

Tossou Atchrimi

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## Community development and participation in Togo: the case of AGAIB Plateaux

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**Abstract.** In order to reinforce the capacity for action of local African communities, international organisations support “participatory” projects that encourage greater local involvement in the implementation of actions. By adopting a well-designed approach, with realistic projects that address precise needs, local communities can be given the techniques and resources for their economic and social emancipation, thereby combating poverty.

This mainly qualitative and documentary research follows activities of an AGAIB, an *Agence d’Appui aux Initiatives de Base* (Grassroots Initiative Support Agency) in Togo’s Plateaux region. This organisation has opted for a form of participatory democracy, enabling communities to take control of their situation through income generating activities (IGAs) and to participate at every step in projects that they themselves have initiated. To secure the future of these programs, however, and extend them to all Togolese communities, greater participation is required from the authorities.

**Keywords.** Self-empowerment, Community, Local democracy, Community development, Togo

### 1. Introduction

The concept of development can be defined as a series of more or less linear changes, from traditional to more modern modes of production, from a daily life marked by suffering and privation to a more comfortable life, made possible by relatively recent progress. Development highlights the need to maintain or improve people’s quality of life, to guarantee the sustainability of resources, to reduce differences in standards of living, to promote community self-sufficiency, and to facilitate the transfer of knowledge or wealth.

In African countries, and in particular in Togo, there are many obstacles that impede the dynamics of development. The incapacity of the authorities to meet the basic vital needs of their populations, especially those in rural areas, is clearly evident: inadequate educational facilities, poor healthcare provision, and dismal levels of access to safe drinking water. In 2006, a national study revealed that only 17% of children aged 11 were enrolled in the last year of primary school, and that infant mortality was high, at 77 for 1000 births (DGCSN, 2006). Aware of

this situation, the government and its international partners put in place action programs to improve standards of living. During the 1990s, however, and a large part of the following decade, these projects were doomed to failure by macroeconomic mismanagement, lack of transparency in the investment of public resources, democratic deficit, and incompatibility with local realities.

All partnership and development perspectives call for a new organisational ethic, founded on local community initiatives and participation. New approaches have emerged, with the goal of putting people at the heart of development and driving home the message that communities should be the artisans of their own development: self-empowerment for men and women through local organisations.

The aim of this research is to propose, by starting out from the “AGAIB method”, a better match between the real socio-economic aspirations of local communities and public development policies. In terms of democracy and participation, the AGAIB has opted for transparency in the management of its activities, enabling communities to take control of their situation through income generating activities

and to participate at every step in projects of which they are the main initiators.

Local democracy—based on the active participation of the beneficiaries and the fulfillment of the relevant conditions—is a pre-requisite for local community development.

## 2. Scoping the issues

From the economic perspective, when we speak of development, we refer to all of the technical, social, demographic and cultural transformations that accompany growth in production. It is therefore a concept that reflects the structural and qualitative aspects of growth. It can—indeed must—be associated with the idea of social and economic progress: improving living standards, educational levels, and well-being for the entire population (Rehim, 2007).

All of these theoretical proposals rely on factors that often ignore the real needs of populations and frequently lead to the failure of programs. Another cause of failure is corruption among some of the actors involved in these initiatives, a phenomenon that is found in the communities themselves, within peasant groups (Amouzou, 2005). *“In practice, [...] in Togo, the humanitarian cause has become something of a golden calf, sparking merciless competition. Denunciation, corruption, political blackmail, clientelism, nepotism, destabilization campaigns, secret deals and coalitions, anti-competitive agreements, embezzlement, poaching of staff... it’s all there”*. (Atchrimi, 2008: 266).

The country’s socio-economic situation is partly to blame for this state of affairs. But humanitarian practices are also a key factor. The procedures for selecting one NGO, to the detriment of another, force NGOs to establish their credentials. Once the calls for tenders have been sent out, each organisation tries to respond by showcasing, in the context of their projects, anything that the donors might find persuasive. Since nothing can be done without their financial backing, the criteria on which these arguments are based are given very careful attention.

