The journal of El-Nebras for legal studies | Volume : 08 / N° : 02 / May 2025. pp 125-142

PISSN : 2572-0007 - EISSN : 2661-7250

Participatory in Algeria and Ways to Enhance Local Development: Selected Projects as Case Studies

Amine Nedjar[1,]

[1]**University of khenchla (Algeria), nedjaramine@yahoo.fr**

Received: 02 /12 / 2024 **Accepted**: 10 /04 / 2025 **Published**: 18 /05 / 2025

Abstract:
Our study explores the principle of participation and its role in fostering local participatory democracy, with a focus on its objectives and challenges. Highlighting Algeria as a case study, it examines the "Capdel" program's vision for establishing representative local governance and its implications for economic development. The research also delves into the project "Citizen Empowerment for the Promotion of Good Governance and Participatory Democracy," led by the El Ghaith Association, emphasizing its contribution to citizen engagement and sustainable local development. The findings underscore the potential and obstacles of participatory democracy in driving good governance and inclusive development in Algeria.

تتناول هذه الدراسة مبدأ المشاركة ودوره في تعزيز الديمقراطية التشاركية المحلية، مع التركيز على أهدافها وتحدياتها. وتسلط الضوء على الجزائر كدراسة حالة، حيث تستعرض رؤية برنامج "Capdel" لإرساء حوكمة محلية تمثيلية وآثارها على التنمية الاقتصادية. كما تبحث الدراسة في مشروع "تمكين المواطنين لتعزيز الحوكمة الرشيدة والديمقراطية التشاركية"، الذي تقوده جمعية الغيث، مع التركيز على مساهمته في إشراك المواطنين وتحقيق التنمية المحلية المستدامة. وتؤكد النتائج على الإمكانات والعقبات التي تواجه الديمقراطية التشاركية في دفع الحوكمة الرشيدة والتنمية الشاملة في الجزائر.

Keywords: Participatory Democracy; Local Development.

[*]**Amine Nedjar**

I. INTRODUCTION

Participatory theory primarily critiques the liberal view of democracy as merely a competition for political power among responsible elites. Emerging in the late 1960s and early 1970s, this critique reflected a broader cultural push for greater democracy and social equality. The theory advocates for active citizen involvement in political decision-making on a large scale, fostering a shared sense of collective responsibility. Proponents argue that this vision can be realized through institutional reforms that expand opportunities for participation (Thomas & Dieter, 2007).

Over the 1990's, participatory methods and approaches have expanded significantly, moving from project-based applications to influencing policies. This evolution has shifted the focus from involving "beneficiaries" to engaging rights-bearing citizens and from addressing program implementation and evaluation to shaping decision-making processes and democracy itself. As a result, participatory approaches have increasingly entered governmental domains, grappling with challenges related to policy influence and institutional reform. At the same time, rising concerns about government responsiveness in development discussions have brought attention to how citizens engage with and make demands on the state (JOHN, 2004).

Our current study aims to answer the following research question:

- **To what extent can programs implementing participatory democracy drive local development in Algeria?**

To address the aforementioned question, the study is divided into six sections as follows:

- The Principle of Participation;
- The notion of local participatory democracy and its main challenges;
- Objectives and Challenges of Local Participatory Democracy;
- The "Capdel" program: A vision for establishing representative local democracy in Algeria;
- Participatory Democracy and Local Economic Development in Algeria;
- the project "Citizen Empowerment for the Promotion of Good Governance and Participatory Democracy in Algeria", implemented by the Association (El Ghaith);

1. First Headline

Participation involves the active engagement of individuals in a collective process concerning the actual or planned actions of administrative authorities. It can encompass involvement in preliminary arrangements, influencing decision-makers, or directly contributing to decision-making processes. From a governance perspective, participation is also valued as a way to identify potential flaws and foster a sense of ownership. While the term "public participation" suggests citizen-led initiatives, the process is typically managed by public entities (Addink, 2019).

