



Local Authorities in the Implementation of Public Security Policies in Benin

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Abstract:

Public security in Benin, once the prerogative of the central government, is undergoing a transformation with growing involvement of local authorities. In a decentralized context, territorial entities are called to play an active role in conflict prevention, risk management, and protection of populations. The question arises: how do they assume this role within the current regulatory and institutional framework? This research, using a mixed-methods approach, offers a socio-anthropological analysis of this dynamic. It combines a critical examination of institutional mechanisms with interviews conducted among local actors. The study was carried out in municipalities of Couffo, Alibori, and Ouémé, with a purposive sample of 132 stakeholders. These areas illustrate diverse contexts: border zones exposed to transnational risks, sensitive urban neighborhoods, and rural municipalities facing land disputes or intercommunal tensions. The analysis highlights social perceptions of insecurity, local strategies for co-producing security, and the structural limitations and political contingencies that hinder community responses. To frame this research, the study draws on the sociology of public action, socio-ecological resilience theory, and stakeholder policy analysis. Findings emphasize the need for and inclusive security governance. Such governance should recognize local knowledge, integrate mechanisms for securing goods, services, and capital, and encourage active citizen participation. Ultimately, the study shows that decentralization reshapes public security in Benin, positioning local authorities as essential actors in building resilience and legitimacy in the face of complex risks.

Keywords: Public Safety, Local Authorities, Local Governance, Co-Construction, Benin

Introduction

Faced with the resurgence of security threats in Benin, ranging from violent extremism in the northern border areas to transnational crime and

growing insecurity in urban centers, the limitations of traditional models of centralized governance are becoming increasingly apparent. Tchoudiba B. (2023) and Expédit O. (2022)

converge on this point, demonstrating that centralized security governance, by ignoring local dynamics, marginalizing community actors, weakens the legitimacy of the state, and creates fertile ground for the emergence of non-state actors. This situation calls into question the foundations of public action in the area of security, particularly in a context where local dynamics, community vulnerabilities, and informal mechanisms of social regulation play a crucial role. Security can no longer be conceived solely as a vertical state prerogative, but must be reintegrated into a territorialized, inclusive, and participatory approach. In this perspective, local authorities are emerging as essential local actors, capable of mobilizing local social, cultural, and institutional resources to address security challenges. Law No. 2021-14 of December 20, 2021, establishing the Territorial Administration Code in the Republic of Benin, legally enshrines their role in security management, but their involvement remains marginal, often symbolic, and sometimes influenced by the central government. Several recent studies notably that of Banégas (2023), highlight the tensions between state security mechanisms and community initiatives, revealing fragmented governance characterized by competing logics and ambiguous relationships between institutional and informal actors.

This work offers a socio-anthropological perspective on the contribution of local authorities to security governance in Benin, based on a detailed analysis of local perceptions, community-based conflict prevention and management mechanisms, and the mechanisms of coordination (or friction) between local authorities, security forces, and civil actors. It aims to move beyond a technocratic view of security to examine daily practices, social representations, and forms of local appropriation of security issues. Drawing on insights from political anthropology (Bayart, 2022), the sociology of institutions (Virginie, 2011), and critical security studies (Abrahamsen & Williams, 2021), this research seeks to shed light on the conditions that enable truly

decentralized security governance, rooted in territorial realities and attentive to local social dynamics.

In practice, this means understanding how local authorities can move from a peripheral role to a central position in the creation of local public security, by articulating state and community logics, negotiating institutional room for maneuver, and building responses adapted to local contexts.

This reflection is part of a critical approach, attentive to power relations, issues of legitimacy, and forms of resistance that permeate the spaces of security governance in Benin.

1. Materials and Methods, and Conceptual Framework for Analysis

1.1. Materials and Methods

Within the framework of this work on territorialized security governance in Benin, data collection was carried out on a sample whose saturation threshold was reached at 132 (one hundred and thirty-two) local actors composed of 58 (fifty-eight) citizens from different communes and districts, 42 (forty-two) municipal agents and officials of the decentralized services of the State, 20 (twenty) members of community organizations and local NGOs engaged in conflict prevention, 12 (twelve) local elected officials and municipal authorities, including mayors, district heads and councilors. The research took place in five municipalities spread across three departments: Alibori, Couffo, and Ouémé. These areas were chosen for their contextual diversity—border zones exposed to transnational risks, sensitive urban neighborhoods, and rural municipalities facing land or community tensions.

The methodological approach adopted is mixed, meaning it is both qualitative and quantitative, with a socio-anthropological orientation. It is based on three main data collection techniques:

Documentary research, which allowed for a critical review of previous work on local security, decentralization, and public policies in Benin.

Semi-structured interviews, conducted with key informants, made it possible to collect both cognitive (representations, perceptions) and affective (lived experiences, emotions related to inse Participant observation, conducted during community meetings, awareness sessions, and local conflict management mechanisms, allowed for the capture of concrete practices and interactions between actors.

The tools used for these techniques included: a reading log for reviewing documentary sources, an interview guide structured around the themes of local governance, perceptions of insecurity, and

coordination mechanisms, and an observation grid for analyzing social dynamics and community mechanisms. The collected data were grouped, categorized, and analyzed according to the research's focus areas. Methodological triangulation was applied to strengthen the validity of the results. Data processing was initially performed manually, then further refined using Word 2019 for transcription and Excel for classifying quantitative data. Finally, a thematic content analysis was conducted on the verbatim transcripts to identify the rationales for action, institutional tensions, and local forms of resilience curity data.

Table 1: Categorical distribution of actors by department and municipality

Departments	Municipalities	Municipal and local elected officials	Agents of the decentralized state services	Representative ONG	Citizens	Community associations	Community and traditional leaders	Total
Alibori	Kandi	6	7	2	5	2	4	26
	Banikoara	6	6	2	5	2	4	25
Couffo	Aplahoué	8	7	2	5	3	5	30
	Djakotomey	4	5	3	3	3	3	21
Ouémé	Porto-Novo	9	6	5	5	2	3	30
Totaux globaux		132						

Source: Field data, August 2025.

