

The Commune of Sirakorola, a Laboratory for Local Innovation

The Atypical Story of a Village Reformer

Mahamadou Diawara

Researcher at Laboratoire Andal, Mali

mahamanousman@gmail.com

Abstract

The commune of Sirakorola is located halfway between Koulikoro and Banamba, on national road no. 27, 110 km from Bamako. The village of Sirakorola was initially the chief town of a district, before becoming the chief town of a commune with the advent of decentralization. Souleymane Coulibaly has been mayor since 2004. Born in 1967 in Sirakorola, he entered school in 1975 and attended up to 9th grade. He left school without a diploma at the age of 17. In 1991, he joined the Adema party, under whose banner he was elected local councilor in the 1999 elections and became first deputy to the elected mayor.

This work is based on a series of studies carried out in the commune in 2006 and 2012¹. The first diagnostic studies showed a commune facing acute political problems, with a mayor's office blocked by factional struggles. As for the mayor, he was virtually without authority. In 2012, we found a relatively peaceful village. And the management of public services had improved considerably. In the meantime, he and his council have succeeded in turning the town hall into a space for meetings, exchanges and debates, and in changing people's perception of the town hall by using popular representations and semiologies. Thanks to their work, the town hall has become a new "vestibule" alongside the village vestibules.

The mayor's role in implementing the many innovations was eminent. A great political entrepreneur, he also proved to be an entrepreneur in the Schumpeterian sense of the term, i.e. a bearer of new ideas who breaks out of routines to seize opportunities arising from circumstances that can produce new situations. He is an entrepreneur-innovator with a flair for anticipation, who knows how to realistically exploit potential opportunities. Thanks to his personal commitment and sense of collaboration, he was able to put in place "new combinations of factors" to defuse the difficult situations he was confronted with, and to convince external partners to accompany him on his journey.

However, the question is whether, from the outset, the partnership between the two parties was not based on a misunderstanding. A misunderstanding that would prove productive in the sense that it satisfied everyone without being the one prescribed or proclaimed. Whereas for the partners, the aim of setting up the various awareness-raising and mobilization procedures was to achieve greater transparency and accountability in the management of the commune, for the mayor, their interest was to encourage his fellow citizens to become more committed and more involved, and above all, to contribute more to tax collection. The question is, what motivates the mayor to devote so much time and energy to his commune, always striving to innovate?

Keywords

Innovations, Entrepreneur-innovator, Taxes, Accountability, Productive misunderstanding

¹ A small survey was carried out in 2023 to update and complete certain information.

How to cite this paper:
Diawara, M. (2024). The commune of Sirakorola, a laboratory for local innovation. The atypical story of a village reformer. *Global Africa*, (6), pp. 145-155. <https://doi.org/10.57832/8gn6-xq77>

Received: August 23, 2023
Accepted: April 19, 2024
Published: June 20, 2024

© 2024 by author(s). This work is openly licensed via [CC BY-NC 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)



Introduction

Since 1999, Mali has been governed on a decentralized basis, with the establishment of 703 communes, 49 districts, 8 regions and the District of Bamako². In 2002, responsibilities for health, education and water were transferred to the local authorities. Even if, in practice, these local authorities are now fully or partially in charge of managing these areas of responsibility, their financial prerogatives remain limited and they are hampered by State services that are reluctant to relinquish their powers³.

Mali's communes do receive subsidies from the State, but for their operating budget, they must above all collect taxes, in particular the regional and local development tax (TDRL), which is a personal income tax. Local public services depend to a large extent on the communes' ability to mobilize local resources and on external support, particularly from technical and financial partners. With little in the way of financial, human and infrastructure resources, local authorities have to come up with palliative solutions to ensure the continuity of services.

In Sirakorola, the low rate of tax and budget collection is an obstacle to the delivery of public services to all 55 villages in the commune, but also to the construction of the "local", i.e. a public space that emerges through interaction around certain political norms between two groups of actors: the State's representatives and those of the local population⁴. According to Gibout (2009), public space has been subject to several interpretations. E. Dacheux (2008) argues that the concept has different meanings because of its ambiguity and the concrete realities in which it is embodied. However, according to him, they all boil down to the existence of a physical, or one might add symbolic, space where ideas are exchanged and opinions formed; a space in which debates take place on subjects of common interest to a given audience. The public space is thus built through confrontation/negotiation between different parties, in order to deliberate on issues and reach a consensus. In this article we will use A. Letourneau's quoted by Lits (2014) definition, which sums up Habermas' idea as "a group of private individuals brought together to discuss issues of common interest."⁵ This definition has the advantage of not giving the concept an end goal or limiting it to its original historical and sociocultural roots.