The concept of participation has also garnered significant attention in the "good governance" literature. Here, it is viewed primarily as a means to enhance government transparency and responsiveness, particularly at the local level, while improving the efficiency of public spending. Additionally, participation is seen as a tool to ensure that public—and sometimes contested—decisions gain broader social and political acceptance (Laurence, Pascale, & others, 2016).

Conceptually, participation can be understood through several interconnected dimensions (Anton, 2023):

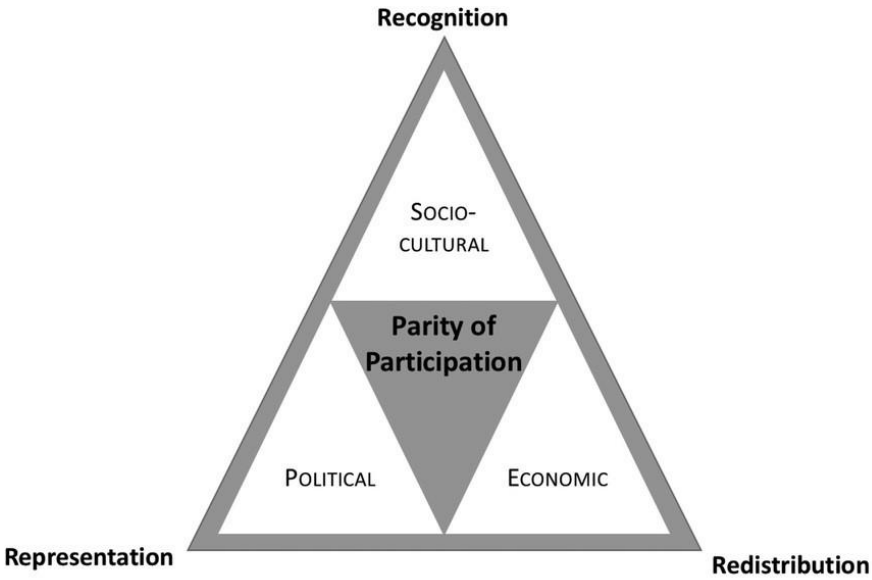
- First, it aligns with the concept of social integration;
- Second, it operates within a framework of living standards, which encompass the essential resources and the social organizational structures necessary for participation;
- Third, it considers the socio-political context as a critical factor;
- Lastly, participation reflects the inseparable relationship between individuals and their environment, necessitating an acknowledgment of both internal (personal) and external

(structural) resources. At its core, participation is defined by the dynamic interplay between involvement / disengagement.

1.1 Justice as parity of participation

Over the past decade, Nancy Fraser has developed a nuanced theory of social justice centered on the principle of "parity of participation". This principle asserts that social arrangements must enable all (adult) members of society to engage with one another as equals, embodying an explicitly egalitarian ideal. Fraser explains that true equality requires real freedom for individuals to participate on equal terms in social life. She frames "participatory parity" as the essence of equal respect for the autonomy of all individuals as social actors.

Figure 1: The Parity of Participation (Marit & Gwendolyn, 2022)



Fraser identifies three key barriers within the social order that can undermine this parity (Chris & Simon, 2007):

- lack of social status;
- insufficient economic resources;
- and absence of political voice;

These obstacles, rooted in distinct dimensions of society, must be addressed to achieve justice. Thus, a just society must ensure that its status hierarchy, economic system, and political framework are structured to eliminate these barriers, enabling equal participation for all.

1.2 Public Participation and Decision-Making in Local Authorities:

In an ideal democratic local government, regular, free, and competitive elections empower citizens to express their needs and priorities. The elected councilors then develop strategies, make critical decisions, and prioritize spending through formal policy and budgetary processes, supported by politically neutral officials who provide advice and execute these decisions.