1.2. Conceptual framework for analysis

Figure 1: Conceptual framework for analysis

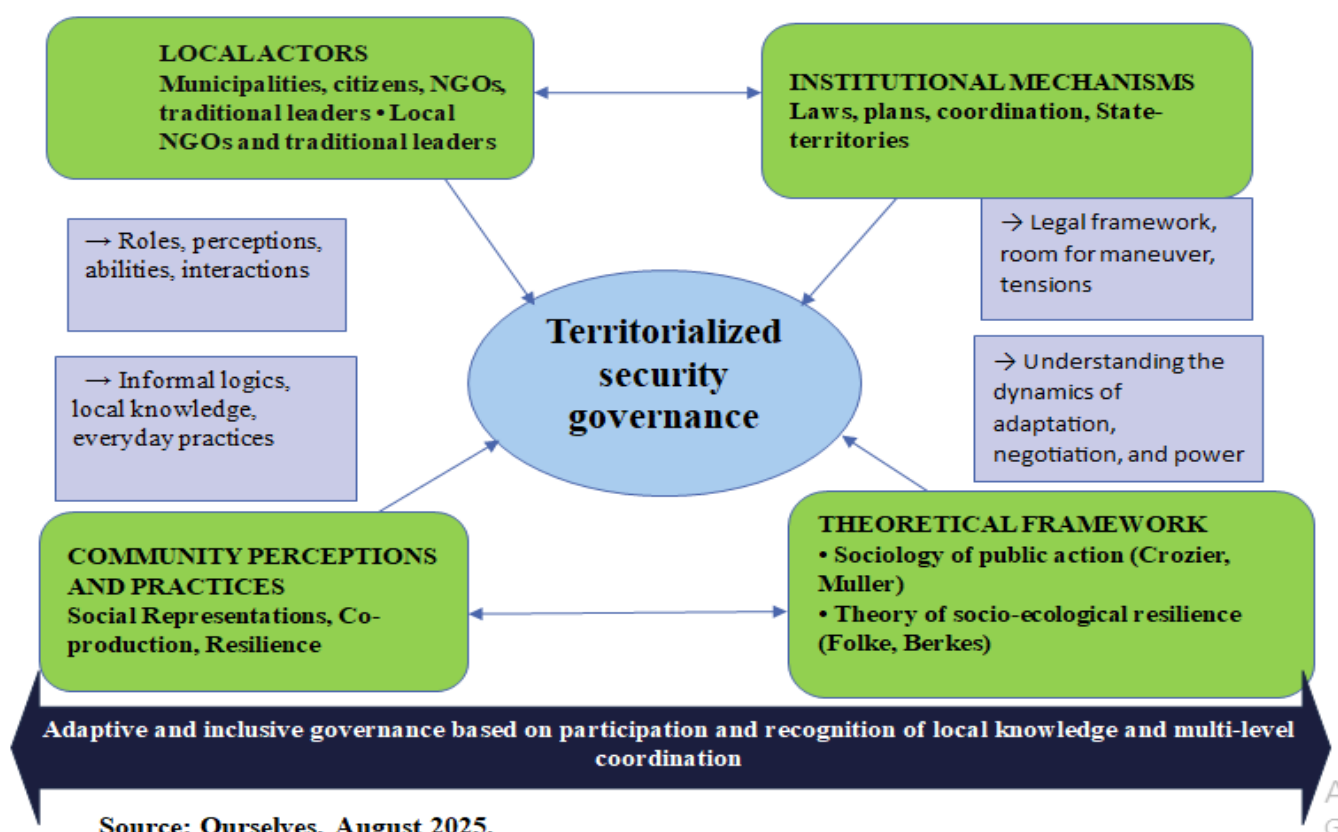
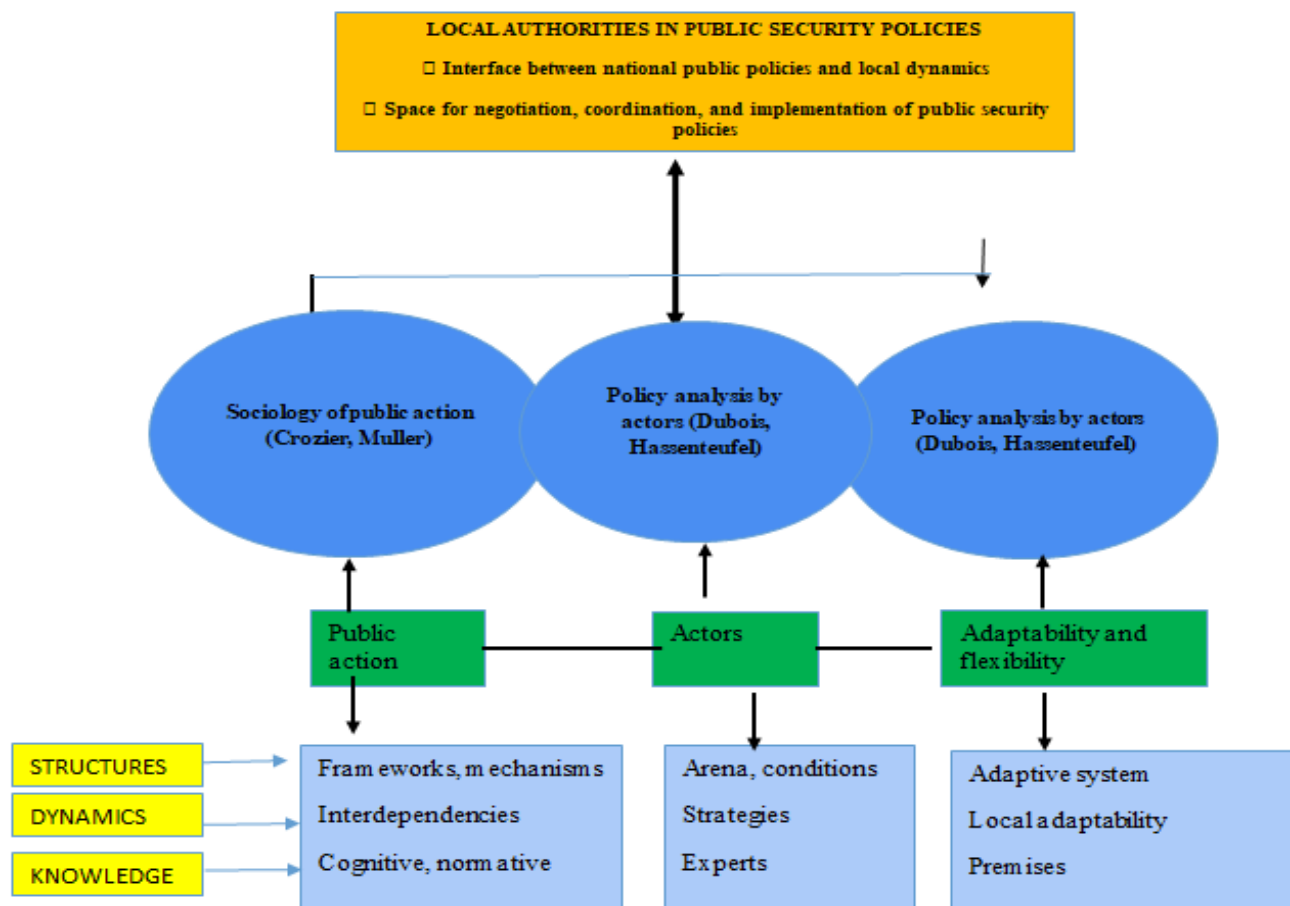


