



**Partners Albania,  
Center for Change  
and Conflict Management**

## *Transparency in Local Service Delivery, A Step Closer to the Citizens*

### **I. Problem Statement**

The decentralization of local government in Albania started in 2000 with the passage of the Law on Organization and Functioning of Local Government. Since then, the legal framework of decentralization has been completed and the main challenge remains its implementation. Particular emphasis has been placed on the devolution of fiscal powers and enlargement of the fiscal autonomy of local governments. Local governments have demonstrated some improvement of their managerial and administrative capacities, have established and streamlined some procedures and are more responsive to citizens' demands.

Despite the progress, the problem of corruption seriously hinders the development and democratization of local government in Albania. According to the 2006 Transparency International Corruptions Perceptions Index, Albania scored 2.6 against a clean score of 10, ranking 111th out of 163 countries surveyed. ("Corruption in Albania - Perception and Experience").

Corruption distorts the allocation of local resources and performance of local governments. Practical consequences of corruption at the local level include poor public services, increased social polarization, scarcity in public services, low public investment and poor economic growth.

Public participation at the local level in Albania has increased in the last few years. On the whole, local governments have been more open and receptive to public input than the central government. NGOs have started to play an active watchdog role with regard to local government performance, and have increased their participation in development of local strategies. Despite these developments, the quality of public participation and consultation still remains partial, inconsistent and not sustainable. In many cases, the communication with citizens is vertical and one way. Access to information is not complete or easy, which is an additional hindrance to full participation.

### **II. Partners-Albania's Role**

Partners Albania has worked over the last seven years to promote collaboration and ensure participation of diverse communities at all levels of decision-making. Transparency of local government has been an important focus of PA work, since corruption is so burdensome to local development and local participatory democracy.

The Parliamentary elections of 2005 and local elections of 2007 were conducted on an anti-corruption agenda. The electoral promises of winning parties and candidates in both cases were focused around transparent governance and inclusive decision making. Following the elections, public expectations were high with regard to concrete results in the fight against corruption. However, most national and international surveys still show Albania ranking high in the incidence of corruption, including local government.

In response to this problem, PA designed a program to reduce corruption at the local government level. The methodology started by working with elected leaders with the political will to initiate change, and then accurately identified transparency deficits by surveying public perception. The

survey findings set the ground for areas in which the municipalities received assistance from PA. Public participation and consultation were part of the entire process. The good practices developed in the project have been disseminated at a national level and serve as a model for other local government units.

The project was funded by British Embassy and the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Albania from April 2008 - May 2009.

### **III. Main Stakeholders**

The stakeholders in this project were the municipalities of Kuçova, Rubiku, Korça, Elbasani, and Municipal Units 1 and 5 in Tirana, mayors and their staff, local NGOs, international donors and development organizations.

### **IV. Processes Used**

#### **Build Understanding and Ensure Effective Leadership**

The methodology put the mayors at the focus of the process because they have are both the administrative head and the public face of Albanian local government. Because corruption is a sensitive issue, PA considered it very important to have the mayors' willingness and support to participate in such initiative. Their trust in the process and confidence in the implementer (Partners Albania) were seen as crucial to the success of the initiative.

So the process started with a national workshop in which 22 local government units represented by mayors or deputy mayors were introduced to the initiative and the methodology to be used. Partners presented to the participants all the stages of the process and discussed with them the benefits and the risk of coming out publicly regarding the weakest points in regard to transparency in their respective municipalities.

Before the workshop, all 65 Albanian municipalities were invited to send an expression of interest to participate in the program, as a way to increase the chances of success by having mayors who had made a conscious decision about participating in the program. Partners Albania received an expression of interest from 22 municipalities, and selected six diverse municipalities to participate based on geographical location, population size and political affiliation of the mayor. The participating municipalities were Kuçova, Rubiku, Korça, Elbasani, and Municipal Units 1 and 5 in Tirana.