Policy and decision-makers often assume a direct relationship between public participation and service delivery. This assumption underpins efforts to collaborate with citizens and community groups to find sustainable solutions to social, economic, and material challenges, aiming to enhance quality of life. Participatory budgeting and performance management frameworks are rooted in the expectation that public involvement will lead to improved service delivery (Moseti, 2010).

However, public participation has not demonstrated significant improvements in service delivery when measured by budget allocations. At best, it fulfills compliance requirements without leading to substantial budgetary shifts. Financial constraints pose a major obstacle, with substantial portions of local authority budgets consumed by infrastructure maintenance and recurrent expenses, leaving minimal resources to address community needs. Consequently, local authorities face tough decisions each fiscal year due to limited financial resources.

Another persistent challenge stems from a traditional culture in which municipal and county officials made unilateral decisions without adequately engaging the public. This historical exclusion, compounded by a lack of capacity to handle public dissent, left community voices unheard for decades.

Political interference further undermines the functionality of local authorities. Politicians often perceive their electoral mandates as a license to make decisions on behalf of the people. As a result, political interests frequently overshadow community needs, with elected representatives prioritizing their agendas over the requirements of those they serve (Mdunyelwa, 2009).

2. The notion of local participatory democracy and its main challenges

2.1 Conceptual Approach

Local participatory democracy is an integral aspect of "local democracy," which can encompass both representative and participatory elements. The term "local democracy" is often used to emphasize ongoing citizen engagement in public debates, community affairs, and the formulation of local policies. It refers not only to citizens' right to freely elect their representatives but also to their rights to access information, participate in consultations, engage in dialogue, and, in some cases, share decision-making authority.

At the local level, "participatory democracy" encompasses a diverse array of techniques, procedures, and initiatives. These include public utility inquiries, local referendums, participatory urban planning and development processes, as well as advisory councils for children, youth, elders, immigrants, or neighborhoods. The shared goal of these mechanisms is to involve citizens in public decision-making.

Citizen participation can take either a spontaneous or institutionalized form. On one hand, participation may arise directly from citizens in a bottom-up approach. On the other hand, it can be initiated by political leaders, following a top-down approach.

Within institutionalized participation, it is also possible to distinguish between two models: a hierarchical model and a negotiated model (Democracy Reporting International (DRI), 2024):

- **The Hierarchical Model**

This model is characterized by a top-down approach, where local authorities present a project to the consulted individuals. It aims either to disseminate information to citizens, in its most minimalistic participatory form, or to consult residents or a segment of the population. Going further, it may involve dialogue and consultation, which implies exchanges and discussions among the various stakeholders concerned with the issue at hand.

- **The Negotiated Model**

This model is based on genuine negotiation, where the project is collectively co-produced by all participants. Participants are guided to adopt a shared participatory culture. Those involved in the participatory process often come from diverse backgrounds, reflecting the

nature of the issue at hand and the purpose of the mobilization. They may include individual citizens, representatives of organized civil society, interest groups, experts, and others.

2.2 Citizen Participation and Democracy:

The legitimacy of representative democracy is increasingly being called into question. Complex decision-making structures involving multiple stakeholders, alongside a declining ability of political parties to effectively represent citizens—evidenced by decreasing voter turnout and rising electoral volatility—have sparked debates about democracy's legitimacy. This has led to growing calls for alternative forms of citizen engagement. Theoretical discussions on the role of citizen participation in democracy are primarily explored by participatory and deliberative democrats. While not exhaustive, this section outlines key arguments advocating for more direct forms of citizen involvement in governance.

Participatory democrats argue that delegating decision-making power to representatives fosters political alienation among citizens. They see active citizen participation as essential to the health of democracy. This perspective traces its origins to Rousseau, who emphasized that citizen involvement in political decision-making is crucial for a functional state. Contemporary participatory democracy theorists expand on this idea, asserting that participation should extend beyond politics to areas such as workplaces and local communities. For example, Barber contends that excessive liberalism has weakened democratic institutions, leading to widespread voter cynicism and alienation. Many citizens abstain from voting entirely, while those who do participate often limit their involvement to electing representatives, who then assume the actual decision-making responsibilities.