Figure 2: Diagram of the analysis model



Source: Our own work.

The diagram above illustrates the theories used to construct the analytical model that served as the theoretical framework for this research. It allows us to:

- Highlight the tensions between institutional directives and local realities;
- Identify the levers of action available to local authorities in implementing public security policies;
- To assess their role in building resilient and inclusive territorial governance.

2- Results

2.1 *Perception of insecurity and expectations of local authorities*

Empirical data reveal a shared perception of multifaceted insecurity which varies according to municipalities, but whose manifestations remain recurrent: thefts, robberies, assaults, and in some cases, risks linked to regional crises or natural hazards.

In Aplahoué, in the Couffo department, the threats described are numerous and affect both individuals and communities. One interviewee emphasized the diversity of the observed acts: "The most frequent are thefts, burglaries, scams, and assaults." These acts of violence are linked to specific contexts, notably land disputes and transhumance. Other forms of insecurity are emerging, such as "the abduction of minors for the purpose of marriage" and "armed attacks targeting both individuals and businesses." Cybercrime, perceived as a growing threat, is also identified, as highlighted by an interviewed police officer.:

"Cybercrime in the Couffo department is reaching alarming proportions. It is practiced throughout the department, particularly in the districts of Azovè and especially Kissamey, and primarily affects young people seeking easy money." In his testimony, another local elected official specifies that the most vulnerable areas are primarily commercial spaces.

"The Azovè and Kissamey areas, where large markets are held and periods of intense agricultural activity also contribute to tensions,

particularly in the localities of Godohou, Atomey, and Hounsahoué, where land disputes arise, sometimes resulting in deadly violence."

These remarks illustrate the interplay between economic vulnerabilities and social pressures in the development of insecurity.

In a different vein, a village chief in the Kandi commune raised the issue of external threats, explicitly mentioning the risk of terrorism:

"Currently, the commune is exposed to threats, particularly terrorism." While acknowledging that thefts and burglaries remain frequent, he drew attention to the danger of border areas: "Almost all districts of Kandi [...] are exposed, especially the villages bordering other countries."

This perception reflects a keen awareness of the porous nature of borders and their role in the spread of threats.

In the commune of Banikoara, the perception differs slightly, where insecurity is associated with natural disasters, citing "floods, thefts, and robberies." The district of Goumori is particularly affected, with villages like Bonni, Kpémbo, and Sansourou identified as "highly exposed to insecurity." Here, insecurity is seen as both a social threat and a vulnerability to climate hazards, reinforcing the idea that local security must be considered in a broader context.

An individual interviewed in the town of Goumori emphasized the role of unemployment and youth marginalization in the rise of crime: "Many young people, even those with degrees, are unemployed. Some then turn to theft, assault, or other offenses." He described a widespread and persistent insecurity, marked by frequent attacks in several localities. The individuals interviewed in the three departments agreed on the multifaceted nature of the insecurity, which they linked to economic factors, institutional failures, external influences, and environmental conditions. Poverty and unemployment are key drivers of delinquency. Added to this socio-economic vulnerability is the educational deficit, which pushes some young people toward crime. The

same discourse also highlighted weaknesses in local governance, particularly in land management and transhumance, which are sources of recurring violence: "Assaults and battery related to land disputes are caused by the lack of legal documentation." " says one of the respondents.