To win the brief, specialists, who are sometimes members of institutions, are called in. *“The role attributed to them, by virtue of their knowledge, is not unlike that of a good sales technician tasked with closing a contract deal. Besides, there is nothing exaggerated about this comparison: at the end of the day, winning the call for tenders is synonymous with getting paid”* (Atchrimi, *ibid.*). The competing organisations therefore stress the quality of their evaluation method, and the professionalism with which it will be applied, so much so that the figures and statistics—which might ordinarily be thought of as indicators of the results, no more— substitute for the actual results and even supersede them, becoming an end in their own right.

In Togo, the facts on the ground are that people are suffering, for example, from the lack of access to drinking water. The problem is more perceptible in rural areas, where hydraulic installations are few and far between, and most of them are inoperative. The visitor to the Plateaux region soon realizes that the main priorities for the poorest communities are of three kinds: access to education, access to health-care, and access to drinking water. On top of which comes the

need to have access to funding for income generating activities, a consideration made even more salient by the impact of the food crisis. What is more, these communities are trained and supervised by the Project so that they can participate more effectively in their own development. The poor track record of the actions attempted thus far gives even greater legitimacy to a community’s right to have a say in decisions that affect it.

Participatory development presupposes greater transparency, a larger role for local organisations, and respect for human rights, which includes efficient and accessible legal systems. It is about promoting the introduction of an alternative system of management, of expressing needs, and of implementing projects, by getting the beneficiaries of the programs to pool their efforts as part of a local dynamic built on the community-based management of their problems. These initiatives are considered to be innovative; they are the consequences of the political and economic democratization process on which Togo embarked in 2005. There are now an increasing number of forums of expression for local actors. The approach we present here is founded on community participation, which is seen as the process by which people are empowered to get involved, actively and genuinely, in determining the questions that concern them, in making decisions about the factors that affect their lives, in formulating and implementing policies around the planning, design and delivery of services, and in pursuing the actions undertaken to make change happen.

The experience of the AGAIBs, (*Agences d’Appui aux Initiatives de Base*—Grassroots Initiative Support Agencies) offers a prism through which we can arrive at an intelligible analysis of the contribution made by participatory models to community development. After years of experience in the practice of participatory local development, it is important to understand in what way the AGAIB approach has contributed to reducing poverty in certain areas of Togo’s Plateaux region. This paper sets out to analyze the characteristics of the AGAIB approach by using the following questions as a starting-point: What are the components of the organisation’s approach? What is innovative about it, and how does it contribute to the issue of the sustainable development of local communities in Togo? How can the authorities appropriate it, with a view to rolling it out nationwide?

Our basic postulate is that the success of community development projects supported by the AGAIBs is due to the involvement and participation of the beneficiary communities.

## 3. Methodological and theoretical frameworks

### 3.1 Institutional framework

The institutional mechanism for the implementation of the projects is as follows:

#### 3.1.1 Central level

**The Project Orientation Committee** (*Comité d’Orientation du Projet*, COP), made up of representatives from the government, the donors and civil society, is chaired by the Minister

of Grassroots Development, Crafts, Youth, and Youth Employment. The Minister of the Economy and Finance is the senior vice-president, and the Minister delegated to the Prime Minister with responsibility for Grassroots Development is the deputy vice-president. The Committee's role is:

- To facilitate convergence between the micro-projects identified by communities and sector development plans elaborated at local and national level;
- To facilitate collaboration with all other poverty reduction projects and programs;
- **The Technical Secretariat**, made up of a coordinator, an administrative and financial manager, an internal auditor, a government contract specialist, a monitoring and evaluation specialist, and a support staffer. The Secretariat provides the AGAIB with technical assistance for contracting, financial management, and disbursements. It also acts as the secretariat for the COP.

