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RESEARCH ARTICLE

BETWEEN POLICY TEXTS AND FIELD PRACTICES: PUBLIC POLICIES, INSTITUTIONAL ARRANGEMENTS AND STAKEHOLDER PRACTICES IN THE SUSTAINABLE MANAGEMENT OF FOREST RESOURCES IN BENIN

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Abstract

Background: Forests in Benin sustain biodiversity, protect soils and support a large share of rural livelihoods, yet they remain under continuous pressure from farmland expansion, wood harvesting, charcoal production and land-use change. Over three decades the country has accumulated an extensive body of forest law and policy, from the 1993 Forest Regime Act to the 2023-2032 Forest Policy and the draft Forest and Wildlife Code transmitted to the National Assembly in November 2025. Whether this accumulation of texts translates into sustainable management on the ground remains an open question.

Methods: A qualitative content analysis was applied to a documentary corpus of laws, decrees, national policies, participatory management plans, institutional reports and peer-reviewed studies. Documents were read along eleven analytical entries, cross-checked across sources, and related to five hypotheses on policy effectiveness, institutional quality, participation, actor responsibility and coordination. Documents were retained on explicit criteria of provenance, subject matter, status and period, and each was coded passage by passage against these entries. As the corpus is documentary, stakeholder practices are analysed as reported or documented in these sources rather than as directly observed.

Results: The framework has been substantially modernised: the 2023-2032 Forest Policy organises intervention around sustainable use and preservation, resilience, and surveillance and securitisation, and acknowledges the obsolescence of the 1994 policy and the dispersion of sectoral rules. Five categories of actors hold formally distinct but partly overlapping functions.

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Recurrent gaps nevertheless separate stated orientations from implementation conditions: limited institutional capacity and funding, uneven effectiveness of participation, persistent pressure despite surveillance provisions, restoration dependent on discontinuous resources, and coordination still to be consolidated.

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Conclusion: Sustainable forest management in Benin now depends less on producing additional texts than on the capacity of institutions to enforce them, to coordinate their interventions and to involve local actors in decisions and benefits rather than in attendance alone.

Introduction:-

Forest resources occupy a structural position in the functioning of Benin's rural territories. They supply timber and service wood, fuelwood and a wide range of non-timber products, while contributing to biodiversity conservation, soil protection and the maintenance of ecological functions. They are also, for a large share of rural households, a direct source of income and a buffer in periods of agricultural stress. The forest question can therefore not be reduced to the protection of wooded areas: it also concerns the conditions under which resources are accessed, harvested, processed and renewed (FAO, 2022; IPBES, 2019). This multiplicity of uses places forests at the intersection of environmental, economic and social stakes. Wooded formations are solicited to meet energy and construction needs at the same time as their area is reduced by agricultural expansion and by various forms of extraction. Sustainable management, in such a configuration, is less a technical optimum than a negotiated balance between the immediate needs of populations and the renewal capacity of the resource, the very tension that the Brundtland formulation of sustainable development placed at the centre of environmental policy (WCED, 1987).

Benin has governed these uses through a succession of legal and institutional instruments. Act No. 93-009 of 2 July 1993 establishing the forest regime organised the sector by distinguishing categories of forests and setting out the principles applicable to their management; Decree No. 96-271 of 2 July 1996 later specified its implementation modalities, including the involvement of riparian populations in protection, surveillance and harvesting. Decentralisation subsequently redistributed part of this responsibility towards municipalities and communities, in line with a wider African movement of transferring natural resource authority to elected local bodies (Ribot, 2002). Participatory approaches and multi-stakeholder management plans developed in this context.

Work on decentralised forest management in Benin nevertheless showed at an early stage that the division of competences between the State, local governments and communities remained insufficiently clarified. The question has not lost its relevance. In adopting the 2023-2032 Forest Policy, the Government itself acknowledged that the degradation of forest ecosystems was accelerating, that the 1994 policy had become obsolete and ill-adapted to the country's situation, and that years of partial regulatory additions had produced a fragmented framework requiring a deeper overhaul. The same diagnosis underpins the draft Forest and Wildlife Code transmitted to the National Assembly in November 2025, whose stated purpose is to consolidate dispersed texts and improve the coherence of sectoral governance.

