

## **Gender and Governance: "Participation of women in local development committees in Equateur/DRC: Case study"**

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### **Abstract**

*For decades, women have numerically outnumbered men. Unfortunately, their access to decision-making positions is still a problem, despite progressive efforts to recognize women's rights. In order to gain an insight in the participation of Congolese women in steering committees (decision-making bodies), Local Development Committees (LDC) set up as part of the PIREDD Equateur project were the subject of this study. To achieve the objectives set, information was gathered using a questionnaire drawn up in advance, following a qualitative approach based on focus-group interviews, and 12 members per LDC formed a focus group where the interviews were conducted. In all, 56 LDCs were visited, according to their accessibility and level of operationalization, out of a total of 165 identified by PIREDD Equateur. On average, the women involved in this study were between 31 and 50 years old and had a low level of education. They were poorly represented in decision-making bodies due to male pressure and dictatorship, and the strong influence of custom on their role in society. The study also revealed that obstacles such as level of education, custom, marriage and inferiority complex hindered their personal development. However, the territories of Bomongo and Bikoro showed a relatively high rate of women's participation in the positions of president and vice-president, and only in a few villages.*

**Key words:** *Women's participation, decision-making body, LDC, PIREDD, Equateur*

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### **I. Introduction**

The United Nations, through UN-Women, works to place women at the forefront of development. And over the last decades, several approaches have been developed to enable the participation of women in development (Nahavand, 2000; Dagenais and Piché, 2000) .

In Africa, women find themselves increasingly at the center of social, political and economic issues (Thiombiano, 2014) . African governments have specifically made important commitments to gender equality, notably in the "Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa" in 2004 and the "Protocol to the African Charter on the Rights of Women in Africa". (Thiombiano, 2014) . Nearly 20 years later, there was a significant progress in women's participation and governments in several countries are increasingly calling on their expertise and leadership when making key decisions (IND, 2013) .

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is one of its African countries which have formally committed to improving gender equity in governance through Law No. 15/013 of August 1, 2015 relating to its implementation women's rights and parity (DRC, 2015) . However, these efforts are often hampered by the persistence of socio-cultural norms that marginalize women and limit their participation in decision-making bodies (IND, 2013) . Furthermore, the contribution of women in the management of public affairs, in general, remains poorly documented and moderately valued, yet they are among the most vulnerable and most affected segments of the population (Nkoum, 2018) .

In order to promote participatory development, the government of DRC chose in its constitution to establish a decentralization system to manage the country <sup>1</sup>. This decentralization can only be effective if citizen participation is inclusive and contributes fully to actions aimed at developing the country from the local level. To support this initiative, several political reforms including those of sustainable agriculture, decentralization and territorial planning have enabled the establishment of local community management structures represented,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.justicepaix.be/la-decentralisation-en-rd-congo-quelle-application/>

depending on the case, by Agricultural and Rural Councils. Management (CARG), Farmers' Associations and Organizations (AP/OP) and Local Development Committees (LDC) <sup>2</sup>. The latter, being representations of the management of community spaces, which is carried out by means of decisions, and simple development plans. Although the organization and structuring of LDCs vary depending on the context, however, the majority of LDCs have a structure of bodies which generally includes a steering committee, a general assembly and a control committee <sup>3</sup>.

Through their household role, they are at the center of the management of natural resources as farmers and generators of household income, and are responsible for growing subsistence products, and often have remarkable knowledge of these resources, even their sustainable management. Although they are dependent on these natural resources, women have less access to them and less control over them than men (Kambale et al., 2016; Nkoum, 2018) .

Furthermore, according to FAO (2015) , understanding their roles and responsibilities, including the gender dimension in natural resources management, is an important step towards ending environmental degradation. . From the available documentation, it is evident that, despite their past contribution to environmental protection and their essential involvement in the care to be provided, men alone cannot reverse unsustainable practices (Williams et al ., 2005) .

In 2020, 745 LDCs were created in 8 provinces thanks to investments from the Central Africa Forest Initiative (CAFI) financed through the UNDP-DRC (United Nations Development Program) and the National REDD+ Fund (FONAREDD). Some provincial governments, such as that of South Kivu, have legally recognized the existence of LDCs through provincial decree No. 20/066/GP/SK of November 11, 2020 establishing the establishment, organization and operation of committees development premises in decentralized territorial entities in the South Kivu province. On the other hand, other provinces, such as that of Ecuador, have never issued a decree on the recognition of LDCs created through.

Consequently, these LDCs operate under the label of non-profit associations through Law No. 004 of July 20, 2001, laying down general provisions applicable to Non-Profit Associations and Public Utility Establishments. Although accepted, they do not constitute an offshoot of the state apparatus. The LDCs are considered as institutions of civil society, as such, they seek to consult various local actors and encourage their involvement in projects related to local development <sup>4</sup>. However, because of their financial dependence, the LDCs also maintain close relationships with various government partners, relationships which are not always consistent with the objectives and statutes of the LDCs.