### 3.1.2 Regional level

The **AGAIB**: made up of a Board of Directors (*Conseil d'Administration*, CA), a Coordinator, and a Regional Approval Committee (*Comité Régional d'Approbation*, CRA) to which the projects identified by the communities are submitted.

The Board comprises seven members, including three directors from the civil service (the Regional Director for Development and Planning acts as a statutory member, while the two others are elected from among the members of the Regional Technical Services), two directors representing the NGOs active in the region, and two directors representing the members of civil society and senior figures of moral authority. They elect a president from among their number.

The Board members are elected by the Annual General Meeting. The Board approves the program of activities and the provisional accounts drawn up by the Coordinator and monitors compliance with the project implementation guidelines.

The Coordinator is responsible for the attainment of the objectives and the results expected from the project at regional level. To this end, he organises coordinates, monitors and supervises all of the activities. He prepares the Regional Approval Committee meeting, finalizes contracts, and ensures the physical and financial oversight of the identified projects.

The Regional Approval Committee (CRA) is made up of five members appointed by the Board from among the members of the General Meeting. Its mandate is to organise the periodic monitoring of micro-projects. It meets at least once every two months, and is convened by the Coordinator.

### 3.1.3 Local level

The Village Development Committee (*Comité Villageois de Développement*, CVD), made up at grassroots

level, identifies, executes and manages micro-projects for the community. It is therefore the main executive instrument of the Community Development Program (PDC). The Village Chief is the Honorary President of the CVD.

Togo has a total of five AGAIBs, covering the country's different administrative regions. The first, in the Maritime region, was set up in 1998. The four others were officially created in 2001. AGAIB-Plateaux effectively became operational in 2008. It provides financial and technical support for projects in communities with few income-generating activities (IGAs) and for the construction of community infrastructures.

Its missions notably include the definition of activity policies and strategies; it is also tasked with monitoring compliance with the procedures manual, approving the work program, and examining and validating activity reports, as well as the annual accounts presented by the Coordinator. The AGAIBs also rely on intermediaries, namely the NGOs or independent consultants who bring their technical know-how to the beneficiary organisations and liaise with the Coordinator. The decision to study the AGAIB in the Plateaux region was based on the fact that this is the country's biggest and most agricultural region, and the one with the largest number of micro-projects: 102 identified out of a total of 395 (DGCSN, 2006).

The total amount of the project is 17.2 millions dollars (approx. 7.2 billion CFA francs), divided up among the 5 AGAIBs on the basis of need. AGAIB-Plateaux' share for the period 2008-2011 was 2 billion CFA francs (RT, 2008).

## 3.2 Protocol and methodology

This study focuses on five groupings supported by AGAIB-Plateaux: four CVDs (Village Development Committees) and the entire beneficiary population. It draws on the results of a project set up in 2008: the Community Development Program (*Programme de Développement Communautaire*, PDC). We met with the actors of the project between September and November 2012. The survey was conducted with two sociology degree students recruited for the purpose. We proceeded in stages:

- Definition of the issues, drafting of the protocol and assignment of tasks;
- The broadest possible documentary research, consulting books, specialist journals, and reports. The aim of this phase was to take stock of earlier studies and analyses and to gather any information that might be useful for the study. It involved compiling and inventory of the existing literature on the topic;
- Semi-structured interviews, with local communities (village and district chiefs, beneficiary associations and farmers' groups) and with regional managers, elected representatives, and union leaders);
- Focus groups: this component takes account of all the local groupings and committees on the basis of their specificities: urban groups, rural groups, and

women's groups, as well as groups of livestock farmers, crop growers and storage workers. Participants were selected by proportional stratified sampling. In this way, each organisation makes up one stratum. For the needs of the semi-structured interviews, we met with 52 individual members of beneficiary organisations: 37 women and 15 men. The women—more vulnerable and more affected by poverty—are also very active, and are more strongly represented in the groups.