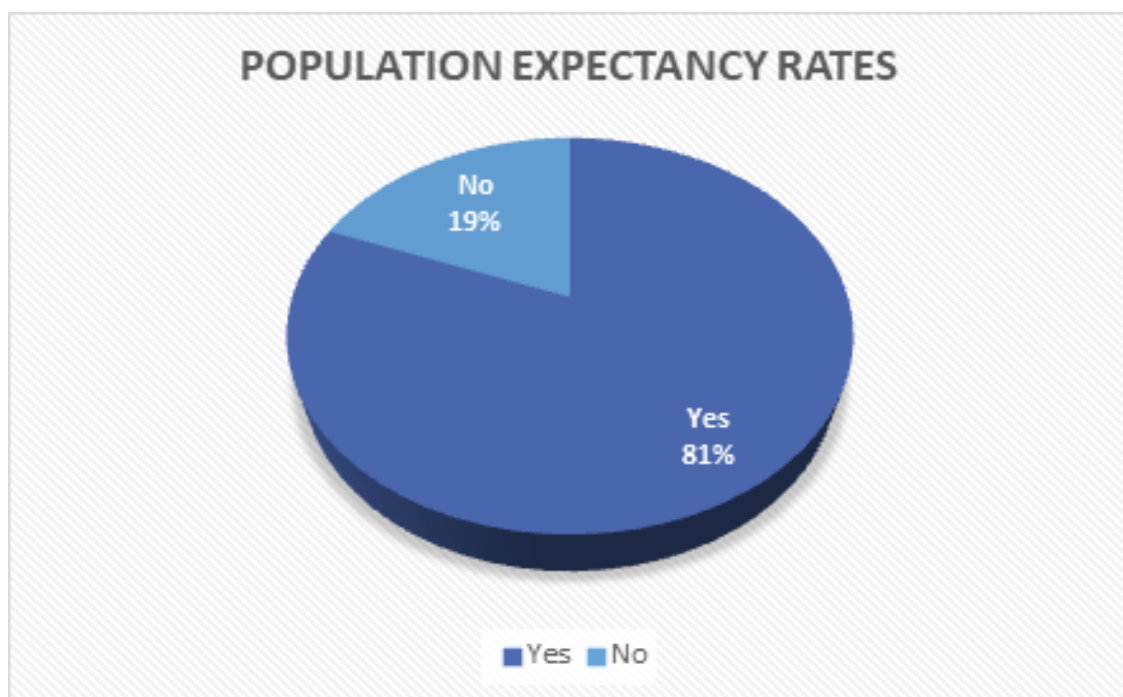
This structural analysis is complemented by other perspectives. One of our interviewees, emphasizing the role of regional and cross-border dynamics, stated: "When things get heated over there, some people retreat to our country. We pick up the pieces." Here, insecurity is perceived as a consequence of geographical proximity to neighboring countries facing security threats, making certain localities within the country involuntary refuge zones.

Regarding the role of local authorities, all participants acknowledged their importance, but with nuances in the scope and nature of their responsibilities. Local authorities must act as true

local leaders in security: "They must participate in the development and implementation of the municipality's security plans." (A local elected official from the municipality of Aplahoué). This vision emphasizes planning, collaboration with security forces, and community awareness. A more pragmatic approach, centered on their role as information relays, was also expressed: "Their main role is to relay information... if they find a suspicious person, they can contact the authorities." (A citizen in the city of Porto-Novo).

In summary, the analysis of data collected from 132 stakeholders (local elected officials, traditional leaders, members of associations, citizens, and security personnel) reveals a strong public expectation of local authorities in security management. 81% of respondents believe that local authorities should play an active role in conflict prevention and the protection of the population.

Figure 3: Public expectations of local authorities regarding security



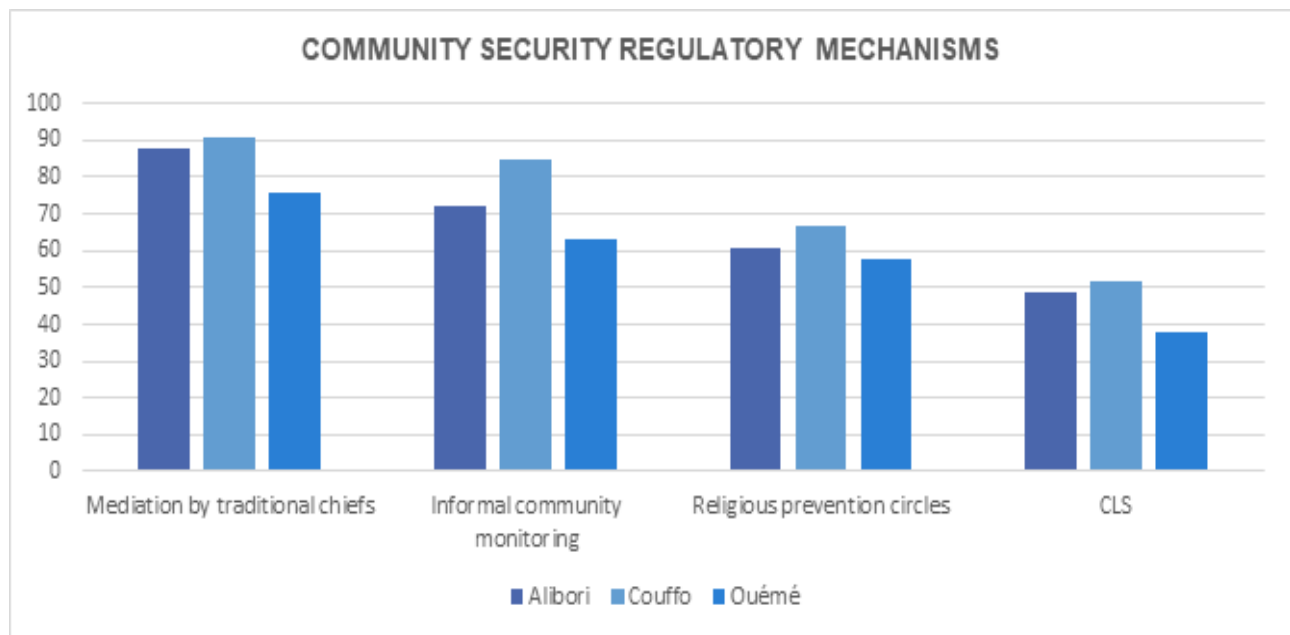
Source: Field data, 2025.

This expectation is particularly pronounced in the border areas of Alibori (Kandi, Malanville), where populations face cross-border threats and express growing distrust of state mechanisms perceived as distant.

