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# ECSRA

Empowering Civil Society in Rural Areas

## Book of achievements





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Empowered lives.  
Resilient nations.



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# ABOUT THE ECSRA PROJECT

## 1.1 Project background and objectives

Independent of the progress of the last two decades, Albanian civil society (CS) continues to face challenges in terms of influencing governance, reaching out to citizens and ensuring sustainable results. The 2010 Civil Society Index as well as other reports evaluating the 3rd sector enables empirical evidence related to inconsistencies in the level of development and civil society role in urban areas versus rural and remote areas.

The lack of active CS actors in rural and remote areas deprives the communities of these areas of the benefits of participatory governance oriented towards citizens. It also deprives them of the advantages of the integration process. Specifically, civil society is one of the actors that are key to the future of the Local Action Groups for Rural Development (LAGs – a three-party partnership between civil society, local government and the private sector) as fundamental structures to be used to channel the EU's assistance for Albania's rural development (a PARD component).



This was the context for the planning and implementation of the project “Empowering Civil Society in Rural and Remote Areas with the Aim of Promoting Good Governance and Development” – ECSRA. This project was aimed at revitalizing civil society in rural and remote areas, as well as contributing to good governance through capacity building and empowerment of civil society in these areas. The initiative was an effort to encourage civil society actions in rural and remote areas, as well as to promote good governance and citizen participation in the disadvantaged and remote areas of Albania, thus facilitating and encouraging cooperation and a closer partnership between the civil sector, local and regional authorities and other local partners.

The initiative was implemented in four counties – Berat, Elbasan, Lezhë and Gjirokastrë over a period of 18 months (July 2011 – December 2012), addressing the key concerns by meeting these two specific objectives:

1. Building sustainable capacities of Civil Society in Rural and remote areas (CSRA) as a key and irreplaceable actor for the advancement of rural communities’ priorities through concrete actions that were founded on and promoted achievement of fundamental democratic principles that are at the basis of inclusive, accountable and citizen-oriented governance.
2. Increasing awareness and advocating with key national and local actors for the strengthening of the CSRA, the development of alternatives for the growth of the third sector in rural and remote areas, and the strengthening of CSRA and local actors in order to include them in networks and trilateral partnerships as an efficient instrument in addressing development inequalities in general and rural development in particular.

## **1.2 Project Activities**

The Project was implemented through several stages, but because of their nature, they can be categorized in four main components, as follows:

### ***1. 2.1 Assessment and working strategy design component:***

This component was met through objectives undertaken and carried out in the framework of:

- a. Carrying out ground work necessary for project initiation and implementation;
- b. Conducting an assessment study on CS in rural and remote areas of Albania;
- c. Disseminating newsletters and making preparations for the awareness raising campaign.

### ***1.2.2 Capacity building component:***

Under the second framework, activities that resulted in the increase of capacities of civil society actors in rural and remote areas of targeted districts, as well as

the building of capacities of their partners in the public as well as private sectors at the local level.

Primary activities focused on:

- a. Sharing findings of assessment report and increasing awareness of identifies issues;
- b. Drafting manuals on Civil Society Organizations' Management as well as on CS-Government-Business Partnerships;
- c. Conducting trainings on capacity strengthening for CSOs in rural and remote areas, with a focus on project cycles and CSO management;
- d. Conducting trainings on trilateral cooperation with participants from all three sectors – civil society, local government and private sector.

### **1.2.3 Awareness Raising and Knowledge Strengthening**

This component was characterized by informational and awareness raising activities that included the following:

- a. Awareness raising campaigns through electronic media;
- b. Dissemination of publications, including informative brochures, a series of newsletters, manuals and an evaluation report on CS in the rural areas.

### **1.2.4 Experience sharing and advocacy component**

Experience sharing and advocacy was achieved through the following:

- a. Workshops
- b. Fair of Ideas
- c. Conferences

All these activities included participants from all three potential parties: civil society, local government and private sector.

## **1.3 Process**

In conclusion of the ECRSA project, reflections on its progress and the followed process are positive. The project implementation process carefully followed the stages and components planned to achieve its aims and objectives. On the other hand, it displayed the flexibility necessary to facilitate and enable as wide an access as possible to its beneficiaries, considering the nature of the intervention and its target.

The Initiative's implementation project was designed based on stages that integrally respected components described in the previous section. Although a few elements, such as informational and awareness, were spread throughout the process in its entirety, its key stages were dominated by specific activities and approaches for the achievements of the initiative's key components: needs' assessment – building capacities – information and awareness – experience sharing and advocacy.

## **1.4 Actors and Supporters of the Initiative (at the local/county level)**

Project implementation within the set deadline and in compliance with projected results was made possible thanks to the involvement, contribution and support of various actors at the local level. The initiative's support was trilateral – from the civil society, local government and business.

The project encountered the enthusiasm and support of civil society organizations that operated in the rural and remote areas in the counties of Berat, Lezhë, Elbasan and Gjirokastër. Non-governmental associations as well as farmers' unions with a stake in and operational in the target areas were involved with the project implementation.

Business representatives and chambers of commerce in the districts where the project took place not only became supporters of the initiative, but also active participants and promoters of its activities. They showed interest in and readiness for further cooperation.

The initiative was welcomed and encountered strong support by local government institutions. The mayors' offices in the involved counties – Berat, Lezhë, Elbasan and Gjirokastër – turned into important partners of the initiative offering support to the highest levels, mayors and municipality councils.

Last but not least, the media was an important supporter and promoter of the initiative. The local media played a major, irreplaceable role especially in the achievement of the informative and awareness raising objectives.