The interviews were recorded. They were kept short, so that the respondents could quickly get back to what they were doing: this was one of the conditions for agreeing to the interviews. The recordings were transcribed afterwards;

- Processing of collected information, analysis of content;
- Synthesis and final write-up.

### 3.3 Limitations of the study

The viewpoint of the people involved in this study represents only one angle of analysis. For a more complete picture, it would be useful to consult all of the groups in the country that benefit from AGAIB support. Given the limited financial resources available, however, this paper will restrict itself to the perceptions of the actors in the region under study. The AGAIBs differ in size, in the importance of their projects, and in their length of existence. This data might suggest that the conclusions of the study of the Plateaux regions could be transposed to other development NGOs in Togo.

Another difficulty inherent in the study was that of meeting with the beneficiaries, who were often hostile to questioning, suspecting a political purpose behind the survey. As well as focusing solely on the beneficiaries' utterances, the study takes account of certain variables to the detriment of others: political affiliations, for example, are not addressed. A political variable would enable us to assess the validity of certain answers in an environment strongly marked by the dead weight of politics and in which the actors very often follow the dictates of their ideology.

The methodology is based exclusively on interviews. Given the theme, it would have been pertinent to use the method of *in situ* observation for a more complete understanding and analysis of the influence of local cultures and values on new initiatives.

Finally, these limitations should be borne in mind with a view to further research.

At the theoretical level, the organisational approach described here draws its substance from the principles of the rationality of actors and of individualism.

The principle of rationality, derived from the work of Max Weber, states that the rational individual gives the reasons behind his or her action. Weber defines his approach, in *Economy and Society*, as a "comprehensive" science that seeks to analyze the meaning intended by an agent or agents in interaction with others and, consequently, sets out to

understand the meaning of all social activity (Weber, M., 1995).

According to the principle of methodological individualism (Boudon, R. and Bourricaud, F., 1986), it is essential to reconstruct the motivations of the individuals concerned by the phenomenon in question. The phenomenon should, indeed, be seen as the result of the aggregation of individual behaviors dictated by these motivations. Methodological individualism considers the end purpose of individual action and the intentionality of the actor placed in conditions where he is forced to react to constraints that get in the way of his objectives.

From what was said earlier, it appears that the beneficiaries of support from AGAIB-Plateaux leveraged their rationality by weighing up the benefits of these projects, which take account of their realities and their conditions of existence.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 General considerations

From the information gathered on people's knowledge of AGAIB projects, it emerges that a large majority of the population is aware of the organisation's existence. This can be explained by the awareness-raising activities and frequent field visits by AGAIB agents. A key aspect of the AGAIB approach is the involvement of the beneficiary population at every stage in the project. It is they, indeed, who initiate the projects in response to their own needs.

*"We're the ones who asked for the well to be drilled, to lift us out of misery, so we are all responsible"* one woman<sup>1</sup> told us.

The financial participation of the communities is also a success factor, in that it encourages community involvement in, and appropriation of, projects.

*"The school building wasn't just the AGAIB's doing: we also participated financially. We provided the land, the sand, the water, the volunteers. Money alone can do nothing; the local people did the lion's share, and now we're going to look after it properly."*<sup>2</sup>

On another level, the climate of trust that exists between the different program actors is worthy of note. It is due, among other things, to regular financial management updates.

### 4.2 Concrete actions

AGAIB-Plateaux organises training for beneficiaries. Courses focus on project management and bookkeeping. In the organisations it supports, AGAIB-Plateaux has put in place a system, backed up by training, to ensure transparent project management. The organisations have also been trained in contracting procedures.

To avoid corruption in the form of entrusting projects to a

<sup>1</sup> A beneficiary of the project during our field visit.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with a district chief from Notsé (a town in the Plateaux region).

friend or relative, any task that requires the intervention of an outside technician has to go through a tender process. Bids are examined in the presence of a national coordination representative. All members are also informed of the start-up of an activity before any funds are disbursed and used. All groups are issued with account books. All managers report on their activities periodically.