Proponents of participatory democracy highlight several key functions of participation within a democratic system (ANK & LAURENS, 2010):

- **Educative Function**: Participation helps citizens enhance their civic skills and competence by involving them directly in public decision-making processes.
- **Integrative Function:** Active involvement fosters a sense of belonging and community among citizens, encouraging them to take personal responsibility for public decisions.
- **Legitimacy of Decisions:** Participation contributes to the creation of rules and decisions that are widely accepted. As Rousseau suggested, citizen involvement ensures that decisions reflect collective will and are thus perceived as more legitimate.

In essence, participatory democracy seeks to bridge the gap between citizens and governance, enriching democratic processes and reinforcing the foundation of democratic legitimacy.

3. Objectives and Challenges of Local Participatory Democracy

Local participatory democracy is not intended to replace representative democracy but rather to serve as a complementary approach. The local level, as a natural space for participation, is often seen as the most relevant context for fostering citizen engagement and bridging the gap between citizens and politics, especially amid a crisis of political representation. Its objectives are diverse (Democracy Reporting International (DRI), 2024):

3.1 Objectives of Local Participatory Democracy

- **Improved Governance and Management**

A functional and managerial perspective views participatory democracy as a way to enhance local governance by adopting the principle that "better management involves closer and more collaborative management." It seeks to improve decision-making processes, prevent potential conflicts, and optimize the rationality of proposed solutions. Administrative and political actors benefit from integrating the experiential knowledge of those directly affected by

policies. While participatory democracy does not necessarily simplify or speed up decision-making, and final decision-making authority remains with elected officials, it can enhance governance by incorporating citizen insights.

- **Social Cohesion and Collective Responsibility**

Through active citizen involvement, participatory democracy promotes social cohesion at the local level, fostering a sense of collective responsibility. It helps integrate marginalized populations into political, social, and economic aspects of citizenship by encouraging their involvement in community life. By rebuilding social bonds, participatory democracy restores a degree of mutual trust between residents and elected officials, thereby enhancing the latter's legitimacy. It also addresses issues such as intolerance and identity-based fragmentation by providing spaces for dialogue and consensus-building, which can channel radical discontent into constructive engagement.

- **A Pedagogical and Political Approach**

On a political level, participatory mechanisms and consultation processes transcend the boundaries of representative democracy. Participatory democracy acts as a form of political education, fostering citizenship through engagement and shared responsibility. Citizens involved in these frameworks are encouraged to reconcile their individual interests to develop collective opinions. In this way, participatory democracy positions the citizen as more than just a voter, yet not quite a decision-maker.

3.2 Challenges of Local Participatory Democracy

The institutionalization of participatory governance at the local level faces several obstacles:

- **Limited Resources:** Local authorities often lack sufficient financial and human resources to implement decentralized governance effectively.
- **Organizational Culture:** In some regions, deeply entrenched centralist and authoritarian administrative traditions hinder the adoption of open and participatory governance practices. This leads to minimal acknowledgment of the role of social actors in local public policy.
- **Risk of Instrumentalization**: Politicians may view participatory democracy as a tool to strengthen their legitimacy, raising concerns about manipulation. Participatory mechanisms can be co-opted as tools for communication, mobilization, control, or self-legitimation by elected officials. This instrumentalization may exclude certain civil society actors (e.g., associations, political groups) due to fears of dissent.

Moreover, "legitimate representatives" from civil society, often co-opted as intermediaries, may monopolize participatory processes, transforming them into less transparent and democratic systems. This dynamic risks creating "professional participants" who dominate these mechanisms, potentially duplicating traditional representative systems in a less inclusive and democratic manner.

Competition among civil society actors for recognition as legitimate interlocutors further fragments civil society, undermining collective mobilization efforts within participatory frameworks (Democracy Reporting International (DRI), 2024).