2.2 Community-Based Security Regulation Mechanisms

The investigations identified several local regulatory mechanisms, often informal but socially legitimate. These mechanisms are represented in the figure below

Figure 4: Community-Based Security Regulation Mechanisms



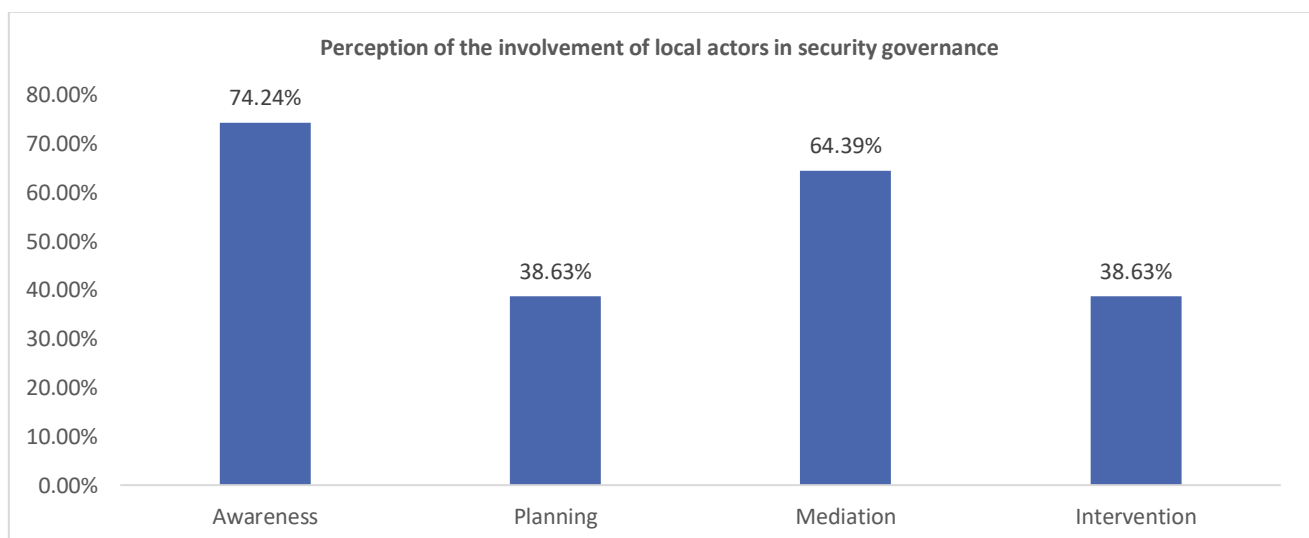
Source: Field data, 2025.

These mechanisms are often perceived as more effective than state-run systems, particularly in rural areas. However, their integration into public policies remains marginal due to a lack of formal recognition and inter-institutional coordination.

2.3 Involvement of local authorities in security measures

Of the 132 respondents, 74% stated that local elected officials participate in awareness-raising or mediation activities, but only 39% felt they had concrete resources to act. (Figure 5)

Figure 5: Perceived involvement of local elected officials in security measures



Source: Field data, 2025.

Some local elected officials, particularly in Porto-Novo, mention strong social pressure but a lack of training and resources to effectively address security challenges.

2.4 Obstacles to security cooperation and institutional limitations

Interviews conducted with local stakeholders highlight several obstacles hindering effective collaboration between local authorities, security forces, and communities. These obstacles—structural, relational, and material—correspond to the findings of the quantitative data.

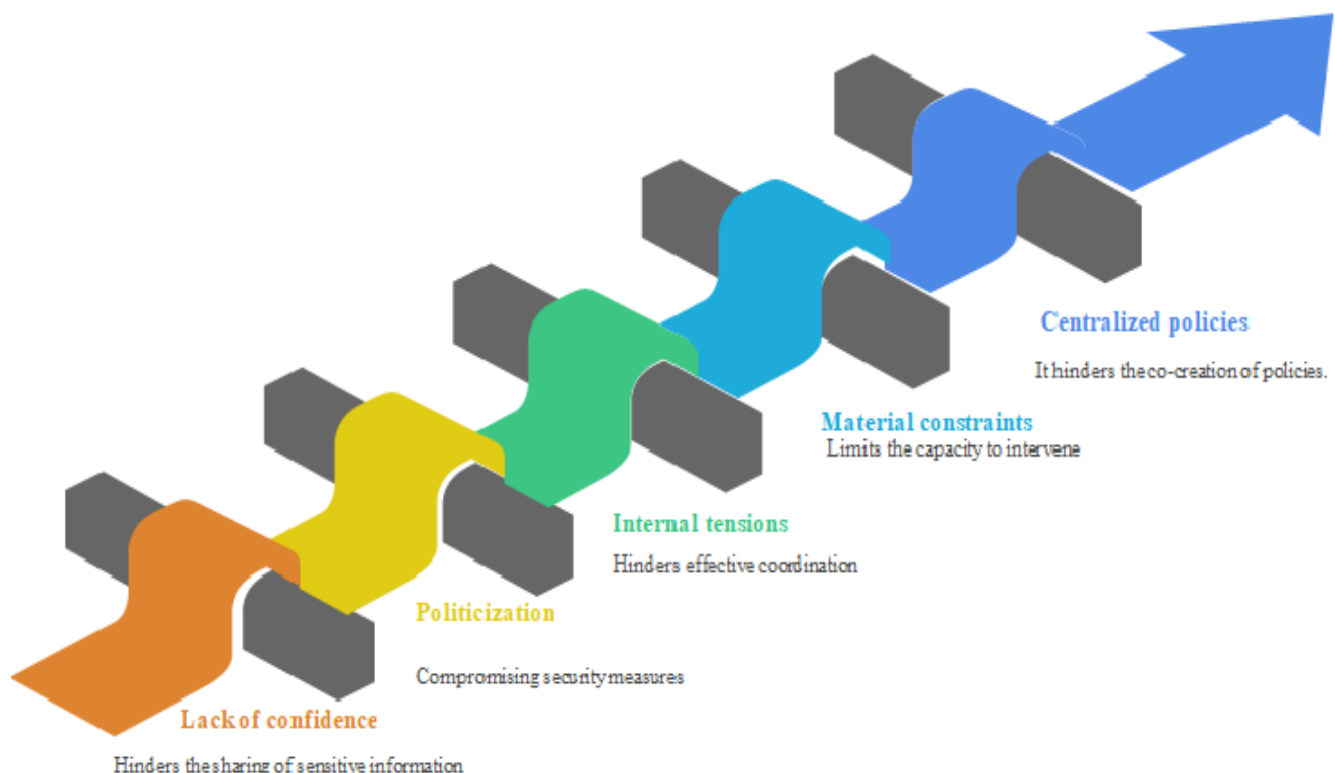
This is precisely what one of the researchers emphasizes, highlighting the difficulties related to trust and intervention planning. He specifically mentions: "the reluctance of some local elected officials to share sensitive information," as well as "certain delayed interventions in the handling of legal cases, sometimes linked to electoral considerations." These elements reflect a politicization of security issues and a weak institutional responsiveness, which can compromise the implementation of security measures. This observation aligns with the data collected from local elected officials, most of whom report having no funding for security actions. The lack of specific funding limits the ability of local authorities to initiate or support local prevention and protection initiatives. Furthermore, emphasis was placed on internal tensions and differing opinions among stakeholders. These relational dynamic underscores the need for consultation and compromise to maintain effective coordination. It echoes the testimonies of 69% of members of Local Security Committees (LSCs), who