# THE CONTEXT OF AREAS TARGETED BY THE PROJECT (4 DISTRICTS) AND THE ECRSA STRATEGY

## 2.1 Socio-economic context in the targeted areas

### Berat

Berat County includes an area of 1.798 km<sup>2</sup> in the Central mountainous area and partly in the Southwestern and partly in the southwestern lowlands of Albania. Berat District has a total population of 113,619. The district is made up of the Kuçova, Poliçani, Ura Vajgurore, Çorovoda and Bogova. Nearly 45.5 % of the population lives in urban areas while the average age of the district's population sits at 36 years. According to INSTAT, median household income in 2007 was 31,000 lek per month, which is considerably lower than the national average of 38,000 lek. Unemployment and poverty are the two main challenges of the region.

The county's territory is primarily mountainous, with an average elevation of 455 m above sea level. Fields are primarily found in the northwestern part, in the Osum valley, until where it meets the Myzeqe fields. Berat's territory includes: Berat and Kuçovë fields and mountainous areas, the Mountain of Tomorr (in the east, 2417 m) and Shpirag (west, 1218 m) as well as the Osum and Tomorica valleys. The fields and hills are the basis for agricultural produce while mountains and valleys represent great sources of timber, pastures and water, yet to be used as resources important to economic and environmental development. Since 1996, an area of 4,000 ha in the Tomorr Mountain has been declared National Park. This park comes second to the National Dajti Park in terms of visitors.

Its geographic position favors transportation and socio-economic ties with several counties. However, studies show that construction of more roads would improve communications with other districts, and would open the way to the city's faster and more intensive development. The Osum River that goes through the city is one of the main rivers in the county. The river represents great potential for the areas of agriculture, power, hydrogeology, ecology, and urban planning. Osum transfers into the Seman River about 995 millions of m<sup>3</sup> water per year, with an average flow of 32,5 m<sup>3</sup>/s.

Tourism represents one of the main pillars in the city's economic development. The city inherits from the past great historical, cultural, ethnographic values that make up for a great tourism development potential. With these touristic resources, the city is capable of developing family and organized tourism.

In 1961 Berat was officially proclaimed a "Museum Town." The city owns a series of monuments which make up for a great testimony of its cultural, historical and artistic heritage of life and work, passed on from generation to generation. In July 2008 UNESCO declared Berat a World Heritage Site by. Berat has over 210 museum objects, out of which 150 are standing objects. Out of these, 60 are first class monuments while the rest fall into the second category. There has been increasing awareness of the community in the recent years about these values, but further investment is necessary to restore and preserve inherited values, as well as to ensure upgrades necessary for an urban infrastructure conducive to the area's tourism development.

Crafts, a valuable tradition, are still alive trade in Berat – wood carving, embroidery, silver-smithing and metal-working, straw ornaments, decorative stone carving, etc. In the recent years, there has been a revitalization of these trades.

As to agriculture, Berat is well-known for produce such as olives, figs, vineyards, fruits, vegetables, medicinal plants, winemaking, etc. The district of Berat has a long tradition in the production of agricultural and livestock products. Currently, it is estimated that plantations make up for a total of 6.000 ha, primarily in olive groves, producing 10,000 tons of olives annually; 4,000 tons in figs; and an annual vineyard produce of about 10,000 tons. The Berat region, thanks also to the favorable climate, cultivates almost all fruits and vegetables.

Agricultural produce processing has developed in the recent years. Berat has a number of agro-food enterprises that process figs, olives, wine, alcoholics and pickled vegetables and fruit compote.

Considering the area's tourist, nature and produce potentials, Berat continues to struggle with economic development and living standards. Farmers' organizations remain weak and the chains that should connect them to the processing companies have hampered the production as well as the sale of their products.

## **Elbasan**

Elbasan County, otherwise known as the country's navel, covers a total area of 3,292 km<sup>2</sup>. In the North and northwest it is bordered by the district of Tirana, in the east and southeast by the Korçë district, and Berat in the West and Southwest. The district includes for cities: Elbasan, which is also the administrative center of the district, Librazhd, Peqin and Gramsh. From the administrative perspective, the district has a total of seven municipalities, 43 communes, and 386 villages.

The Elbasan County is the third largest in the country after Tirana and Fier in terms of population and the third in terms of area after the counties of Korçë and Shkodër. The district's population is estimated at 433,244. The Elbasan district is the county's largest with a population 20% larger than the total of the three other

county's districts put together. Even though there has been a decrease in population by 6% in the period 2001-2008, population density at the county level remains almost the same while there has been an increase in the population density of Peqin and Elbasan districts. In 2008 Population density was 107 residents/km<sup>2</sup> while urban population was estimated at 36%, well below the national average. The region has an average socio-economic development level.

Rural population dominates in the Elbasan County, making up for 65% of it, a lower percentage than that of 1989, of 69%. The lowest percentage of rural population is found in Elbasan District, 56%.

Elbasan experiences a Mediterranean climate, with a mild winter and hot summer. It rains mostly during the winter and autumn with an average of 1490 mm annually. Average annual temperature is 15.4°C.

38% of the terrain is mountainous, 28% is fields and 34% is made up of hills. The district is traversed by two rivers, Shkumbin and Devoll. Shkumbin, the main river, flows from the northeast to the west, splitting the Elbasan County in two equal parts. The watershed area takes up a total of 1062 km<sup>2</sup> with a length of 90km.

Lakes are among Elbasan's water resources, with a total of 650 ha in natural lakes and irrigation reservoirs. There are 33 irrigations reservoirs that cover a total area of 342 ha. Lakes are mainly found in the Dumre area, with a total of 308 ha.

The county's regional development is based on a moderate economy, and serious structural challenges, including the dilapidation of the industrial area. The region has an average tourism, agriculture and industry development potential, although it is tending to improve and bring in positive effects for the region. Median household income is estimated at 24,906 lek (2007), considerably lower than the national average of 38,141 lek.

