

For more than three decades, decentralization has been a major reform in African states, presented both as an instrument of democratization and a lever for territorial development. For J. MANOR (1999, pp. 12-16),

decentralization aims above all to bring the state closer to its citizens in order to strengthen the effectiveness of public action and improve the legitimacy of local institutions. This principle of proximity is also highlighted by D. RONDINELLI, J. NELLIS, and G. CHEEMA (1983, pp. 5-9), who define decentralization as a structured transfer of authority, responsibilities, and resources to local entities that are better placed to meet the needs of the population. In Benin, this movement is part of the legacy of the National Conference of February 1990, which laid the foundations for institutional reform geared towards democratic openness and participatory management of public affairs. Law No. 97-029 of January 15, 1999, the legal basis for local governance in Benin, reflects this ambition by setting out the powers of municipalities and the terms of their organization. As J.-F. BAYART (1996, pp. 45-52) shows, decentralization reforms in Africa are part of an attempt to readjust in the face of the limitations of a centralized state, historically marked by distance from the people and a weak capacity to integrate local dynamics. According to him, these reforms aim to bring public action closer to citizens by correcting the dysfunctions inherited from a state apparatus perceived as unresponsive and often disconnected from social realities.

However, decentralization cannot be understood solely through legislative texts: it is embodied in practices, power relations, and social dynamics. O. GAGBEI (2021, pp. 5-8) highlights that local governance in Africa faces a fundamental tension: on the one hand, centralized state institutions that claim to organize citizen participation, and on the other, the aspirations of populations for participatory democracy rooted in their social and cultural practices. This tension explains why the results of decentralization are sometimes mixed: while it opens up new opportunities for citizen participation and endogenous management, it also reveals structural limitations such as insufficient local resources, institutional overlaps, and persistent territorial inequalities. These observations are now fueling calls for a reconfiguration or "reinvention" of decentralization, a concept advocated by P. SMOKE (2015, pp. 4-7), who believes that current reforms must go beyond the simple transfer of powers to aim for a profound transformation of public governance. In this perspective, J.-M. KAUZYA (2005, pp. 9-12) emphasizes the need to strengthen citizen participation, professionalize municipal administrations, and adapt institutional models to local contexts. Thus, the analysis of decentralization in Benin requires a multidimensional approach based on four fundamental axes: the overall objectives pursued by decentralization; the institutional framework that organizes its implementation; the structural advantages and limitations that determine its effectiveness; and, finally, the reasons that are currently prompting researchers and practitioners to consider a profound reinvention of the model.

#### **Methods, materials, and analysis model:-**

##### **Methods and Materials:-**

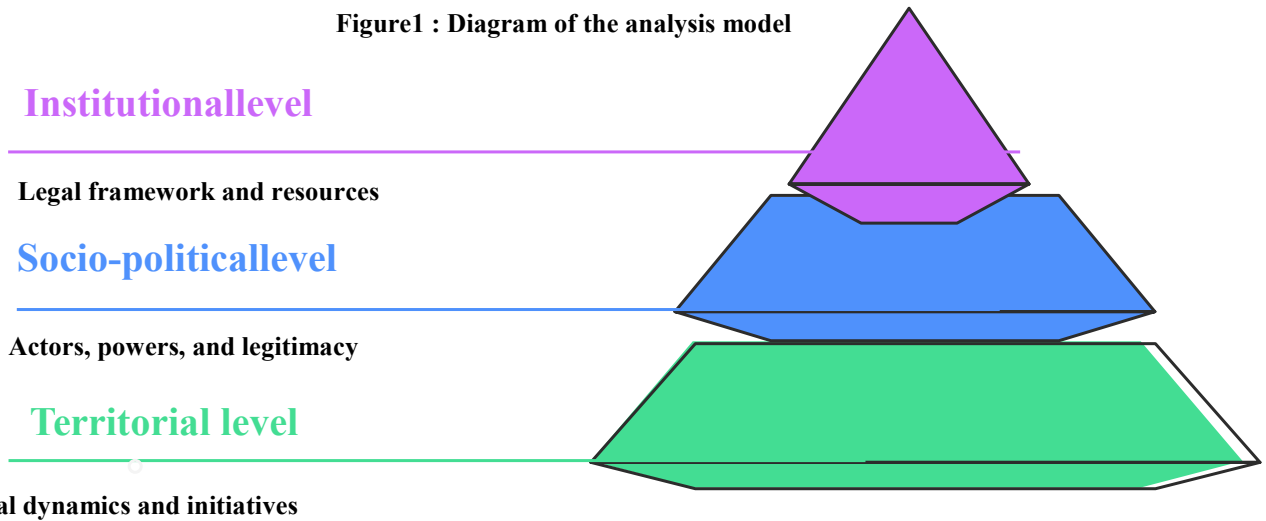
The analysis was conducted from a socio-anthropological perspective using a qualitative approach. It combines two main tools: a literature review organized around the founding texts of decentralization in Benin (laws, decrees, municipal development plans), academic works, and institutional reports on the one hand, and field surveys (semi-structured interviews with elected officials, municipal employees, citizens, and observations of local meetings) on the other. This diversification of sources makes it possible to understand both the normative logic of the reforms and their operationalization in the Beninese context. The materials used therefore range from legislative texts to empirical data collected in the field, including scientific literature that situates the Beninese case in the subregional and international debate.