3.3 Algeria and the Experience of Participatory Democracy

Local development is a multifaceted and evolving process aimed at achieving the social and economic aspirations of communities while addressing their essential needs. In light of shifting global dynamics, traditional development models have come under scrutiny, leading to a growing emphasis on solutions tailored to the unique characteristics of each community.

Development is no longer dictated from the top; instead, it has become a grassroots initiative requiring the active involvement of all local stakeholders. The state, no longer holding a monopoly over the development process, is now compelled to operate based on principles of participation and decentralization.

In this changing context, Algeria has adopted a renewed approach to governance, reflecting its commitment to economic and political reforms. The nation has implemented measures to promote and enhance the management of local development, establishing it as a cornerstone of its broader development strategy. This paradigm shift underscores Algeria's recognition of the critical role participatory democracy plays in fostering sustainable and inclusive local development (Ayache & Ammar, 2024).

3.3.1 Participatory Democracy in the Constitution:

Algeria's 2016 Constitution underscores the principle of participatory democracy, emphasizing the role of citizens in public affairs. The preamble affirms this commitment, stating:

"…and intends to build with this Constitution institutions, the basis of which is the participation of every Algerian man and woman in the conduct of public affairs…"

Article 15 further defines participatory democracy at the local level, declaring:

"The state is based on the principles of democratic organization, separation of powers, and social justice. The elected council is the framework in which the people express their will and monitor the work of public authorities. The state encourages participatory democracy at the local community level."

Additionally, Article 17 highlights citizen participation in local governance:

"The elected council represents the basis of decentralization and the place for citizens' participation in the conduct of public affairs."

3.3.2 Participatory Democracy in Municipal Law 11/10

The Municipal Law 11/10 dedicates Part Three of Section One to the concept of citizen participation. Article 11 emphasizes the municipality as the institutional framework for practicing local democracy and managing neighborhood affairs (Boumediene, 2022):

"The municipality constitutes the institutional framework for the practice of democracy at the local level and neighborhood management. The Municipal People's Assembly takes all measures to inform citizens about their affairs and consult them on options and priorities for economic, social, and cultural development according to the conditions specified in this law. In this regard, available media and communication tools may be used. The Municipal People's Council may also present a report on its annual activities to the citizens."

Article 12 further calls for creating a conducive environment to encourage local initiatives:

"The Municipal People's Council shall ensure the development of an appropriate framework for local initiatives aimed at motivating citizens and urging them to participate in settling their problems and improving their living conditions."

Similarly, Article 13 provides the council president with the authority to consult stakeholders:

"The president of the Municipal People's Council may, whenever the affairs of the municipality so require, seek the assistance of an advisory capacity, every local figure, every expert, and/or every representative of a legally approved local association."

Despite these provisions, it is notable that the articles in the Municipal Law do not explicitly reference "participatory democracy," even though the Constitution clearly affirms it in Article 15. This discrepancy highlights a gap between the constitutional endorsement of participatory democracy and its explicit integration within municipal legislation.

4. The "Capdel" program: A vision for establishing representative local democracy in Algeria:

The CAPDEL program (Capacity Development Program for Local Development Actors), which advocates for participatory democracy for local development, aligns with Algeria's efforts to reform its administrative system, as is the case in other countries worldwide. It is a cooperative project with the European Union and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), aimed at promoting the involvement of citizens and civil society in municipal management and sustainable, integrated local development (Ghalem & Faouzi, 2021).

The program is co-financed by the three partners with a total budget of €10 million: approximately €2.5 million from the Algerian government, €7.7 million from the European Union, and €170,000 from the UNDP.

CAPDEL supports pilot municipalities in two ways:

1. By strengthening the capacities of all local actors involved in the governance process.

2. By assisting in the establishment and sustainability of frameworks and mechanisms enabling joint efforts for the development of their municipalities.

