

The Impact of the Use of National Languages on Local Governance in Mali: Issues, Challenges, and Prospects.

Aldiouma KODIO

Université Yambo OUOLOGUEM de Bamako, Mali
aldioukodio1978@gmail.com

Moulaye KONE

Université Yambo OUOLOGUEM de Bamako, Mali
moulayekone2@gmail.com

Balla DIANKA

Université des Sciences Techniques et des Technologies de Bamako, Mali
balla.dianka@yahoo.fr

Abstract

This study analyzes the impact of integrating national languages into local governance in Mali, where close ties between the administration and citizens are crucial for social cohesion. The central question examines the capacity of these languages to enhance administrative efficiency and citizen participation, despite the constraints that still limit their institutional use. The objective is to assess the contributions and limitations of an inclusive language policy within local communities. The study employs a qualitative approach and is based on a literature review of local practices as well as comparable international experiences. Drawing on participatory governance and language planning, the study revealed that despite persistent constraints, national languages improve policy understanding, civic engagement, and cultural heritage, highlighting the need for policies, agent training, tool development, and community consultation to strengthen Mali's legitimacy.

Key words: *citizen participation, language challenges, local governance, national languages*

Résumé

Cette étude analyse l'impact de l'intégration des langues nationales sur la gouvernance locale au Mali, où des liens étroits entre l'administration et les citoyens sont essentiels à la cohésion sociale. Elle examine la capacité de ces

langues à améliorer l'efficacité administrative et la participation citoyenne, malgré les contraintes qui affectent encore leur usage institutionnel. L'objectif est d'évaluer les apports et les limites d'une politique linguistique inclusive au sein des communautés locales. L'étude adopte une approche qualitative et s'appuie sur une analyse documentaire des pratiques locales ainsi que sur des expériences internationales comparables. S'appuyant sur la gouvernance participative et la planification linguistique, l'étude a révélé que, malgré des contraintes persistantes, les langues nationales améliorent la compréhension des politiques, l'engagement civique et le patrimoine culturel, soulignant ainsi la nécessité de politiques, de formations d'agents, de développement d'outils et de consultations communautaires pour renforcer la légitimité du Mali.

Mots-clés : défis linguistiques, gouvernance locale, langues nationales, participation citoyenne

1. Introduction

Mali's linguistic diversity, a reflection of its cultural and social plurality, constitutes a major challenge for local governance. In rural contexts, the use of national languages emerges not only as a vector of social cohesion, but also as an instrument of democratic inclusion: it determines whether populations have access to decision-making processes, education, public services and local governance. However, despite its importance, the question of the effective integration of national languages in governance remains insufficiently explored (Minta, 2020). Several studies have highlighted the role of language in citizen participation. A USAID report states that discussions in public hearings and in the media must be conducted in languages that are understood by the local population; otherwise, this excludes a large part of the population (USAID, 2014). Furthermore, a multinational study on bilingual education highlights, “Despite texts aimed at promoting local languages, there is a major imbalance: French remains the official language while more than 80% of the Malian population is “non-French speaking” (UNICEF, 2013, p.41). In the educational field, as stated by Minta and Kodio (2023) in their research on bilingual education

in Mali, “French is still and remains the only official language of Mali, although it is spoken and understood by a relatively small percentage of the population.” (p. 184). These studies converge on the idea that the integration of national languages into education and governance mechanisms can promote inclusion and efficiency. At the institutional level, Mali's recent progress confirms this trend: for instance, the country has adopted a national action plan within the framework of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022-2032) for the promotion of local languages (UNESCO, 2025). Similarly, in the context of decentralization, a number of analyses show that the relocation of skills requires adequate communication with the population. For example, in a study on the commune of Sanankoroba, it is observed that “decentralization, although aimed at improving local administration and stimulating development, struggles to materialize in the lives of citizens” (Coady Institute, 2019). However, few studies focus specifically on the impact of the use of national languages in local governance processes, participation, transparency, cohesion, and on how this linguistic dimension can act as a lever for sustainable development.

In Mali, local governance faces a major linguistic paradox. Although thirteen national languages are officially recognized, French remains the *de facto* sole language used in administration, municipal meetings, public consultations, and official documents. This situation, according to the Coady Institute (2019) excludes a large number of the population, particularly rural and low-literacy areas, from decision-making processes that should, in fact, be participatory since the decentralization initiated in the 1990s. Yet, numerous studies show that the use of local languages improves understanding of public issues, strengthens transparency, facilitates accountability, and increases trust between those who govern

and those who are governed (Bamgbose, 2000). In other words, national languages are a vital lever for participatory democracy and local development. However, their integration into local governance faces financial, logistical, institutional, and sociolinguistic obstacles, in a context where French continues to be valued as a language of prestige and modernity. Therefore, the central question of this study is: How can the promotion and effective use of national languages become a strategic tool for strengthening citizen participation, social cohesion, and the legitimacy of local institutions in Mali, while also contributing sustainably to community development? This question is all the more relevant as it simultaneously addresses the challenges of democratization, administrative efficiency, social inclusion, and the promotion of Malian cultural heritage, at the very moment when the country is seeking to rebuild its institutions on more participatory foundations closer to local realities.