By turning the town hall, and indeed the commune, into a space for meetings, exchanges and debate, the mayor and his communal council have succeeded in changing people's perception of the town hall by using popular representations and semiologies. Thanks to their work, the town hall has become a new vestibule where people can discuss issues relating to village life, a more open one indeed, since it is accessible to all, unlike the vestibule of the village chiefs and elders. In Sirakorola, the town council's innovative actions are helping to build public space, by organizing public debates such as restitutions, democratic questioning forums, or by collecting the TDRL. We posit that in Sirakorola, this public space is under construction, and that the various actors are "learning"⁶ about it through public debates' procedures and, paradoxically, through tax collection too.

This work is based on a series of studies⁷ carried out in the commune on the provision of public services (water and sanitation, health, school in 2006-2007) and their improvement (in 2012). The first diagnostic studies showed a commune facing acute political problems, with the mayor's office blocked by factional struggles within the communal council, but also in the management committees of the various local public services, in this case the school and the health center. As for

2 A new territorial and administrative organization was voted in January 2023 by the National Transition Council. With this territorial reorganization, Mali now has 19 regions, 156 cercles, 466 arrondissements and 819 communes.

3 Until 2002, the communes had only civil status, which was entirely transferred to them. All other areas of competence were still shared either with the State, or with associations or private stakeholders.

4 The notion of "local" borrowed from Olivier de Sardan refers to an emerging public (and state) space where representatives of the state and representatives of the population interact around multiple norms (local, regional and national) concerning access to goods and services (Oumarou, 2011, p. 13).

5 Letourneau (2001) quoted by Lits (2014).

6 Notion borrowed from Storrie (1996), who speaks of the artisanal apprenticeship of citizenship, cited by Gibout (2009).

7 Studies carried out in the commune as part of two Laboratoire Citoyennetés research programs on public service delivery and quality improvement.

the mayor, politically harassed by a united opposition, he was virtually without authority, despite having the support of the Sirakorola village chief. Six years after our return to the field, in 2012, we found a relatively peaceful village. Tensions and open or muted struggles had subsided. As for the management of public services, it had improved considerably.

We propose here to study the Sirakorola town hall as a public service. The aim is to see how, under the action of the town council and particularly under the impetus of the mayor, the “local” is constructed in Sirakorola. Beyond the recovery of popular images drawn from local representations and semiologies, what reforms and innovations have led to this result? What are the levers that explain the success of the mayor’s reforms? Ten years on, what is left of these innovations as new initiatives emerge?

We shall see the prominent role played by the mayor in implementing these innovations. A great political entrepreneur, he also proved to be an entrepreneur in the Schumpeterian sense of the term, i.e. a bearer of new ideas who goes beyond conventional approaches, breaking out of routines to seize opportunities arising from circumstances that can give rise to new situations⁸. Thanks to his personal commitment and sense of collaboration, the mayor of Sirakorola was able to put in place “new combinations of factors⁹”, to defuse the difficult situations he faced as mayor. He also used his interpersonal skills to convince outside partners to support him along the way.

However, he is far from the “reformer” of the state’s public services. He has neither the profile, nor the skills, nor the background. As a civil servant, he is educated and qualified. Often relegated to the margins of public administration, the reformer of state public services manages, despite the obstacles he encounters, to build, through his dedication and inventiveness, a work space that is favorable to himself, his collaborators and users. The mayor of Sirakorola is the opposite of this profile. An unschooled peasant, he rose to the head of the town hall and stayed there for a long time.

Our analysis will focus on public debate procedures and the collection of the TDRL. First, we’ll look at how the mayor has succeeded in creating a serene atmosphere in the communal council and in the commune, using the results of the research to improve the management of public services and the collection of the TDRL. After a presentation of the commune, we’ll look at how he used innovations - both those proposed by his partners and those devised by himself - to make the mayor’s office a place of permanent exchange and debate, thereby winning the confidence of the population, gaining their support for proposed initiatives and getting them to pay their taxes.

Presentation of the Commune of Sirakorola

Located halfway between Koulikoro (55 km) and Banamba (30 km), on national road n°27, the commune of Sirakorola is 110 km from Bamako. Its population is estimated at 26833 inhabitants¹⁰. The village of Sirakorola was originally a district capital, before becoming a capital with the advent of decentralization.