##### **Analysis model:-**

##### **The analysis model used for this research is organized around three levels:**

- Institutional: legal framework, powers, resources, center-periphery relations.
- Socio-political: actors, power relations, local practices, social logic.
- Territorial: local dynamics, initiatives, capacities, constraints.

Figure1 : Diagram of the analysis model



Source: Ourselves

**Results:-**

**Decentralization: from aspirations to meaningful objectives:-**

Decentralization is a political and administrative process whereby the state transfers some of its powers and resources to local authorities. In West Africa, as elsewhere, it is seen as a strategy for modernizing public action and a means of bringing the state closer to the people. Its objectives are multiple: to improve governance, stimulate local development, strengthen citizen participation, optimize the management of public resources, and consolidate democracy. Deductively, it reflects a profound transformation in the relationship between the state, society, and territories.

Figure2 : Objectives of decentralization



Sources: Ourselves

A primary objective is to improve public governance. The central government, often perceived as distant and cumbersome, struggles to respond effectively to local needs. According to D. RONDINELLI (1981, p. 140), decentralization brings decision-making centers closer to citizens, increases responsiveness, and improves the quality of services. By entrusting responsibilities to municipalities, departments, or regions, the state establishes a more flexible form of governance that is better adapted to socio-cultural realities, which is essential in African

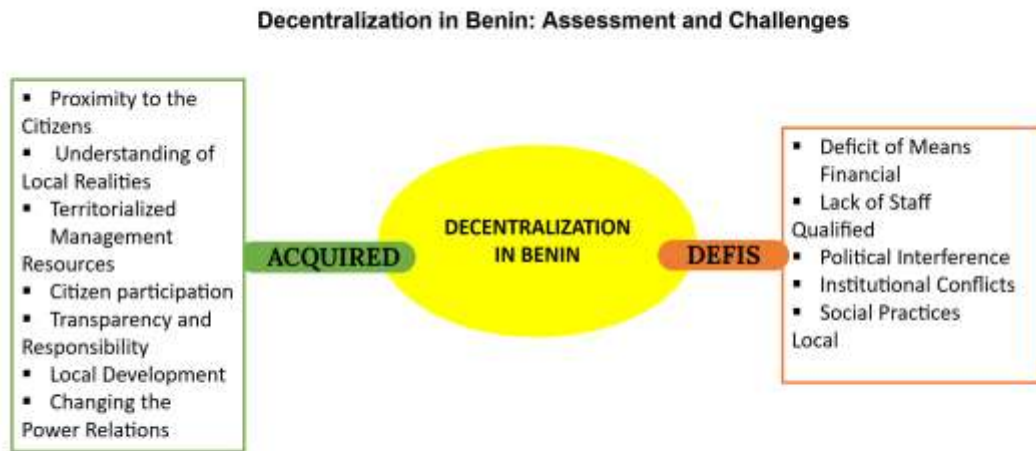
contexts marked by regional and ethnic diversity. It also aims to reduce the distance between the state and the people. J.-F. MEDARD (1990, pp. 323–353) describes the African state as "neo-patrimonial," often perceived as distant from ordinary citizens. Decentralization creates a direct link between institutions and local communities. A town hall that is close to its residents can better address complaints, understand priorities, and adapt its actions, thereby strengthening the legitimacy of the state and equity in the provision of public services. It also encourages citizen participation. E. OSTRUM (1990, p. 88) has shown that communities manage collective resources effectively when they participate in decision-making. Community consultations, participatory budgets, neighborhood committees, and open municipal councils make it possible to integrate local knowledge, customs, and real needs into public action. This participation promotes transparency, buy-in, and understanding of citizen dynamics.