The overall objective of the study is to analyze how the use of national languages can contribute to strengthening local governance, citizen participation, and social cohesion in Mali, while identifying the obstacles to an inclusive language policy. Specific objectives include:

- to identify the main obstacles to the integration of national languages into local governance;
- to evaluate the positive effects of using national languages on understanding public policies, citizen participation, and the promotion of cultural heritage;
- to propose concrete strategies (staff training, community consultation, multilingual digital tools) for the gradual and effective implementation of an inclusive language policy at the local level.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

- What obstacles hinder the effective integration of national languages into local governance in Mali?
- How can the use of national languages improve citizen participation, understanding of public policies, and social cohesion?
- What concrete strategies and initiatives can promote the sustainable implementation of an inclusive language policy in Malian local authorities?

The study is structured into several interconnected sections. It begins with a presentation of the research methodology, followed by the results which examine the challenges related to the use of national languages in local governance and highlight their role in promoting citizen participation, social cohesion and the legitimacy of institutions. This is followed by an analysis of technical and logistical constraints, such as translation, transcription, and staff training, and then of the consequences of linguistic exclusion on policy understanding and citizen trust. The following section assesses their positive effects and the persistent challenges in their implementation. The study concludes with perspectives and recommendations, proposing concrete strategies to strengthen linguistic inclusion, improve local governance, and support the sustainable development of Malian communities.

2. Methodology

2.1. Area of Investigation

The study focuses on twelve (12) pilot municipalities distributed across four regions of Mali: Ségou, Sikasso, Mopti, and Kayes, with three municipalities per region. The selection of these areas

is based on several methodological and sociolinguistic considerations aimed at ensuring the representativeness and relevance of the results. Firstly, these regions reflect the linguistic diversity of Mali. They are home to several national languages widely used in social, administrative, and political interactions: Bamanankan, Khassonke, Fulfulde, Dogoɔɔ, Mamara, and Bomu, among others. This linguistic plurality provides an ideal setting for analyzing the concrete impact of the use of national languages in local governance. Secondly, the selected regions exhibit marked cultural and socioeconomic heterogeneity. They encompass rural and urban areas, as well as spaces characterized by diverse sociopolitical dynamics. This diversity allows us to observe how local realities influence the integration of national languages into public governance processes. Finally, the choice of this area of investigation reflects the desire to cover different geographical areas of Mali: the South (Sikasso), the Center (Ségou, Mopti), and the West (Kayes). This distribution ensures a more balanced understanding of the linguistic impact across the country and allows us to identify trends, challenges, and opportunities specific to each area.

2.2. Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative approach with analytical and descriptive aims. It seeks to gain an in-depth understanding of the dynamics, obstacles, and potential related to the use of national languages in local governance. This approach was chosen due to the social and contextual nature of the phenomenon under study, which requires a nuanced understanding of the linguistic perceptions, practices, and policies observed at the local level.

2.3. Samples and Sampling:

Stakeholders directly involved in local governance and the

implementation of language policies were targeted. These include: local government officials and elected representatives, administrative officials, community representatives, civil society organizations, and certain citizens who use public services. A purposive sampling was utilized and selection was based on the relevance of the stakeholders to the linguistic issue. To this end, twelve (12) pilot municipalities were chosen, distributed across four regions: Ségou, Sikasso, Mopti, and Kayes (three municipalities per region). This choice aimed to reflect the linguistic, cultural, and geographical diversity of Mali. Therefore, the sampling of these twelve municipalities provides a broad and varied analytical framework, essential for a thorough assessment of the issues, challenges, and opportunities related to the use of national languages in local governance in Mali.

2.4. Data Collection Techniques and Tools

A thorough literature review was conducted using secondary sources, including official texts and reports on language policies, previous studies and publications, as well as relevant national legislation and decentralization documents. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 25 key stakeholders, including 15 men and 10 women, among them elected officials, civil servants, linguists, and community leaders. These interviews aimed to gather their perceptions, experiences, and suggestions. All interviews were transcribed verbatim for analysis.

2.5. Data Analysis Methods

A thematic content analysis was conducted based on the methodological framework proposed by Bardin (2013). This method allowed for the classification, organization, and interpretation of qualitative data around central themes such as obstacles, strengths, and strategies related to the use of national

languages in local governance. The results were interpreted by systematically employing Haugen's (1972) theoretical framework, not only to establish a conceptual link, but above all to concretely analyze how linguistic choices, power relations, and forms of citizen participation are intertwined. More specifically, Haugen's theory of language planning was applied along its two structuring axes, status planning and corpus planning, in order to assess the institutional hierarchy of languages within local authorities, their actual use in administrative interactions, and the consequences of these practices on access to information, understanding of public decisions, and citizen involvement. Consequently, status planning was used to examine the predominance of French as the language of power in municipalities, while corpus planning made it possible to account for the difficulties associated with the use of national languages, highlighting the recurring obstacles to their effective administrative implementation. The articulation of these two dimensions thus offered a nuanced reading of field observations: the linguistic imbalances observed are not limited to practical choices, but reflect power configurations that structure citizen participation and condition the legitimacy of local institutions.