#### **Identify Issues**

PA diagnosed the transparency issues in participating municipalities by seeing them through the lenses of the citizens. A public perception survey focused on the transparency and efficiency of the service delivery procedures used by local governments was conducted in all six municipalities. Partners Albania conducted face to face interviews with citizens during visits to the municipality premises during a one month period.

The survey aimed to measure public perceptions with regard to: (1) free and easy access to information, (2) performance in responding to citizens, (3) efficacy and transparency in service provision (4) citizens involvement in decision making at the local level.

The survey findings were used to (1) identify the problematic areas in each municipality (2) set a platform for dialogue and development of an assistance plan with Partners Albania, mayors and municipal staff. Some of the survey findings were:

- By and large, the municipalities do not issue an Application Acknowledgement Note when a citizen applies for services, setting the ground for corruption;

- The application procedures for services are unclear;
- Lack of information about application procedures often leads to submission of incomplete documentation and delays in service delivery;
- Tariffs for services are partially published in five out of six municipalities involved in the survey;
- Overall, the citizens are of the opinion that the municipality is not fully aware of their needs;
- The majority of citizens expect important changes in the way their municipality works.

### **Endorsement of Findings**

PA organized five roundtables in the target municipalities to present the findings, with participation of municipal staff, local NGOs, interest groups and local media. At the roundtables, the mayors expressed support for the process and endorsed the findings, while most of the staff demonstrated resistance to accepting them, especially when municipal performance scored low. The discussion focused on problematic areas, reasons why and ways to address them.

These roundtables created space for dialogue among local actors and set the priorities for PA's assistance plan to the participating municipalities.

### **Facilitate the Design of a Response Plan**

The specific issues selected to be included in the assistance plan were different in each municipality. The main determining factors were: (1) issues identified in the survey; (2) the mayor's agenda for the city; (3) other assistance projects in which municipalities were enrolled; (4) issues that could be feasibly addressed within the project timeframe.

In each municipality, the mayor appointed one of his staff to work closely with PA to coordinate and supervise the implementation of the assistance plan. The main areas of assistance in the six municipalities consisted of:

- Designing and/or reviewing public communication strategies
- Designing monitoring and evaluation plans as a tool to support budget adjustments.
- Setting up mechanisms to evaluate the effectiveness of local policies adopted by the municipality through regular public input.
- Design tools to improve transparency and public access to information.

In a national workshop, PA presented the integrated findings of the surveys conducted in the six municipalities and the assistance plans. The workshop was attended by the mayors and municipal staff of municipalities participating in the project, representatives of other municipalities, civil society organizations, and representatives of international institutions supporting the decentralization process in Albania.

### **Lessons Learned Dissemination**

PA used a variety of forums and means to share the results and lessons learned from this initiative. Group discussions with mixed audiences from municipal staff and public interest groups were used widely at each stage of the project. This served as an example to the participating municipalities of how to design and facilitate consultative processes with the public.

All the public events around the initiative were covered by local and national media. Several articles in print media discussed the findings of the survey and the progress made in targeted municipalities throughout the initiative.

PA used promotional materials to convey the importance of working collaboratively with local government to make it accountable and responsible towards its citizens. In addition, PA used its bimonthly newsletter, website and other NGO publications like the Albanian Association of Municipalities.

## **V. The Driver of Change (What made the difference?)**

- The program took the time to establish trust in the local partner (Partners Albania) as a neutral and non-partisan actor. Trust has proven to be the cornerstone in any partnership between civil society organizations and local government, especially when dealing with sensitive issues like transparency and corruption.
- The political will of participating Mayors to advance their anti-corruption agenda was essential. Corruption is one of the top priority issues in the political agenda in Albania. It remains one of the key indicators with regard to government performance and voters motivation to choose between candidates in an election period.
- In the conditions of increased public demand and limited budgets, local governments have demonstrated more willingness to consider any possible alternative to meet the demand and improve quality.
- Transparency in performance and application of participatory processes is a funding condition from donors. This conditionality has been educational for the local governments in Albania leading to increased public accessibility and accountability.