The creation of the village dates back to the 17th and 18th centuries and is the result of a vast migratory movement that was part of the history of the Bambara kingdom of Ségou (Bèlèdougou, Kolokani). This vast movement of successive migrations gave rise to two villages created by two great lineages, the Traoré and the Coulibaly, who have always cohabited in a more or less perceptible tension depending on the era. Living in a sort of “armed peace”, the two lineages have never succeeded in founding a single village. Sirakorola is made up of two juxtaposed villages, each with its own village chief, separated by an imaginary line whose course is not unanimously agreed upon by both parties. This cohabitation gave rise to rivalry for control of the united administrative and political space created by colonization and the post-colonial state. Later, material and financial interests were grafted onto this age-old rivalry, as were other crucial elements which helped to give the rivalry

⁸ Paul-Marie Romani (1988) quoted by Touré (2020).

⁹ According to Joseph Schumpeter, innovations are “new combinations of factors” (Boutillier & Uzunidis, 2013).

¹⁰ According to a 2009 estimate, versus 27,859 inhabitants according to the 1998 census.

greater scope and complexity: not only was there a bipolarization of the village, but also struggles for influence that manifested themselves even in the communal council and in attempts to control the various village management committees and their resources.

A Commune Dominated by Factions

This rivalry between the two village chieftainships creates a rift that reflects the political and social bipolarization of the village: while the Coulibaly's aim is to maintain their domination of the village, the Traoré's is to recover the power they lost. Each faction seeks to gain control over local institutions and organizations, or to create associations to better mobilize and control them. After the 2004 communal elections, the Coulibaly, through ADEMA and MPR, controlled not only the town hall, the communal council and the working committees, but also all the management committees such as the Community Health Association (ASACO), the Pupils' Parents' Association (APE), the Market Management Committee (CGM) and the School Management Committee (CGS). They and their allies can be found in key positions in all these structures.

Technical and Financial Partners

Sirakorola is a model commune, the good pupil of technical and financial partners, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other stakeholders in the field of development, but also of State public services. After an initial unfortunate incident, Sirakorola has built up an image over the years as a commune without problems, without chieftaincy or political conflicts. To make matters even better, the commune's mayor appears to be a man open to all development initiatives and innovations proposed by financial backers. Hence the presence of numerous projects. A number of partners have been involved in the commune since its creation, even if this has not always been the case¹¹. It was during the current mayor's first term of office that the partnership with the development world began to expand. During our last visit, we counted at least five external contributors, not counting local associations and organizations: The Netherlands Development Organization (SNV), Integrated Development and Enhancement of the Role of Women (DIVAROF), the Shared Governance Program (PGP), the Mutual Aid Association for Development (AED), TONUS¹².

Innovations and Local Development

Sirakorola is home to several innovations, all aimed at creating a greater participation by the local population in the affairs of the commune, greater transparency in the management of public services and greater accountability on the part of the town hall towards the local population. However, the most imaginative innovations are those aimed at improving tax collection. While the former contribute to the emergence of a communal space, the latter appear to be both the result of and a factor in the learning of a space for debate and local citizenship.

Public Debate Procedures and the Construction of Public Space

Initiated by the mayor's office with the support of technical and financial partners, with the declared aim of establishing greater transparency and accountability in the management of the commune, the public debate procedures we will be looking at here are four in number: general assemblies, feedback rounds, reports and democratic questioning forums. Established as democratic practices, they are based on the idea that the more the population is involved in the management of the commune, the more they are kept informed of the destination of resources, the more they will be

11 Faced with the opposition between rival clans, the initial stakeholders preferred to leave, abandoning the commune to its fate. It was in the wake of this setback, and learning from it, that the village adopted the apparent unanimity we observed during our investigations. The fractures uncovered in our reports earned us much criticism and rejection of our research findings, before being accepted as belonging to a bygone era.

12 From one period to the next, the partners change, as do their numbers, but the fact remains that the commune is always supported by at least five people, even during the difficult times of Covid and the security crisis.

willing to pay their taxes and, in general, to participate in the activities of the mayor's office. The point here is to see how these procedures contribute to the construction of the "local" at commune level.

The sessions are supposed to be a space open to the public where people can come and find out about the life of the commune by following the debates on the budget, the trade-offs, the investments, etc. In practice, however, sessions are held with representatives of the various social, economic, professional and political groups invited by the mayor's office. People are generally unaware that the sessions are public and open to any citizen who wishes to attend. The idea of setting up these activities, with the support of partners (SNV, AED, PGP, in particular), came about to remedy this dysfunction.

However, in their implementation these new spaces for exchange and debate tend to reproduce the *modus operandi* of sessions where participants are invited by the local council, thus excluding certain groups, if they do not exclude themselves in the first place. So, each new mechanism has its own participants and its own venue¹³.