Based on this observation, the present study set itself the objective of contributing to the reflection on the problem of LDCs governance in general and in particular, the participation of women in the management of Local Development Committees (LDCs). It will be a question of: i) determining the level of participation of women in the steering committees, which are the decision-making bodies of the LDCs; ii) determine the cultural, social and political barriers that hinder their participation. The results found will help to better understand local power structures and gender dynamics, a crucial step in promoting gender equality and community governance.

## **II. Material and Methods**

### **Study environment**

This study was carried out in four territories of the province of Equateur (Bikoro, Bomongo, Lukolela and Ingende). These territories were chosen because these zones constitute areas of intervention for the PIREDD project (figure 1).

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<sup>2</sup> <https://fonaredd-rdc.org/programme-integre-redd-equateur-piredd-equateur/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.cafi.org/fr/pays-partenaires/democratic-republic-congo/pour-une-gestion-locale-et-participative-de-lusage-des-terres-745-comites-locaux-de-development>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ijrdo.org/index.php/sshr/article/view/2108>

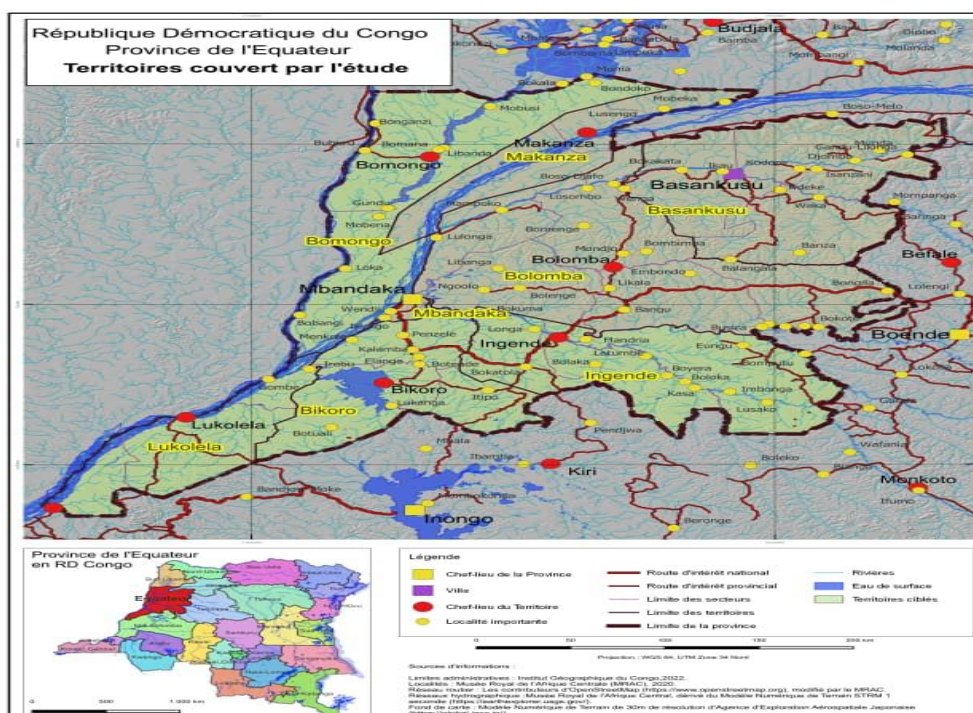


Figure 1. Location of the study area

### Lukolela Territory

The territory of Lukolela is one of the territories of the province of Equateur which extends upstream of the territory of Yumbi and downstream of the commune of Wangata (city of Mbandaka) between 0° 35' and 16° 35' South and 16° 35' and 17° 50' East. Located on the left bank of the Congo River, the territory shares a natural border (Congo River) with the Republic of Congo to the west, to the east by the territory of Bikoro and Inongo, to the north by the sector of Inganda and the Congo River and finally through the territory of Yumbi in the province of Mai-ndombe. The territory of Lukolela extends over an area of 17,952 km<sup>2</sup> and is divided into 3 sectors, namely: the Mpama sector, the Banunu-Bobangi sector and the Losakani-Ngele sector. The latter is made up of 4 groups, of which only the Losakanya group (24 villages and 14 CLDs have been identified) is covered by the PIREDD project (UNDP, 2011) .

### Bomongo Territory

The territory of Bomongo is located in the northwest of the Democratic Republic of Congo on the left bank of the Ubangi River, approximately 300 km from the city of Mbandaka between latitudes 0°27' and 0°50' South and longitudes 18 °22' and 18°56' East. The total population counted is estimated at 77,807 inhabitants distributed in 77 villages (Forabola, 2019) .

### Bikoro Territory

The territory of Bikoro is one of the territories of the province of Equateur located at 0° 45' South and 18° 07' East on the edge of Lake Tumba , on its eastern shore. It is divided into 3 important sectors: Lake Ntomba (8 groups and 88 villages), Elanga (3 groups and 83 villages) and Ekonda (6 groups and 116 villages). With an area of 13,842 km<sup>2</sup>, its population is estimated at 244,808 inhabitants with a density of 18 inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup> (UNDP, 2011) .