denounce the lack of official recognition, despite government rhetoric attempting to establish their legitimacy.

In addition, material and financial constraints faced by the police were discussed, as stated by a respondent in the municipality of Banikoara: "The police do not have enough resources or equipment to manage certain situations." This shortage of operational resources limits the intervention capacity of the security forces and hinders inter-institutional collaboration. This observation is reinforced by data indicating that 77% of local stakeholders feel they have not received adequate training in security management, which affects their effectiveness in the field.

Finally, 65% of respondents believe that security policies are designed in a centralized manner, with little consultation with local authorities. This centralization reinforces dependence on the state and hinders the co-construction of public security policies, which is nevertheless essential for a response tailored to local realities.

Figure 6: Obstacles to collaboration and institutional limitations



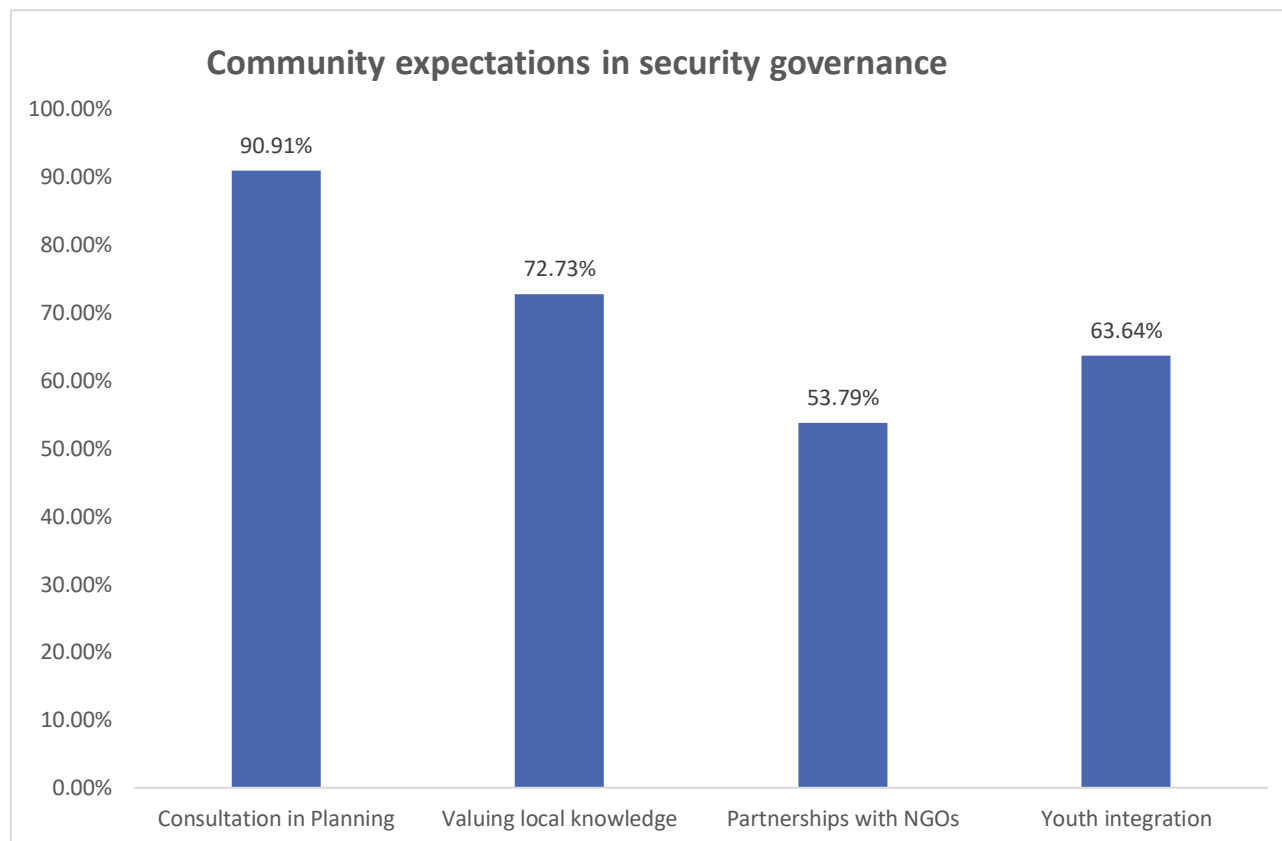
Source: Conducted online using the NAPKIN AI application, November 2025.