In addition to these opportunities for local people to discuss issues of concern to them directly with the communal authorities, decentralization has also made access to municipal services and the mayor easier.¹⁴ We are thus witnessing a process that tends to give a central role and place to the town hall in the lives of the people, a refocusing of people's lives around the town hall. For the local population, the mayor's office has become the main element in the commune, the one through which everything now revolves: "The State no longer intervenes without going through the mayor's office". The main change they see, favored by decentralization, is the disappearance of fear among the population. For them, you can tell the mayor what you want, which is not the case with the "commander".

The town hall and "words from the vestibule"

In the local perception, the commune has become a reference point and the town hall a daily reality. It is a key element in many other aspects of their lives: for the provision of public services, the issuing of civil status certificates, the collection of taxes and duties, etc. More significant is the involvement of the mayor's office in conflict resolution, as the village chief used to say: "Bringing disputes to the mayor's office is like bringing them to the vestibule, before the assembly of the council of elders ("Bolonla kouma"¹⁵). The mayor's office has thus taken on a function that used to be assigned to a traditional institution, the "vestibule", a place known as a place of conciliation and peace between members of the community.

According to Dubois (2003, p. 5), an institution only exists through the uses to which it is put. It can happen, for example, that the user brings to the institution demands other than those it is officially supposed to satisfy. This is the case here for the town hall, which, in addition to the powers transferred to it, notably in the field of civil status, is often called upon to resolve disputes. Like the village chief's vestibule, the town hall is a passageway for certain users in their search for a solution to disputes they would rather not bring before the courts. The "words from the vestibule" are brought to the town hall to find, as they say, an amicable solution, a solution negotiated between the parties under the arbitration of the mayor¹⁶. In the new institutional configuration of decentralization, the mayor's office has become a space open to all, an important element in regulating many aspects of people's lives, and is invested with certain social functions traditionally attributed to village institutions.

13 With the exception of the feedback tours and the space for democratic questioning, which are more open, organized directly with the people in the villages, without intermediaries or representatives.

14 The town hall in Sirakorola is never empty. When it is not users who have come for administrative formalities, its local residents who have come to say hello to Town Hall workers, the mayor and his councillors. Not to mention all those passing through for a glass of tea. In short, the town hall is a beanery where you can be sure of finding tea at almost any time, and meeting up with some of the councillors, Sirakorola residents and others.

15 Literally, it means "the words of the vestibule". The assembly of the council of elders meets in the village chief's vestibule to discuss matters concerning the community, and to settle any disputes brought before it. The "words of the vestibule" are all matters of common interest.

16 However, it seems that the mayor, faced with the complexity of some of the problems presented to him, prefers to refer the protagonists to the sub-prefect.

The town hall, a public place (Foroba yoro)

Just as the “vestibule” was for lineage chiefs, the town hall is a place for meetings and debates on subjects of common interest. For this reason, “a lot of meetings are held at the town hall. Not a week goes by without a meeting at the town hall”. In addition to their high frequency, several types of meeting can be distinguished: “There are meetings at the town hall all the time. Meetings with town councilors, with village councilors, with people from the village of Sirakorola, those from other villages, etc.” (Diawara, 2007).

But for many residents, these meetings are not open to the public. According to them, each category of population has its own meeting, and municipal councilors have their own sessions: “I have already taken part in meetings. It was a meeting with the shopkeepers about an association. Then there was another meeting about the market”. The meetings are therefore categorical. The town hall chooses who it wants to meet and invites them by letter of invitation or press release, while excluding others. This leads people to believe that the sessions and meetings are not public.

There is a sort of division of tasks, roles and meetings: each group has its own meeting. Communal councilors hold sessions; village chiefs hold general assemblies. However, according to one village councilor, “the town hall is a public place (Forobayoro)”. As a result, all meetings held there are public. In reality, the town hall proceeds by segmenting the population. The question is whether this way of working corresponds to a need or aims to better deal with current issues. The fact remains, however, that the opportunities for meetings and debate are multiplied. But to what end? More participation or more transparency?

The TDRL and the Emergence of Local Citizenship

Taxes are the main source of revenue for the commune of Sirakorola, and the TDRL is its largest component. In contrast to other taxes, which sometimes fluctuate significantly, the share of TDRL is on the rise. This trend is likely to be even more pronounced in the coming years, as the commune council seems to have focused more on collecting the TDRL. We will look at how the TDRL helps to create a sense of belonging to a political community or a community of residence. Finally, we will look at the innovations introduced in this area by the town council, and what the results have been.

Decentralization and Levies: Perceptions and Representations

In order to explain decentralization to the Malian people, in the 1990s the State began to translate it into words that sounded like a slogan: “Bringing power back home”. This was understood in a variety of ways. There are two main themes: the return of power to its original holders, the natives, and “taking control”. Here, we will look at the link between this second definition and the TDRL, which remains our object of analysis.