These developments make explicit a proposition that this article takes as its starting point: the sustainability of forest resources does not depend solely on their biophysical availability or on the existence of protective rules. It depends equally on the capacity of institutions to organise uses, coordinate interventions and enforce rules, and on the way different categories of actors appropriate those orientations and translate them into practice. Implementation research established long ago that a decision taken at national level passes through a chain of actors and decision points, each of which may attenuate or reorient the expected outcome (Pressman and Wildavsky, 1973).

The difficulty is therefore not located in the existence of rules but in their territorial translation. Decentralisation introduced new actors into natural resource management without always specifying who is responsible for what, for use decisions, for the conduct of management plans, for the control of removals, or for the sharing of revenue from exploitation. The literature further shows that a multiplication of actors can generate situations in which several authorities claim legitimacy over the same resource, a configuration long identified as one of the limits of community-based conservation when “community” is treated as an undifferentiated given (Agrawal and Gibson, 1999). Documented Beninese experiences, in particular at Lokoly and Toui-Kilibo, illustrate this fragmentation of authority and the contestation surrounding the role of local governments in the management of forest spaces.

These difficulties matter because forest resources are simultaneously an economic resource for populations, a heritage to be conserved for the State, and a space over which several actors seek to exercise rights or responsibilities. Practices of harvesting, processing, trade, protection or restoration are not independent of the institutional rules that govern access. The problem can thus be formulated as a possible mismatch between what public policies prescribe, what institutions are mandated to do, and what actors actually do in the field. The central question addressed here follows directly: to what extent do the policies and institutional arrangements established in

Benin favour sustainable forest management, and how do the practices of the different actors shape the implementation of those policies?

Governance offers an appropriate entry point because it allows rules, institutions and actors to be considered simultaneously. In the forest domain, management does not rest on administrative decisions alone; it engages local governments, communities, producers, harvesters, traders, local organisations and other resource users. What matters is how responsibilities are distributed among them, how their actions are coordinated, and how public rules are applied locally, the classical analytical terrain of common-pool resource institutions (Ostrom, 1990, 2009) and of forest governance research (Agrawal, 2007).

Beninese experience further indicates that decentralised management cannot be read as a simple administrative transfer of competences. It modifies the relations between the State, local governments and local institutions. Local actors seek recognition for their own rules and claims over resources, while newly elected authorities seek to assert jurisdiction over the spaces falling within their territory. This situation connects to a broader debate on natural resource governance: does sustainable management require primarily a strengthening of State control, or a greater involvement of local actors? The Beninese cases suggest that the question is misposed in that form, and that what is at stake is the articulation between these forms of authority and responsibility. National rules remain necessary, but their effectiveness also depends on their comprehension, acceptance and application by local actors.

Research conducted in Benin has documented several of these dimensions separately, the legal framework, decentralisation, community-based management, or a given local experience. What remains comparatively under-documented is the relation between the three levels: the evolution of public policy orientations, the functioning of institutional arrangements, and the concrete practices of the actors responsible for, or affected by, forest management. This gap is all the more consequential at a moment when the sectoral framework is being recomposed through the 2023-2032 Forest Policy and the ongoing legal reform.

The objective of this article is accordingly not to inventory existing policies. It is to analyse how these policies are organised, which actors they mobilise, how responsibilities are distributed among them, and to what extent observed practices are consistent with sustainable management objectives. The contribution is threefold. Scientifically, it brings policy analysis and the analysis of actor practices into a single frame. Empirically, it situates governance questions within the specific configuration of the Beninese forest sector, marked by a plurality of actor categories, by decentralised public management and by a recent recomposition of the policy and legal framework. Operationally, it identifies the points on which public action requires reinforcement: clarification of responsibilities, inter-institutional coordination, effective participation, control of practices, appropriation of rules and accountability of resource users.