The grassroots organizations do not possess the resources to fund their initiatives. The AGAIB finances the projects of group members living below the poverty line. As a result, it covers 95% of the budget. The allocated funds and activities are monitored through follow-up visits by intermediaries: *“we placed the intermediaries so that they would be very close to the beneficiaries”*<sup>3</sup> and, as one beneficiary added: *“the follow-up visits allow us to correct our mistakes, and make up lost time if we’re behind schedule. They motivate us.”*<sup>4</sup>

The project has contributed to an improvement in living conditions. Support from the AGAIB has created jobs. Many people were without fixed employment, but post-funding they have become workers, i.e. producers (13,774 new workers out of a planned 14,000: a fulfillment rate of 98%). Infrastructure rehabilitation or construction work employs local labor and injects significant resources into the local economies of the project zone. Likewise, IGAs have created jobs for direct and indirect beneficiaries, thereby helping to reduce rural exodus and prostitution: now that there is work to be found locally, young people are less tempted to migrate to the cities—notably to the capital, Lomé—in the belief that they will find a better life there.

The projects have facilitated the social integration of the beneficiaries. Work is not only an activity that generates production; it is an activity that creates social bonds. The project that involved, among other things, financing socioeconomic infrastructure micro-projects (schools, health centers, etc.), proposing income-generating activities implemented directly by communities in accordance with their priorities, and training their members in job creation had very significant positive social impacts, notably in the areas of education, health, employment and standards of living. On the health side, the hydraulic installation built by the project supplies the population with drinking water and helps reduce the prevalence of water-borne diseases.

In terms of community participation in the implementation of micro-projects, the results are, once again, edifying. The 5% contribution expected from the beneficiary communities resulted in a genuine involvement in the execution of the micro-projects. Though severely affected by several crises in the region (especially food crises), the local populations succeeded—thanks to their direct participation in decision-making, project implementation, and local governance—in improving their conditions. Local men and women participated effectively in every phase of the project, right from the initial expression and identification of needs. They worked on the project part-time, even full-time, often on an unpaid basis. Only a small group of laborers, notably the youngest, were paid. The Village Development Committees (CVD) were

<sup>3</sup> An AGAIB/Plateaux agent.

<sup>4</sup> A project beneficiary.

able, after receiving training, to play a major role in selecting firms and signing contracts with them, striving to prevent traditional practices of clientelism. They were also able to set up accounts and pay firms, allowing them to monitor the works and put in place a basic accounting system for financial oversight.

In the space of four years, the PDC project, by following this approach, has proved effective in a fragile institutional context, especially when it comes to rebuilding socio-economic infrastructures. More than 580 micro-projects have been completed since 2008: far more than the 395 planned. As things stand, in 2012, the quality of the micro-projects is satisfactory, and the IGAs are profitable, with positive financial results.

Another characteristic of the project is the creation of school canteens. This is a very new concept in Togo, where the usual practice is for schoolchildren, of all ages, to buy food from women vendors during the break. The food sold is subject to no health or hygiene controls. Under the AGAIB project, a number of women were recruited into the groups to work as cooks and to serve food to the schoolchildren. Meanwhile, food safety is monitored by specialist services. The food is distributed free of charge during this experimental phase. The advantage of this practice is to reduce outbreaks of cholera—a very frequent problem in this region—in the school environment. The “labor-intensive works” sub-component has also yielded satisfactory results. More than 25,000 temporary jobs have been created for women and young people between 18 and 35 years of age. The operation has enabled the reforestation of over 2,000 hectares and the rehabilitation of some one hundred engineering works such as water reservoirs and fishponds for agricultural production. In short, in terms of direct beneficiaries, the project has affected more than 200,000 people.

In total, with the PDC, hundreds of infrastructures have been created, and thousands of new employment possibilities will be made available under the labor-intensive works initiative. The project is an appropriate response to the technical and socioeconomic needs of the local populations.