In addition, decentralization stimulates local economic development. G. CHEEMA and D. RONDINELLI (2007, pp. 1-20) emphasize that local authorities are better at identifying investment opportunities and managing infrastructure. Thanks to increased financial autonomy (taxes, land, development funds), they build basic infrastructure, enhance local resources, and create an environment conducive to entrepreneurship, thereby promoting bottom-up development. It also improves the efficiency of public services. The central government suffers from administrative and logistical burdens. By transferring the management of water, sanitation, primary health care, and basic education to municipalities, they can respond more quickly and precisely. R. CROOK and J. MANOR (1998) consider this efficiency to be a major argument in favor of decentralization. Furthermore, it reduces regional inequalities. In many African countries, resources are concentrated in large cities. Decentralization aims to strengthen peripheral and rural areas. Equalization funds and local financing policies support poor communities, promoting more balanced development. Finally, it consolidates democracy. It stimulates local political competition, empowers elected officials, and promotes civic engagement. According to J. MANOR (1999), public participation in local governance deepens democracy. Local elections also allow new elites to emerge from communities, enriching national political life.

**A look back at the results of decentralization after two decades of implementation:-**

Since the 1990s, decentralization has become a key element of public governance reforms in several developing countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. In Benin, as part of the Democratic Renewal, it was introduced with the aim of modernizing the state, improving democracy at the local level, and promoting grassroots development. However, after more than 20 years of implementation, this reform has had mixed results, combining institutional progress with persistent structural obstacles.

**Figure3 : Results and challenges of decentralization in Benin**



Sources: Ourselves

Current research on local governance therefore encourages us to go beyond a purely normative interpretation of decentralization in order to study its concrete impacts on local social, political, and economic dynamics. One of the main achievements of decentralization is the rapprochement between public administration and citizens. The establishment of municipalities and districts has helped to reduce the institutional distance between the state and local populations. According to J.C. RIBOT (2006), decentralization has the potential to consolidate the legitimacy of the state if it truly enables the transfer of decision-making powers to local authorities that are accountable to citizens. In the Beninese context, this proximity has simplified access to basic administrative services, increased the visibility of public action, and encouraged more frequent communication between local representatives and citizens. This proximity to institutions is accompanied by a deeper understanding of local realities by municipal officials. Unlike the central administration, which is often disconnected from local social dynamics, local officials interact within a social space they share with residents. According to J.-P. FAGUET (2014, p. 2-13), decentralization can improve the quality of public decisions when local authorities have access to detailed information on community needs. This ability to adapt is particularly crucial in environments characterized by great social, cultural, and economic diversity.

In economic and budgetary terms, decentralization has enabled more localized management of public resources. Beninese municipalities have autonomous budgets and the ability to direct investments toward local priorities such as infrastructure related to education, health, trade, or roads. However, as noted by P. SMOKE (2015, pp. 97-112) and J. BOEX et al. (2016), financial decentralization in Africa is often incomplete. Local entities are given increasing responsibilities, but they do not always have sufficient or consistent financial resources, thus limiting their true independence. Citizen participation is another key element in the argument for decentralization. The reform seeks to involve citizens in the decision-making process through public consultations, local committees, and the participatory design of Municipal Development Plans. E. OSTROM (2010) demonstrates that involvement can improve the effectiveness of public policies, provided that it is based on truly deliberative and inclusive mechanisms. However, in Benin, these mechanisms often remain formal, and citizens' involvement in them is uneven.

In terms of local governance, decentralization has promoted the establishment of transparency criteria, accountability processes, and institutional control instruments. The Municipal Development Support Fund is a structuring tool, as it makes access to resources conditional on compliance with management criteria. With regard to local development, various empirical studies show that decentralization has contributed to improving basic infrastructure and stimulating certain local economies. However, R. CROOK and J. MANOR (2018) emphasize that the benefits of decentralization are neither guaranteed nor constant: they fluctuate depending on local contexts, available resources, and the quality of local political leadership. Decentralization has also changed power relations at the local level. It has facilitated the rise of political elites at the municipal level and reshaped the relationships between the state, local officials, and traditional authorities.