Theoretical framework and hypotheses:

Public policy and sustainable forest management:

Public policies are one of the instruments through which the State addresses problems affecting society as a whole. They define objectives, set rules and allocate means of action. In the forest domain they organise access to resources, frame their exploitation, ensure their protection and encourage their renewal. The existence of a policy, however, guarantees neither the attainment of its objectives nor the consistency of its effects. Between a decision taken nationally and its realisation in the field lies an implementation chain involving several actors and several levels of decision, along which expected outcomes may be modified (Pressman and Wildavsky, 1973).

This point is directly relevant to forests. Policies are designed within a national frame but applied in territories whose economic, social and institutional conditions differ. Forest services, local governments, communities and economic operators must convert general orientations into concrete action. A forest policy may thus be substantively sound and still produce limited results where means are insufficient, responsibilities poorly defined, or rules weakly enforced. Sustainable management depends both on the quality of policies and on their effectiveness.

H1: The effectiveness of forest policy implementation favours the sustainable management of forest resources.

Institutional arrangements:

Policies are implemented through institutions, understood as the rules, organisations and mechanisms that structure relations among actors and organisations (North, 1990). Several institutions intervene in the forest sector: the forest administration, local governments, local management structures, community organisations and economic operators.

Each holds distinct responsibilities, and sustainable management depends in part on how these responsibilities are defined and articulated.

An effective institutional arrangement makes it possible to know who decides, who controls, who uses the resource and who must account for practices. Where responsibilities are ill-defined, several actors may intervene on the same matters without genuine coordination, making control difficult and non-compliance more likely. Conversely, institutions endowed with clear responsibilities and adequate means facilitate enforcement and improve resource management. In this study, institutional quality refers to the clarity of responsibilities, coordination among institutions, control mechanisms and the capacity of structures to enforce rules.

H2: The quality of institutional arrangements positively influences the sustainable management of forest resources.

Governance and stakeholder participation:

Governance extends the analysis beyond the State to the relations among all actors concerned by a resource. It rests on the mechanisms through which decisions are taken, responsibilities shared and rules applied. This approach is particularly suited to forests, whose management involves several categories of actors: local populations use the resource for their activities, municipalities intervene in the management of their territory, technical services perform control and support functions, and harvesters and traders participate in economic valorisation.

Common-pool resources can be managed sustainably when users take part in defining the rules and when monitoring and conflict-resolution mechanisms exist (Ostrom, 1990). Participation may therefore favour a better appropriation of rules and strengthen compliance. A distinction must nevertheless be drawn between genuine participation and the mere presence of actors within management structures: effective participation supposes that actors can voice concerns, contribute to decisions and take part in monitoring. Evidence from co-management arrangements elsewhere points in the same direction, emphasising knowledge generation, bridging organisations and social learning as the conditions under which participation becomes consequential (Berkes, 2009).

H3: Effective participation of actors in forest governance mechanisms favours the sustainable management of forest resources.

Actor responsibility and management practices:

Sustainable management also depends on the practices of those who use or administer forest resources. Policies and institutions create a frame; actors put rules into practice. Responsibility is decisive at this level. It refers to the way actors perceive their own role in the protection, rational exploitation and renewal of resources. An actor who considers conservation to be the exclusive business of the State will be less disposed to modify practices; one who recognises a share of responsibility will be more disposed to comply and to take part in management actions. Practices are further shaped by economic interests, knowledge, perceptions of the resource and the constraints actors face, a configuration in which strategic behaviour within organised settings plays a substantial part (Crozier and Friedberg, 1977).

H4: A high level of actor responsibility towards forest resources favours the adoption of practices compatible with their sustainable management.

Coordination and rule enforcement:

The diversity of actors intervening in forest management makes coordination necessary. The forest administration, local governments, communities, local organisations and economic operators may hold different responsibilities and pursue different interests; without coordination mechanisms their actions may lack coherence. Coordination allows information to be shared, overlapping responsibilities to be avoided and activities to be monitored; it also contributes to conflict resolution and to better rule enforcement. Where several institutions intervene on the same resource, weak coordination creates control difficulties, and actors may not know clearly which institution to address or which responsibilities fall to whom.