This research acknowledges certain limitations: restricted access to some administrative data, linguistic and cultural diversity making generalization difficult, and financial and logistical constraints that may limit the study's geographical coverage. Despite these limitations, the study makes a scientific and practical contribution to the discussion on inclusive governance and language policy in Mali. It aims to shed light on the conditions for the effective and equitable use of national languages in local decision-making and participation processes. The data were coded manually, and emerging themes were refined through an iterative process to ensure validity.

3. Results and interpretations

3.1. The challenges of using national languages in local governance

Access to information and democratic participation are essential conditions for inclusive local governance, particularly in a multilingual country like Mali. Enabling citizens to obtain information and debate in their mother tongue facilitates understanding of public issues, strengthens the sense of belonging, and consolidates trust in institutions (USAID, 2014). In this context, the integration of national languages into political and administrative communication spaces is a requirement for linguistic justice and participatory democracy. The use of national languages in the media, official documents, and public deliberations is a key lever for promoting transparency and inclusion. The creation of digital and institutional resources in local languages fosters cultural diversity and broadens public participation in decision-making processes. This dynamic also aligns with decentralization policies and bilingual education programs initiated in the 1990s, which aim to bring institutions closer to citizens and strengthen local resilience in the face of crises (UNESCO, 2025). This impact is tangible in daily life. In Koro, a municipality in the center of Mali, residents listen to the municipal council meetings broadcast on local radio in their native language. For Salimata, a businesswomen and mother of three children, these broadcasts are a breath of fresh air: “Before, I never understood what the authorities decided. Now, I can listen, ask questions, and even discuss with my neighbors. My children are also learning to read and write in our language at school. It gives us the feeling of finally being listened to and respected.” (Interview: September 24, 2024). In other words, the provision of official documents and digital resources in the local language thus allows citizens

like Salimata to take ownership of the decisions that concern them and to actively participate in the life of their community.

However, the implementation of these systems remains confronted with several constraints: the lack of qualified translators and documentalists, the inadequacy of digital infrastructures, and the absence of a clearly defined legal framework for the official use of national languages limit their institutionalization and their real impact on citizen participation. Therefore, the promotion of national languages in local governance is not limited to a communication issue: it constitutes a strategic instrument for transforming the relationship between the State and citizens. By promoting access to information and democratic participation in languages understood by all, Malian local authorities strengthen the legitimacy of institutions and social cohesion, placing language at the center of a truly participatory and pluralist local democracy.

3.2. Local cultures, languages and governance

Promoting cultural and linguistic identities has become a major challenge for local governance in Mali, a country characterized by remarkable linguistic and ethnic diversity. Far from being mere tools of communication, national languages embody collective memory, cultural heritage, and social values. Their integration into local decision-making processes helps to ground public policies in a legitimate sociocultural framework, thereby fostering social cohesion and contributing to regional stability (Samassékou, 2006). This dynamic is increasingly evident in the digital sphere. The growing presence of online content in national languages demonstrates that linguistic diversity can go hand in hand with technological innovation. The production of digital and educational resources in local languages not only encourages the adoption of information technologies but also

contributes to the preservation of intangible heritage. In many communities, digital platforms and learning tools developed in the languages spoken by the population facilitate access to knowledge and civic information. They also mobilize younger generations around the promotion of their mother tongue, thereby strengthening the link between culture, education and local governance.

At the same time, school bilingualism, implemented from the elementary level, helps to legitimize national languages in formal training and administrative spaces. It is not only a pedagogical tool, but a mechanism for inclusive development and social resilience. Learning in the mother tongue strengthens trust between the school and the community and consolidates cultural continuity between the domestic sphere and public institutions, particularly in areas affected by community tensions (Minta & Kodio, 2023).

Finally, international institutions emphasize the importance of integrating local languages and cultures into development and governance programs. Training public officials in the use of national languages, producing multilingual administrative documents, and recognizing linguistic heritage in public policies are all levers for more representative and sustainable governance (UNESCO, 2025). Thus, the promotion of national languages in Mali does not only respond to a cultural imperative: it is part of a political and institutional logic aimed at consolidating social cohesion, promoting identity pluralism and strengthening the legitimacy of local policies.

3.3. Language, inclusion and social justice

Promoting social equality and reducing linguistic inequalities are essential levers for strengthening national cohesion in Mali. In a context where French remains the primary language of institutional communication, the recognition and effective use of national languages appear as instruments of social justice.

Enabling a community to understand and participate in decision-making processes in its mother tongue fosters civic autonomy and reduces the risk of exclusion (Samassekou, 2006). This reality is concretely illustrated on the ground. During a community meeting in Ségou, residents welcomed the use of Bamanankan in the presentation of the local budget: “This is the first time we truly understand where the money is going,” Kelessigue confided. (Interview: December 21, 2024). Such an initiative demonstrates how the promotion of national languages transforms citizen participation into a genuine exercise in local democracy.

