

Towards Localized Governance: The Role of Municipal Agents in Communication with Rural Citizens in Antananarivo

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Abstract—In a global context marked by the demand for participatory and proximity governance, institutional communication appears as a strategic lever to strengthen the link between local administrations and citizens. In Madagascar, and more specifically in the rural communes of the Antananarivo region, the decentralization process has not yet resulted in active population involvement in local development projects. This research aims to explore the hypothesis that the communication skills of communal agents directly influence citizen satisfaction and their engagement in communal initiatives. The research question is as follows: how can the communication practices of communal agents promote effective citizen participation in rural areas? To answer this, a questionnaire was administered to agents of rural communes, addressing their roles, communication skills, interactions with the population, and their perception of the impact of communication on local development. Preliminary results show that agents trained in communication report better quality dialogue with citizens, notably in handling complaints, administrative requests, or disseminating information about projects. Agents also identify major obstacles such as lack of resources, language difficulties, and absence of internal coordination. These findings suggest that professionalizing communication practices, developing internal communication between services, as well as using digital tools, are essential avenues to establish a more open and participatory governance.

Keywords—Public communication, communication skills, communal agents, citizen participation, local governance, rural commune, Antananarivo.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary global context, local governance has established itself as a strategic lever for promoting sustainable development and participatory democracy. Around the world, ongoing institutional reforms aim to strengthen citizen involvement in public affairs management and to improve the transparency of territorial decision-making. At the heart of this dynamic, communication emerges as an essential tool to build trust between local institutions and populations. It is no longer limited to simple top-down information dissemination but has become an interactive and inclusive process, allowing a

collective appropriation of development issues (Gaventa, 2006) ; (Fung, 2015). Territorial communication, in particular, plays a decisive role in animating public life. By placing citizens at the center of local decisions and actions, it contributes to revitalizing the public sphere, strengthening local democracy, and supporting efforts toward sustainable development (Chafik & Abbadi, 2023). It thus encourages active and responsible participation of residents in initiatives within their territory. Furthermore, public communication serves as a lever to improve the quality of services provided, increase the transparency of local policies, and promote a more equitable proximity governance (El Bettioui et al., 2020).

However, this virtuous dynamic still encounters numerous limitations. In some regions, the principles of sustainable development are applied only partially, hindering the transformation of governance models (Talbot, 2006). In response to these challenges, the integration of information and communication technologies (ICT) into territorial practices opens new perspectives for strengthening citizen participation, promoting digital inclusion, and facilitating the circulation of knowledge (Déprez, 2014). These factors highlight the importance of participatory and context-sensitive communication, capable of fostering genuine dialogue between elected officials, municipal agents, and citizens - an essential condition for sustainable and legitimate local governance.

Decentralization in sub-Saharan Africa aims to bring government closer to the citizens and to reinforce local governance (Hounmenou, 2006). While it supports the articulation of local preferences and the provision of public goods (Hounmenou, 2006) its effectiveness remains limited. In Uganda, despite some progress, decentralization has not yet significantly improved the conditions of the rural poor (Kakumba, 2010). Challenges persist, notably a communication gap between government institutions and local communities (Rasila & Mudau, 2013). This lack of effective

communication hampers citizen participation and rural development (Rasila & Mudau, 2013). Furthermore, decentralized land management in Senegal reveals complex power dynamics among local elected officials, state agents, private entrepreneurs, and traditional leaders, influencing access to land resources (Touré, 2011). These dynamics underscore the need to strengthen local governance and improve participatory mechanisms.

In Madagascar, decentralization efforts launched in the late 1990s aimed to consolidate rural communes as the foundation of local governance (Bidou et al., 2008). However, the implementation of participatory approaches - often inspired by Western democratic models - faces resistance due to the social and cultural specificities of Malagasy rural populations. This mismatch between imported principles and local realities contributes to a persistent lack of citizen engagement in communal development processes (Blanc-Pamard & Fauroux, 2004). Although participation is widely encouraged, even required, by international donors, it often remains formal or symbolic, which risks undermining the success of projects based on participatory approaches. The decentralization framework has nonetheless granted new responsibilities to communes, particularly in managing renewable natural resources - such as forests - in land tenure security and local development planning (Bidou et al., 2008). While communes have emerged as key decision-making bodies, newly created regions are simultaneously developing their own territorial development plans, introducing a new dynamic in spatial planning. This situation illustrates a delicate phase of institutional transition, in which the conditions for shared and concerted management are still under construction (Blanc-Pamard & Fauroux, 2004).

The central issue of this article revolves around the following question: how do the communication skills of communal agents influence citizen involvement in development projects within the rural communes of Antananarivo? This question raises crucial concerns for local governance and participatory democracy, emphasizing the quality of relationships between the administration and the population. The working hypothesis assumes that the mastery of communication skills by communal agents is a determining factor in citizen satisfaction and their motivation to voluntarily engage in local initiatives. This hypothesis implies that strengthening the communication capacities of agents, along with the adoption of practices adapted to the local context, can serve as powerful levers to improve proximity governance and social cohesion.