H5: Effective coordination among institutions and concerned actors favours rule enforcement and contributes to better sustainable management of forest resources.

Taken together, these five propositions describe sustainable forest management as the joint outcome of policy orientations, of the institutional arrangements charged with their implementation, and of the practices through which those orientations acquire concrete form.

Materials and Methods:-**Research design**

The study follows a qualitative design based on documentary analysis. It examines public policies, the institutional framework and the practices of actors involved in forest resource management in Benin, relating policy orientations to the texts that frame them, to the arrangements provided for their implementation, and to the practices of the different categories of actors. The design is appropriate where the object of analysis is the relation between prescribed rules and their territorial translation, and where the relevant evidence is dispersed across legal, administrative and scientific sources.

Study setting:

The study covers the forest sector of the Republic of Benin. The choice is justified by the ongoing recomposition of the sector's policy and institutional framework, in particular the adoption of the 2023-2032 Forest Policy and the reforms engaged in the legal framework governing forest resource management. The sector is treated as a space in which environmental, economic and social stakes intersect.

Units of analysis:

The analysis bears principally on the documents and institutional bodies involved in forest resource management. Five categories of actors are considered: the forest administration, local governments, local communities, harvesters and economic operators. Particular attention is given to documents produced by public institutions and to texts defining the rules, responsibilities and mechanisms of forest management. Two terminological conventions are followed throughout. The terms stakeholders and actors are used as equivalents and designate these five categories, the first being retained in the title, the abstract and the section headings. The expression stakeholder practices designates the practices attributed to these categories in the documents examined, practices prescribed by the texts, or reported by institutional and scientific sources, and not practices observed directly by the authors. Riparian populations, the expression used by the legal texts, refers to the local communities settled in the immediate vicinity of the forest formations concerned. Local governments and municipalities likewise designate the same category, the communes, which the legal texts vest with competences over their territory.

Data collection:-

Data collection rested on an in-depth documentary review covering laws, decrees, policies, strategies, plans and programmes, institutional reports, technical documents and scientific work relating to forest management in Benin. The corpus allowed the evolution of forest policy, its legal framework, its operationalisation, its governance mechanisms, the place given to participation, implementation shortcomings, and reported results and emerging problems to be examined. Information was cross-checked across sources in order to verify consistency and strengthen reliability. Documents were selected according to four explicit criteria. Provenance: priority was given to texts adopted by the Beninese State and to documents produced by public institutions or by their technical partners, scientific work being retained only when published in peer-reviewed outlets. Subject matter: a document was retained when it defines, implements or assesses rules governing forest resources, the bodies in charge of them, or the uses made of them. Status: instruments in force at the time of analysis were retained together with the instruments they superseded, the trajectory of the framework being itself an object of the study.

Period: the corpus runs from the 1993 Forest Regime Act to the draft Forest and Wildlife Code transmitted to the National Assembly in November 2025. Press coverage, undated grey literature and documents bearing on other sectors without forest provisions were left aside. Where several documents covered the same provision, the most recent official version was retained and read against the version it replaced. Official legal and policy documents were obtained from the Journal Officiel of République of Benin, FAOLEX, and official documents issued by the ministry responsible for forests and its technical services. Additional institutional and technical documents were obtained from national and technical documents were obtained from national public institutions and their technical partners. The documentary search was closed in December 2025. A total of 42 documents were retained analysis, comprising 12 legal and regulatory instruments, 8 policy, strategy and planning documents, 12 institutional and technical report, and 10 peer-reviewed scientific publications.

Data analysis:

The material was processed through documentary content analysis structured by an analytical grid comprising eleven entries: policy description, historical background, legal and regulatory framework, operationalisation, governance, participation, innovation, implementation gaps, results and impacts, emerging problems, and

recommendations. The information obtained was then related to the five hypotheses concerning policy effectiveness, institutional quality, participation, actor responsibility and coordination. This procedure makes it possible to identify convergences, shortcomings and discrepancies between the orientations set out in the texts and their translation into forest resource management. The grid was applied in the same way to every document in the corpus. Each document was read in full and every passage bearing on one of the eleven entries was extracted and assigned to that entry, a passage being assigned to several entries where it bore on several of them; the unit of coding is therefore the passage, not the document. The entries were defined a priori from the research question and the five hypotheses and were not modified in the course of the analysis.