### Territory of Ingende

The territory of Ingende is one of the territories of the province of Equateur located at 0° 14' North and 18° 58' East. The territory is divided into 3 sectors: Bokatola (6 groups and 118 villages), Duali (5 groups and 143 villages) and Eungu (4 groups and 94 villages). Only the Bokatola sector is covered by the PIREDD project. With an area of 17,328 km<sup>2</sup>, its population is estimated at 188,533 inhabitants with a density of 11 inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup> (UNDP, 2011) .

**Methodology**

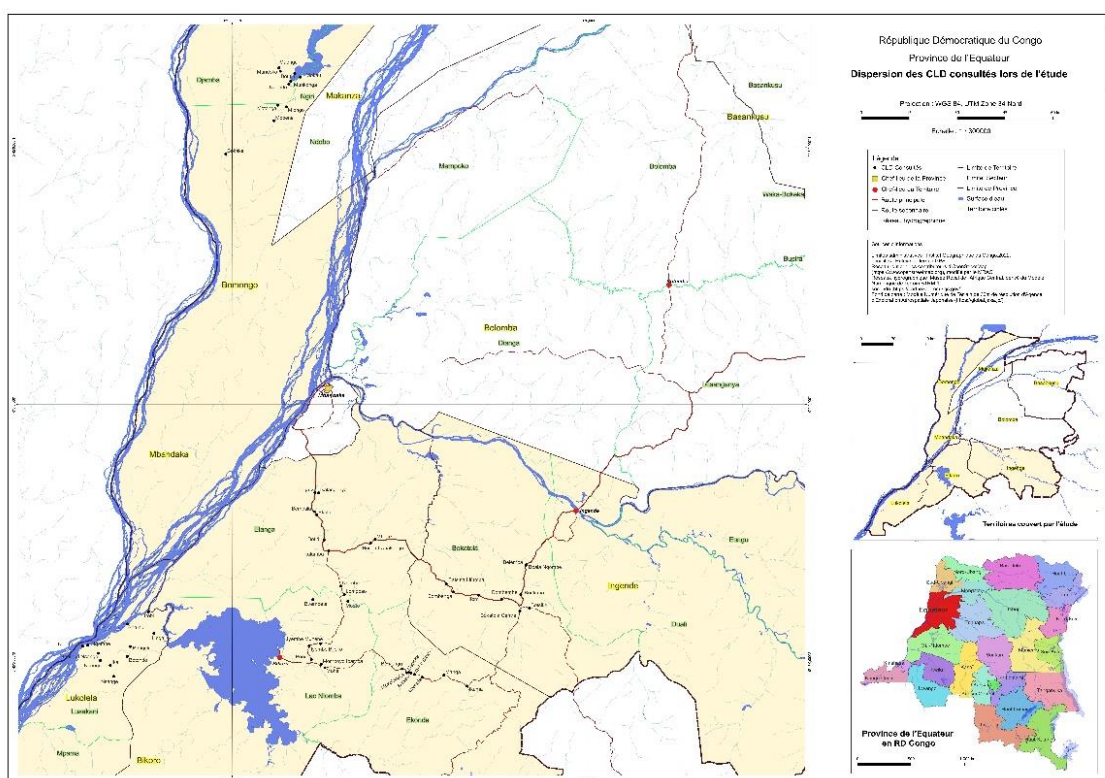
**Study period**

The collection was carried out in two phases. The first concerned the territory of Lukolela in July 2022. The second completed the three other territories (Bikoro, Bomongo and Ingende) in June 2023.

**Sampling**

Data collection was carried out following a qualitative approach focused on face-to-face interviews, through focus groups formed with LDC members (preferential consultation method) using a questionnaire previously developed according to the goals. Each group representing a LDC was made up of 12 members. However, of the 165 LDCs identified in the province of Equateur by PIREDD Equateur thanks to investments by CAFI (Central Africa Forest Initiative) (CAFI, 2021), 56 LDCs were randomly selected according to their effective structuring or revitalization and their accessibility (figure 2).

In addition, open questions were organized among the various administrative agents of the territories and sectors, and certain international, national and provincial organizations. (WWF, FAO, ENRD) based in the province of Equateur.



**Figure 2. Mapping of the CLDs studied**

These surveys showed the participation of 672 members, including 259 women and 413 men, distributed in 56 LDCs due to one LDC per village. Indeed, 26 focus groups in the Bikoro territory, 10 in the Bomongo territory, 9 in the Ingende territory, and 11 in the Lukolela territory were located (table 1).

**Table 1. Number of LDCs visited**

Territories/Sectors	Number of LDCs visited	Number of people surveyed	Number of women who took part in the surveys	Number of men who took part in the surveys
<b>Bikoro</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>312</b>	<b>141</b>	<b>171</b>
Ekonda*	8	96	41	55
Elanga*	8	96	47	49
Lake Ntumba*	10	120	53	67
<b>Bomongo</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>81</b>
Ngiri*	10	120	39	81
<b>Ingende</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>108</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>76</b>
Bokatola*	9	108	32	76
<b>Lukolela</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>132</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>85</b>
Losakani*	11	132	47	85

Grand total	56	672	259	413
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\*: Sectors