Similarly, the rise of digital content in local languages reflects the progress of a more inclusive governance model. The creation of platforms and administrative documents translated into national languages helps to overcome language barriers and broaden access to public information. The dissemination of these multilingual resources strengthens everyone's participation in public debates and improves the transparency of governance. Furthermore, the democratization of internet access fosters a more horizontal flow of information, an essential condition for active and informed citizenship (Milakovich, 2010).

Finally, bilingual education, supported by decentralization policies, represents another pillar of linguistic and social equality. Instruction in the mother tongue, supplemented by a lingua franca or official language, allows students to acquire solid skills while remaining rooted in their culture (Minta & Kodio, 2023). This approach promotes more equitable linguistic representation in administrative and political spheres, thus breaking with the exclusive dominance of French.

Thus, opening up institutional spaces to linguistic plurality encourages the participation of long-marginalized populations and redefines the relationships between citizens and institutions. Linguistic inclusion, far from being a simple cultural issue,

constitutes a pillar of equitable development and national cohesion.

3.4. Technical and logistical constraints of translation and transcription

The effective implementation of national languages in local governance faces major technical and logistical constraints. Mali's linguistic plurality, with distinct phonetic, grammatical, and orthographic structures, complicates the consistent translation and transcription of official documents. According to UNESCO (2025), this diversity leads to a shortage of qualified translators, transcribers, and terminologists. This shortage limits the reliability and accuracy of administrative documents, with potential legal and political consequences.

Logistical obstacles significantly exacerbate the difficulties associated with disseminating translated documents. Indeed, the uneven distribution of transport and communication infrastructure slows the delivery of resources, while the digitization of processes depends on internet connectivity and a stable electricity supply, often limited in rural and remote areas. These structural constraints thus accentuate the disparities between urban and rural areas, hindering the equitable implementation of language and education policies.

This reality is clearly reflected on the ground. For example, in the Mopti region, a retired teacher recounts that he sometimes had to travel several kilometers to collect translated textbooks from better-equipped schools, due to the lack of a reliable internet connection. Despite these constraints, he confidently states that “These books in the local language change the way children understand lessons.” (Interview: December 15, 2024). This testimony illustrates how even limited efforts in language adaptation can have a tangible impact on the quality of learning and educational inclusion.

Nevertheless, experimental initiatives, particularly in the field of bilingual education, are now opening up encouraging prospects. The production of translated textbooks and teaching materials constitutes a first step towards the standardization of language corpora. According to UNICEF (2013), the support of international organizations and local associations strengthens technical capacities, develops digital translation tools, and consolidates the skills of local stakeholders. Thanks to these efforts, it is gradually becoming possible to overcome technical obstacles and improve multilingual institutional communication.

3.5. Difficulties in adapting administrative and legal institutions

Adapting administrative and legal institutions to the use of national languages is a major challenge in Mali. Indeed, public institutions inherited from a Francophone model struggle to integrate functional multilingualism. The lack of clear normative frameworks for the translation and drafting of documents in local languages leads to significant heterogeneity in institutional practices.

As a former elected official from the municipality of Komoro in the Kayes Region points out: “This situation particularly affects the judicial system. Minutes, judgments and official acts are rarely translated, which restricts access to justice for non-French-speaking people and undermines confidence in the institution.” (Interview: December 2, 2024). This testimony concretely illustrates the obstacles citizens face in their daily lives. In addition, in the municipality of Logo Sabouciré in Kayes, Hawa, a trader and mother, recounts: “When I wanted to contest an administrative decision concerning our market, I didn’t understand the official documents, which were only in French. I had to ask my son to help me translate, and even then, everything remained very

complicated. If these documents had been in Khassonke, everyone could have participated and understood.” (Interview: December 5, 2024). Her experience demonstrates how the lack of appropriate language resources can exclude citizens from the administrative process and restrict their access to their rights.

Furthermore, at the local governance level, decentralization struggles to translate into genuine linguistic delegation. Local elected officials often lack the resources and tools necessary to adapt their administrative practices. This is compounded by a lack of training, a scarcity of translated documents, and meager budgets allocated to communication, all factors that hinder the effective implementation of language policies.

This situation is clearly reflected on the ground. In Koutiala, a municipality in the Sikasso region, a local elected official explains that he has to draft most official documents in French, due to a lack of Bamanankan translations, even for information intended for the predominantly non-French-speaking local population. He adds, “We would like to communicate in the languages of the inhabitants, but we have neither the manuals, nor the budget and the necessary training to do so properly.” (Interview: December 11, 2024). This testimony concretely illustrates the difficulties faced by local authorities in implementing inclusive language policies, despite the decentralized frameworks that would theoretically allow it. To overcome these obstacles, structural reform is essential. It should include the systematic training of public officials, the production of official language reference materials, and the establishment of monitoring and evaluation bodies. These measures would not only help to make institutions more accessible, but also to strengthen citizens' trust and social cohesion.