Local and regional partners see fast growth potential for the region in the areas of urban planning, economic, social and rural development. Elbasan district aims a sustainable urban and rural development in the future and an increase of the role of Elbasan city as the region's administrative center, with standardized cultural and social services, protection of, and increase of natural resources, strengthening of the community's cohesion, urban revitalization, encouragement of a balanced spread of economic development opportunities, balances approach on infrastructure and telecommunications to create a competitive edge, etc.

Reduction of pollution from industrial development and waste management remains a problem to this day. In the recent years, there have been efforts to support the growth of agriculture and encouragement of bio products in specific areas as well as well as special support for rural communities in smaller settlements.

## **Gjirokastra**

Gjirokastër County covers a total area of 2,884 km<sup>2</sup>. It consists of the districts



of Gjirokastrë, Përmet, and Tepelenë. In the north, Gjirokastrë County borders Berat County, Fier County in the northwest, Vlorë in the south and west, Greece in southeast and Korçë County. Population is estimated at 58,754 residents. In 2005 Gjirokastrë was proclaimed a UNESCO World Heritage Site as one of the few remaining Balkan towns of the Ottoman period.

The county is crossed by two rivers, Vjosa and Drino, in the South. The administrative center of the County is the city of Gjirokastrë, situated in southern Albania, along the steep valley of Drino river, surrounded by a landscape rich in history.

Gjirokastrë is one of the most important economic centers in southern Albania. Kakavija's customs represents the border crossing point with the largest flow of people and goods to and from Greece. Besides being the region's administrative center, Gjirokastrë is the headquarters of several prestigious manufacturing and trade companies, as well as the largest banking center in southern Albania.

Gjirokastra is otherwise known as the "City of a Thousand and One Steps," featuring hundreds of Ottoman-era fortified country houses with stone rooftops, wooden balconies and stone walls sometimes washed in lime. Gjirokastrë, with its magnificent castle overlooking the city from a steep hill, is a museum rich in traditions and culture. From a stronghold of feudalism to an Ottoman gem and later an important center for Italian fascist occupiers, the city has seen many rulers and inspired many poets, authors and artists. Median household income in the Gjirokastrë district is estimated at 45,906 lek (2007), considerably higher in comparison to the national average of 38,141 lek.

Agriculture remains the basis of economy, but there is recently an increase in the food processing industry, taking advantage of the large production in fruits, vegetables and dairy products. The city has a university and is the region's administrative center. Tourism is becoming one of the biggest hopes for the city's development, thanks to its unique cultural, historical and architectural heritage.

Other major activities in the Gjirokastrë region are trade, water and soda bottling industry, processing factories for milk, cheese and other by-products, etc. Trade and wood carving have developed parallel to the development of building materials production as well as construction. It is noteworthy to mention the inward processing business in textile and shoemaking. Quarrying and stone processing for construction and decorative purposes is also noteworthy.

## **Lezha**

The Lezhë County lies in a favorable geographical position, with a total coastline of 39 km. It is located in the crossroads of main arteries of road, sea, air and train transportation. It features a remarkable mixture of Albania's landscape, with abundant water sources, a rich flora and fauna, creating thus great development conditions and opportunities for the residents of this region and beyond.

Lezhë County population is estimated at 240,253. The County consists of five municipalities, 16 communes, 9 cities and 170 villages. The Lezhë County covers

a total areas of 1588.4 km<sup>2</sup>. It borders Shkodër County in the North, Kukës and Dibër counties in the Northeast, East and Southeast, Durrës County in the South and the Adriatic Sea in the West, with a coastline of 38 km. Lezhë's territory is made up of mountains in the North (65%) and fields in the West (35%).

Lezhë County geographic position – being at the center of main transportation arteries that connect the North to the South, the East to the West overland, as well as its proximity to major sea ports such as Durrës and Shëngjin (the later is part of the County's territory), makes this region a very attractive area within easy reach, not only on the national level, but also to neighboring countries such as Italy, Montenegro, Kosovo, Macedonia and Greece. Another element that is key to the region's development potential is the multitude of potable water sources, a railway line that ends up in Montenegro, air transportation considering its proximity to the international "Mother Teresa" airport while the Gjadër airport (which is not yet functional).

Most of the population lives in urban centers – nearly 53% – while 47% live in rural areas. Average age is estimated at 34,6 years. Median monthly household income in 2007 was 24,614 lek, at a time that the national median was 38,000 lek, thus reflecting the region's economic difficulties. The average unemployment rate on the regional level sits at 24.2 % and varies from 11.6% in the Lezhë district to 44% in the Kurbin district. This discrepancy speaks of the huge differences within the region.

On the other hand, 56.6% of those employed work in the private sector, while 43.4% are employed by the public (government) sector, a fact that reveals a lagging private sector considering the burden that the public sector shares as an income source.

The Lezhë County has been an area of primarily industrial economy – mining, food and chemicals' industry – as well as agricultural up to the early 1990s. With the beginning of democratic processes, the County faced serious challenges in adapting to an open market economy. Now the economy is primarily focused on building materials' manufacturing, construction, agriculture and fishing.

Some of the most essential problems identified in the County is the lack of youth centers, weak marketing infrastructure, low public awareness, failure to engage youth in activities and town halls, untrained administration employees, lack of motivational teaching methods, lack of cultural activities, poor use of natural sources, chaotic urban planning, poor management of public funds, pollution, inadequate use of the industrial zone, lack of long-term policies, poor planning, lack of cooperation, deforestation, etc. There is a total of 2,978 private companies, 85% of which are small and medium companies (SMEs).

In addition to partnerships with national and regional partners, addressing socio-economic challenges in the Lezhë region and beyond requires consolidation of cooperation with the right local development actors, but also partners in the neighboring counties with which Lezhë shares issues, advantages and opportunities.