The main objective of this article is to analyze the communication practices of communal agents in the rural communes of Antananarivo, to identify the obstacles encountered in their interactions with the population, and to assess the extent to which these skills influence citizen engagement in local development. More specifically, this study aims to understand the training needs of agents in communication, to identify the preferred types of communication (internal and external), and to propose recommendations to improve the management of relationships between the commune and its residents. This work is part of

an action research approach, aiming to generate applicable knowledge to enhance the effectiveness of local public policies and to promote inclusive rural development.

II. METHODS

This study is based on a hypothetico-deductive approach using an empirical methodology that combines both qualitative and quantitative methods. It aims to analyze internal and external communication practices in the rural communes of Antananarivo and assess their impact on citizen participation in local development. Between 10 and 15 kilometers from the center of the capital, the fieldwork was carried out in three rural communities in the Avaradrano district. These communes, all classified as Category I, were selected for their geographic proximity - facilitating repeated travel required for data collection - and for their bordering nature, which offers comparable administrative contexts. The selection followed an initial survey in several communes of Atsimondrano, including Alasora, which were later excluded due to logistical constraints.

The research unfolded in two complementary phases. The first, exploratory phase allowed for initial immersion in the three communes to gather general information about their operations, communication mechanisms, and citizens' perceptions. This phase involved informal interviews and non-participant observation with municipal authorities, administrative staff, and local residents. It helped identify strategic moments for conducting surveys - especially market days and administrative service days - and guided the design of appropriate research tools: interview guides and structured questionnaires. The second phase focused on systematic data collection through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire, intended for communal agents, was developed based on the initial findings and organized into several sections: sociodemographic data, self-assessment of communication skills, perceived impact of communication on citizen satisfaction, feedback and suggestion management, and improvement proposals. It was written in French, the administrative language, but administered orally in Malagasy to ensure full comprehension by all respondents. Questionnaire distribution was done in collaboration with municipal officials, who encouraged staff participation by raising awareness about the study's relevance.

In parallel, 40 semi-structured interviews were conducted with local authorities, communication officers (or individuals serving similar roles), and representatives of various socio-professional categories: public officials, farmers, shopkeepers, self-employed workers, company employees, service personnel, laborers, students, unemployed individuals, and retirees. The interviews, which lasted an average of five to eight minutes, were conducted by a team of six qualified investigators with training in journalism and communication, equally distributed across the three communes. The relatively short duration of the interviews was intended to ensure clarity while respecting respondents' limited availability - particularly among community members. Although the written materials were in French, using Malagasy as the interview

language helped build trust, especially with those less comfortable with the official language.

To triangulate the data and enhance reliability, non-participant observation was carried out at town halls and public gathering spaces such as markets and administrative counters. Techniques from investigative journalism, including informal interviews, were also employed. The surveys coincided with the 2024 local election campaigns, creating a unique context marked by intensified political discourse and increased communication efforts from the communes. Sampling was purposive, based on representativity criteria: age, education level, professional status, and communal role. Special attention was given to agents responsible - or presumed to be responsible - for communication, in order to assess their skills, daily practices, and encountered challenges. Social categories represented in the sample included civil servants, department heads, landowners, farmers, shopkeepers, artisans, agricultural workers, liberal professionals, service personnel, students, unemployed persons, and retirees.

Data processing and analysis involved specialized tools. Questionnaire responses were entered and analyzed using Sphinx software for descriptive statistics. SPSS software was used to conduct univariate, bivariate, and multivariate statistical tests, depending on the nature of the variables (nominal, ordinal, numerical). These analyses enabled the testing of the initial hypotheses through correlation measurements, variable cross-tabulations, and principal component analysis (PCA) to identify the main dimensions shaping communication practices and perceptions at the communal level.

Despite certain constraints related to the election period and contextual disruptions, the professional status of the author - recognized as a journalist with the National Television - facilitated access to local authorities and eased on-the-ground collaboration. Thanks to the combination of diverse methods and the active involvement of local stakeholders, this methodological approach enabled the collection of rich and representative data to better understand the role of communal agents' communication skills in fostering citizen engagement within the rural communes of Antananarivo.

III. FINDINGS

The analysis of data collected from the three rural communes of Avaradrano - Sabotsy Namehana, Anosy Avaratra, and Ankadikely Ilafy - reveals contrasting dynamics in terms of institutional communication. The results presented in this section are organized around several key areas: the current level of communication skills among communal agents, their perception of training-related issues, the obstacles they face in their interactions with the population, and the impact of these practices on citizen involvement in local development projects.

The following charts illustrate the observed trends quantitatively, complemented by qualitative insights drawn from the semi-structured interviews. These findings shed light on the connections between communication quality, the effectiveness of municipal services, and citizen participation.

They also help identify potential areas for improvement, both in terms of internal communication within the town halls and in their interactions with users.

3.1. Overview of Communal Agents' Communication Skills

Before assessing the impact of communication on citizen participation, it is essential to examine the communication skills that communal agents attribute to themselves. Figure 1 presents the self-assessed skill levels (good, average, very good) across the three surveyed rural communes: Ankadikely Ilafy, Anosy Avaratra, and Sabotsy Namehana. The results reveal a marked heterogeneity between the communes.