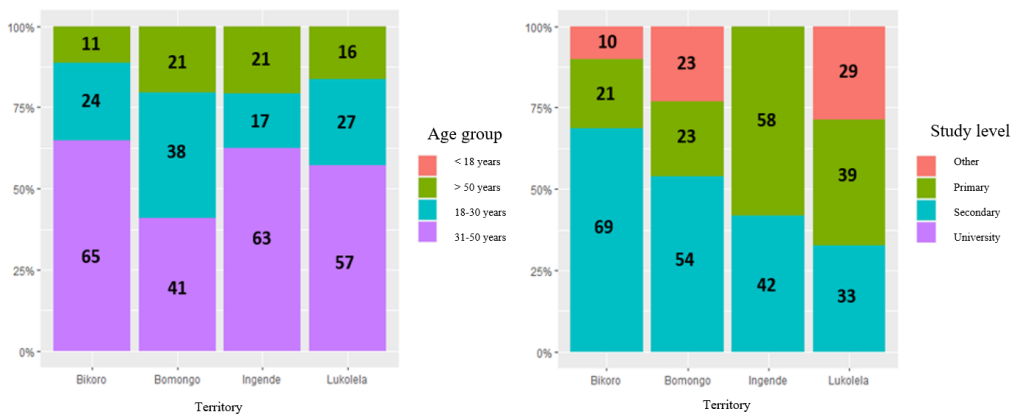
**Statistical analyzes**

The data collected were managed using Microsoft Excel® 2016. Statistical analyzes were carried out using R® software in version 4.1.2. The latter made it possible to obtain the graphs presented in the work. The data were mainly summarized as proportions presented in different graphs. In addition, the Shapiro test was carried out with different variables in order to confirm the normal distribution or not of our data. Based on this, the nonparametric Mann-Whitney test was performed at the two-sided alpha level of 0.05 to check the significant difference between two paired variables. In addition, in order to present the distribution of women in the decision-making bodies of different LDCs, a Correspondence Factor Analysis (CFA) was carried out using the R software and 73.59% of the total inertia of the dataset was expressed in the first three dimensions.

**III. Results**

**Social demographic characteristics of women within LDC decision-making bodies**

At the end of this study, of the 259 women consulted, 190 were part of the steering committees with an average of 3.39% of women per steering committee. In addition, the 31-50 age group was strongly represented in the four territories with a high percentage in Bikoro (65%) and Ingende (63%) (figure 3).

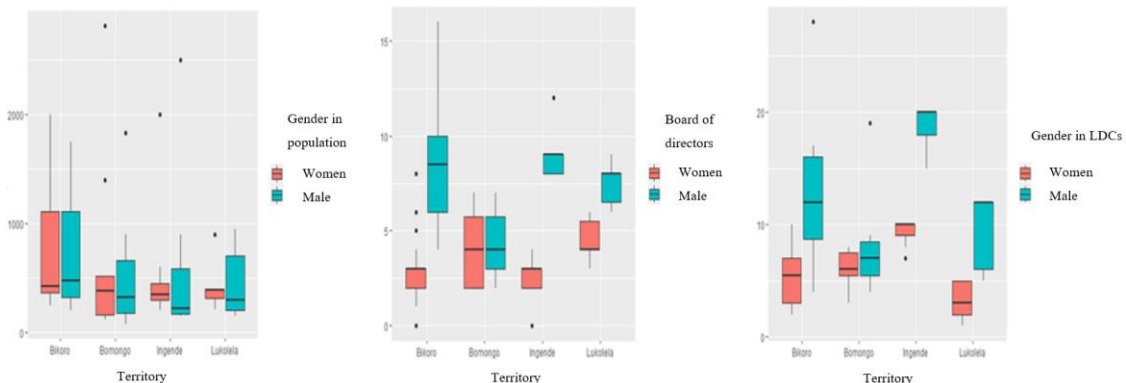


**Figure 3. Proportion of age and level of study of women on LDC steering committees**

In addition, the analysis of sociodemographic data also shows that the majority of women had a secondary school level in the four territories while no university graduates were identified. On the other hand, almost 58% of women members of decision-making bodies are at the primary level in Ingende and illiterate (others) in the other 3 remaining territories.

**Representation of women in organs**

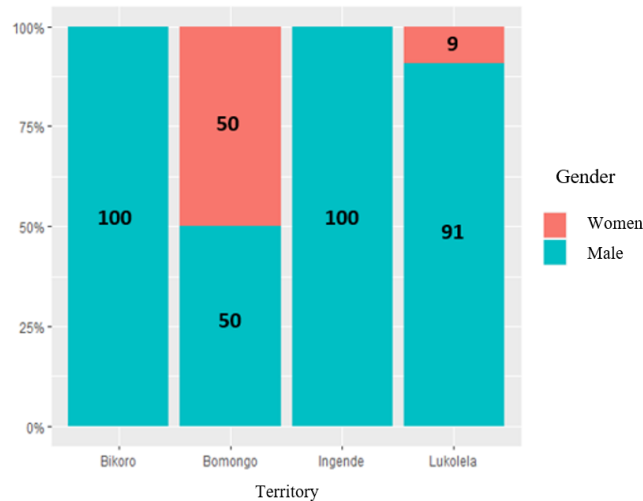
Analysis of women representation in different village organizations reveals that women are generally represented in the same way as men. The statistical analysis carried out using the Mann-Whitney test confirms that there is no significant difference between the numbers of women and men in the territories under study (p=0.460) (figure 4).