3.6. Political obstacles and resistance to change

The implementation of an inclusive language policy faces

persistent political obstacles and resistance to change. In a context marked by security and institutional crises, the language issue is often relegated to the background. The colonial legacy, which gives French the status of a language of prestige and institutional legitimacy, fuels the reluctance to fully integrate local languages. Political differences and budgetary priorities focused on security and institutional reconstruction limit the funding of language policies, reinforcing the marginalization of national languages. To overcome this resistance, an inclusive national dialogue is essential, involving the State, communities, civil society and international partners. The objective is to legitimize multilingualism as an instrument of cohesion and to place the linguistic question at the center of the Malian democratic project.

Therefore, the challenges of implementing national languages in Malian local governance reflect the scale of the transformations required at the technical, institutional, and political levels. Between logistical constraints, regulatory inadequacies, and decision-making inertia, the success of this reform will depend on an integrated approach combining technological innovation, language training, and sustained political commitment. More than just a communication tool, language is presented here as an issue of sovereignty, justice, and democratic legitimacy, the mastery of which determines the success of the decentralization and national reconstruction process.

3.7. The consequences of linguistic exclusion on local governance

Linguistic exclusion is a determining factor in social and political marginalization in Mali, a country characterized by exceptional linguistic diversity, with 13 national languages coexisting within its borders. The predominance of French in administrative institutions and public procedures exacerbates inequalities in access to information and civic participation.

Those who do not speak French are often excluded from public debates, community consultations, and political decisions that directly influence their daily lives. This situation generates a particularly strong sense of exclusion in rural areas and among ethnic groups historically underrepresented in decision-making bodies, reinforcing distrust of the state and weakening social cohesion. The lack of systematic translation or interpretation services at local meetings prevents many citizens from expressing their concerns or understanding the issues at stake in public policies. The linguistic divide, often compounded by economic and territorial inequalities, undermines the legitimacy of local structures and compromises cohesion between communities, while hindering reconciliation and peacebuilding processes. This reality is clearly reflected on the ground. In the Kakoulou District of Kayes, a resident recounts: “During municipal meetings, everything is said in French. My neighbors and I don’t understand half of what is being discussed, and we remain silent. Yet, our lives and our incomes are at stake”. (Interview: December 11, 2024). This testimony illustrates how the lack of translation and the dominance of a foreign language limit civic expression and exacerbate feelings of exclusion.

The persistence of monolingual governance in French also undermines citizens’ trust in their local representatives. When authorities speak in a language foreign to the majority of the population, they create a symbolic and functional distance, perceived as a sign of domination and exclusion. The lack of linguistic understanding limits transparency and participation in public affairs: municipal meetings and public consultations are often perceived as imposed formalities rather than genuine spaces for dialogue. This breakdown of trust translates into voter abstention, low citizen mobilization, and, sometimes, open challenges to local authority. In areas where formal governance structures are fragile, this loss of legitimacy fosters the emergence of parallel authorities, customary, religious, or

community-based, whose linguistic and cultural proximity strengthens their credibility with the population. Restoring trust requires a multilingual communication policy, combining language training for elected officials, translation of administrative documents, and the creation of consultation spaces accessible to all, in order to strengthen democratic accountability and the transparency of institutions.

Linguistic exclusion can also amplify social and interethnic tensions. Language is a powerful marker of identity, and the dominance of a single language, in this case French, reinforces symbolic hierarchies and fuels resentment between linguistic groups. Populations whose language is not represented in the administration have fewer opportunities to assert their rights, access public resources, or fully participate in development programs. This situation creates fertile ground for frustrations and community conflicts, where language can become an instrument of political protest, or even a challenge to the established order. Dysfunctions observed in some municipalities, where linguistic misunderstandings have led to the dissolution of municipal councils, illustrate the direct link between linguistic exclusion and the weakening of local governance. The recognition and promotion of linguistic pluralism thus appear as essential measures to prevent tensions, strengthen national cohesion, and consolidate the legitimacy of local institutions in their mission of equitable representation.

In short, linguistic exclusion constitutes a major challenge to governance and political stability in Mali. It restricts citizen participation, weakens the legitimacy of local authorities, and fuels intercommunal tensions. The recognition and promotion of national languages appear as essential levers for transforming linguistic richness into an engine of social cohesion and sustainable development.

3.8. Practices and initiatives to promote the use of national languages

The integration of national languages into local administrative services is a key lever for improving governance efficiency and strengthening social cohesion in Mali. Enabling citizens to access public services in their mother tongue facilitates understanding of procedures and communication with government officials, thereby strengthening trust in institutions. Within the framework of decentralization, some municipalities have experimented with creating language services and translation programs to adapt administrative documents to the most widely spoken local languages. These initiatives demonstrate that, when accompanied by targeted training for civil servants, the use of national languages promotes transparency and ownership of local policies. However, the widespread adoption of these practices remains limited and requires legal formalization to mandate the partial or complete translation of official documents, public information materials, and local signage.