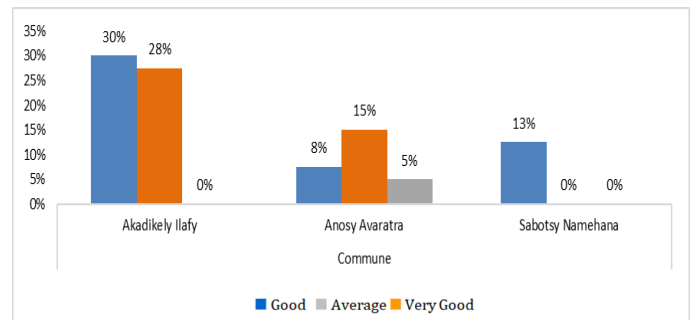


Figure 1: Communication Skills in the Three Communes

The analysis of communication skills, as self-assessed by communal agents, reveals notable disparities among the three surveyed rural communes. In Ankadikely Ilafy, results show a predominance of agents who consider themselves to have good communication skills (30%), followed by 28% who rate their skills as average. However, no agent reported having "very good" skills. This distribution reflects a relative confidence in their abilities, yet also a lack of perceived excellence in this domain. It suggests a need for capacity building, particularly to elevate these skills to a more assertive level that meets the growing demands of participatory governance.

In Anosy Avaratra, the profile is more fragmented and overall less favorable. Only 15% of agents rate their skills as average, while 8% consider them good and 5% "very good." These low and scattered proportions reveal a diffuse perception of communication capacities, which could reflect either a more critical self-assessment or a structural weakness in mastering communication practices. This situation may also indicate an institutional undervaluing of communication skills.

In Sabotsy Namehana, 13% of agents claim to have good communication skills, while none placed themselves in the "average" or "very good" categories. This situation can be interpreted in two ways: on the one hand, as a sign of cautious and homogeneous self-evaluation, indicating a certain stability in perceptions; on the other hand, as a sign of a lack of assessment tools or structured training programs to distinguish between skill levels.

Overall, the findings highlight a general under-recognition of advanced communication skills (with an almost complete absence of the "very good" category) and a high variability between communes, both in terms of intensity and consistency of responses. These results underscore the need to strengthen

professional communication competencies among communal agents through training programs tailored to local profiles. Such capacity building is essential for proximity governance, where the effectiveness of institutional communication directly influences citizen engagement in local development dynamics.

3.2. Perceived Need for Communication Training

The study highlights a broadly shared consensus on the necessity of ongoing communication training for communal agents, seen as a key lever for improving their effectiveness in carrying out their daily responsibilities

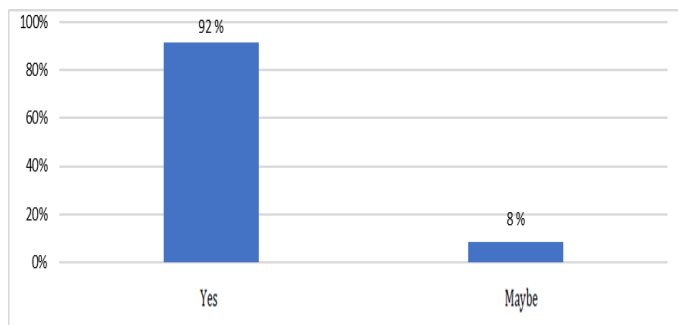


Figure 2: Need for Communication Training

According to the data collected from the respondents, an overwhelming majority - nearly 92% - acknowledge the crucial importance of providing communication training to communal agents. This strong consensus highlights a collective awareness of the significant impact that communication skills have on the effective functioning of local public services.

In contrast, a small minority - around 8% of respondents - expressed some hesitation regarding the necessity of such training, offering a more nuanced response by selecting “Maybe.” Although this divergence is limited, it may reflect differing perceptions of the relative importance of communication or a lack of clear information about the concrete benefits that such training could bring to the agents and, by extension, to the broader community.

3.3. Message Clarity and Citizen Understanding

The ability of communal agents to formulate clear and understandable messages is a fundamental lever for the effectiveness of local administration. In rural areas, where levels of education and access to information can vary significantly, the clarity of institutional communication is crucial to ensure proper reception of messages, reduce misunderstandings, and encourage active citizen participation in public actions. This section focuses on how agents assess their own capacity to communicate accurately and their perception of citizen understanding within their respective communes.

The results highlight significant differences between the communes regarding the perception of the clarity of institutional messages and their understanding by the population. In Sabotsy Namehana, there is near unanimity among agents on the importance of delivering clear communication to citizens. This priority appears fully

integrated into local practices, reflecting a strong awareness of the impact that message formulation can have on community engagement. In Ankadikely Ilafy, 62% of agents share this concern, while in Anosy Avaratra, only 42% emphasize the importance of message clarity. These figures reveal an uneven consideration of this essential aspect of public communication. Moreover, about 38% of agents in Ankadikely Ilafy believe that only some of the messages transmitted are sufficiently clear, suggesting that efforts in this area remain partial or insufficiently systematic. This situation can lead to misunderstandings, misinterpretation of communal actions, and even institutional distrust. Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen both the written and oral communication skills of agents, as well as to implement appropriate tools (visual aids, linguistic simplification, community relays) to ensure better accessibility of information for all citizens.