2.5 Community Expectations and Local Proposals

Despite the obstacles, the population expresses a desire to actively participate in security governance. 91% of respondents wish to be

consulted in the development of Local Security Plans (LSPs), the effectiveness of which remains limited, with an implementation rate of only 11.68%, representing 9 out of the country's 77 municipalities; and 73% propose the integration of customary knowledge into official mechanisms.

Figure 7: Community expectations regarding security governance



Source: Field data, 2025.

This field data justifies the need for adaptive, inclusive, and territorially based governance, founded on the recognition of local dynamics and community knowledge.

3- Discussion

➤ *An Incomplete Territorialization of Security Governance*

The results reveal a clear desire among the population to see local authorities play an active role in public safety. This expectation, expressed by more than 80% of respondents, reflects a quest for proximity, responsiveness, and legitimacy in managing local threats. It aligns with the paradigm of territorialized governance, as defined by Lebel et al. (2006), where responses to public challenges must be co-developed with local stakeholders.

However, this territorialization remains largely formal. Local elected officials are often perceived as symbolic figures, without real power or dedicated resources. This paradox recalls the work of Crozier & Friedberg (1977) on organizational constraints: local authorities are entrusted with a mission without the necessary means to accomplish it. A disconnect is thus observed between legal texts (e.g., Law No. 2021-14 establishing the Territorial Administration Code in Benin) and actual practices on the ground.

Community mechanisms: between social effectiveness and institutional invisibility

Customary regulatory mechanisms—chieftaincies, religious reconciliation, informal monitoring—appear as pillars of local security. Their effectiveness relies on social proximity, a nuanced

understanding of community dynamics, and the ability to mobilize symbolic resources.

Yet, these mechanisms remain marginalized in official policies. Their weak institutional recognition reflects a form of administrative blindness to local knowledge. This phenomenon can be interpreted through the notion of "practical norms" developed by Olivier de Sardan (1998), which highlights the gap between formal mechanisms and actual governance practices. The central state struggles to integrate these forms of regulation into its security frameworks, resulting in a two-tiered governance system.

➤ ***Institutional Asymmetry: A Structural Obstacle***

The involvement of local authorities in public security policies is hampered by a series of structural obstacles:

- The lack of dedicated funding (83% of elected officials surveyed)
- The lack of specific training (77% of local stakeholders)
- Weak inter-institutional coordination (69% of CLS members)
- The centralization of security decisions
- These elements reflect an institutional asymmetry, where local authorities are seen as implementing bodies rather than strategic partners. This configuration is reminiscent of Muller's (2015) analysis of public policymaking, where peripheral actors are often excluded from the priority-setting processes.
- This situation generates fragmented governance, where responsibilities are dispersed without coherent coordination.

➤ ***Social Representations of Insecurity: Between Fear, Resilience, and Expectations***

Local perceptions of insecurity are marked by significant anxiety, particularly in sensitive urban areas and border towns. This anxiety manifests itself in different ways, reflecting the specific realities of each context. The accounts collected in various localities in Benin illustrate this complexity.

In Malanville, a border town, the fear of cross-border incursions is palpable. The proximity of the border generates a constant feeling of insecurity, fueled by the fear of seeing individuals or armed groups cross the border and disrupt daily life. This fear is exacerbated by the porous nature of the border and the difficulties encountered by security forces in controlling it effectively. Local populations feel vulnerable and exposed, which contributes to a climate of mistrust and suspicion.

In Porto-Novo, the capital of Benin, mistrust of the security forces is a recurring problem. This mistrust stems from several factors, such as negative experiences with police officers, allegations of corruption or abuse of power, and perceived excessive police repression. This mistrust undermines collaboration between the population and the security forces, making it more difficult to combat crime and insecurity, particularly through the provision of information.

In Kandi, a town in northern Benin, the use of customary mechanisms for conflict resolution and maintaining order is a common practice. These mechanisms, based on local traditions and values, are often seen as more effective and legitimate than state institutions. They can include practices of mediation, conciliation, or community sanctions. The emphasis placed on these mechanisms demonstrates a desire to take ownership of security and justice management, drawing on local resources and skills.

These representations reflect a moral economy of security, where expectations extend beyond physical protection. Security is perceived as a common good encompassing social recognition, community justice, and dignity. People aspire to be protected not only from physical threats, but also from injustice, discrimination, and violations

of their dignity. They wish to be treated with respect and consideration, and to have their fundamental rights guaranteed.

This broader conception of security aligns with the reflections of Roncoli et al. (2009) on integrating vernacular knowledge into resilience policies. Roncoli and his colleagues emphasize the importance of considering local knowledge and practices in the design and implementation of public policies. They demonstrate that local populations possess valuable knowledge about risks and vulnerabilities, as well as adaptation and resilience strategies. Integrating this knowledge strengthens the effectiveness and relevance of public policies and fosters their ownership by the communities concerned.

In this context, security becomes a matter of local citizenship. Communities assert their right to be protected according to their own cultural and social values. They wish to actively participate in shaping security policies and to have their needs and concerns addressed. This demand for recognition is central to the co-creation of public policies.

The co-creation of public policies involves close dialogue and collaboration between public authorities, civil society organizations, and local communities. It requires careful attention to the needs and expectations of the population, as well as consideration of their knowledge and practices. It also implies an equitable distribution of responsibilities and resources, and participatory monitoring and evaluation of implemented policies.

In short, social perceptions of insecurity are complex and multifaceted. They reflect the specific realities of each context, as well as the aspirations and expectations of populations regarding security. Taking these perceptions into account is essential for the design and implementation of effective and relevant public policies that address the needs and concerns of the populations concerned. The co-construction of public policies, which involves dialogue and close collaboration between public authorities, civil

society organizations, and local populations, is a promising avenue for strengthening security and local citizenship.

➤ ***Dynamics of co-construction: between participatory imperative and fragmented practices***

The co-construction of security policies, while theoretically valued, remains largely ineffective. Local Security Plans (LSPs), when they exist, are often developed without genuine community ownership. Yet, 91% of respondents expressed a desire to be involved in their development.