For each entry, the material assembled in this way was compared across documents in order to distinguish statements converging across several sources, statements found in a single source, and discrepancies between what a text prescribes and what institutional or scientific sources report on the same point. Each entry was then related to the hypotheses it informs: policy description, historical background, legal and regulatory framework, operationalisation and implementation gaps to H1; legal and regulatory framework, operationalisation and governance to H2; governance and participation to H3 and, for the responsibilities that the texts prescribe, to H4; governance and implementation gaps to H5. The entries on innovation, results and impacts, emerging problems and recommendations were used in the joint appraisal of the five propositions. The coding was conducted manually by the two authors. The first author carried out the initial coding of the documentary corpus using the predefined analytical grid, while the second author reviewed the coded material and checked the consistency of the classification and interpretation of the extracted passages. Differences interpretation were discussed between the two authors and resolved through discussion and reference to the definitions of the analytical entries and the research questions. No qualitative analysis software was used.

Results:-

Evolution of the forest policy framework:

The documentary analysis reveals a progressive build-up of the framework governing forest resources in Benin. Four moments structure this trajectory (Table 1): the establishment of the legal regime in 1993, the definition of national sectoral orientations in 1994, the renewal of those orientations in 2023, and the consolidation of dispersed texts currently under way.

Table 1:- Evolution of the forest policy framework in Benin.

Period	Principal instrument	Observed development
1993	Act No. 93-009 of 2 July 1993 establishing the forest regime	Establishment of the legal framework for forest management
1994	National Forest Policy	Definition of national sectoral orientations
2023	Benin Forest Policy 2023-2032	Strengthening of restoration, conservation and governance
2025-2026	Draft Forest and Wildlife Code	Updating and harmonisation of the legal framework

Source: Documentary analysis.

The Benin Forest Policy 2023-2032 marks a new stage in this trajectory. It intervenes in a context shaped by resource degradation, by the effects of climate change and by the acknowledged limits of the previous framework. The document gives a substantial place to the restoration of degraded areas, to biodiversity conservation and to the improvement of forest governance. This evolution reflects an effort to align forest policy with the sector's current problems; it also shows that forest management no longer rests on resource protection alone, but progressively incorporates restoration, valorisation and stakeholder participation. The framework has thus been reinforced, which raises, rather than settles, the question of the consistency between new orientations and their effective application.

Content and orientations of the 2023-2032 Forest Policy

Analysis of the policy brings out three major orientations, summarised in Table 2: sustainable management and preservation of resources; resilience of the sector and of communities; and surveillance and securitisation of forest resources.

Table 2: Orientations of the 2023-2032 Forest Policy.

Orientation	Principal components
Sustainable management and preservation	Conservation, restoration and sustainable use of resources
Resilience	Adaptation to climate change and strengthening of community capacities
Surveillance and securitisation	Control, protection and action against illegal practices

Source: Documentary analysis.

These orientations indicate that the policy seeks to act simultaneously on the state of the resource and on the institutional conditions of its management. Restoration and conservation constitute the principal responses to observed degradation, while surveillance addresses the enforcement deficit. It follows that the effectiveness of the policy depends not only on the relevance of its orientations but also on the means mobilised and on the capacity of institutions to convert them into action, a relation consistent with H1. The orientations are broadly coherent with sustainable management objectives; their reach depends on their operationalisation.

Institutional arrangements and governance:

The documents identify five categories of actors intervening in forest management, with formally distinct functions (Table 3). The functions set out in Table 3 are those assigned by the texts. They describe mandates as prescribed, not practices observed in the field.

Table 3: Institutional actors and functions identified in forest management.