Taking one’s own destiny into one’s own hands remains the most widespread definition of decentralization in Sirakorola. It can be broken down into a number of different propositions, all of which, however, boil down to the same idea of taking charge, of deciding things for yourself and by yourself, starting with the choice of your representatives. Taking control means being able to work for yourself. Taking control means agreeing to pay the taxes that will be used to cover expenses.

Taxes in the commune

The commune of Sirakorola generally performs well when it comes to collecting taxes. However, there are significant fluctuations from one year to the next: from 40% in 2000, the collection rate fell to 34% in 2002, before gradually rising to 76% in 2006. At the same time, the TDRL percentage fell from 63% to 47% and 91% respectively. Perceptions of decentralization and the mayor’s office are not without influence on the legitimacy of levies and on people’s willingness to contribute. Of course, taxation is compulsory, but it also makes it possible to work, in other words, to build the commune. Which makes it bearable, acceptable and legitimate.

“Taxes are a way of working”.

For almost all taxpayers, taxes are used to work, in other words, to build and develop the commune. Even if (or because) these statements seem to be part of the rhetoric used by local authorities to justify levies, they are nonetheless shared and backed up by examples from the people themselves: “taxes are for work, to pay doctors’, teachers’ and soldiers’ salaries, to build schools”. It is the mayor’s means of work: “If we do not pay taxes, how is the mayor going to work?”

“Taxes are compulsory anyway”

The compulsory nature of taxation, although mentioned, is rarely emphasized. It is true that taxes are used to work, build schools, health centers, etc., whatever is useful for the well-being of the population. However, we never pay it willingly. It is always done under duress, even when you are trying to find a general or personal interest in it. It is compulsory because it is part of tradition, and legitimized because it serves the general interest and is equal for all. However, not all levies have the same obligation or the same legitimacy. There is a differentiated relationship with levies, with the TDRL in particular having a stronger symbolic charge. The TDRL is in fact the most compulsory of taxes, from which one cannot evade under any circumstances, on pain of repression: “If someone calls you and you cannot pay it, or if the village chief cannot get you to pay it, you can have problems” (CS). Most of these problems involve imprisonment or pre-trial detention in the gendarmerie. However, it is not the deprivation of liberty that is the most feared; imprisonment also represents a humiliation in the eyes of society.

In the collective memory of rural populations, the TDRL remains to some extent associated with the capitation tax of the colonial period. It is reminiscent of the capitation tax, both in the way it is levied on individuals and in the way it is collected, with the help of village chiefs and the deputy local governor. Hence its name “ni songo”, meaning “the price of life¹⁷”. Nowadays, if the TDRL is not paid at the price of one’s life, one is no less exposed to humiliation for non-payment.

Shame as an incentive to contribute

It is not so much the deprivation of liberty for non-payment of tax as the humiliation it represents in the eyes of the population that makes people fear detention. And the humiliation begins with being detained in the vestibule or at the town hall: “Tax brings shame. Saying you have been taken to the vestibule means you have not been able to pay your taxes. And that is shameful. This shame is not for the taxpayer alone. The shame is for the whole village. When tax collectors arrive in the village accompanied by their “guards”, the whole village is humiliated.

The TDRL and Family, Social and Civic Identities

While the fact of not (being able to) pay taxes can lead to deprivation of freedom and humiliation, it can also prevent you from having a social identity, since not appearing in any official register means you have no official existence: “In the countryside, if you do not pay taxes, you do not count because you are not on any paper”. Not paying taxes means not appearing in the family record book, which is used to draw up tax rolls. Without a family record book, you cannot even have any civil status documents that would give you access to a social existence. As P. Bourdieu points out: “(...), official registration procedures (...), like civil status documents (...) have the capacity to create (or institute), through the magic of official nomination (...), socially guaranteed social identities (that of citizen, voter, taxpayer, parent, owner, etc.) or legitimate unions or groups (families, associations, unions, parties, etc.)”.

¹⁷ According to history, it was under Biton Coulibaly, the first elected king of Ségou, that a contribution was introduced to prepare the mead served to notables visiting the king. The notables’ voluntary contribution was honey. Hence its name *di songo*, the price of honey; *di* meaning honey. It was later extended to the whole population in monetary and compulsory form. We thus went from the “price of honey” to the “price of life”. In Bambara, to say the two words, all you need is one letter: honey = *di* and life = *ni*. Hence *di songo* and *ni songo*.