Despite this progress, the structural constraints inherent in decentralization remain significant. The lack of local financial resources is a major obstacle. Financial assistance from the state limits the autonomy of municipalities in their planning and actions. In addition, the shortage of qualified personnel has an impact on the quality of planning, financial management, and project monitoring. Political interference and institutional conflicts also undermine the functioning of local authorities. Partisan rivalries, tensions between elected officials and traditional authorities, and ambiguities related to administrative oversight limit decision-making and the continuity of public action. According to the UNDP (2020), these dynamics are common in young democracies where decentralization takes place in a context of intense political competition. Finally, local social practices such as clientelism, patronage, and loyalty networks continue to influence municipal governance. They thus constitute a major challenge to the consolidation of transparent and inclusive local governance.

### **Why reinvent decentralization?**

In practice, decentralization has proved to be partly beneficial to states long overwhelmed by the crisis of the 1980s and 1990s. A generation later, the results show notable successes, particularly in terms of refining the legal and institutional framework for steering the process, building functional infrastructure to serve grassroots communities, and, above all, establishing democratic roots that support political change and citizen participation at the local level, thereby consolidating the state renewal that began in 1990. However, the poor performance recorded, which tends to undermine efforts and de s the development ambitions of decentralization reform, has led to a rethinking of the ideology by reinventing the basic objectives. Indeed, the technical operational biases of local administrations, which

for the most part lead to confusion of roles, the inadequate financing of local development with an incompatible financial dependence on the central government and decentralized cooperation, and finally the limited economic impact of decentralization in local authorities reflect the structural and operational limitations of the process, calling for a political overhaul of the reform. This is confirmed by the recent work of J. T. DICKOVICK and R.B. RIEDL (2022), who emphasize that decentralization in Africa has often led to the creation of formal local institutions without any substantial transformation of governance practices. Similarly, E. PALI, C.C. AHLOU, and F.P. YATTA (2025, pp. 1-25), based on a study of municipal elected officials in Togo, show that positive perceptions of decentralization remain severely limited by financial and institutional constraints. These findings fuel a growing consensus around the need to reinvent decentralization in order to adapt it to contemporary realities.

Reinventing decentralization does not mean questioning the principle of local governance, but rather recognizing the limitations of traditional models based primarily on the administrative transfer of powers. It means moving beyond a political and legal approach to embed decentralization in a more inclusive and effective system of territorial governance. J.-P. FAGUET and C. PÖSCHL (2022) emphasize that the positive effects of decentralization depend on the quality of local institutions and accountability mechanisms. Similarly, A. A. TOBI and G. I. AYODEJI (2024, pp. 45-62), in the Nigerian context, have attempted to show how the absence of profound institutional reforms limits the real impact of decentralization on local governance. The reinvention of decentralization thus appears to be a necessary response to the persistent gap between political ambitions and concrete results. From this perspective, one of the main arguments justifying this reinvention is the persistence of financial constraints faced by local authorities in financing local development. Despite the legal recognition of their autonomy, they remain heavily dependent on transfers from the central government. Analyses by the World Bank (2023) and the OECD (2023) confirm that low own-source revenues reduce the capacity of local governments to plan and implement sustainable policies. More empirically, M.V. FAGHA (2024) demonstrates that incomplete fiscal decentralization severely limits local economic development, particularly in local authorities with low economic potential. The new direction of decentralization therefore requires the establishment of coordinated frameworks to strengthen local taxation, improve budgetary transparency, and put in place innovative mechanisms for resource mobilization.

In addition to these financial constraints, there are persistent weaknesses in institutional and administrative capacities. Local authorities are faced with increasingly complex responsibilities, particularly in the areas of urban management, environmental crises, and local economic development. According to UCLG Africa (2023), African local governments still lack the human and technical resources, and sometimes the skills, to respond effectively to these demands. I.YUSUF, M. DAUDA, and S. GEBEH (2025, pp. 33-52), based on the case of the Kenema Local Council in Sierra Leone, show that the effectiveness of local governance remains closely linked to the quality of administrative skills available at the territorial level. The reinvention of decentralization therefore also requires increased investment in local capacity building and administrative modernization. Institutional coordination is also a major challenge for the performance of local authorities. Indeed, overlapping responsibilities between the central government, decentralized services, and local authorities continue to hamper the effectiveness of local public action. N. STEYTLER & J. De VISSER (2021, p.312) emphasize that the lack of clarity in the distribution of roles weakens local autonomy and dilutes responsibilities. These findings are reinforced by the work of K. AYENAGBO (2023, p. 85), which shows that, in the Togolese context, institutional confusion directly undermines the quality of local public service delivery. Reinventing decentralization therefore requires an effort to clarify responsibilities and strengthen multi-level coordination mechanisms.

