



Citizen Participation in Influencing the Political Agenda: A Cornerstone in Advancement of Democracy

I. Problem Statement

The transformation of Albania from one of the most oppressive Communist regimes into a representative democracy has been long, and is still a work in progress. Elections, the foundation of any democratic system, have yet to meet international standards¹. The 2007 local elections were determined by OSCE/ODHIR in their final report to have only “partly met OSCE commitments and other international standards for democratic elections.”

In a society where many of the critical ingredients needed for a healthy civil society have become corrupted and discredited, Albanian citizens are trying to grasp the idea of advocating for their own interests and rights. Although civil society groups have become more active in articulating certain pressing public issues, on the whole there is limited experience in the country in translating issues into a political context and mobilizing support to leverage political attention to common problems.

In addition, Albanian political parties do not provide channels through which people can effectively make their needs and opinions heard. The parties have yet to develop effective communication channels with their electorate. Their electoral platforms do not reflect constituency needs- the political parties claim citizens’ votes based on personal loyalties. Even following elections, citizens and civil society have very limited ability to keep elected officials accountable for their electoral promises.

II. How the Center Became Involved

Partners-Albania was one of the implementing partners in the “Democracy and Governance in Albania (DGA²)” program from 2004-2007, funded by the United States Agency for International Development.

¹ OSCE/ODHIR Election Observation Mission Final assesses June 2009 parliamentary elections as tangible progress with regard to the voters’ registration and identification, legal framework, but the politicization of counting process and violations during the election campaign undermined public confidence in the election process.

² The DGA consortium included: the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI), Partners for Democratic Change (Partners), and the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX)

The overall goal of the DGA program was to enable citizens, NGOs, media, and political parties to become more actively involved in a participatory and transparent political process to combat corruption and promote better governance through free and fair elections.

The local elections of 2007 were an important opportunity for the program to meet this goal and demonstrate the true values of democracy. Partners-Albania planned to mainly work with civil society groups in urban areas to increase the information available to citizens and improve the link between real citizen concerns and party campaign promises. The goal was to help citizens, NGOs and the media hold politicians accountable for electoral pledges and advance the influence of non-governmental advocacy efforts in policymaking. These activities were implemented as part of the “I Support Good Governance” campaign.

III. Main Stakeholders

In seven of Albania’s main cities, Partners-Albania mobilized a coalition of civil society organizations and interested citizens to spearhead the “I Support Good Governance” campaign. In total 200 young people, women, businesspeople, NGO members and citizens in seven cities participated in planning workshops, and about 3,000 citizens participated in the events.

As criteria for selecting the target cities and groups, Partners-Albania considered geographic distribution, experience in civic engagement, size of population and previous connections to the Partners-Albania network. The seven biggest municipalities outside of Tirana, the capital were chosen: Durres, Fier, Vlora, Elbasan, Korca, Pogradec, Shkodra and Gjirokastra.

Shkodra: A coalition of seven youth organizations

Durrës: A coalition comprised of 20 women organizations, representatives of women political forums and youth organizations

Fier: A coalition of 12 youth organizations

Vlora: A coalition of 20 young people and youth organizations

Gjirokastra: A coalition of 12 cultural preservation NGOs, tourism and media outlets

Pogradec: A coalition of 15 anti-corruption, environmental, women, educational, children and media NGOs

Korça: A coalition of 30 business owners and business associations.

IV. Processes Used

The initiative was designed to span the pre and post election period, with the final goal being fulfillment of the electoral pledges by the elected leaders in the respective cities.

Pre-Election Period

The objective of the pre-election effort was to ensure that the agendas of each mayoral candidate included priority issues from the local community.

- **Convening the stakeholders**

The initiative started by contacting as many civil society groups as possible in each city and asking if they wanted to be involved in an election-related cooperative advocacy campaign.

- Identifying the issues and setting priorities

Partners-Albania organized and facilitated a one-day strategic planning workshop for civil society groups in each city. The purpose was to identify issues of common concern that required decision making authority of the local government, and to prioritize and select an issue for the campaign.

- Build coalition and agree on slogan and logo of the campaign

Partners then helped the local civil society groups and representatives to establish coalitions around the issues identified and agreed upon. The campaigns in all seven cities run under the national campaign slogan of “I Support Good Governance”. In addition, each local campaign developed its own slogan and logo designed around the advocacy campaign issue.