Registration in the family record book is therefore more than a simple administrative act; it materializes a sense of belonging to a family, if not creates one. And the fact of paying one's TDRL from the family record book, while reinforcing this sense of belonging, also constitutes a mark of solidarity with one's family. This is why any attempt to pay separately is also seen as a break with the family of origin¹⁸. What is more, the TDRL also helps to create and establish a sense of belonging to a given community: "I do not want to talk about that (tax) because I do not pay my tax here. I am a foreigner. I do not pay it here, I pay it at home". So there is a kind of ambivalent attitude towards the TDRL, which signifies both repression and humiliation, and at the same time refers to belonging to a family, if not a community.

Although considered an individual tax, the TDRL is in fact never paid individually, whether in Sirakorola or elsewhere in Mali. For those who do not live in their village of origin, this method of payment enables them to maintain links not only with their family community, but also with their village community. On the other hand, it helps maintain a sense of belonging to a given political community. The TDRL is not just an imposition, it is also a moral obligation to one's family and community. Its non-payment is experienced as a disgrace that tarnishes not only the honorability of the family unit, but also that of the entire village.

Honor as a means of pressure to contribute

In Sirakorola, the town council has decided to use a sense of honor to encourage taxpayers to pay their taxes. This is a major innovation after the coercive methods used in the past. After intimidation and humiliation, which sometimes produced good results, the Town Hall has decided to adopt this method. With the introduction of what it calls the "citizens' day", the mayor would like to create a certain amount of competition between his fellow citizens to get them to pay the tax themselves.¹⁹ Prior to "Citizen's Day", a competition for the top 3 taxpayers had been tried out. The winners of this competition received public honors: they were presented with a flag by the mayor, their photo was posted in the town hall and their names were published in the media. To promote transparency and competition between the villages in the commune, the collection rates for each village are made public.

Relying on people's willingness to pay to collect taxes could be seen as a daring gamble, given that taxes are generally perceived as an obligation, for which people would, if possible, use all sorts of tricks to avoid them. However, the mayor is playing on his fellow citizens' sense of family, patriotism and other such sentiments. And perhaps it is not such a fool's gamble after all, as we've seen, in these parts, taxation is also a family affair, and a village affair too. The mayor's office relies on these feelings of family and community honor and civic-mindedness to encourage people to pay their taxes. In view of all these considerations, does not paying taxes also contribute to the emergence of local citizenship? At least, that is the role that the Sirakorola town council wants it to play.

As we can see, debate procedures are not simply spaces created to conform to an administrative tradition or to comply with the demands of partners who have helped organize them or fund certain public services. Above all, they are about learning the procedures of discussion, negotiation and deliberation. For mayors and local councils, they are also places where messages and ideas can be disseminated to convince their fellow citizens of the need to participate and contribute to the development of their community. To paraphrase Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan (1999), it is at these meetings that representatives of the commune and the local population interact in all matters concerning access to goods and services.

¹⁸ At a collection session at the Sirakorola-Est village chief's, in the company of the estate manager, there was talk of making two family booklets for two brothers, so that each would pay on his own instead of from the same family booklet, in order to pay the TDRL. However, one of the brothers present did not want to talk about it, especially in public. The matter was postponed.

¹⁹ The first edition of this "citizen's day" was held at the town hall during a public ceremony in which town hall workers set an example. Three million FCFA were collected that day.

Souleymane Coulibaly, the Village Reformer

Born in 1967 in Sirakorola to farming parents from the village of Hamariboubou, some ten kilometers from Sirakorola, Souleymane Coulibaly entered school in 1975 and attended up to 9th grade. He left school without a degree at the age of 17. In 1991, he joined the Adema association, under whose banner he was elected local councilor in the 1999 elections and became 1st deputy to the mayor, who was none other than the grandson of the Sirakorola village chief. The Traoré family, exploiting the slogan that explained decentralization as the “return of power to the home”, set about getting one of their own elected to the mayor’s office. They succeeded. Despite their victory, they failed to use the mayor’s office as a springboard, a means of spreading their influence in the commune.

Often away from Sirakorola, the mayor was soon outflanked in his own camp and was unable to keep control of either the party or the town hall. In the absence of the incumbent mayor, Souleymane Coulibaly became de facto mayor of the commune. Differences soon arose between Souleymane and Coulibaly, who accused him of making decisions on his own, without his input. Even before the end of the mandate, they parted ways, with the mayor later joining the RPM, created in 2002 by Ibrahim Boubacar Keita. Souleymane Coulibaly remained with the Adema and was elected mayor in 2004. His election was the result of influence struggles between the Traoré and Coulibaly families. He is now in his 3rd term and 20th year at the helm of the town hall. Despite his disagreement with the first mayor from the Traoré family, and the latter’s departure for the RMP, Souleymane Coulibaly maintains good relations as mayor with the family of the village chief of Sirakorola-Ouest, who supports him through thick and thin.