On a much more top-down level, citizen participation remains one of the essential pillars of productive decentralization. Although territorial proximity is supposed to encourage community involvement in development actions, participation often remains limited to formal mechanisms. (P. ONYALO (2024, p. 60), in his analysis of decentralized governance in Kenya, shows how citizen participation remains largely symbolic when it is not accompanied by solid institutional mechanisms. Similarly, J. GAVENTA & R. McGEE (2022, p.134) have already pointed out that participation only has a real impact when it effectively influences local public decisions. Reinventing decentralization therefore means strengthening participatory mechanisms, particularly through participatory budgets, digital platforms, and citizen monitoring mechanisms. This aspect of the proposed new reform highlights the links with social inclusion, which is closely linked to participation. Recent analyses by the UNDP (2023) indicate that decentralization can exacerbate local inequalities when it mainly benefits political or economic elites. Women, young people, and marginalized groups often remain underrepresented in local decision-making bodies. These findings are consistent with those of N. B. ACHOR (2025, p. 52), who highlights the absence of

inclusive policies as an obstacle to decentralization. Reinventing decentralization therefore involves promoting inclusive local governance based on equity and representativeness.

Furthermore, social, economic, and environmental changes reinforce the need to rethink decentralization. Rapid urbanization, land pressure, and the effects of climate change are profoundly transforming territories, creating an urgent need to move away from traditional approaches. According to UN-Habitat (2022), local governments are on the front line of these challenges, but do not always have the necessary resources. A reinvented decentralization must integrate strategic territorial planning and enhanced inter-municipal cooperation in order to respond effectively to these transformations. Finally, the reinvention of decentralization must enable local authorities to be repositioned as strategic actors in local development. (A. RODRIGUEZ-POSE & C. WILKIE (2019, p. 1205) have shown that territorial development relies on the capacity of local actors to mobilize endogenous resources. More recently, R. PONCE-RODRIGUEZ & C. R. HANKLA (2023, p. 930) confirm that local authorities with real autonomy and enhanced capacities are better able to support the local economy and territorial innovation. Development-oriented decentralization therefore requires moving beyond a purely administrative approach to give municipalities a leading role in the economic and social transformation of territories.

Reinventing decentralization appears to be a necessity in view of the limitations of the traditional model and the contemporary challenges of governance. This does not mean calling into question its founding principles, but rather adapting them to current realities in order to build more effective, more inclusive territorial governance that is resolutely oriented towards sustainable development. This reinvention is an essential condition for making local authorities true levers of transformation at the service of citizens.

### **Discussion:-**

Decentralization involves the transfer of powers from the center to local authorities, which may be decentralized local authorities, local populations, or civil society (K. ELOUNDOU, 2012, p. 118). Today, it is seen as a means of promoting local development, as it has helped to establish democracy and good governance (A. COLY, 2017, p. 7). In Benin, decentralization is the manifestation of a strong political will to bring the state closer to its citizens and improve local governance. Since the National Conference of the Nation's Vital Forces in 1990 and Law No. 97-029 of 1999, it has established itself as a mode of governance aimed at giving municipalities more responsibilities so that they can become actors of development and democracy. To amplify the power of local authorities, decentralization must be accompanied by a transfer of budgetary envelopes from the state to decentralized structures, enabling them to fully exercise the functions and prerogatives assigned to them by law (I. LABIADH, 2016, p. 1). But beyond legislative and regulatory standards, this process unfolds in practices and power relations, influenced by social and customary logics that strongly affect its effectiveness, as shown by C. LUND (2006, pp. 685–705) in his analysis of the hybrid logics of local governance.

After more than twenty years of implementation, the achievements are undeniable: municipalities have become accessible interlocutors, capable of providing local services such as civil registration and market management; they have enabled the emergence of local elites and the restructuring of power with traditional authorities; they have stimulated local development through the construction of infrastructure and the mobilization of external funding; and they have finally opened up spaces for citizen participation, even if their application remains uneven. These advances confirm J. MANOR's (1999, pp. 42-45) idea that decentralization is based on a logic of institutional empowerment and improved accountability of local authorities. These achievements remain fragile in the face of persistent structural limitations. Municipalities are heavily dependent on the FADeC and have few resources of their own, which limits their real autonomy. The legal framework leaves gray areas that lead to overlapping jurisdictions and tensions with the central government. The lack of qualified professional staff, political interference, and clientelism reduce transparency and efficiency. Citizen participation remains limited, often dominated by local elites, with low representation of women and young people. These findings are consistent with the analyses of D. A. RONDINELLI, J. R. NELLIS & G. S. CHEEMA (1983, pp. 19-23), who point out that reforms fail when they do not take into account the actual capacity of local actors, financial constraints, and power relations between the center and the periphery.