Training and raising awareness among local government staff constitute another major focus. Civil servants, in direct contact with the population, must be proficient in local languages or have access to qualified translators to ensure the fairness and clarity of administrative documents. Beyond the linguistic dimension, this training must also emphasize the sociocultural dimension of each language through workshops on cultural diversity and intercultural communication. Such initiatives bring civil servants closer to local realities and contribute to strengthening social cohesion. To be sustainable, they must be integrated into decentralization and civil service reform policies, with the support of technical and financial partners.

Bilingual education is a central pillar in the promotion of national languages. Bilingual programs, which introduce instruction in the mother tongue before learning French,

improve comprehension, academic success, and social integration, while also encouraging the involvement of parents and communities in local education management (Nounta et al., 2025). These initiatives often rely on partnerships with NGOs and international organizations to produce bilingual textbooks and train teachers. Bilingual education thus goes beyond mere pedagogy: it contributes to building inclusive local governance and strengthening community resilience.

Moreover, the integration of national languages into local governance is generating increasing interest in Africa, as it denotes a significant lever for democratic participation, transparency, and social cohesion. In Senegal, according to Diallo (2019), linguistic diversity, marked by the coexistence of Wolof, Pulaar, Serer, and Diola alongside French, the official language, represents both a cultural asset and a challenge for governance. The use of national languages in municipal councils and community meetings fosters a better understanding of administrative decisions and strengthens the legitimacy of public policies. By enabling citizens to directly access information and decision-making processes, this approach helps to bridge the gap between authorities and the population, while simultaneously building trust in local institutions.

Similarly, in Burkina Faso, where more than sixty languages are spoken, Nikiema (2005) and Napon (2006) emphasize that the use of local languages in regional and municipal administrations plays a crucial role in social cohesion and the promotion of national culture. Initiatives to translate official documents and conduct meetings in national languages such as Moore, Dioula, or Fulfulde facilitate understanding and citizen participation. However, these efforts are often hampered by a lack of resources and training for public officials, thus limiting their impact. Despite these constraints, linguistic inclusion remains an essential tool for promoting participatory governance and

strengthening community resilience in the face of socio-economic challenges.

In South Africa, Lafon (2004) highlights the importance of linguistic diversity in a context where eleven official languages coexist. The use of national languages in local governance structures, recognized as a constitutional right, also constitutes a strategic tool for strengthening citizen participation. Municipalities that adopt multilingual policies, by providing public communication and administrative services in several languages, promote transparency, accountability of elected officials, and the inclusion of historically marginalized communities. The South African experience thus demonstrates how valuing multilingualism can transform a source of division into a driver of nation-building and local democracy.

Finally, civil society and local communities play a key role in promoting national languages. NGOs, cultural associations, and community radio stations participate in disseminating translated information, raising public awareness, and creating educational materials, serving as a bridge between institutions and citizens. These initiatives foster local ownership of language policies, strengthen the legitimacy of local authorities, and help prevent social tensions while supporting peacebuilding. Therefore, the integration of national languages in Mali rests on a set of administrative, educational, and community initiatives, the success of which depends on the establishment of a clear legal framework, the training of personnel, and the active engagement of civil society.

3.9. Challenges and obstacles encountered in the implementation of national languages

The implementation of the use of national languages in local governance in Mali faces a series of complex challenges, the first being a lack of financial and human resources. Although decentralization policies and administrative reforms reflect a

political will to include local languages, local authorities rarely have sufficient resources to train, recruit, and retain qualified staff capable of ensuring effective bilingual communication. Local budgets, often strained by dependence on state transfers and security constraints, do not allow for the funding of translation programs, information materials in local languages, or regular training for public officials. This budget deficit leads to the exclusion of a segment of the population from decision-making processes, undermining the legitimacy of institutions and citizen participation.

At the human level, the scarcity of trained personnel and the lack of professional incentives to master national languages further exacerbate the situation, particularly in rural and Sahelian areas, where the number of civil servants is small and their versatility is significant. These constraints are compounded by competing socio-economic priorities, such as security, health, and infrastructure, which relegate language promotion to a secondary concern. Yet, it has been demonstrated that the use of mother tongues in public communication fosters citizen participation, transparency, and social cohesion.

Furthermore, technical limitations and language barriers constitute another major obstacle. While bilingual education and some community communication initiatives exist, they remain limited by the lack of digital infrastructure and appropriate language tools. Administrative platforms, institutional websites, and educational portals remain predominantly in French, thus excluding a large portion of potential users. The development of applications, translation software, and speech synthesis systems adapted to local languages would represent a significant step forward in popularizing these languages in the public sphere. However, this transition faces two main challenges: civil servants, often trained in a monolingual system, lack linguistic and technical skills, and institutional mistrust hinders innovation. The coexistence of numerous dialects also

complicates the standardization and harmonization of administrative and legal terminology, which is essential for ensuring the consistency of official documents. Overcoming these obstacles requires a concerted approach bringing together researchers, linguists, and institutional stakeholders to make national languages genuine instruments of governance and inclusion.