The End of Hegemonies or How to Turn a Lost Cause into an Opportunity

Romani (1988), argues that the Schumpeterian entrepreneur is characterized by his ability to seize the opportunities presented to him, depending on the circumstances, in order to bring about the necessary changes and innovations²⁰. Souleymane Coulibaly, by using the results of his research to disarm his political opponents and put an end to the hegemony of the clan that opposed him, succeeded in turning a situation over which he had no control, in his favor. Six years later, in 2012, Sirakorola had become a peaceful village. The climate of tension, the open or muted struggles observed in the local council and in the management of other public services, were no longer perceptible. As for the management of public services, it had improved considerably. How did the mayor go about achieving this general climate of calm at all levels?

We are told that the results of the research were a great opportunity that the mayor seized to turn around what was for him a hopeless situation. It has to be said that he quickly understood the benefits he could draw from the research, even if he was initially reluctant to share his findings, particularly with regard to the unveiling of the conflict between East and West. The existence of two villages and the conflict between them, first denied and then rejected by most of the local stakeholders, including the mayor, was eventually admitted but downplayed.

The report clearly described the situation that prevailed not only in the communal council, but also in the management committees, whose mandates had expired years ago. These committees were run on a patrimonial basis by a clan and were never accountable to the mayor. Drawing on the report, the mayor organized research findings dissemination tours in all the villages of the commune, during which the local population discussed the research findings and proposed solutions. A five-year action plan emerged, to be implemented with the support of partners. Several points were retained, including improvements in the management of public services, the collection of taxes, greater involvement of the population in the management of public affairs through the introduction of new participation mechanisms, etc.

²⁰ Paul-Marie Romani (1988), *op. cit.*

With this action plan and the solutions proposed during the feedback tours, the mayor was able to easily renew the Asaco board and the CGS, despite opposition from the eastern chieftaincy. At the same time, he succeeded in putting an end to the Coulibaly hegemony over the management committees. Through the subsidy granted to the management committees and the creation of a monitoring committee, he now controls their management.

Public Debate Procedures or How to Innovate Without Changing

The results of the research and the resulting action plan have not only helped to improve the governance of local public services and tax collection, but it has also enabled the mayor to regain control over his commune and exert his authority over social and political stakeholders. They have also been invaluable in attracting new projects and new partners, and have enabled him to make numerous achievements. Even today, a large number of partners are involved in the community, with almost all of them being new. Of the 12 partners counted, only one was present in 2006. Many social investments have been made since then, and Sirakorola has had running water for almost ten years. It has also become Mali's "flagship village", having been the first commune to benefit from solar lighting.

At the instigation of its partners, or with their support, the town council has created various mechanisms for informing, raising awareness and mobilizing the population to participate effectively in the affairs of the commune. The aim is to achieve greater transparency and accountability. They are intended to complement the sessions or make up for their shortcomings, as the latter were little known and not open to the public, either through ignorance or simply because the mayor's office did not make enough effort to bring them along. It could even be said that, as we saw above, the town hall encouraged selective participation by segmentation through the invitation system. As a result, they became limited and discretionary, like the sessions. Similarly, general assemblies, reports, restitutions, etc., organized along the same lines as the sessions, i.e. on the basis of invitations, did not in the end bring about any major changes in the way the commune was run.

But for the mayor, was not the point of these innovations to be elsewhere, not to achieve the transparency and accountability sought by the partners, but to increase the involvement and participation of the population in the life of the commune, and above all to collect more taxes? Were not the numerous meetings and gatherings with the local population organized with the aim of explaining this interest, the need to participate in commune affairs, to pay taxes? What if, from the outset, the partnership between the two parties was based on a misunderstanding? In other words, for the partners, the mechanisms for participation are designed to increase transparency in the affairs of the commune, hold the mayor to account for his management and ensure a more democratic expression of all segments of society. For the mayor, on the other hand, their aim is to win the population's support for his or her policies, and to gain their trust. The ultimate goal is optimal tax collection.

Clearly, the public debate procedures instituted by the mayor's office have not, in practice, brought about the changes desired by the partners. However, it cannot be said that the mayor acted deliberately to divert the procedures from their initial objectives. Rather, it could be said that he acted out of compulsion, caught up in local realities, and certainly out of a concern for efficiency, based on his own experiences which have shown that segmentations (men and women, young and old, lineage chiefs) were more productive in terms of participation. In the commune of Sirakorola, and especially since the arrival of Souleymane Coulibaly, debt collection has been a major preoccupation of the communal council and one of its greatest successes, if not the greatest of the mayor's office. As soon as he arrived, while the commune's budget and the share of TDRL were falling, he managed to increase it considerably. Since then, the amount of TDRL has risen steadily, almost threefold. If there is a misunderstanding, it is a "productive misunderstanding" in the sense that it leads to a result that satisfies everyone, without being the one prescribed or proclaimed²¹.