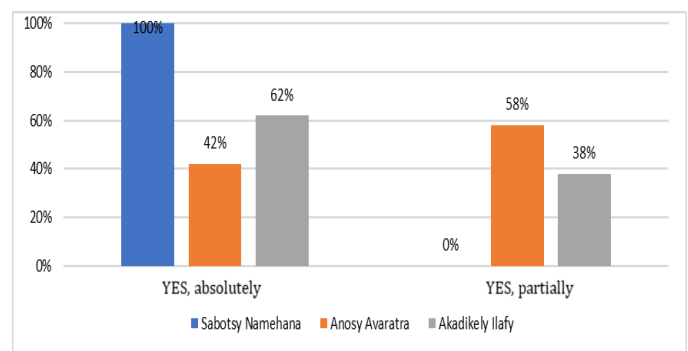


Figure 3: Importance of Clear Communication with Citizens

3.4. Main Challenges Encountered in Communication with the Population

Despite the commitment demonstrated by communal agents to maintain close communication, several structural and contextual obstacles limit their ability to establish smooth and effective dialogue with the population. These constraints, often related to organizational factors or informational gaps, negatively affect mutual understanding and citizen participation.

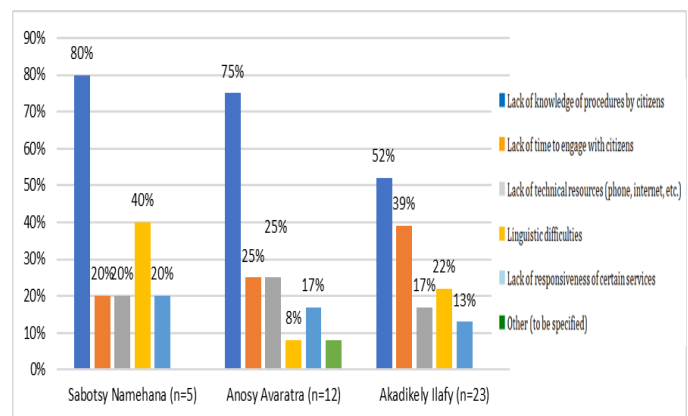


Figure 4: Main Challenges Encountered in Communication with the Population

The data collected reveal that the main difficulty encountered by communal agents lies in the widespread lack

of knowledge of administrative procedures among the majority of citizens. This information gap, which hinders effective communication, is particularly pronounced in Sabotsy Namehana (approximately 80% of respondents), followed by Anosy Avaratra (75%) and Ankadikely Ilafy (51%). This highlights the gap between citizens' expectations and their familiarity with the current administrative processes. Secondly, the lack of time allocated for exchanges with residents represents a significant barrier, reported by between 20% and 40% of agents depending on the locality. Finally, some respondents (between 10% and 20%) also point to the lack of responsiveness of certain services, which can generate frustration and undermine trust in local institutions. It is therefore necessary to strengthen not only the communication skills of agents but also the mediation and information mechanisms aimed at users, as these findings emphasize.

The survey underscores several major obstacles that hinder effective communication between communal agents and citizens. The primary challenge identified concerns the poor understanding of administrative procedures by a large portion of the population. This issue is especially marked in Sabotsy Namehana, where 80% of communal agents report an information deficit. This trend is also noted in Anosy Avaratra (75%) and Ankadikely Ilafy (51%). Such a situation reflects a significant gap between administrative requirements and citizens' familiarity with existing procedures. This informational deficit acts as a barrier to institutional transparency and can lead to misunderstandings or even foster distrust toward local authorities.

TABLE 1: Summary of Communication Obstacles Identified by Communal Agents (% by Commune)

Obstacles identified	Sabotsy Namehana	Anosy Avaratra	Ankadikely Ilafy
Lack of knowledge of administrative procedures	80%	75%	51%
Lack of time to engage with citizens	20%	30%	40%
Lack of responsiveness of certain municipal services	20%	10%	18%

The lack of knowledge regarding administrative procedures constitutes a particularly significant challenge in Sabotsy Namehana, where it is mentioned by nearly all agents surveyed (80%). This high rate may be explained by limited accessibility to public information or by the excessive complexity of administrative processes. Anosy Avaratra also presents a concerning situation (75%), while in Ankadikely Ilafy, although the proportion is lower (51%), it remains significant. These data reflect a shortfall in the transmission of essential information to citizens, reinforcing inequalities in access to basic services and affecting the quality of institutional relationships.