Finally, political and administrative resistance constitutes a further impediment. The historical perception of French as a symbol of national unity and institutional efficiency creates reluctance to promote local languages. Some officials fear that this recognition could fuel identity-based demands or weaken national cohesion, while the administration, steeped in a Francophone bureaucratic culture, remains ill-prepared to adopt a bilingual model. Official documents, forms, and communications are still written exclusively in French, and the lack of a coherent, comprehensive language policy reinforces this resistance. Yet, the successful experiences of some rural municipalities show that such a reform can strengthen national unity while promoting inclusion and citizen participation.

In short, the challenges associated with implementing national languages are numerous: financial, human, technical, and political constraints combine to slow language promotion. Nevertheless, a structured policy, supported by strong political will, can transform this linguistic diversity into a lever for stability, inclusion, and local development.

3.10. The positive effects of using national languages

The use of national languages in Malian local governance produces significant beneficial effects, both in terms of communication and citizen participation and cultural preservation. On the one hand, the use of local languages improves the understanding of public policies. In a context of high linguistic diversity, the dissemination of information in the

populations' mother tongue broadens access to public debates and reduces misunderstandings in the implementation of development programs. The experience of citizen audits in certain municipalities of Bamako illustrates how a better understanding of administrative documents and council minutes strengthens the involvement of residents and establishes a climate of trust between elected officials and citizens. These initiatives contribute to transparency, the accountability of authorities, and the effectiveness of decentralized governance. Furthermore, the adoption of national languages promotes the consolidation of citizen participation and local democracy. Residents can understand and express themselves in their mother tongue, which strengthens the legitimacy of debates and encourages effective control of public projects. The use of local languages facilitates participation in municipal councils, neighborhood committees, and consultative bodies, helping to prevent corruption and ensure transparent resource management. This approach goes beyond simple cultural enhancement: it constitutes a strategic instrument for including populations traditionally removed from institutional circuits and promoting the stability of local communities. Finally, the promotion of national languages contributes to the preservation of linguistic and cultural heritage, the foundation of Malian identity. The integration of local languages into administrations and the education system safeguards traditional knowledge, artisanal practices, and local rituals, while strengthening community ownership of cultural heritage (Diallo, 2019, p. 119). Bilingual programs piloted in northern Mali show that teaching in the mother tongue promotes student integration and community resilience in the face of tensions. The participation of populations in the creation of educational materials and in community consultation contributes to sustainable social cohesion and harmonious development.

As a result, the use of national languages improves communication, strengthens citizen participation and preserves cultural heritage. These benefits show that linguistic diversity can be an effective lever for local governance, provided it is supported by a coherent and inclusive institutional policy.

3.11. Perspectives and Recommendations

To strengthen the use of national languages in local governance in Mali, it is essential to adopt inclusive language policies adapted to local realities. The country's ethnic and linguistic diversity necessitates the implementation of strategies that guarantee access to information and decision-making processes for all. This requires the translation of official documents, the recruitment of civil servants capable of working in local languages, and training in basic translation and interpretation techniques. Co-designing reforms with local communities, traditional authorities, and civil society allows for the identification of existing resources and the adaptation of policies to specific contexts. These reforms should be viewed as levers for inclusion, stability, and development, supported by close coordination among all institutional and community stakeholders.

Consultation and involvement of local communities are also key factors. Establishing permanent consultation mechanisms, involving community associations, civil society, and local authorities, makes it possible to develop realistic and sustainable solutions that meet local needs. The experience of Burkina Faso demonstrates the importance of translating political commitments into concrete action plans to strengthen the effectiveness of linguistic and cultural initiatives.

Investing in language training and appropriate infrastructure is essential to ensure the sustainable use of national languages. Training programs must include language development, cultural awareness, and translation and interpretation skills.

Simultaneously, the creation of adequate infrastructure, resource centers, language schools, translated textbooks, and qualified translators, facilitates the dissemination and effective use of local languages. These measures contribute to promoting inclusion, reducing functional illiteracy, and strengthening social cohesion.

Furthermore, partnerships with international organizations and linguistic experts represent a strategic lever. These collaborations provide educational resources, training programs, and technical support for producing bilingual or multilingual documents, while also enabling the transfer of skills to local professionals. Pilot projects, such as community radio stations or bilingual administrative services, provide a framework for experimenting with, adjusting, and sustaining initiatives. Combining local and international expertise thus constitutes a sustainable approach to strengthening citizen participation and the effectiveness of local governance. In summary, strengthening the use of national languages in local governance relies on an integrated set of inclusive policies, training, community consultations, and strategic partnerships. By transforming linguistic diversity into a lever for cohesion and participation, Mali can make its national languages a driving force for effective governance, sustainable development, and social peace.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the use of national languages in local governance in Mali represents both a strategic opportunity and a complex challenge. From a social perspective, it promotes citizen inclusion, strengthens communication between institutions and the population, and consolidates social cohesion in a country characterized by significant linguistic diversity. From a practical perspective, the promotion of local languages contributes to the