21 The concept of "productive misunderstanding" is taken from the American anthropologist Marshall Sahlins by Baré (1985) in his Tahitian research, in which he seeks to translate the subtle interweaving of the social and political demands of traditional chiefs and the cultural and religious offerings of missionaries (...).

Conclusion

From a certain angle, it could be said that the mayor is playing games with the partners and innovations proposed to him –like those development brokers who know how to present things well to donors in order to capture the manna flowing in the world of development– but a more in-depth analysis reveals that his attitude is more one of adaptation to an unprovoked situation and realism. In view of the results he has achieved, we can only acknowledge that his choices have benefited the commune, which has seen a steady increase and improvement in the supply of goods and services over the last fifteen years.

This pushes us to see in him the Schumpeterian entrepreneur-innovator who has the ability to anticipate (flair) and seize opportunities, without being opportunistic in the sense of someone who adapts his behavior and ideas to circumstances in order to take advantage of them, but rather, as Schumpeter says, someone who knows how to realistically exploit the potential offered by a new situation. His strength lies in knowing how to make (new) combinations of innovations, in an incremental approach whose cumulative effects produce change. We need only look at how he used the innovation of participation and transparency mechanisms to win the trust of both partners and the general public, and achieve an increase in tax collection. And finally, how, through the TDRL, it has succeeded in fostering the idea of local citizenship. In this virtuous circle, debate procedures generate participation and trust among partners and the local population. These in turn lead to improved collection of the TDRL, which in turn leads to better provision of goods and services.

However, unlike the Schumpeterian entrepreneur, the mayor of Sirakorola is not a man of ruptures. On the contrary, he could best be described as a man of consensus, with an eye for balance. Having succeeded in breaking the monopoly of the Coulibaly clan, he has not broken the ties between himself and the latter, and continues to maintain cordial relations between the two chiefdoms. It has not been emphasized enough, but the mayor has great interpersonal skills, which explain his ability to mobilize his collaborators and, above all, the partners he often meets in Bamako. It remains to be seen what motivates the mayor to invest so much time and effort in his commune, always seeking to innovate?

Bibliography

- Baré, J.-F. (1985). La conversion des Tahitiens au protestantisme comme malentendu productif (1800-1820). *Anthropologie et histoire. Cahiers de l'Orstom*, (XXI)1, 132.
- Bourdieu, P. (1994). *Raisons pratiques. Sur la théorie de l'action*. Éditions du seuil, 123.
- Boutillier, S., & Uzunidis, D. (2013). L'entrepreneur schumpétérien. *La Pensée*, 375(3), 97-109. <https://www.cairn.info/revue-la-pensee-2013-3-page-97.htm>
- Dacheux, E. (dir.) (2008). *L'espace public : un concept clef de la démocratie*. CNRS Éditions, 5-12. <https://books.openedition.org/editionscnrs/13740>
- Diawara, M. (2007). Le « prix de la vie » Impôts et taxes dans la commune de Sirakorola (cercle de Koulikoro, Mali). *Étude Récit*, 18.
- Dubois, V. (2003). *La vie au guichet. Relation administrative et traitement de la misère*. Economica.
- Gibout, C. (2009). L'espace public comme lieu de transactions sociales. Une lecture à partir des pratiques de loisirs urbains. *Pensée plurielle*, 1(20), 153-165. <https://doi.org/10.3917/pp.020.0153>
- Lits, M. (2014). L'espace public : concept fondateur de la communication. *Hermès, La Revue*, 3(70), 77-81. <https://doi.org/10.3917/herm.070.0075>
- Olivier de Sardan, J.-P. (1999). L'espace public introuvable. Chefs et projets dans les villages nigériens. *Revue Tiers Monde*, 40(157), 139-167. <https://doi.org/10.3406/tiers.1999.5371>
- Romani P-M (1988). Comportements industriels et entrepreneurs. *Traité d'Economie Industrielle*. Edition Economica, 1988, Chapitre 1/1.5
- Oumarou, H. (2011). La construction du « local » et la gouvernance communale par le bas. L'exemple de la commune rurale de Banibangou (Niger). *Études et travaux du Lasdel*, 86.
- Storrie, T. (1996). « Vers un apprentissage artisanal de la citoyenneté », *In Blanc, M. et al.* (1996).
- Touré, A. (2020). *Économie politique, économie industrielle et systèmes productifs, éléments nécessaires à l'émergence des économies*. Bamba Impression.