



ISSN NO. 2320-5407

ISSN(O): 2320-5407 | ISSN(P): 3107-4928

International Journal of Advanced Research

Publisher's Name: Jana Publication and Research LLP

www.journalijar.com

REVIEWER'S REPORT

Manuscript No.: IJAR-56512

Title: Elements for a Redesign of Decentralization in Benin

Recommendation:

Accept after minor revision.....

Rating	Excel.	Good	Fair	Poor
Originality	✓			
Techn. Quality		✓		
Clarity	✓			
Significance		✓		

Reviewer Name: Faheem Abdul Muneeb

Reviewer's Comment

This manuscript critically examines decentralization in Benin after more than two decades of implementation, highlighting its institutional achievements, structural constraints, and the need for a strategic reinvention of the model. Anchored in the sociology of public action and social change theory, the study combines literature review and qualitative field data to analyze decentralization across institutional, socio-political, and territorial levels. The topic is highly relevant in the context of ongoing governance reforms in West Africa and contributes to debates on democratic consolidation, local autonomy, and sustainable territorial development.

Scientific Contribution and Empirical Strength

The article provides a comprehensive overview of decentralization's objectives—improved governance, citizen participation, service delivery efficiency, reduction of territorial inequalities, and democratic consolidation—clearly illustrated in Figure 2 (page 3), which visually synthesizes these objectives. Figure 3 (page 5) effectively summarizes both the achievements and challenges of decentralization in Benin, distinguishing between “acquired gains” (proximity to citizens, transparency, local development) and persistent “deficits” (financial constraints, political interference, lack of qualified staff).

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The discussion is well grounded in classical and contemporary decentralization literature (Rondinelli, Manor, Smoke, Faguet, Lund, and others). The manuscript successfully demonstrates that while decentralization has fostered institutional proximity and local elite formation, it remains constrained by incomplete fiscal autonomy, overlapping competencies, and socio-political practices such as clientelism. The argument for “reinventing” decentralization is convincingly supported by recent international scholarship (e.g., World Bank, OECD, UN-Habitat, Rodriguez-Pose).

However, while the theoretical engagement is rich, the empirical component remains somewhat underdeveloped. The manuscript references semi-structured interviews and field observations but provides limited direct quotations or systematic presentation of empirical findings. A clearer distinction between literature-based arguments and field-derived evidence would enhance analytical depth.

Methodology and Analytical Approach

The qualitative socio-anthropological approach is appropriate for analyzing governance reforms and institutional dynamics. The three-level analysis model (institutional, socio-political, territorial) presented in Figure 1 (page 2) provides a coherent conceptual framework for structuring the discussion.

Nonetheless, the methodology section would benefit from more precise reporting. The number of interviews conducted, selection criteria, geographical scope, and data analysis procedures are not sufficiently detailed. Providing clearer methodological transparency—particularly regarding how field data informed specific conclusions—would strengthen scientific rigor and replicability.

Structure, Style, and Presentation

The manuscript is logically organized into introduction, methods and analysis model, results, discussion, and conclusion. The progression from normative objectives to structural constraints and finally to the argument for reinvention is coherent and well articulated.

However, there are several stylistic and formatting issues that require attention. Minor grammatical inconsistencies, typographical errors, and spacing irregularities appear throughout the text. Some references are duplicated (e.g., Crook & Manor 1998; Rodríguez-Pose & Wilkie 2019), and bibliographic formatting lacks uniformity. Figures should also be consistently labeled and formatted according to journal standards.

REVIEWER'S REPORT

The title is clear and appropriately reflects the analytical focus. For greater academic precision, a refined alternative could be:

Decentralization in Benin: Between Institutional Consolidation and Structural Constraints

This version sharpens the reform-oriented emphasis while maintaining the original meaning.

Final Recommendation

Overall, the manuscript provides a substantial and policy-relevant contribution to the study of decentralization in Benin and more broadly in African governance contexts. Its theoretical grounding is strong, and its call for multidimensional reform is well justified.

With minor revisions focusing on methodological clarification, refinement of empirical presentation, correction of stylistic issues, and standardization of references, the manuscript is suitable for publication.

Decision: Accepted with minor revisions.