At the end of this analysis, it is clear that decentralization, far from being a simple administrative mechanism, is a genuine political project aimed at transforming the modalities of governance, participation, and local development. On another note, authors such as M. T. ALOU (2009, p. 199), who trace the history of decentralization processes in Africa, paint a less flattering picture, emphasizing the faltering steps and missteps of various experiments. At the

same time, A. GADJI (2010, p. 42) points out that the challenges of achieving local development through decentralization are due to the weakness of local financing resources. M. ZAKI (2014, p. 19) has identified the same financial difficulties as obstacles to decentralization in Senegal. In contrast to these authors, whose approach could be described as pessimistic, there are other, more optimistic positions. Indeed, according to some scholars, decentralization is a real guarantee of democracy and good governance. This position is supported by Y. POULIN (2003, p. 22), for whom "decentralization is the answer to the failure of central governments in terms of economic and social development." Decentralization creates competition between local governments, giving citizens a choice about where they live. Public spending decisions made at a level of government closer to the population are more likely to reflect the demand for public services than those made by the central government (Y. POULIN, 2003, p. 4). In light of the above analyses, one conclusion emerges: decentralization is a conditional tool for local development. It can only achieve its objectives if certain multisectoral obstacles of a structural, economic, sociocultural, democratic, and environmental nature are overcome.

In the Beninese context, these ambitions have been translated into a structured legal framework, notably Law No. 97-029, designed to give effect to the principle of proximity and strengthen the autonomy of municipalities. Decentralization therefore benefits those who are already advantaged, widening the gap with the poorest. E. CALDEIRA et al. (2012b) establish similar results in their study of the effect of decentralization in Benin: decentralization has a moderately positive impact on access to basic services but tends to increase inequalities in access between and within local jurisdictions. However, the effectiveness of decentralization depends less on legislation than on its appropriation and operationalization. Research by P. SMOKE (2015, pp. 3-6) confirms that structural limitations manifest themselves in the form of insufficient resource transfers, weak technical skills, and institutional overlaps.

Thus, the promised benefits of increased participation, endogenous development, and inclusive governance are hampered by limitations deeply rooted in the country's administrative and political history. These findings are now fueling calls to "reinvent" decentralization. For J.-M. KAUZYA (2005, pp. 8-11), this reinvention requires a refocusing on participatory local governance, institutional innovation, and the professionalization of local authorities. It requires better coordination between the central government and municipalities, a clarification of responsibilities, but above all, massive investment in training, territorial engineering, and citizen mobilization. Ultimately, decentralization in Benin can only succeed if it becomes a real lever for social transformation and not just an administrative transfer. It must embody a political and civic project capable of consolidating democracy and supporting inclusive and sustainable development. Authors such as J. MANOR (1999), Rondinelli and Cheema (1983), C. LUND (2006, pp. 685–705), P. SMOKE (2015), and J.-M. KAUZYA (2005) converge on a central idea: decentralization must be rethought in order to be truly transformative, integrating local realities, citizen participation, and the requirements of sustainable development. It therefore remains an open-ended, complex but essential project for the future of the territories and for the reduction of mass poverty.

### **Conclusion:-**

Decentralization in Benin, initiated as a project of proximity and democratization, has led to real progress in local governance, citizen participation, and territorial development. However, persistent structural limitations—financial dependence, institutional vagueness, weak human resources, and the weight of political logic—show that the current model remains imperfect. More than just an administrative reform, decentralization must be rethought as a real lever for social transformation, capable of strengthening the legitimacy of the state while promoting local initiatives. Its reinvention requires clarification of powers, investment in the financial and human capacities of municipalities, and participatory governance that gives a voice to citizens in all their diversity. Ultimately, the future of decentralization in Benin depends on its ability to overcome its weaknesses and become a driving force for vibrant democracy and inclusive development, rooted in the social and territorial realities of the country.

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