The Shkodër County is in this regard one of the regions to which Lezha remains traditionally related to. This cooperation between the two regions, to some extent a preferential one over other counties, should be seen as a partnership between two regions that not only share common issues and opportunities, but also complement each-other in various sectors. The two regions are well-known for their historical and cultural values and monuments, important natural resources, and a considerable economic development potential and key communication points with its neighbors in the North (Montenegro) and Southeast (Kosovo), which could be considered strategic potential for the entire country.

## **2.2 Target groups and beneficiaries**

### ***2.2.a Focus on rural and peripheral areas***

Studies on civil society (reviewed and summarized in the publication “Civil society in rural and remote areas in Albania: Needs, Challenges, and an Action Plan,” IDM 2012) stresses that the greatest part of the issues related to CSOs in Albania could be considered valid for CSOs in rural and peripheral areas. Actually, studies on the identification, positioning, capacities and activities of these associations remains limited compared to those on the development of the sector in general.

When you try to analyze and assess the dynamics of civil society in Albania, one of the easily noticeable characteristics seems to be an overflow and overlap of CSOs’ activities in urban areas while there is a limited presence or complete absence in rural or remote areas. In general, most of the Albanian CSOs are based in Tirana and a smaller number are based in central Albanian towns of Durrës and Elbasan, Shkodër in the North and Vlorë and Gjirokastër in the South. Meanwhile, according to data from a 2009 questionnaire, 89% of CSOs are based and operate in Tirana and the other major towns, and only about 11% operate in smaller towns and villages<sup>1</sup>.

Despite the fact that CSOs that operate in the rural and remote areas are small, have few staff members with limited professional capacities and experience, and lack financial stability, they play an important role in rural development, although this role is still weak.

Civil society carries great value and makes exceptional contributions to sustainable development and the consolidation of good governance. Therefore, particularly in the rural areas where its presence is limited, various initiatives should be undertaken in order to tackle challenges such as:

- Lack of information and specific studies on CSOs operating in Albania’s rural areas.
- Small number of CSOs operating at the commune level or villages with lacking capacities and financial sustainability.

1. Euclid and Human Development Promotion Center (2009), 31

- Organizations remain weak despite efforts to improve their capacities and establish networks and functioning remains poor since they depend on local communities' contribution and willingness to cooperate.
- Lack of capacities to draft project ideas, build coalition and advocacy skills in these organizations.
- Inadequate attention to the challenges and concerns of rural communities, including civil society issues, in the agendas and platforms of well-known civil society organizations.
- CSOs in rural communities lack the experience, capacities or network of supporters that would contribute to local government, community development and the acceleration of the EU integration process.

This is the context that led to the emergence of ESCRA as a project to contribute directly to the improvement of the quality of life and good governance in rural and remote areas by supporting a civil society that is capable of addressing the communities' main challenges and the growth and developing and consolidating new best practices.

### ***2.2.b Challenges in empowering citizens and encouraging good governance.***

The Civil Society Index (IDM & CIVICUS, 2010) documented the low level of citizen engagement and involvement with civil society in Albania. Low involvement of citizens was also related to the CSOs' distance from their needs and the low impact of the initiatives undertaken. Transparency and accountability, the fundamental principles to good practices, turned out to be the main concerns about the civil society. As such, they greatly influence the integrity and morals of the Albanian CSOs to be able to influence and persuade good governance at the local or national level.

In general, Albanian citizens demonstrate remarkable indifference to opportunities to get involved in social activities, a characteristic that is typical of societies in transition or in the first post-transition years, with a middle class that is not well defined and with great social inequality. The CSI showed that Albanian citizens are very likely to spend their time on their own in an unorganized manner, rather than engage with social organizations.

Although social activism did not appear to be limited among specific social groups, involvement remains substantially low even after the series of efforts made by the international community, Albanian civil society actors and donor community operating in the democracy and governance area. Only recently, there has been a shift in the focus towards more active citizenry in order to address low levels of membership and volunteerism in social organization, which is telling of the Albanian citizens' indifference to civic engagement and civil society in general. A better approach and better coordination of actions could have led to expectations of a higher civic engagement.

On the other hand, Albanian CSOs continue to a large extent to remain dependent on the agenda and priorities of international donors. This brings about a low level of sustainability and stability for these organizations. As a result, the impact of the work of the civil society is extremely fragmented both in terms of geography or themes. This is a situation that is tending to worsen at a time when donor presence is reducing g with every day.

The lack of CS actors, especially in rural and remote areas, deprives the communities of these areas from the benefits of governance that is participatory and citizen-oriented, as well as the advantages that integration processes bring. So that civil society meets its obligations and expectations with regards to building democracy and sustainable development, an encouraging climate, not an obstructive one, is necessary. This climate can and must be enabled by the government and donors through support fro the organizations – financially, policy- and strategy-wise. ECSRA was one of the biggest efforts to encourage civil society and civic engagement in rural and remote areas where the issues are even more serious.

## **2.3 Intervention strategy and ECSRA methodological approach**

As it was briefly mentioned in section 1.2, project activities, in order to achieve objectives and the desired impact, the initiative built its strategy and methodological intervention around four main components: a. Assessment b. Capacity building c. Awareness and d. Experience sharing and advocacy. In this chapter you will learn more details about the followed strategy and the methodological approach applied for each of the components.