Regarding the time allocated for exchanges with the population, notable differences exist between the communes. In Ankadikely Ilafy, 40% of agents report this lack of availability, compared to 30% in Anosy Avaratra and 20% in Sabotsy Namehana. This suggests that internal organizational conditions and administrative workloads vary from one context to another, directly influencing the frequency and

quality of interactions between agents and citizens. A lack of availability can hinder the flow of information and also limit spaces for listening and citizen participation. Finally, the lack of responsiveness from services is perceived as a disruptive factor in communication across the three communes, albeit in different proportions: 20% in Sabotsy Namehana, 18% in Ankadikely Ilafy, and only 10% in Anosy Avaratra. These figures highlight that, in certain contexts, slow administrative responses undermine the credibility of public action and can generate frustration among citizens. Here again, the issue concerns organizational efficiency and the institutional capacity to respond to requests within reasonable timeframes. These obstacles thus stem from both structural factors—such as lack of time and internal organization—and informational factors related to the accessibility or clarity of transmitted messages. In this perspective, it appears necessary to strengthen the communication skills of communal agents and to develop appropriate support mechanisms. Linguistic simplification, the use of community relays, and the simplification of administrative procedures constitute levers to promote more inclusive, understandable, and effective public communication.

3.5. Perception of the Impact of Communication on Citizen Engagement

One of the central objectives of this research was to assess the extent to which the quality of institutional communication influences active citizen participation in communal life. The agents' perception on this matter serves as a valuable indicator for understanding the relationship between information, institutional trust, and local engagement.

TABLE 2: Impact of Citizen Communication on Local Engagement

Commune	YES, strongly (%)	YES, but slightly (%)	NO, not at all (%)	Total (%)
Sabotsy Namehana	100	0	0	100
Anosy Avaratra	57	36	7	100
Ankadikely Ilafy	38	56	6	100

The results reveal notable differences among the three surveyed communes. In Sabotsy Namehana, all agents interviewed (100%) unanimously recognize a strong and direct impact of communication on citizen engagement. This unanimity reflects a deeply held belief that clear, regular, and tailored communication fosters increased participation of residents in local affairs. In Anosy Avaratra, this perception is shared by 57% of respondents, while it drops to 38% in Ankadikely Ilafy. Furthermore, a significant portion of agents perceive this impact as moderate: approximately 36% in Anosy Avaratra and 56% in Ankadikely Ilafy believe that institutional communication has a limited but existing effect on citizen engagement. The perceived effectiveness of communication varies according to local contexts, and improving its content, channels, and frequency could further strengthen citizen mobilization - especially in communes where this impact is still seen as partial.

3.6. Internal Communication and Coordination of Services

Coordination among municipal services is a key success factor for local development projects. Indeed, smooth and structured communication between the various institutional actors enables better alignment of actions, more efficient use of resources, and enhanced monitoring of ongoing initiatives.

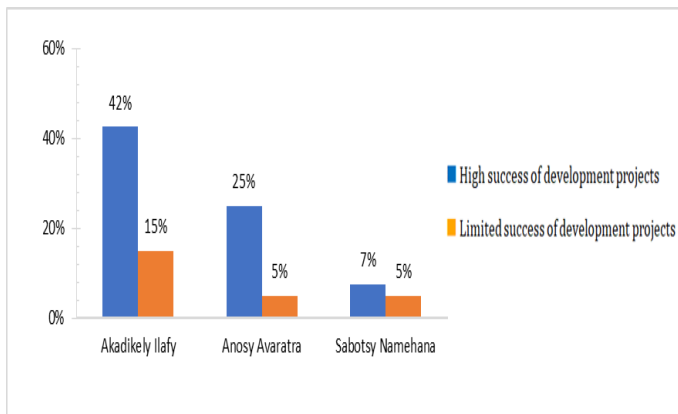


Figure 5 : Impact of Improving Internal Communication on the Success of Local Development Projects

The survey results reveal that this reality is particularly noticeable in Ankadikely Ilafy, where about 42% of the agents surveyed acknowledge that the quality of inter-service coordination significantly influences the success of communal projects. This view is shared, but to a lesser extent, by 25% of respondents in Anosy Avaratra, while it is much less expressed in Sabotsy Namehana (less than 10%). These disparities suggest that the recognition of the importance of coordination varies according to the internal dynamics specific to each commune. Furthermore, regarding communication specifically about development projects, approximately 15% of agents in Ankadikely Ilafy point to a lack or weakness in this area, compared to only 4% in Anosy Avaratra and Sabotsy Namehana. This suggests that although Ankadikely Ilafy clearly identifies the challenges related to coordination, it faces greater difficulties in structuring institutional communication around projects. These findings call for strengthening internal communication mechanisms through regular meetings, shared monitoring tools, and clearer role definitions among services.

3.7. Types of Projects Desired by the Population

Within a participatory governance framework, it is essential to consider the real expectations of local populations regarding development. For this reason, both communal agents and citizens surveyed were invited to express their priorities in terms of projects to be implemented. This approach aims to better align communal actions with the needs expressed on the ground, while strengthening the legitimacy of decisions made at the local level.

The data collected highlight development priorities that vary slightly from one commune to another but reveal a strong interest in certain types of projects, particularly those related to basic infrastructure. Road infrastructure and public buildings top the list of expectations, especially in Sabotsy

Namehana, where 100% of respondents consider them a priority. This concern is also shared, though to a lesser extent, in Anosy Avaratra (75%) and Ankadikely Ilafy (60%), reflecting a widespread need to improve access conditions and community facilities.