**Figure 4. Representation of women in organs**

On the other hand, when it comes to representativeness at the LDC level, there is a low representation of women compared to men with the exception of the Bomongo territory where the representativeness was found to be equal. Furthermore, the Mann-Whitney test reveals a significant difference ( $p < 0.001$ ).

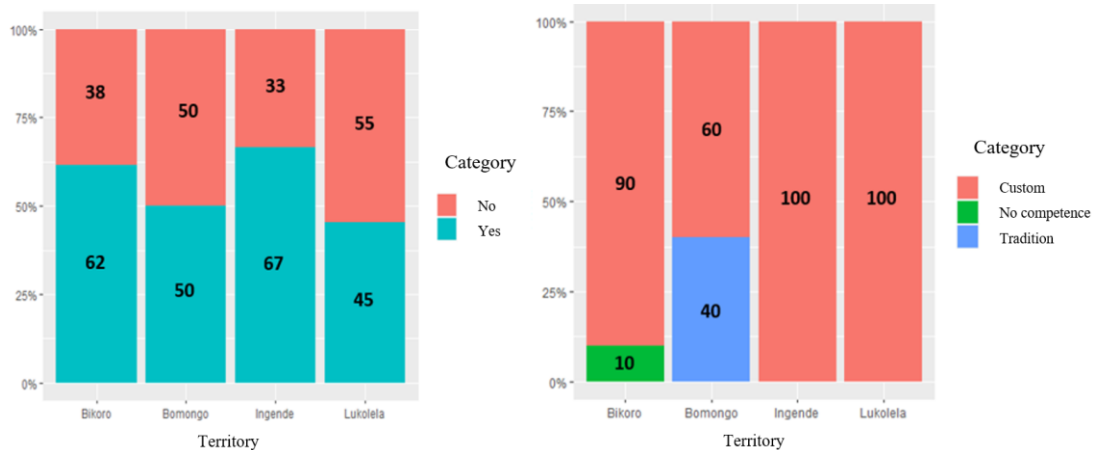
In fact, very few men give women the opportunity to manage LDCs. In the territories of Bomongo and Lukolela, only a limited percentage of men grant women the possibility of becoming presidents of the steering committee, with 50% and 9% respectively (figure 4).



**Figure 5. Representation of women in the presidency of the LDCs**

**Community members' perceptions of women's ability to manage effectively.**

In general, community observations indicate that women appear to be as qualified as men in management matters. However, it is in Lukolela and Bomongo that the communities believe that women can become village chiefs with 55% and 50% respectively (figure 6).



**Figure 6. Community perception of women in village management**

Furthermore, for the portion of those who think that women can not lead, custom remains the most cited reason in all territories. Moreover, a small proportion (40%) in Bomongo think that women suffer from a lack of skills, which prevents them from easily accessing decision-making positions.

Apart from this, a large part of the communities believes that women can manage other organizations outside the village. It is only in Bomongo and Bikoro that a small proportion thinks they are not capable (figure 7).

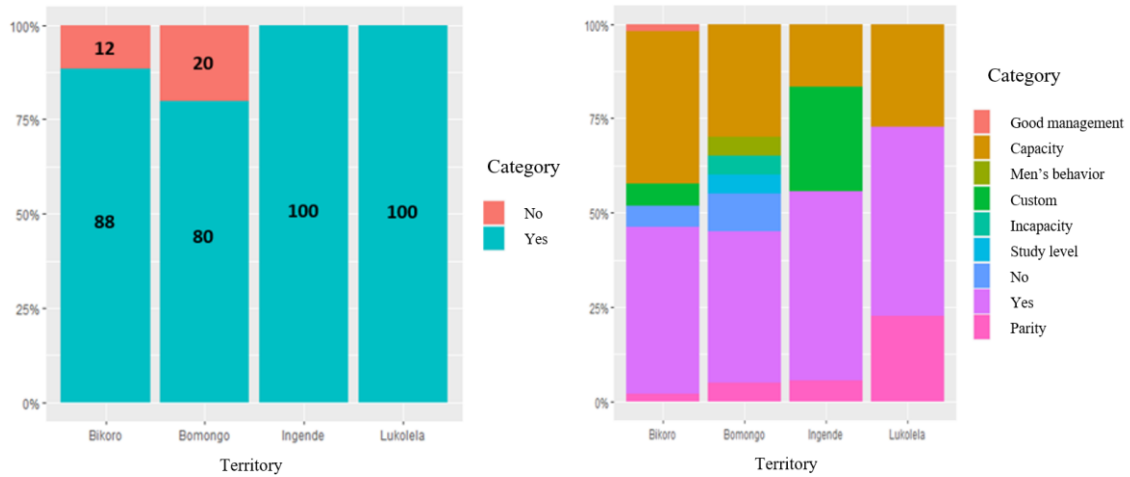


Figure 7. Community perceptions of women in organizational management

**Taking into account the opinions of women in the community**

The analysis reveals that men dominate women in all the territories studied. Observations show that women are often forced to follow men's decisions, even if they express their opinions. Ultimately, these opinions are rarely taken into account (Figure 8).