“Change comes with the WOMAN !” - Durrësi

“Youth Center, the dream that together can become a reality!” - Fieri

“Be involved... Reflect now!” - Shkodra

“Together for Transparent Governance!” - Korça

“We deserve a Devoted, Qualified, Not-Corrupted Public Administration!” - Pogradeci

“Restore your city - promote its heritage!” - Gjirokastra

“We want to be part of the Change: Youth in local decision-making process!” - Vlora

- Develop an action plan and create working groups

PA guided participants through the process of first identifying allies, supporters and contributors, and then developing a detailed work-plan with a timetable of activities, budget, and strategies to draw attention to the issue. Small working groups were assigned the responsibility to coordinate implementation of specific activities of the action plan. The coalitions agreed to have one organization act as the liaison with Partners-Albania and coordinator in the ground.

As part of the action plan, the groups drafted a budget and identified contributors to the advocacy campaign. Partners Albania provided a small grant to each coalition to implement the main activities of the campaign. Most of the campaign’ activities were based on the voluntary work of the working groups and constituencies.

- Building awareness through a media campaign

Partners-Albania paid special attention to helping the coalitions develop effective public awareness campaigns. More than 3,000 citizens in seven cities were actively involved in the promotional activities, open debates and forums with candidates during the local campaigns, which helped to build a new culture of interaction between citizens and politicians.

The media campaigns were exclusively locally produced and broadcasted, which contributed to bringing the message closer to the citizens in the respective cities. The media campaigns included press conferences, TV debates, newspaper articles, TV spots, posters and fliers.

- Individual meeting with the candidates and presentation of position papers

The working groups in charge of “candidate outreach” held meetings with each of their local candidates for the office of mayor to present their campaign position paper, a document that laid out the problem the coalition had identified and suggestions on how to address it in a collaborative way. The candidates were given one to two weeks to reflect on the proposal and take a position.

The meetings were used to educate the candidates about the issue, establish a potential partnership and inform them about the process. The coalitions told each candidate that if they would expect the elected mayor to fulfill his or her promised action on the issue within the first year of his/her mandate. The coalitions expressed their openness to collaborate with the elected mayor in supporting him/her to meet the electoral promises.

- Getting the candidates pledges on issues identified

Candidates who agreed to take action on the campaign issues signed a pledge in front of the cameras at a media event that was broadcasted on all the local television stations. Many candidates were eager to take advantage of this publicity opportunity. The coalition then had a public record to use as a monitoring tool after the elections.

- Candidate Forums on the specific issues of interest

The most challenging component of the campaign for the local interest groups was organization of Candidate Forums, as many of the candidates were unwilling to appear in a public debate. Partners-Albania used its extensive network in each city and institutional clout to help the coalitions pressure candidates to attend, and pressure local media outlets to broadcast the events. In the end, the local coalitions were able to organize Forums in five out of seven cities. Around 1000 citizens participated in these Candidates' Forums, all of which were broadcasted on local and national television.

Post-Election Period

Partners–Albania continued to support the local coalitions as they followed up their advocacy campaigns until the newly elected mayors fulfilled their pledges.

- Capacity building in participatory governance and monitoring tools

About 60 members of the local coalitions in all cities were trained on participatory governance and monitoring tools. The training was tailored around the specific issues the coalitions were working.

- Development of a lobbying strategy

As a follow up to the training, Partners Albania assisted the coalitions to design an action plan supporting the post-election campaign. In cases where the city had a new mayor and city council, the coalition carefully considered which parties were represented in the council when designing its post electoral lobbying effort. The coordinating role remained with the same local groups and individuals as in the pre-election campaign.

- Keeping the Coalition motivated and informed

The coalitions used different forms of communication to keep their members and public at large informed about the progress of the initiative. Representatives of the coalitions monitored city council meetings closely and organized regular meetings with the mayor and his cabinet. Regular updates were sent to the coalition members. Other sources of information were the local media and coalition members' newsletters including Partners.

- Agree on a realistic implementation plan with the Mayor

Almost all the issues addressed in these campaigns had an implication for the municipal budget, which made the issues more difficult and complex to address. All the coalitions therefore had to become involved in the municipal budget drafting process.

The coalitions first reconfirmed with the mayor that he had the will to pursue the issue. Then, they used the media and public pressure to support the mayor and the cause in the city council, especially when the other political parties sitting in the council were uncooperative.

▪ Public praise for the elected leaders for fulfilling the pledges

Within the first year of the mayors' mandate as originally targeted, all the pledges were fulfilled. The coalitions again used media forums such as publications of member organizations to applaud these achievements, recognizing the essential contribution of elected leaders and mayors in particular. This built the credibility of the coalition, created a long-term cooperative relationship with the mayors, and created a political incentive for other candidates and parties to cooperate with them in the future.