The implementation of local incubators follows the launch on August 2020 of the second call for proposals for local development association projects in the pilot municipalities of Babar (Khenchela), Djanet (Illizi), Djemila (Sétif), El Khroub (Constantine), Messaad (Djelfa), Ghazaouet (Tlemcen), Ouled Ben Abdelkader (Chlef), and Timimoun (Adrar) .

The training had been organized into two sessions, each lasting five days, and was aimed at members of around sixty associations whose projects had been preselected for an incubation process out of a total of 112 project ideas received. These civil society associations had benefited from hands-on training supported by pedagogical and methodological tools, focusing on project cycle management, territorial planning, associative vision, and partnership development.

Subsequently, individualized coaching had been provided to each association to help finalize their projects. By the end of this incubation process, the most advanced projects had received funding through CapDeL (UNDP, 2020).

5. Participatory Democracy and Local Economic Development in Algeria:

As a reminder, the associative projects admitted to the incubation process focused on two themes (UNDP, 2020):

- On the one hand, strengthening civil society to enable more active and effective participation in governance and local development processes through actions such as information dissemination, awareness-raising, communication, engagement, and training.
- On the other hand, projects that act as catalysts for local economic development (LED), contributing to economic growth with the potential to create sustainable jobs and income for the target populations, improve their employability, or enhance and strengthen their production, processing, and/or marketing capacities.

The DEL catalyst project, based on the enhancement of a territorial economic resource, was intended, on the one hand, to provide a concrete response to a priority identified during the strategic planning process for the commune's development. On the other hand, it aimed to generate a dynamic of coordination and synergy among a diverse range of actors and sectors, including institutional, economic, public and private, associative, vocational training, universities, research and innovation, as well as employment and entrepreneurship support mechanisms.

Thus, local associations, supported by the Government, local authorities, the UNDP, and associative trainers mobilized by CapDeL, along with financial support from the European Union, had been able to progressively and fully participate in the local development of their communes.

6. the project ”Citizen Empowerment for the Promotion of Good Governance and Participatory Democracy in Algeria”, implemented by the Association (El Ghaith)

The **“Association for Solidarity and the Fight Against Poverty and Exclusion”** (El Ghaith), based in Bordj Bou Arreridj, Algeria, implemented this project between April 1, 2018, and September 30, 2021. Although initially planned for 24 months, the project was extended three times for periods of six, three, and nine months, resulting in a total duration of 42 months.

The initiative was carried out in collaboration with four civil society organizations—INSAF, El Ikram, El Amel, El Allig—and the National Organisation for Combating Desertification and Protecting the Environment. Its primary goal was to promote citizen participation in decision-making processes at the local level across five Algerian governorates: Bordj Bou Arreridj, Annaba, and Setif in the east, and M’Sila and El Bayad in the south (Amal, 2022).

During the implementation phase, the project encountered numerous challenges. Resistance from public officials delayed the required permissions to hold the launch seminar, which had to be postponed twice. Additionally, mistrust and the unavailability of local officials posed significant barriers to conducting interactive and participatory activities. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic further disrupted the project’s strategy, diminishing beneficiary engagement and adversely impacting the effectiveness of civil society organization (CSO) initiatives.

Given the constitutional revision of February 2016 and the related literature from the participation of citizens in the management of Municipality Affairs, the project is considered to be consistent with Algeria's political priorities. At the end of November 2016, the European Union and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) signed a financing agreement for (CAPDEL) (As previously mentioned), aimed at strengthening the capacities of local authorities and civil society as actors in local development. There were no synergies between this project’s activities and the CAPDEL, because of the difference in the areas of intervention, however, there was a synergy of knowledge and skills. There are trainers and project managers who have been recruited by the CAPDEL, and informal exchanges have been made (Amal, 2022).

7. Conclusions and recommendations

There is a clear need to enhance citizen and civil society organization (CSO) involvement in local development in Algeria. The frameworks, mechanisms, and tools for participation rely heavily on experimentation, which underscores the importance of initiatives that prioritize capacity building, innovative practices, and learning opportunities.