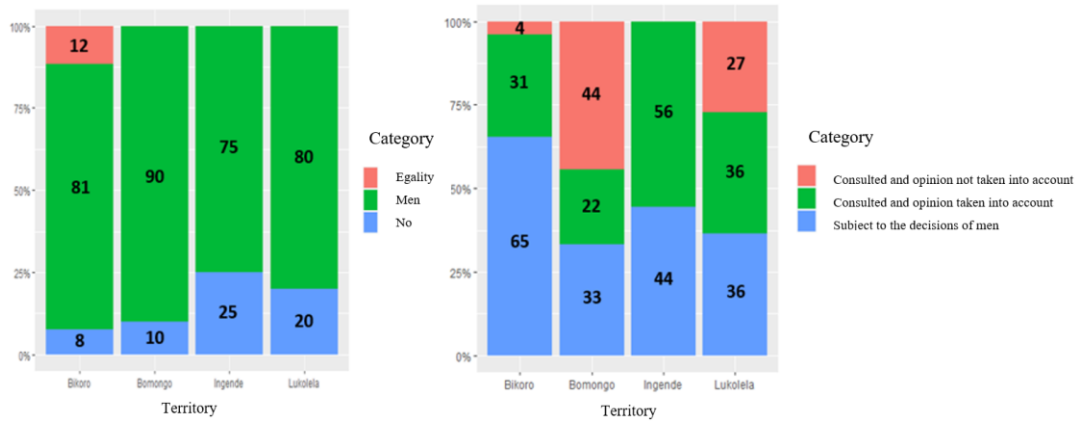


Figure 8. Treatment of women in the community

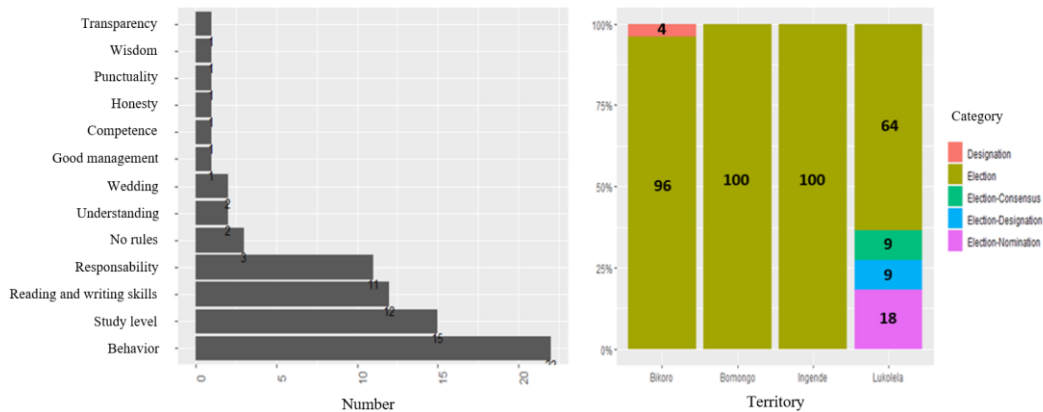
Figure 9 shows that women are actively consulted in LDC meetings and activities. Outside of the Ingende territory where 20% of respondents testify that women are not consulted, the rest of respondents think that women's contributions are also productive.



Figure 9. Consultation of women in LDCs

**Voting method and rules laid down within the decision-making bodies of the LDCs**

It emerges from this study that the election is the best known voting method and at the same time the best desired by the communities of all territories to promote equality of opportunity between women and men in the steering committee. In addition, attitude, level of study, ability to write and read as well as a sense of responsibility are the most cited rules for accessing the steering committee. In reality, these rules limit the majority of women from submitting their applications, especially since they have been in most cases less educated, as this study reveals (figure 10).

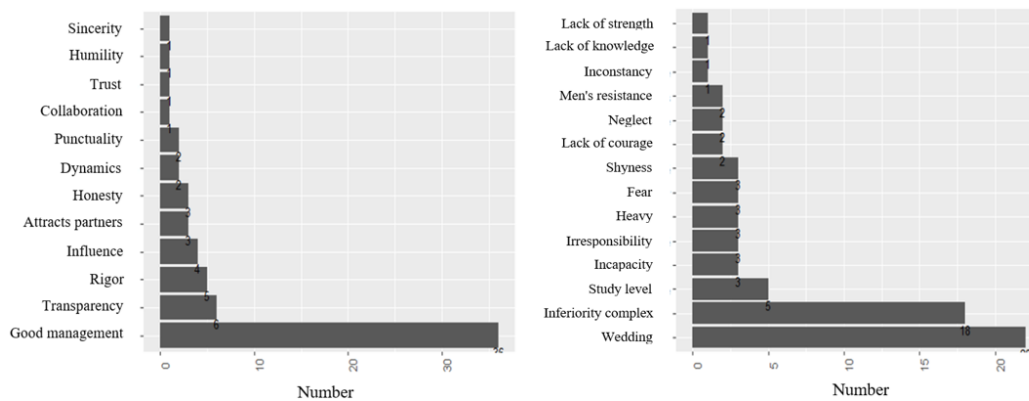


**Figure 10. Rules laid down and the voting method used for accession to the LDC steering committee.**

Extensive investigations during the interviews reveal that apart from the position of President and intended President, other positions (in the majority of cases) are not matter to a vote. Arrangements have often been made to appoint by consensus the secretaries, the public relations officer, the advisors, etc.