### ***2.3.a Assessment and working strategy design component:***

The intervention strategy started with an assessment of the situation. A study was undertaken to identify CSOs' needs in Albania's rural and remote areas to collect detailed information on the nature, opportunities, challenges and needs, as well as the lack of activities in the areas. The specific geographic areas covered by the study were those where the intervention would take place – Gjirokaštër, Berat, Lezhë and Elbasan – a choice also meant to test its relation to development discrepancies. The study achieved these objectives:

- Identification of key CSOs that act in the rural areas of Berat, Gjirokaštër, Lezhë and Elbasan, as well as their profiling;
- Measurement of the CSOs's knowledge of the role of civil society;
- Comparison of CSOs in the rural areas to those in urban areas, their differences and similarities;
- Identification of thematic areas developed and succeeded;
- Identification of the main challenges and existing needs;
- Mapping of geographic zones that would be covered with concrete initiatives

- and gaps related to uncovered thematic areas;
- Elaboration on the opportunities that rural CSOs create, partnerships and capacities, especially in the framework of EU membership (EU assistance programs for rural development);
  - Assessment of challenges for a more meaningful role of the CSOs in order to improve local governance and empower community and marginalized and vulnerable groups, including women, youth and the Roma community.

The applied methodological approach consisted in mixed research methods. The study uses a combination of data collection and analysis, both qualitative and quantitative. The techniques used for the conduct of the assessment study includes:

### ***Review of resources***

The research team collected and made use of a wide gamut of publications that contained information on the history and current situation of civil society in Albania's urban and rural areas. Part of the reviewed publications were study reports on civil society in Albania, action reports from various CSO groups and networks, lists and statistics on CSOs, manuals and related training materials, as well as reference material from the internet. Special attention was paid to previous reports on civil society in the rural areas in general and the project's target areas – the counties of Berat, Elbasan, Gjirokastrë and Lezhë – in particular. Documents from the local government and institutions as well as reports and statistics on the activity of CSOs and their needs in the specific fields where they operate, enabled information on the specific target areas and the necessary basis for the collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data.

### ***In-depth interviews with key informants***

In-depth interviews were held with key informants with the aim of exploring the current CS situation in rural and remote areas of the selected counties. The interviews revealed information on role it has in the community and in the local government system, about the types of initiatives or existing actions in the relevant areas, the challenges and needs they face during their activities, their strong and weak points, as well as what CS actors consider to be their "next steps" in the reorientation of CSOs towards an increased focuses on rural areas, in the framework of development and integration challenges.

Key informants were CSO representatives, local leaders, media representatives as well as local government officials. In-depth interviews also served as a tool to identify key local actors and analysis topics to be covered by the questionnaire during the next stage of the project. This instrument was used in two stages of the needs assessment process, specifically, at the beginning of the assessment, in order to identify issues, and, at the end (after the poll and focus groups) in order to clarify and validate tendencies.



### ***Polling***

In order to determine needs and opportunities of CS development in the target areas, key local actors were polled. The questionnaire aimed mainly rural CSOs representatives (whose beneficiaries were primarily women, youth, Roma community, senior citizens, etc) as well as media and local government representatives. The pool of questions was based on the specific project objectives as well as findings generated from the in-depth interviews with key informants.

### ***Focus group discussions***

Focus group discussions (FG) were held with community groups supported by CSOs in various areas in order to test the validity of the findings that came out of the questionnaire and the in-depth interviews. The selection of participants was based on the criteria of relevant beneficiaries. They were grouped in discussion groups of 8-12 people, based on different themes that were addressed during the evaluation process (including findings from the questionnaire and the in-depth interviews). Two focus group discussions were held in each of the target areas, with a total of eight FGs with more than 60 participants.

Study findings serves as the basis for the designing of the strategy o the continuation of the intervention as well as the detailed plan of activities for each stage. They were published both in Albanian and English and copies were handed out to stakeholders and interest groups.

### ***2.3.b Building capacities component:***

#### **CSOs manual**

Based on the findings of the needs assessment study in the rural and remote

areas, the IDM team drafted a manual on CSOs in rural and remote areas. The manual was designed as a tool to help civil society representatives to manage their organizations more efficiently, in compliance with good governance, responsible management and accountability principles as well as to increase their capacities in developing programs and project management cycles. The first draft of the manual was consulted with the evaluation study research team in order to better address needs identified through the assessment process.

### **Manual on trilateral partnerships**

Following capacity building activities, a special manual on partnerships and trilateral cooperation, between the civil society, the local government and the private sector, was developed. The primary audience group for this manual were local government actors who can use the manual as a tool to build trilateral cooperation. Both manuals were printed out and disseminated not only to training participants and the areas targeted by the project, but also to other interested actors throughout the country. They also can be consulted online on the IDM website [www.idmalbania.org](http://www.idmalbania.org).

### **Trainings on project cycling and CSO management**

The efforts to prepare this component started early on, with the beginning of the initiative. However, the methodological approach for their designing and execution was such that identified needs had to be reflected. Therefore, the series of training started only after the results of the needs assessment study had been identified.

### **Interactive workshops**

Building on the experience gained during the training sessions with CSO representatives, IDM planned and executed interactive workshops with representatives from the local government, public agencies and private sector in the target counties: Elbasan, Berat, Lezhë and Gjirokastër. Copies of the prepared manuals were handed out during the trainings.

The workshops had a double mission. First, they served to increase awareness of public and private actors on the important role of each of them has and can play in order to revitalize civil society. Secondly, they served as a first step to encourage and establish contacts and collaborative relations between these actors.

### **National workshop**

This workshop was founded in the research study findings as well as in the strategy designed to revitalize civil society in rural and remote areas. It served not only to further validate validity and revalue the assessment findings, but also to finalize the intervention plan and strategy for the next stages. A large number of active representatives of state institutions donors, civil society, private sectors, media, etc, participated in the workshop. Nearly 170 participants debated during the one-day event that was widely covered by the media.