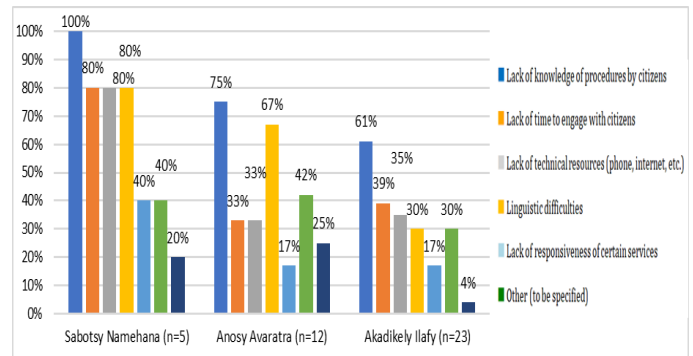


Figure 6 : Types of Local Development Projects Desired by the Population

Healthcare infrastructure, notably health centers, represents another significant priority, strongly expressed in Sabotsy Namehana (80%), but much less so in Anosy Avaratra (around 30%) and Ankadikely Ilafy (around 40%). These differences may reflect variations in existing healthcare facilities or experiences with access to care. The communal market is also cited as a desired project, with particularly strong interest in Sabotsy Namehana (80%), and to a lesser degree in Ankadikely Ilafy (around 40%) and Anosy Avaratra (over 30%). This demand illustrates the importance given to commercial spaces for energizing the local economy. Environmental concerns, although mentioned somewhat less frequently, remain significant: about 42% of respondents in Anosy Avaratra, 40% in Sabotsy Namehana, and 30% in Ankadikely Ilafy express a desire for projects related to environmental preservation and ecology. This indicates a growing awareness of issues related to the living environment and sustainable resource management. Finally, projects that promote cultural heritage appear as a priority for 40% of respondents in Sabotsy Namehana, but only 18% in Anosy Avaratra and Ankadikely Ilafy. This result highlights local differences in sensitivity toward identity and cultural issues.

3.8. Proposals to Improve Communication with Citizens

As part of a continuous improvement approach, municipal officers were invited to put forward concrete suggestions aimed at strengthening the effectiveness of communication with citizens. These proposals, drawn from their field experience, reflect a clear willingness to adapt institutional practices to local realities. They highlight potential courses of action to enhance transparency, service responsiveness, and citizen involvement in community life.

At Ankadikely Ilafy and Anosy Avaratra, communication training is the most frequently cited priority (31% and 21% respectively), reflecting a clear desire to strengthen internal skills. At Sabotsy Namehana, this concern is less frequently expressed (10%), with a slightly higher interest in digital tools (13%), although this approach remains generally underutilized in the other communes (10% in Ilafy, 2% in Anosy). The

organization of forums or public meetings is particularly valued in Ankadikely Ilafy (28%), indicating a strong demand for direct dialogue with citizens, while it generates moderate interest in Anosy Avaratra (17%) and very little in Sabotsy Namehana (5%). Lastly, simplifying administrative procedures emerges as a cross-cutting priority, especially in Ankadikely Ilafy (33%) and Anosy Avaratra (20%), highlighting a perceived need to streamline processes in order to improve service accessibility. These results reveal varying priorities across the communes, underscoring the necessity of adopting differentiated communication strategies that take into account local expectations, the level of familiarity with digital tools, and the specific institutional conditions of each locality.

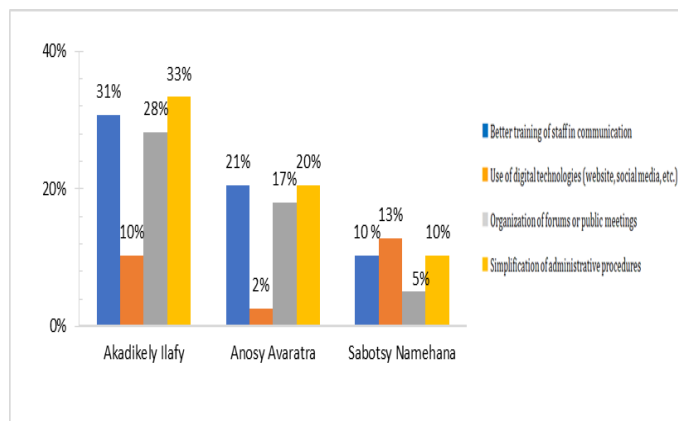


Figure 7: Proposals for Improving Communication between Municipal Officers and Citizens

IV. DISCUSSION

The results collected in the three rural communes studied reveal contrasting dynamics in terms of institutional communication. They highlight both a lack of professionalization, strong expectations regarding training, and a growing awareness of the strategic role of communication in strengthening citizen participation. This discussion offers a structured analysis of these issues by linking empirical findings with recent theoretical contributions.

4.1. A Lack of Communication Professionalization in Rural Malagasy Communes

The analysis reveals significant heterogeneity in the communication skills self-assessed by communal agents across the three rural communes studied, highlighting the absence of a coherent professionalization policy in this domain. In Ankadikely Ilafy, agents express moderate confidence in their abilities, while in Anosy Avaratra and Sabotsy Namehana, self-assessments appear more cautious and fragmented. This not only reflects a lack of targeted training but also limited institutional recognition of communication as a strategic role.