**Perception of community members on the advantages or disadvantages of being managed by a woman**

It follows from the analysis of the perception of community members that, 36 quotes relate to “good management” and 22 quotes to “marriage”, which generally states that women have a good capacity to manage institutions. In return, they are blocked by household chores on the one hand and the dictatorship of men on the other hand, without forgetting the inferiority complex and the level of education (figure 11).



**Figure 11. Advantages and disadvantages of being managed by a woman**

**Taking into account the specific needs of women within decision-making bodies**

For all the observations made in relation to the specific needs of women within decision-making bodies, it is appropriate to note that the level of study is the major obstacle to the development of women in these four territories. Added to this is the inferiority complex and marriage. In addition, training and awareness are important for the development of these women (figure 12).



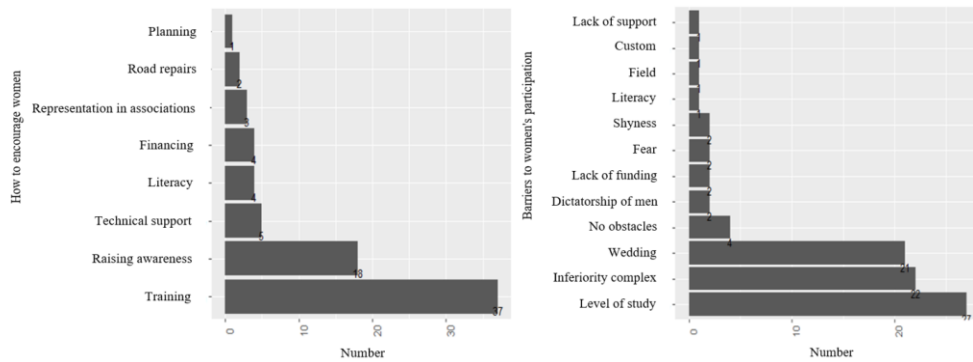


Figure 12. Specific needs of women within decision-making bodies

In addition, several focuses revealed that meetings were held once a month, while another part affirmed that Saturday was the best day for meetings (figure 13).

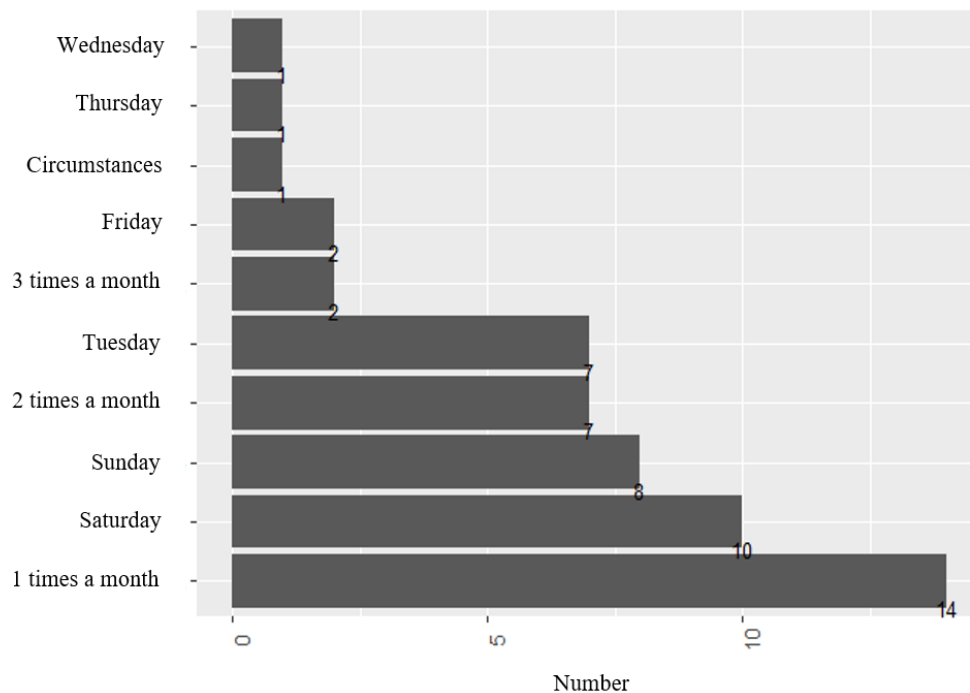


Figure 13. Meeting days in LDCs

**Participation and role of women within the LDC steering committee**

The results on the role of women within the steering committee of LDCs confined in the CFA reveal that dimension 1 presents a significant association between the villages of Lomposo, Nioni, Bempaka and Bofidji characterized by women occupying the positions of cashier and secretary. Dimension 2, on the other hand, shows that women from villages: Ibeko Bioko, Ifomi, Bokatola Centre, Moheli, Ikalangonya and Manga presented a significant association in the positions of advisor and treasurer (figure 13).