### **2.3.c Information and awareness component**

#### **Television and radio ad**

A television ad was prepared based on an all inclusive analysis on the east alternatives for a greater inclusion in the consolidation of civil society in these areas. The analysis was based among other things in the needs assessment. The TV ad included images from the project activities supported by the initiatives and was broadcast in the local TV stations of the targeted areas over several months. Parallel to it, IDM made sure that similar messages were carried by local radio stations. The main message carried by the ads was the encouragement of active citizenship, strengthening of the community and ultimately improvement of live through greater participation in the civil society sector.

#### **Promotional material**

Besides TV and radio ads on awareness raising another set of tools like newsletters, manuals and leaflets were prepared and disseminated in the four targeted regions and beyond. In total, six newsletters and two manuals with total of 300 copies each were handed out. In addition, they are accessible free of charge any time on IDM's website [www.idmalbania.org](http://www.idmalbania.org). Leaflets and flyers (500 copies) were disseminated even farther than other materials.

### **2.3.d Experience sharing and advocacy component:**

Experience sharing and advocacy was carried out through workshops, brainstorming and conferences.

#### **Two regional workshops**

Their aim was the facilitation and encouragement of efforts of local stakeholders to work and support civil society in the areas targeted by the initiative. One of the two workshops was attended by representatives of Elbasan and Lezhë, while Berat and Gjirokastër representatives attended the second. This choice was made primarily to encourage inter-zonal exchange. Representatives at the workshops came from all three pillars of the cooperation expected and encouraged from the initiative – the state, the private sector, and civil society. IDM enabled better exchange of ideas by sending informational materials to participants in advance, something which participants found interesting and praised. These events were also helpful in informing participants on the Fair of Ideas and the opportunities offered, the process and criteria.

#### **The Fair of Ideas**

Could be called "the core" of the project since it was designed and implemented in a way that it could connect and channel the project's development from the awareness stage, to capacity building and generation and absorption of ideas, to their selection, support and ultimately the direct impact on the revitalization of CS in rural and remote areas. Over 120 CSOs and other actors working in or interested in undertaking or supporting civil society initiatives in rural or remote

areas were invited to attend. There was a large presence of actors from the local government, the donor community, and the business. The event received good coverage from the media. Although there were initially nearly 100 initiatives, only 60 of those turned into actual project proposals presented at the first round of applications. The level of CSO development in these areas and the lack of financial and managerial staff, especially with regard to legal issues and taxation turned out to be a serious obstacle for these organizations.



# **ECSRA: IMPLEMENTATION AND IMPACT**

## **3.1 Component: Assessment and strategy building**

### **Description and implementation**

In order to come up with an intervention strategy as effective as possible in addressing civil society needs in areas targeted by ECSRA, the project took off from a study on needs assessment. The study aimed identification of CSOs' needs in the rural and remote areas of Albania, offering detailed information on the nature, opportunities, challenges, needs and gaps in the thematic areas of their activity.

Specific geographic areas of the study were those where the intervention would take place: the counties of Gjirokaštër, Berat, Lezhë and Elbasan. The geographic spread also helped to gauge the diversity of development in Albania. The study realized its objectives through a mixed methodological approach in order to enable measurement of the extent of problems and needs, but also their depth and variety.

A research team based in Tirana as well as four assistants selected from the targeted areas contributed to the project's implementation. This solution was the result of the strong points raised by local partners during the conduct of the study with their better knowledge of the situation, the local actors and lower costs for the primary data administration process on the ground.

In order to increase the validity of the findings and sense of ownership by the targeted communities, the first draft of the report was shared and discussed with representatives from these communities. Four focus groups were organized, one for each county. Besides discussing the validity of the findings, the FGs generated a series of concrete recommendations on the future steps of the project.

Focus groups were organized in Gjirokaštër ( November 5, 2011), Berat (7 November 2011), Lezhë (November 10, 2011) and in Elbasan (November 11, 2011). Arguments and recommendations generated during these discussions were included in the final version of the report. To complete the process, the final

report was presented and discussed in a national conference with the large participation of key central and local government representatives, civil society, donors, media and other actors who work for the strengthening of civil society in the rural and remote areas.

## **Results**

The main byproducts of this component were the study report on the assessment of the needs of civil society in rural and remote areas in the counties targeted by the project, as well as the strategic working plan for the implementation of the rest of ECRSA components.

The study report was published both in Albanian and English. Nearly 500 copies were printed and distributed primarily in the target areas as well as at the central level. In addition, both language variants of the report were made available online on the IDM page [www.idmalbania.org](http://www.idmalbania.org).

The Assessment Study - "Achievements and Needs of Civil Society in Rural and remote Areas" - confirmed that civil society in these regions remains in an embryonic stage. Rural and remote areas are little attractive to organizations that work on the national or international level. Civil society organizations based in rural areas not only are few, but have a modest and inconsistent activity. The low activity of the civil society and the weak influence of its work in these areas was a perception that all civil society representatives and other communities shared.

It was widely recognized that working in the rural and remote areas is far more challenging and difficult than working in urban areas, but it was also recognized that there are advantages and special features that make working in these areas more interesting and rewarding. Proximity to interest groups and the opportunity to communicate directly are seen as advantages for sustainable influencing under normal conditions. Just the same, in order to make the work of civil society actors in these small areas more tangible and concrete, would in turn directly affect the strengthening of trust between the three parties: civil society – community – local government.

The need to survive, independent of difficulties, forces part of these organizations to lose focus of their mission and scope of activity and getting involved in a multitude of aims, objectives, activities and beneficiaries. The image of civil society in rural areas has been improved especially due to the work done to address issues that are related to advocacy and lobbying for certain interest groups or entire areas, like women and children's rights' the preservation and promotion of culture; environmental protection and promotion of tourism (cultural or environmental); or the promotion of certain professional groups (i.e. farmers, artisans, local reporters, etc.).