## **VI. Outcomes**

The project assisted the participating municipalities, as well as others, in their efforts to improve the practices of good governance. They developed new rules and procedures to communicate with citizens (e.g., citizen information office, communication strategies) and ways to increase public participation in local decision making.

The municipalities broadened and intensified their communication with local stakeholders, which is expected to become more sustainable as new systems are implemented and new skills are applied.

The project created space for municipalities at national level to share their challenges and learn from their experiences in the fight against corruption. The sharing process highlighted some innovative approaches in improving transparency in local government operations.

The survey conducted by PA served as additional information with which donors and development organizations could better target their assistance to local government. The project attracted the interest of bilateral donors working in Albania, who included some of the issues identified in the survey as part of their country assistance program.

Some specific outcomes consist of:

- Elbasan municipality built capacities of the staff and developed mid-term budget indicators. This will increase the transparency in budget allocation and expenditures and also the efficacy of the public services.
- Elbasan municipality developed a Personnel Performance Evaluation manual to be used by the human resources department on an annual basis.
- The municipalities of Rubik, Tirana Municipal Unit 1 and 5 designed procedures for the establishment and functioning of the citizen information office. It was identified as a priority by the respective Mayors to increase the transparency of municipal services in response to the concerns raised by the citizens.
- Korca municipality developed an analytic system to evaluate and monitor the impact of local policies on the public. The system will enable the municipality to collect input in support of an open and participatory budgeting process. PA installed information management software

and trained the staff on data input and analysis. As a result, the Municipality of Korca conducted for the very first time a public survey to set priorities for the budget plan of 2010.

- The municipalities of Korca and Kucova developed an Internal and External Communication Strategy.
- Kucova Municipality took immediate actions to make public all fees for municipal services, as one of the weak transparency areas identified in the survey.
- Kucova Municipality decided to use a public survey as a tool to identify public priorities as part of the budget drafting process.

The processes applied demonstrated to the local leaders that consultative processes are not threatening as long as they have the political will to serve the public with them and through them.

## **VII. How to Sustain the Change**

Processes that are built mainly on the political will of leaders tend to be unsustainable, because changes in the leadership create a new reality in the functioning of the institution and its interactions with local actors. Creating and influencing a broader base of public pressure to support political will is a long and difficult process. That is why active citizens are key to any vibrant democracy. To ensure the sustainability of similar processes, a whole new culture of active citizen involvement is needed.

This can be supported by programs that:

- Strengthen the capacities of local NGOs and CBOs who act as intermediary groups between local government and citizens.
- A sound legal framework and respect for the rule of law is a must in making any effort, at any level of the government sustainable. It builds citizens' trust in institutions and encourages their participation in decision making.
- Assist local governments to further develop skills and methods on how to actively interact with citizens, building on what has been achieved so far.
- Increase municipal budgets and fiscal independence of local governments, which enables them to involve local groups in service provision.

## **VIII. Policy Recommendations**

- Local government assistance programs would be of greater benefit to local governance if public participation were incorporated as an integral and conditional component.
- Public participation at the local level, despite the progress made, is still low in Albania. It is the duty of the civil society groups and local governments to actively work in engaging the citizens in the decision making process.
- Assistance to local government should be demand driven and based on local realities. Application of advanced technologies and tools should be accompanied by advancement of skills in the municipal staff.
- Public participation and consultation, as an obligation of any level of government when initiating and approving new laws and policies, has been poorly implemented. International institutions monitoring Albania's progress in the European integration processes should be more demanding about this aspect of governance in Albania.
- Foreign assistance to local government needs to be much better coordinated, not only in terms of geographical coverage, but also strategies applied, interaction with local actors, involvement of local expertise and sharing of lessons learned.