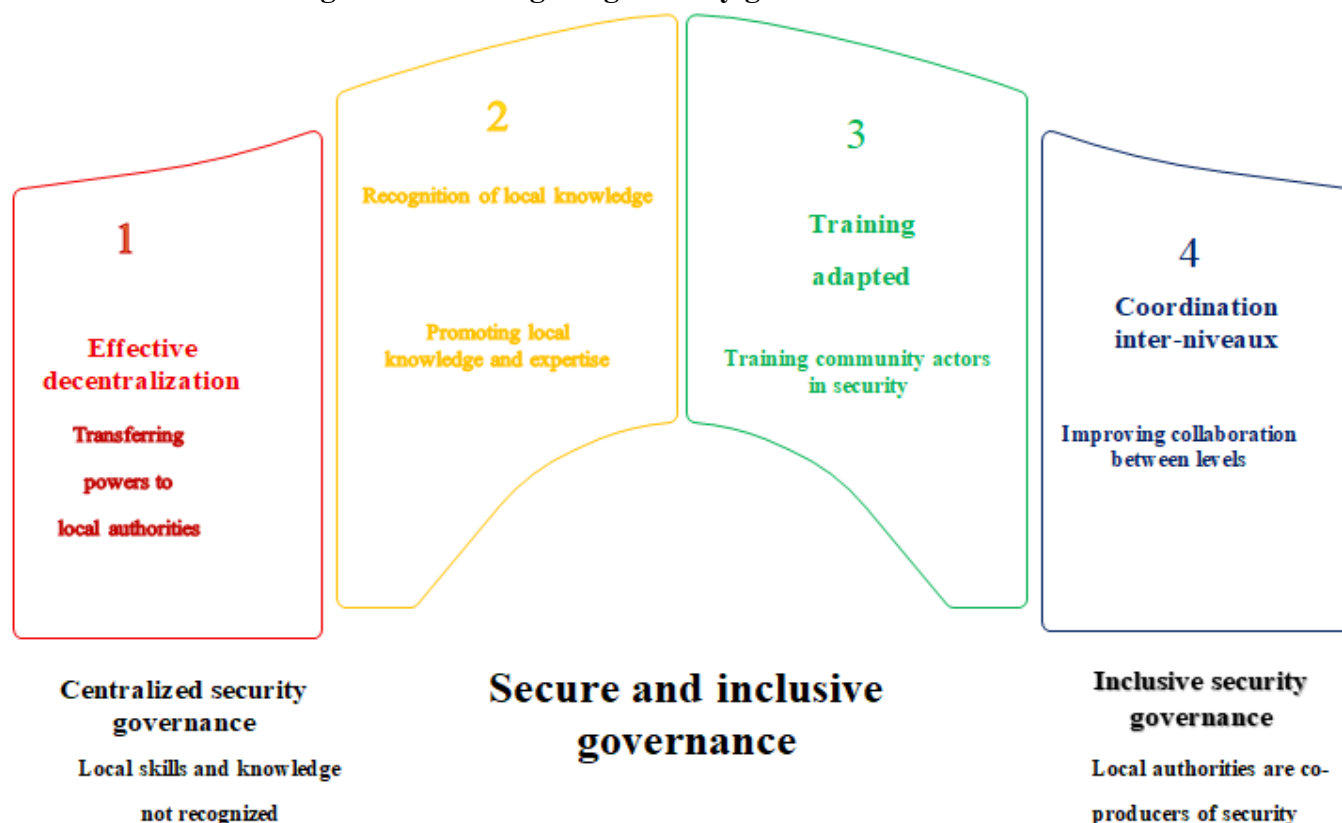
This participatory imperative, which has not been acted upon, generates social frustration and a loss of trust in institutions. It echoes criticisms leveled by various stakeholders regarding participatory mechanisms in Africa, which are often instrumentalized without any real transformation of power dynamics.

Some municipalities, however, are experimenting with innovative practices: integrating young people into intelligence gathering in Porto-Novo in the Ouémé region, partnerships with NGOs for training Local Security Committees (LSCs) in Kandi, and the use of community radio for awareness-raising in the Couffo region. These initiatives demonstrate that adaptive governance is possible, provided that local dynamics are recognized.

➤ ***Towards inclusive and territorially based security governance***

The survey results argue for a reconfiguration of security governance in Benin. This reconfiguration presupposes an effective decentralization of powers—recognition of local knowledge—appropriate training for community actors—and coordination between levels of governance. It also implies a transformation of institutional representations: communities should no longer be seen as mere implementers, but as co-producers of security. This approach aligns with the principles of adaptive governance (Adger, 2006), based on flexibility, inclusion, and resilience.

Figure 8: Reconfiguring security governance in Benin



Sources: Conducted online using the NAPKIN AI application, November 2025.

Sources: Conducted online using the NAPKIN AI application, November 2025.

Conclusion

This research, conducted in the Alibori, Couffo, and Ouémé departments, reveals that local authorities, although identified as key local actors, remain marginalized within formal security structures. Community expectations of these local authorities are high, but their capacity to act is hampered by institutional asymmetries, a lack of resources, and insufficient recognition of local knowledge. Customary regulatory mechanisms, citizen initiatives, and informal forms of security monitoring demonstrate a territorial resilience that is often undervalued by public policies. This invisibility of local practices constitutes a blind spot in security governance, even though it could be its very foundation.

Security cannot be conceived solely as a matter for the central state. It must be co-constructed with local communities, valuing community dynamics, local knowledge, and the forms of social organization that structure local life. This

implies a reconfiguration of the relationship between the state and society, based on mutual recognition, training for local actors, and the establishment of horizontal coordination mechanisms.

Ultimately, local authorities must no longer be considered mere administrative intermediaries, but rather as co-producers of security, capable of thinking and acting based on lived realities. Only then can security governance become inclusive, localized, and sustainable.

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