These findings are consistent with Servaes (2010), who highlights the importance of abilities such as active listening, audience-tailored conversation, and priority negotiation in achieving effective public action. Yet, institutional communication in these communes largely remains top-down,

reduced to unidirectional transmission - ill-suited for citizen interaction or engagement. Beyond individual competencies, the absence of an organizational culture that values communication as a governance lever constitutes a major obstacle (Chafik & Abbadi, 2023).

This professionalization deficit is also observable at the national level, notably in the fields of education and environment. Malagasy-French institutional bilingualism constitutes a significant linguistic barrier, limiting access to public information. Furthermore, poor dissemination of educational policies contributes to a persistently low school enrollment rate - especially among girls from vulnerable backgrounds (Randimbarison & Rabearisoa, 2024). In environmental conservation, insufficient communication about reforms and international policies exacerbates local tensions and undermines community buy-in (Canavésio, 2009); (Hrabanski & Bidaud, 2014). In response, several authors call for a rethinking of institutional systems to include more participatory, contextualized communication strategies that are sensitive to Madagascar’s sociolinguistic realities (Blanc-Pamard & Fauroux, 2004); (Bessières, 1998). Thus, communication professionalization - especially in rural areas - emerges as a fundamental lever for strengthening local governance and fostering more active, inclusive citizen participation.

4.2. Strong Demand for Local Public Communication Training

The overwhelming support for communication-specific training among communal agents - 92% in favor - reflects heightened awareness of how communication skills improve public service delivery. This demand arises in a context of limited human resources, confronted with complex issues such as conflict resolution, community mobilization, and effective information transmission. Communication training is no longer viewed as merely a technical supplement but as a strategic lever for reinforcing trust between institutions and citizens, as evidenced by Thomas & Mefalopoulos (2009) in their studies on participatory development. In this light, participatory communication - based on listening, citizen feedback, and co-constructing messages - appears essential for embedding public policies locally (Lebenya et al., 2024). Meanwhile, professional communication management, particularly via digital media and social networks, is identified as a key factor in promoting rural territories, strengthening links among local actors, and facilitating access to markets for local products (Dašić et al., 2024). Implementing modular training programs that combine theoretical development input with practical communication tools would equip agents with the capabilities needed to respond effectively to field realities. However, despite this clear intent, several structural challenges remain: weak infrastructure, lack of inclusive systems, and fragmentation of existing initiatives (Andrianirina, 2012); (Lebenya et al., 2024). Thus, it is essential for territorial authorities - working with universities and local organizations - to sustainably invest in building transversal skills for agents in Malagasy rural communes,

incorporating continuous training systems with monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

4.3. The Clarity of Institutional Messages: A Crucial Issue for Malagasy Rural Areas

Message clarity is a determining factor in the effectiveness of public communication, particularly in rural Malagasy contexts where risks of misunderstanding are heightened. In Sabotsy Namehana, nearly 100% of agents emphasize the importance of clarity, reflecting a clear awareness of the negative consequences of ambiguous messaging: rumor spread, misinterpretation, and citizen disengagement. In Ankadikely Ilafy (62%) and Anosy Avaratra (42%), the importance placed on clarity is less marked, indicating varying levels of institutional maturity in communication management. Indeed, unclear communication often results in significant organizational costs, such as grievances, local tensions, and eroded trust in authorities.

These results resonate with analyses in other sensitive sectors - such as public health - where message clarity is essential to promote positive behaviors and ensure adherence to health recommendations (Panjaitan et al., 2023). For the same reason, in peacekeeping missions, the clarity and believability of the message are crucial for transparency and for helping reconciliation efforts (Oksamytna, 2022). In social protection, the lack of linguistic and cognitive accessibility in official documents can compromise the effectiveness of programs aimed at vulnerable populations (Busch & Folaron, 2005). When applied to the Malagasy environment, this emphasizes the need to tailor public communications to literacy levels, indigenous languages, and sociocultural frameworks of reference. Employing visual supports, local information campaigns, and community relays appears to be a pertinent strategy to enhance message reception. Nonetheless, as Vallier (2011) reminds us, clarity must not erase complex ethical or cultural issues: the objective is to promote comprehensible communication while respecting diverse perspectives.

4.4. Structural Constraints Hindering Effective Proximity Communication

The main challenges identified by agents - particularly citizens' unfamiliarity with administrative procedures, lack of time for dialogue, and low service responsiveness - reflect an institutional environment poorly suited to smooth and inclusive communication. The information access deficit, reported by 80% of respondents in Sabotsy Namehana and 75% in Anosy Avaratra, highlights the absence of adapted mechanisms such as reception counters, mediator agents, or user-friendly digital platforms. In their absence, citizens rely primarily on word of mouth, reinforcing inequalities in access to rights and weakening the transparency of public action.