Actor	Principal functions identified
Forest administration	Control, surveillance, management planning and rule enforcement
Municipalities	Territorial management and participation in resource management
Local communities	Participation in management and use of resources
Harvesters	Exploitation in conformity with established rules
Economic operators	Processing and marketing of forest products

Source: Documentary analysis.

This diversity indicates that forest management rests on shared responsibility. The multiplicity of intervening bodies makes coordination between institutions and resource users necessary, which supports H2, institutional quality as a condition of sustainable management, and equally H5, since coordination appears indispensable to avoiding overlapping responsibilities and improving rule enforcement. The configuration reflects a move towards more participatory governance; yet the presence of several actors does not by itself guarantee effective management. Clarification of responsibilities, circulation of information and control remain determinant.

Stakeholder participation in management:

The documents examined give an explicit place to riparian populations and local governments in forest resource management. Forest management plans provide for the involvement of riparian populations in protection, surveillance and harvesting, in accordance with Decree No. 96-271 of 2 July 1996 setting out the implementation modalities of Act No. 93-009. Participation appears in co-management mechanisms, in the management of forest spaces and in certain restoration and conservation activities. The corpus, however, documents the existence of participation mechanisms far more consistently than their actual influence on decisions. Participation provided for in the texts cannot therefore be equated with effective participation at every stage of management. It must be appraised not only through the presence of actors within the arrangements, but through their capacity to take part in decisions, in monitoring and in control. Participation is thus recognised within the governance framework, while its effectiveness remains an open issue for sustainable management.

Gaps between policy orientations and implementation conditions:

Cross-reading of the corpus brings out a recurrent distance between stated orientations and the conditions required for their realisation (Table 4).

Table 4: Gaps between policy orientations and implementation conditions.

Stated orientation	Constraints identified	Resulting gap
Sustainable management	Need for means and institutional capacities	Implementation to be strengthened
Stakeholder participation	Participation varies across arrangements	Effectiveness to be improved
Forest resource monitoring	Persistent pressure on forests	Control to be reinforced
Restoration	Need for continuous action and means	Dependence on available resources
Coordination	Multiplicity of actors	Coordination to be consolidated

Source: Documentary analysis.

These gaps show that the existence of a policy and legal framework does not suffice to secure the intended results. Implementation also depends on institutional capacities, on available resources and on coordination among actors. The finding reinforces H1, H2 and H5 jointly: the difficulties of sustainable management are not attributable to the content of policies alone, but also to the conditions under which they are applied.

Expected effects and emerging problems:

The documents examined show that recent policies give greater weight to the restoration of degraded areas, to biodiversity conservation, to resource valorisation and to the improvement of governance. These orientations may produce positive effects on the environmental, economic and social dimensions of forest management. Documentary analysis does not, however, allow a causal link to be established between the measures adopted and the observed evolution of resources. Announced or expected results must accordingly be distinguished from results effectively measured, a distinction that conditions any objective appraisal of policy effectiveness and that points to the need for regular data and robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

Several challenges emerge from the corpus: continued degradation of resources, pressure linked to exploitation, control difficulties, financing needs, and the adaptation of the legal framework to new sectoral realities. The revision of the legal framework is significant in this respect: the draft Forest and Wildlife Code engaged by the public authorities reflects the need to update and harmonise applicable texts. Forest policy must therefore remain evolutive, so that institutional and regulatory responses can adjust to the new pressures affecting forest resources.

Discussion:-

The results converge on a single proposition: Benin has progressively strengthened its forest policy framework, while the difficulties have shifted towards implementation and towards the coordination of actors. The 2023-2032 Forest Policy itself acknowledges the limits of the previous arrangement, the obsolescence of the 1994 policy and the dispersion of sectoral texts, which indicates that the reforms engaged respond to real needs. The adoption of new orientations nevertheless does not automatically improve the state of resources. It must be accompanied by means, by control mechanisms and by regular monitoring of the actions undertaken, in line with the implementation chain identified by Pressman and Wildavsky (1973).