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

The initiative was about citizen participation in political decision making and as such, political context shaped and influenced its design, implementation and results. The main drivers of change were:

- The process was designed and implemented as non-partisan, lead by groups that were also perceived in public as non-partisan.
- The ownership of the initiative was vested into local groups.
- The approach applied was cooperative rather than attacking. Candidates were always given time to formulate responses and positions before being asked to make public comments or pledges. Building positive relationships with the candidates enabled more cooperative joint actions in the post-election period.
- Decentralization of the political campaign. In Albania, political party leaders determine the candidates list, but the national party has little influence on how the local candidates run the campaign.
- International assistance provided important financial leverage for civil society actions and sometimes served as a broker between citizens and politics.
- International pressure to meet democratic standards for free and fair elections as a criteria for the integration of Albania into the European Union provided key political leverage for civil society.

VI. Outcomes

The initiative developed a successful model of mobilizing community groups to ensure that citizen issues and concerns are high on the agenda candidates for local office. The initiative was designed and implemented in an electoral context, but its principles and methodology are easily adaptable and applicable in any collaborative advocacy process.

The results of the Good Governance campaign were:

- local authorities in *Gjirokastra* increased the budget for restoration and reconstruction efforts;
- in *Vlora*, the Mayor and the Municipal Council approved an action plan for youth issues;
- in *Durrës*, a new office dealing with gender issues was established in the Municipality;
- in *Fier* a youth center was established with support from the Municipality;
- in *Korca* an "Anticorruption Integrity Pact" between small businesses and local authorities was signed;

- in *Pogradec* procedures regarding public access to the Municipality were improved based on the citizen report card produced.

The long term impact of this initiative was strengthening and institutionalizing a cooperative relationship between NGOs and government at the local level, creating new channels for citizen participation in government and thus deepening the culture of democracy in Albania.

VII. How to Sustain the Process

In a developing democracy like Albania, sustainability is the key word in the advancement of democratic institutions, including both government and civil society actors. We have learnt that sustainability is a process and result of many contributing factors. The sustainability of participatory processes is interrelated with the advancement of public institutions accountability and responsibility, maturity and democratization of politics in general.

To sustain the development of participatory processes in the long run, the following elements are particularly important:

- The enhancement of NGO sector advocacy capacities, particularly how to promote participatory government, how to influence policy design and monitor government performance. Advocacy training has been shown to be effective when used as a tool, not a goal in itself. Advocacy skills require follow-on coaching on how to use them in a real context. This is not necessarily something that development programs have done until now.
- There is a need to make public participation and consultation an integral part of development assistance programs in any sector, and move away from “thematic” consideration of it. In Albania, public participation and consultation is officially legal binding for any strategy or legal initiative by the government, but is not enforced by international pressure. The meaningful integration of real participation into government assistance programs would positively impact the situation.
- Special attention should be given to local resource and capacity building organizations as an effective and efficient vehicle to sustain changes. Capacity building is a constant demand for any sector including the NGO one, and in the long run, it can not be provided by foreigners or foreign assistance programs.
- Financial independence and decisive legal protection from government harassment for NGOs will alleviate reluctance to engage in political processes such as elections. Being labeled as politically partisan is a risk that any organization takes when implementing initiatives such as the one described in this case, and some NGOs do not consider it within their mandate.

VIII. Recommendations for successful citizen mobilization programs

The role of donors and policy makers in citizen mobilization processes cannot be discussed in isolation from the general situation of civil society in Albania, the progress of democratic

development in the country, and the current role and presence of foreign assistance in the country. In this context, it is recommended:

- It is important to continue foreign assistance in support of the Albanian NGO sector. Especially in the last two years, Albania has experienced a tremendous reduction in foreign funding, but local mechanisms and laws for supporting philanthropy and public participation are not sufficiently developed to take up the slack. The lack of funding is having negative impact not only on the NGO sector but on the democratic process in general.
- Donors should maintain as low a profile as possible when funding initiatives that are considered political. Highly visible control and extensive bureaucracy from the donors in design and implementation, for example, insistence on use of donor logos, damages the local ownership, reliability and sustainability of the initiative.
- Funding should aim to build local capacities in addition to meeting certain program goals. In the rush to achieve short-term program goals, donors often resort to exclusive use of foreign expertise, bypassing local capacities and institutions where they exist, and relegating the time-intensive task of building local capacity to last priority. Foreign assistance should support local groups in filling in the democratic gaps and moving the development process forward, not create unnecessary competition with them.