In the meantime, it is imperative that in the future the civil society in these areas turns its attention to the issues that the community considers important, but which have not been paid attention to: the need for more employment opportunities;

projects for rural and agricultural development; infrastructure development; sensitization of the community; encouragement of volunteerism and community work; greater participation of women in the community's life; growth of inter-institutional cooperation and protection of the rights of minorities or other special needs' groups.

The main challenges identified included the following:

- Financial limitations, conservative mentality, lack of cooperation between the local government, the business, the media, etc.
- Lack of clarity on the coverage and spread of the mission and the activity of CS actors.
- The need for trainings and qualifications
- The need for improvement of relations with the public, the media, the local government, etc.
- The need for construction of partnerships and networks within the civil society and beyond.

The results of the assessment were welcomed, accepted and translated into building blocks for concrete strategies both for IDM and the manuals for civil society, local government or private sector actors who attended the national workshop. Its impact was wider. The national workshop alone saw 170 representatives from the three sectors attend.

## **3.2 Building capacities component**

### **Description and implementation**

In the framework of the second component were undertaken activities the impact of which would result in an increase of capacities of civil society in rural and remote areas in the targeted countries, as well as capacity building for their partners in the state and private sectors at the local level.

The first stage of this component was closely related to the assessment study. The sharing of the study's main findings in the round tables with representatives of the sectors' and their discussion with the aim of planning further interventions and offering recommendations was considered not only an informational activity but also one that was conducive to capacity building, especially those related to self-realization, self-assessment, analysis of strong and weak points, of opportunities and threats as well as the designing of crosscutting strategies for their tackling.

The second stage was dedicated to the creation of the resources necessary for building capacities in relation to the needs identified through the assessment process. As a result, based in the study findings on the needs of SC in the rural and

remote areas, the IDM team designed a manual for CSOs in the rural and remote areas. The manual was designed to assist civil society representatives to better manage principles of good governance, responsible management, and accountability, as well as to increase their capacities in the development of programs and project management cycles. The first draft of the manual was consulted with the research team for a better addressing of the needs identified through the assessment process.

As part of this component, a special manual on partnerships and trilateral cooperation between civil society, local government and private sector, was developed. Its primary audience group was local government actors who could use the manual as a tool to build trilateral cooperation.

Both manuals were forwarded to the target groups through:

1. A series of trainings on project cycle and CSO management, with the participation of representative of civil society organizations in these areas; and
2. Interactive workshops on the establishment of partnership and corporations with the participation of representatives from the local government, public agencies and private business operating in the targeted areas: Elbasan, Berat, Lezhë and Gjirokastrë. They served first and foremost to increase the sensitivity of public and private sector actors on the important role that each of them can and should play in a more vital society; secondly, an initial step for the encouragement and establishment of contacts and collaborating relations between these actors.

## Results

A series of trainings were conducted for building capacities. During the first round, 12 trainings were organised with representatives of civil society organisations operating in the rural and remote areas of Berat, Elbasan, Gjirokastra and Lezha regions. In total 170 representatives of more than 90 civil society organisations benefitted from the CSO project Cycle Management. Trainings were structured in such a way that enabled not only the relevant knowhow transfer on specific aspects of good management of civil society organisations, but at the same time enabled discussions on concrete issues of interest to civil society stakeholders in these regions. In the second round, 8 interactive workshops, 2 per each region were organised and the capacities of around 96 representatives of local government, local businesses and civil society were built on establishment of partnerships with civil society stakeholders and acknowledgement of their role and contribution. The training module included basic concepts and principles of tripartite partnerships, legal framework and partnership policies among local government, civil society and private sector, Instrument for Pre-Accession (V) on Rural Development for integrated rural development, LEADER approach and best practices of tripartite partnerships in Albania and European countries.

In addition, two regional workshops were organised in Berat and Tirana with representatives from the four targeted regions of ECSRA project. More than 40

representatives of civil society, local government and other stakeholders participated in these workshops aiming at the development and general advancement of civil society especially in rural areas. The aim of the activity was to discuss on the findings of the the study “Civil society in rural and remote areas in Albania” and to clarify the concrete steps needed to be taken for the revitalization and ri-orientation of civil society in these areas.

### 3.3 Information and awareness component

#### Description and implementation

A detailed information and awareness strategy that included a variety of communication means and tools was designed as part of the Strengthening of Capacities of Civil Society Organizations in Rural and Remote areas Project.

Communications strategies were founded on two main components: informing involved parties and those interested in the project and the awareness raising and sensitization of various target groups on the importance of civil society in rural and remote areas with the aim of achieving continuity and sustainability after this project has concluded.



IDM held the media and public outreach campaign that was announced at the beginning of this project in cooperation with UNDP representatives. The four main component of the communications and awareness campaign during the implementation of this project were:

- **Promotional and informational material** for the wider public, on the project objectives and the novelties it brings. Brochures with general information on the project, its objectives, expected results, implementation stages, targeted actors.
- **Periodical publication** (quarterly) of the Communitarian Newsletter, during the duration of the project, to reflect all of the developments, activities and results achieved through this regional project.
- **A television ad** of 30 seconds that was broadcast on four regional television stations, one for each of the counties where the project took place.
- **Communications with the media and media coverage** of the results and the activities held during the project and the initiatives that derived from it.

**Promotional material** included the dissemination of 500 leaflets with basic information about the project. These materials aimed to introduce the various actors – civil society organization, community, local government, etc – to the two-year project “Strengthening of Civil Society Capacities in Rural and Remote Areas,” which is funded by UNDP and implemented by IDM in cooperation with local organization in the counties of Lezhë, Elbasan, Berat and Gjirokastër.

The leaflets included concise information about the initiative, the involved actors, the initiative’s objectives as well as specific information about the civil society development situation in Albania’s rural and remote areas.