Furthermore, agents' lack of availability - especially in Ankadikely Ilafy (40%) - reveals the limits of internal organization within rural communes, where workload overload restricts qualitative interactions with users. These observations align with Narayan (2002), who notes that public service quality largely depends on local institutions' capacity

to listen to citizens and integrate their feedback into policymaking. In this perspective, sustainably improving institutional communication necessarily involves reorganizing internal priorities: better time management, creation of regular dialogue spaces, and implementation of tools fostering active listening and mediation. Such measures would not only boost administrative efficiency but also help restore trust between citizens and institutions - an essential condition for proximity governance.

4.5. Local Public Communication as a Driver of Rural Citizen Participation

Survey results demonstrate that communication practices have a direct influence on citizens' participation in local affairs. In Sabotsy Namehana, unanimous recognition of the connection between information and citizen involvement (100%) reveals strong institutional awareness of communication's strategic role. In contrast, more modest percentages in Ankadikely Ilafy (38%) and Anosy Avaratra (57%) suggest less structured or extensive consultation experiences, affecting perceptions of institutional dialogue's usefulness. According to Arnstein (1969), citizen participation levels are closely linked to information accessibility and decision-making process transparency. Where institutions establish suitable communication channels - public meetings, community consultations, feedback loops - citizen engagement tends to be both more inclusive and lasting. Communication strategies shape local social networks, influencing citizens' agency. Viewed in this way, communication becomes a key lever for legitimizing public policies: it enhances perceived equity, trust in institutions, and citizens' capacity to voice their priorities (Riduan, 2024). Moreover, opening spaces for debate and expression is a prerequisite for exercising civil and political rights. However, in Malagasy contexts - marked by structural and cultural constraints - the operationalization of these principles remains challenging. It is vital to adapt participation mechanisms to local specificities, relying on existing community initiatives. Thus, transforming citizens into development partners requires investment in inclusive, transparent, and culturally sensitive communication strategies, multiplying spaces for exchange and consultation tools adapted to rural Malagasy realities.

4.6. Towards a More Coherent Alignment between Rural Citizens' Expectations and Institutional Priorities

The results reveal a significant convergence between rural populations' aspirations and institutional priorities—represented by desired projects: basic infrastructure, health centers, communal markets, and environmental protection. In Sabotsy Namehana, strong demand for collective facilities reflects a clear desire for territorial structuring, while in Ankadikely Ilafy and Anosy Avaratra, attention to heritage valorization and environmental sustainability reflects heightened awareness of long-term challenges. To effectively meet these expectations, institutional communication must go beyond mere information dissemination and become a true instrument of citizen mobilization. Local agents play a crucial role in explaining projects, building consensus around shared

priorities, and regularly reporting on outcomes. This proactive stance fosters community buy-in and reinforces public action's legitimacy. Participatory planning - conceptualized by Chambers (1994) - here becomes fully relevant: it relies on a continuous exchange dynamic where information flows both ways - from institutions to citizens and vice versa - enabling enlightened co-construction of local development.

4.7. Developing Differentiated Communication Strategies Tailored to Malagasy Local Realities

The proposals made by communal agents - targeted training, participatory forums, administrative simplification, and use of digital tools - demonstrate diverse expectations across communes. This diversity reflects not only varied local priorities but also different levels of digital communication acculturation. In Ankadikely Ilafy, emphasis is placed on simplifying procedures and fostering proximity dialogue, reflecting a desire for direct and accessible communication. Conversely, Sabotsy Namehana favors integrating digital channels - such as mobile applications and online platforms - to improve transparency and information flow. This territorial differentiation demonstrates that a uniform strategy cannot effectively meet each context's specific needs.

Therefore, it is essential to develop communication plans tailored to field realities, co-constructed with local stakeholders and adjustable based on feedback. These approaches should be underpinned by participatory diagnostics and regular monitoring-evaluation, in line with methods promoted by Servaes (2010).

V. CONCLUSION

In the rural communes of the Antananarivo region, administrative decentralization has yet to result in truly participatory governance. The analysis conducted in this study highlights a frequently underestimated yet crucial factor: institutional communication, understood as a tool for dialogue, transparency, and citizen mobilization. Based on a survey of communal agents, the findings reveal that communication skills, when mastered and strategically implemented, significantly enhance the quality of interactions between municipal services and rural populations. The data collected point to a strong demand for communication training, prevailing top-down practices, and recurring structural challenges: work overload, a lack of accessible information systems, and poor interdepartmental coordination. The disparities observed among the communes studied indicate that institutional maturity in communication varies by territory, and that the most effective strategies are those that consider local contexts and sociocultural frameworks. These results confirm the hypothesis that the communication skills of agents directly influence citizen satisfaction and engagement in communal projects. The ability to explain initiatives, listen to concerns, and tailor messages to local realities emerges as a decisive lever in promoting active and sustainable participation. In this sense, communication should not be reduced to a mere dissemination tool but rather conceptualized as a transversal function of local governance. Finally, this research opens new avenues for inquiry. While the link

between communication and citizen engagement is evident, *to what extent could the implementation of structured, continuous training in public communication sustainably transform the relationship between administrations and citizens in rural settings?* A longitudinal study assessing post-training impacts would provide a promising perspective to further explore these issues and support Malagasy communes in moving toward more inclusive governance.

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