Recommendations

1. Capacity Building for State Officials:

Local authorities require training on the principles, mechanisms, and tools of effective local governance. This will modernize public services, improve their delivery, and foster greater citizen engagement in local development efforts.

2. Enhancing Collaboration Between CSOs and State Officials:

To strengthen cooperation, the following considerations are essential:

- **Commitment to Authorizations**: Authorities must demonstrate a willingness to facilitate financing and implementation of similar projects by granting necessary permissions.
- **Awareness and Communication**: Develop targeted awareness campaigns and communication strategies to address the mistrust and lack of motivation among CSOs and youth, encouraging their active participation.
- **Creating Dialogue Spaces**: Establish neutral and well-managed platforms for dialogue and collaboration. These spaces should be facilitated by trusted actors who can foster transparency and mutual trust.

By addressing these areas, Algeria can build a stronger foundation for participatory local development and sustainable collaboration between its citizens, CSOs, and local authorities.

Referrals and references:

- Addink, H. (2019). The Principle of Participation. Dans H. Addink, *Good Governance: Concept and Context* (pp. 129–140). Oxford : Oxford University Press.
- Amal, K. (2022). *Citizen Empowerment for the Promotion of Good Governance and Participatory Democracy in Algeria.* Algeirs: UNDEF.
- ANK, M., & LAURENS, D. G. (2010). Examining Citizen Participation:Local Participatory Policy Makingand Democracy. *Local Government Studies*, 477–491.
- Anton, A. (2023). General Concept of Participation. Dans A. Anton, *Living - Participating - Growing Old* (pp. 31-48). Austria: Springer VS, Wiesbaden.
- Ayache, b., & Ammar, a. (2024). Participatory democracy as a framework for upgrading local development management mechanisms With reference to the Algerian experience. *Journal of Finance, Investment and Sustainable Development*, 195-217.
- Boumediene, H. (2022). The experience of participatory democracy in Algeria as a modern management method for local development – an applied study. *Journal of Economic Integration*, 507-517.
- Chris, A., & Simon, T. (2007). Parity of Participation and the Politics of Status. *European Journal of Political Theory* , 1-18.
- Democracy Reporting International (DRI). (2024). *LA DÉMOCRATIE PARTICIPATIVE AU NIVEAU LOCAL.* Berlin: Democracy Reporting International (DRI).
- Ghalem, B., & Faouzi, G. (2021). Le marketing territorial participatif: approche synthétisée d'une participation citoyenne aux projets de développement local Etude de cas de dix (10) communes de la wilaya de Tizi Ouzou (Algérie). *Revue internationale de la performance économique*, 304-320.
- JOHN, G. (2004). Participatory development or participatory democracy? Linking participatory approaches to policy and governance. *Participatory Learning and Action*, 150-159.
- Laurence, B., Pascale, D., & others, &. (2016). The participatory democracy turn: an introduction. *JOURNAL OF CIVIL SOCIETY*, 225-230.
- Marit, R., & Gwendolyn, B. (2022). From the smart city to urban justice in a digital age. *City*, 684-705.
- Mdunyelwa, L. (2009). Public Participation in Local Government: It's Impact on Service. *International Research Group Programme (GDRI)* (pp. 1-10). South Africa: International Research Group Programme (GDRI).
- Moseti, Y. (2010). Public participation for sustainable development in local cities . *46th ISOCARP Congress* (pp. 1-7). Kenya: 46th ISOCARP Congress.
- Thomas, Z., & Dieter, F. (2007). *Participatory Democracy and Political Participation.* Oxford: Routledge.
- UNDP. (2020, october 24). Communiqué de presse . *Le CapDeL lance son 2ème incubateur de projets associatifs de développement local dans les communes pilotes* . Alger, Alger, Algeria: UN.