#### 4.3 Lessons learned

As initiators of the projects, the social actors are involved in their definition and planning, and in implementing the action plans. This approach consists in giving a voice to grassroots communities, enabling them to say what they hope for and expect in the way of change; it involves them in the design and definition of development projects, and in implementing the decisions to which they are committed by bringing in their local resources. It is, in other words, participatory development.

In this local mobilisation approach, the AGAIB motivates communities to “take control of their destiny”. Rather than supporting individuals, however, it assists groups and village development committees that are not in a position to create social infrastructures.

In drawing up the projects and action plans, the communities know best how to overcome internal constraints relating to differences of culture and religion between individuals. In

every site that we visited, the beneficiary actors—and especially the local dignitaries—particularly appreciated being brought in on every stage of the projects.

The question of gender is also addressed. As women are more exposed, female groups and those with a majority of women are given priority. Most of the women we met declared that the project had allowed them to create income-generating activities in order to earn a little money and help cover household expenses such as buying cooking condiments and contributing towards school fees, thereby reducing their dependence on their husbands.

*“Without my wife, my family would no longer exist. She’s the one who pays for the children to go to school, for medical prescriptions, and for day-to-day household expenses”<sup>5</sup>*

The reinforcement of the socio-economic capacities of local organisations could change the relationship with the local administration. Local structures weaken the authority of the powers that be. Since the “rule” is rather to weaken local populations in order better to dominate them, this economic independence will make it difficult for the political masters to keep the people “in line”. In the event of an election, attitudes will be harder to manipulate, leading to a decline in political clientelism. One potential consequence is the development of a sense of citizenship. The results of the elections will be the expression of the collective will.

#### 4.4 Shortcomings to be addressed

The analysis of the AGAIB approach pointed to effective results, but there are certain shortcomings that should be noted.

In terms of training, it is noticeable that the area of health has been neglected. There are no awareness campaigns about issues such as malaria, HIV/AIDS, maternal health, tuberculosis, or diarrheic disorders. The low level of public education is an impediment to the rapid assimilation of information. Basic literacy classes should be introduced, integrating health education information, to enable the beneficiaries to confront these problems. But the AGAIBs’ dependence on the World Bank makes it difficult to unblock funds in an emergency. Other sources of funding should be sought, to guarantee the sustainability of the programs. In this respect, government support will be a great advantage. The experience of these projects should enable the authorities to take over from the international bodies by integrating this approach into public policy and granting it a significant share of the budget.

There are a number of risks that might prevent the fulfillment of the project’s development goal. These include excessive control over the implementation of activities by the central authorities and the weakness of counterpart funding from the communities. Another difficulty for the project is the non-sustainability of initiatives due to poor coordination between the AGAIBs and the existing regional sector programs, and to all the red tape involved in

unblocking funds. This situation means that the AGAIBs do not have adequate resources, at all times, for the funding of community micro-projects.

## 5. Conclusion

Development through self-empowerment emerges as a process by which a local community organises for better mobilisation and use of its material and human resources.

Self-empowerment, therefore, is above all the business of local actors. It is characterised by a collective awareness that takes root in a community faced with structural constraints. The ultimate goal of the approach is to give grassroots communities the capacity to become autonomous. It is the task of the external partners to create the right conditions to help local communities appropriate development values. Only by getting involved, only by taking on responsibility, can local populations be truly empowered: self-empowerment is a social practice, a process that begins when the first development action is undertaken. This principle implies a strict rule of conduct: the local community’s knowledge must be leveraged, and local potential fully harnessed, before any recourse to external partners. In this respect, the AGAIBs, through their practices, have created a new dynamic that deserves to be supported. It only remains for the authorities to get involved, for greater effectiveness and greater efficiency, in the interest of all of Togo’s rural populations.

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<sup>5</sup> Quote from a civil servant whose wife is a beneficiary of an ongoing project in the canton of Amakpamé.