legitimacy of institutions, the active participation of citizens in public decision-making, and the preservation of cultural heritage. However, the coexistence of several languages entails practical and political challenges: risks of exclusion, costs associated with producing multilingual documents, training of administrative staff, and the need to standardize terminology to ensure the clarity and efficiency of public services. Despite these constraints, gradual and planned integration, supported by training and awareness programs, can transform multilingualism into a genuine asset for governance and local development. The success of this process hinges on the implementation of structural measures: strengthening the language skills of public officials, integrating national languages into local information systems and media, establishing translation services, and adopting a clear legislative framework recognizing their official status. Political will and sustained institutional commitment are essential to ensuring the sustainability of these mechanisms. International experience (Senegal, Burkina Faso, South Africa) demonstrates that recognizing local languages can be a lever for democracy and institutional effectiveness. Besides, information and communication technologies (ICTs) offer new opportunities to disseminate national languages through multilingual educational and administrative platforms. Therefore, integrating national languages into local governance transcends the purely linguistic issue: it emerges as a strategic tool for strengthening institutional legitimacy, citizen participation, and social peace. By combining training, legislation, community mobilization, and technological innovation, Mali can transform its linguistic diversity into a driver of development, local democracy, and national unity.

Références

BARDIN Laurence, 2013, *L'analyse de contenu* (13^e éd.). Paris

: Presses Universitaires de France.

AFRICANEWS, 2023, “Mali drops French as official language”. Africanews.

Consulté le 30 septembre 2025 sur <https://www.africanews.com/2023/07/26/mali-drops-french-as-official-language/>

BAMGBOSE Ayo, 2000, *Language and Exclusion: The Consequences of Language Policies in Africa*. Münster, LIT Verlag.

COADY INSTITUTE, 2019, *The myths and realities of local governance in Sanankoroba, Mali*. Antigonish, Nova Scotia: St. Francis Xavier University.

Retrieved on August 28, 2025 from <https://coady.stfx.ca/the-myths-and-realities-of-local-governance-in-sanankoroba-mali/>

DIALLO Sileymane, 2019, « La problématique de la promotion des langues nationales sénégalaises au statut de langues officielles. » ABUDoF, Varia, 2 (8), pp.28- 47. fhal-03091939

GUINDO Paul, 2015, *Présentation de la politique linguistique du Mali*. AMALAN.

HAUGEN Einar, 1972, *The ecology of language: Essays by Einar Haugen* (A. S. Dil, Ed.). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

LAFON Michel, 2004, « De la diversité linguistique en Afrique du sud : Comment transformer un facteur de division en un outil de construction nationale?. » P. Guillaume, N. Péjout, A.W. Kabwe-Segatti. « L’Afrique du sud dix ans après : Transition accomplie? », *Karthala*, pp.217-247, 2004. fhalshs-00078501f

MILAKOVICH Michael. E. (2010). “The Internet and Increased Citizen Participation in Government.” *In JeDEM*. 2(1). pp. 01-09. Retrieved on July 12, 2025 from <https://doi.org/10.29379/jedem.v2i1.22>

MINTA Moussa, 2020, *Using National Languages in Public Elementary and High Schools in Mali: Challenges and Perspectives*. IPU, Mali. Ph.D. Dissertation.

MINTA Moussa & KODIO Aldiouma, 2023, « Attitudes towards the teaching of national languages in Mali. » *Revue acaref*. pp.184-190, Retrieved in August 23, 2024 on <https://revues.acaref.net/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2023/03/12-Moussa-O.-MINTA.pdf>

NAPON Abou, 2006, « Le rôle des langues nationales dans la promotion de la culture burkinabè », In *Revue du CAMES*, nouvelle série B, vol.007, n°1, pp. 205-213.

NIKIEMA Norbert, 2005, « Les langues nationales dans l'administration pour la bonne gouvernance et la participation démocratique », In *cahiers du CERLESHS*, pp. 45 – 71.

SAMASSÉKOU Adama, 2006, « Pluralisme linguistique et problématique du développement en Afrique. » In *Bulletin de la Classe des lettres et des sciences morales et politiques*, tome 17, n°7-12, pp. 379-386. Consulté le 24 octobre 2025 sur <https://doi.org/10.3406/barb.2006.38936>

UNESCO, 2025, “UNESCO and the promotion of languages in Africa: Cultural diversity and multilingualism”. Consulté le 13 octobre 2025 sur <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/unesco-and-promotion-languages-africa-cultural-diversity-and-multilingualism>

UNESCO, 2025, *Mali launches its National Action Plan for the International Decade of Indigenous Languages*. Consulté le 2 septembre 2025 sur <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/mali-launches-its-national-action-plan-international-decade-indigenous-languages-idil-2022-2032>

UNICEF, 2013, *Multi-country study on multilingualism and bi/plurilingualism in schools in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger*.

UNICEF West and Central Africa Regional Office. Retrieved on September 15 , 2025 from

https://www.unicef.org/wca/media/9186/file/Etude%20MLE_EN_Web.pdf

USAID, 2014, *Mali Democracy, Human Rights and Governance Assessment Report*. United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Retrieved in January 23rd, 2025

from https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/202205/Mali_2014DRG%20Assessment_public_FINAL.pdf

UNESCO Institute for Education, 2003, *Citizenship, Democracy and Lifelong Learning*. Consulté le 03 avril 2025 sur <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000149312>