The findings on participation call for equal caution. Benin has progressively adopted a participatory approach in the management of its classified forests, an orientation reinforced by the participatory management plans approved in 2024, which provide for the involvement of riparian populations and local governments. The presence of a participatory arrangement does not, however, signify that management has effectively improved. A recent assessment of four forest reserves in Benin, tracking land use, land cover and plant community dynamics from 1986 to 2021, shows that the effects of participatory management vary across sites and that natural formations continued to decline in favour of cropland and fallow despite the participatory arrangements in place, agricultural intensification and population growth remaining the dominant drivers (Soumanou et al., 2024). This supports the reading proposed here: the effectiveness of a participatory policy depends less on its existence in the texts than on the way it is applied in the field, which is precisely the conditionality that co-management research associates with knowledge generation, bridging organisations and social learning (Berkes, 2009).

The situation is particularly visible in the Upper Ouémé Classified Forest, where an inventory of 300 plots distributed across fifteen transects records logging and agriculture as the most frequent disturbances, ahead of charcoal production, fire and grazing; cultivated area increases with proximity to densely populated villages, while

logging and fire concentrate along the forest edge (Sodalo et al., 2025). Pressure therefore persists inside a reserve covered by a management arrangement, which points to difficulties in rule enforcement rather than in the design of the arrangement itself. Management plans may thus be institutionally sound while encountering difficulties at the moment of application. Governance appears central here: where rules are insufficiently respected or control remains limited, policy orientations lose part of their effectiveness.

Community participation must further be understood from local social and economic realities. Acceptance of restoration practices varies with the characteristics of populations, notably their social conditions and their understanding of the importance of ecosystem restoration. Resource protection therefore does not depend on administrative decisions alone; it depends on how populations perceive the resource, on the benefits they can derive from it and on their capacity to take part in restoration actions. Participation becomes more durable when it also answers community needs, a conclusion consistent with the emphasis placed on social capital and collective action in resource management (Pretty, 2003) and with the caution against treating communities as homogeneous units (Agrawal and Gibson, 1999).

Recent community-based restoration experiences point in the same direction, and they also mark the limits of the argument. In southern Benin, mangrove conservation is organised around community-managed areas: the Togbin-Adouanko Community Biodiversity Conservation Area, part of Ramsar Site 1017, still carries mangrove forest over about one fifth of its 205 ha, alongside marshes, water bodies and swamp forest (Akoton et al., 2026). Land-cover analysis of that same site records a reversal of trend at small scale, 3.43 ha of mangrove degraded between 1995 and 2005 against 2.65 ha restored between 2005 and 2015, and projects only a limited gain in extent by 2070 should that rate be maintained (Padonou et al., 2021). At national scale the balance is far less favourable: Beninese mangroves fell from 5,117.2 ha in 1986 to 3,052.4 ha in 2022, a loss of 40.30%, notwithstanding the designation of the two main blocks as Ramsar sites in 2001 (Kochoni et al., 2025).

The juxtaposition is instructive for the present argument. An international designation, like a national policy, is a text: it produced no measurable reversal of mangrove loss at country scale, whereas the locally managed areas, where community initiative and customary protection are recognised, register modest but positive restoration. What proves decisive is therefore not the status conferred on a space but the existence of actors who effectively manage it and of means that sustain them, which is precisely the condition this article finds wanting in the wider forest sector. Work on sacred forests reinforces the point: these spaces result from long-standing interactions between populations and their environment, so that their conservation rests not only on administrative rules but on locally held practices and values (Lokossou et al., 2025). Restoration policy accordingly gains from incorporating community knowledge and practice, which widens the notion of governance to actors and mechanisms that classical institutional arrangements do not always accommodate (Berkes, 2018).

The results also show that the drivers of degradation extend well beyond governance. Agricultural pressure, timber harvesting, charcoal production, urbanisation and the effects of climate change continue to reshape forest spaces, and recent work on Beninese forest ecosystems confirms that land-use change constitutes a major pressure on resources and on their carbon storage capacity. Forest policy must therefore be read in relation to the other policies that shape land use and rural livelihoods, rather than as a self-contained sectoral instrument (FAO, 2024; IPBES, 2019).