Dimension 3 brings together the villages of Botulu, Iyembe Biloko, Maenge, Mekakalaka and Mobena as having a significant association with the position of vice-president. However, the post of president was almost unoccupied by women with the exception of the few LDCs visited in Bomongo territory.

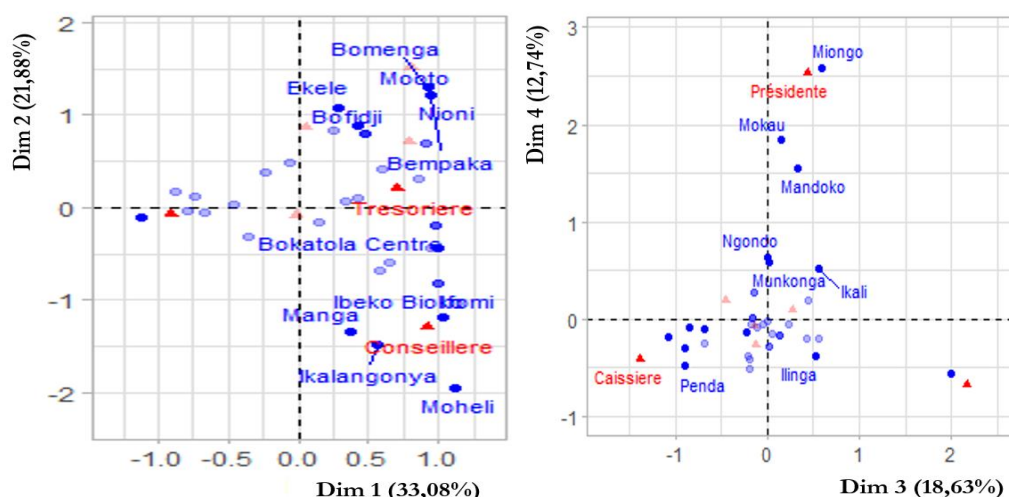


Figure 14. Role of women within the LDC steering committee

#### IV. Discussion

According to this study, most women present in LDCs have a low level of education, or are even illiterate, which limits their participation in decision-making bodies. These results are consistent with other studies conducted in sub-Saharan Africa, which also found low participation of women in these decision-making bodies. This situation constitutes a major obstacle to the socioeconomic advancement of women, especially since most of these women are over 31 years old. However, age can be a beneficial factor for women, as older women are generally more likely to be listened to and consulted for decisions in their community than younger women (Sathar and Kazi, 2000; Acharya, 2010). In fact, according to Thiombiano (2014), women aged 40 or over are twice as likely as younger women to take part in decisions.

In addition, although the law on parity and the REDD strategy require a participation of 30% of women in positions of responsibility, women are poorly represented at the level of the LDC steering committees. These results corroborate with the work of Awa (2019) in Senegal who believes that women's participation remains low at the level of local governance.

In a context where discrimination against women is anchored in social, local and customary practices, women involved in LDC activities face greater obstacles than their male counterparts to be recognized and prove their competence. It is obvious that women still face major difficulties in getting their ideas across among men in the villages.

However, respondents indicate that customs and lack of skills are the two major factors preventing women from leading. We observe several ancestral practices in which the role of women is limited to motherhood, while women are in reality capable of accomplishing many other tasks. According to the majority of those interviewed, women could manage other organizations and institutions, even outside the villages, if they had the opportunity, thanks to parity and their capacity. And according to Thiombiano (2014), women today find themselves increasingly at the center of social, political and economic issues in Africa.

It is therefore imperative to initiate actions that make it possible to quantitatively and qualitatively improve the participation of women in local governance structures while taking into account the progress noted and the stereotypes to be banned.

It is very clear that the level of study is the major obstacle to the development of women in these four territories. Added to this is the inferiority complex and marriage. In addition, training and awareness are important for the development of these women. In general, but more particularly in Africa, it is in the areas of conjugality and reproduction that male domination is supposed to be exercised in a privileged manner among women (Broqua and Doquet, 2013).

#### V. Conclusion and recommendations

This study was carried out in the four territories of the province of Equateur examined the participation of women in local governance bodies, in particular the LDCs, which are decision-making bodies. The results show that women have low participation in the steering committees of these LDCs. Several factors such as level of education, customs, marriage and inferiority complex explain this low participation. These factors are present in all territories and block the participation of women in governance.

Furthermore, women are poorly represented in local organizations and are often dominated by men. The rules governing access to certain positions also prevent women from accessing them. Overall, the study reveals

that women inherit lower-paying roles, while men occupy key positions with more benefits, preventing them from participating in decision-making bodies.

To reduce the gaps and improve the participation of women in decision-making bodies, several measures are proposed, such as the creation of schools for single mothers and the monitoring of girls' education at the local level, the strengthening of women's leadership capacities, the empowerment of women through village savings and credit associations, or the establishment of forums for reflection on subjects that are still taboo in collaboration with community radio stations.

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