Against this evidence, H1 is broadly supported, with an important qualification: the existence of a relevant forest policy does not suffice to produce the expected results, since its effectiveness depends on effective implementation. H2 is likewise supported, the results showing the weight of institutions, of the clarification of responsibilities and of control capacities, the institutional dimension emphasised by North (1990) and by forest governance research (Agrawal, 2007). For H3, participation appears to be a substantial avenue but does not produce identical effects across contexts. H5 receives support from the coordination difficulties observed among the administration, local governments, communities and other actors. H4 could not be tested directly on documentary material, since the corpus documents prescribed responsibilities rather than the responsibility that actors themselves recognise; its examination requires survey data at actor level and is taken up in a companion study.

Overall, the principal challenge of Beninese forest policy is no longer to possess a policy and regulatory framework. It is to create the conditions under which that framework can actually function. Recent studies show that the outcomes of participatory forest management remain variable, that pressure on resources persists, and that local practices can nonetheless constitute a substantial support for conservation. The success of the 2023-2032 Forest

Policy will therefore depend on the capacity of public authorities to strengthen enforcement and, above all, to build a local participation that is not merely provided for in the texts but genuinely integrated into management decisions and benefits (Ostrom, 2009; Ribot, 2002).

Two limits should be noted. First, the analysis rests on documentary sources, which report prescribed arrangements and reported outcomes rather than observed practices; it therefore establishes the conditions of implementation rather than measuring their effects. Second, the corpus covers the national level, whereas the effectiveness of forest governance is known to vary across territories. Combining this analysis with actor-level survey data across contrasted municipalities would allow the propositions retained here to be tested directly.

Conclusion:-

This study set out to analyse public policies, institutional arrangements and stakeholder practices in the sustainable management of forest resources in Benin. The documentary analysis shows that the country now possesses a policy and institutional framework better adapted to current stakes, notably through the 2023-2032 Forest Policy. The existence of these orientations does not, however, suffice to secure sustainable management of the resource. The principal difficulties concern the implementation of policies, coordination among actors, the clarification of responsibilities and the effectiveness of community participation. The texts recognise the necessity of sustainable and participatory management, but the available studies show that their translation in the field remains variable across territories and local conditions. These findings bear on practices as documented in the corpus; appraising practices as actually performed would require field observation and actor-level survey data.

Sustainable forest management in Benin thus depends less on the multiplication of texts than on the capacity of institutions to apply them, to coordinate their interventions and genuinely to associate local actors with management decisions. Four priorities follow, each of which engages identifiable actors. Enforcement and surveillance fall to the forest administration, which holds the mandate for control, management planning and rule enforcement (Table 3), and whose field capacity, staff, means of movement, presence at the forest edge, conditions what the texts provide for. Monitoring and evaluation fall to the ministry responsible for the sector, the Ministry of Living Environment and Transport in charge of Sustainable Development, under whose authority the 2023-2032 Forest Policy was adopted (République du Bénin, 2023): it is at this level that indicators, baselines and periodic reporting on the objectives of the policy can be established, so that announced results may be distinguished from results effectively measured. Territorial articulation falls to the municipalities, which hold general competence over land use and are therefore the level at which forest provisions meet agricultural expansion, charcoal production and urbanisation.

Effective participation falls to the management bodies provided for in the participatory management plans approved in 2024, whose composition, decision-making powers and share in the benefits of management determine whether riparian populations take part in decisions or merely attend them. Harvesters and economic operators, finally, are the actors whose conformity with the rules these three levels are meant to secure. The national directorate in charge of forests is the Directorate-General of Water, Forests and Hunting (DGEFC), under the Ministry of Living Environment and Transport in charge of Sustainable Development (MCVT). At the local level, participatory forest management is organized through Participatory Management Councils, with management structures including the Forest Management Unit Council (CGUA) and the Village Forest Management Council (CVGF). On this basis, the effective implementation of the 2023-2032 Forest Policy constitutes a major stake. It will have to rest on a better articulation among the State, local governments, communities and the economic actors of the territories. Such an articulation could turn forest governance into a genuine lever for resource conservation and for the durable improvement of local livelihoods.

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