The dissemination stage, which was part of the campaign to inform and raise awareness of the need to strengthen civil society in the rural and remote areas was spread throughout the project and ran parallel to the preparation stage for activities in the framework of the project. During the meetings held in the period July – August 2012, with various actors that were involved in the initiative as well as during the informal discussions with representatives of the civil society and local government, the promotional materials supplied the necessary basic information on the project’s results and expectations for the various groups involved or interested in the project.

Another instrument selected to be part of the awareness campaign was an ad prepared by a professional advertising company with the aim to raise awareness on how important a developed and stable civil society is to rural and remote areas. The ad was designed and realized in close cooperation with UNDP, IDM and “NILOR Production” Studio. The 32 second ad was broadcast in four regional televisions, each of which covered one of the specific counties involved in the project, over a two month period, with a frequency of six airings a day during afternoon hours with peak audience. IDM worked with TV Skampa in the Elbasan County; TV Rozafa in the Lezhë County; ALPO TV in Gjirokastër County and GLOB TV in Berat County.

The ad was broadcast over a two-month period, reaching various target groups and preparing the necessary setting for the activities and interventions planned as part of the initiative. The ad was aimed at a broad audience and aimed the sensitization of the community and various decision-making actors on the importance that non-governmental organizations have in the development of rural and remote areas.

**The Communitarian Newsletter**, a quarterly publication of the Institute for Democracy and Mediation, was an information and sensitization instrument for all participants in the activities and initiatives planned. The Communitarian Newsletter could be considered the 'voice' of the ECRSA project due to its conception as an informative review with detailed information on all of the activities planned and held in the framework of the project, as well as information on the stages and products of these initiatives.

Its first four editions (a total of six were published over an 18-month period), the Communitarian Newsletter focused on each of the counties where the project was implemented, providing general information on the socio-economic situation for each of the districts and an outline of civil society situation in each of the regions. The last two editions focused primarily on the initiatives implemented with the support of ESCRA.

The Communitarian Newsletter aimed to inform the public and interested actors on the activities held under the ESCRA project and the activities and results of each of the local organizations. In addition, the Review aimed to sensitize the wider public to get involved and play an active role in these organizations. As a result, the Communitarian Newsletter was part of all the civil society activities in the rural and remote areas, providing information on the activities planned and organized.

**Communication with journalists** and media coverage was also a very important component of the information campaign on the projects' results and activities as well as initiatives that followed. This was a very key component of the ECRSA's information campaign to help spread further the impact of the initiative at the county level and beyond. As a result of activities organized at the national level, special attention was paid to media coverage, a key tool in raising awareness at the national level about the importance of a strong civil society in rural and remote areas. In particular, the "Fair of Ideas" held at the conclusion of the second stage of the project, received especially prominent media coverage from leading national as well as local TV stations.

At the county level, non-governmental organizations of rural and remote areas used local media to cover their activities which were held in the framework of the ECSR initiative and to raise the awareness of large numbers of viewers on the importance and the results of the project and its initiatives. Leading media outlets in the Lezhë, Elbasan, Gjirokastë and Berat were involved.

## Results

Many of the quantitative indicators related to each of the awareness raising and information elements were presented in the section above. ESCRA did not take any specific action to measure the impact of this campaign. However, it used a number of indicators that revealed the spread, the effectiveness and impact of the information and awareness component. Here is an outline:

- a. ECSRA became well-known in the target areas and beyond. The high number of organizations that showed interest in it as well as the high number of applications was one of the indicators. Also, information requests and interest expressed from civil society actors from the other areas proved the initiatives' impact, as well as the need for an intervention in other districts of the country.
- b. The wide support from local government actors as well as the communities was another indicator. The level of participation and interest shown was another result of the awareness campaign through the local media in the target areas.
- c. Constant feedback and contributions to the Communitarian Newsletter for CS representatives in these areas, the local government and business, proved that there was positive review of this component.

### 3.4 Component: experience sharing and advocacy

#### Description and implementation

Two regional workshop, a fair of ideas for project proposals and a concluding conference were planned and carried out in order to enable sharing of experiences and advocate on the developmental issues and interests of the civil society in general and civil society in rural and remote areas in particular.

The aim of the regional workshops was to facilitate and take forward the efforts of local actors to work to support civil society in the areas targeted by the initiative. Two workshops brought together respectively representatives from the counties of Elbasan and Lezhës and Berat and Gjirokastër. This solution was made with the primary objective to enable inter-regional exchange. Workshop participants came from all three pillars of the cooperation expected from and encouraged by the initiative – the state, the private sector and civil society. IDM enabled better exchange ideas by sending participants informational materials well in advance, something which participants found interesting and praised. These events were also helpful in informing participants on the Fair of Ideas and the opportunities offered, the process and criteria.

The Fair of Ideas, which could be called the core of the project since it was designed and implemented in a way that it could connect and channel the project's developments from the stage of awareness raising, capacity building and generation and absorption of ideas, to their selection, support and ultimately the direct impact on the revitalization of CS in rural and remote areas. More details in rela-

tion to its implementation can be found under the ECSRA Best Practices chapter, part of this publication.

## **Results**

There was wide interest on the regional workshops as well as the Fair of Ideas, as seen in the large numbers of participating stakeholders. Each of the two workshops were attended by 40 participants who represented 20 organizations as well as the local government of the target areas. Over 120 CSOs and other actors working in or interested in undertaking or supporting civil society initiatives in rural or remote areas were invited to attend the Fair of Ideas. There was a large presence of actors from the local government, the donors, and the business. The event received very good media coverage. Although the interest expressed and the offered ideas initially amounted to nearly 100 initiatives, only 60 of those presented turned into actual applications. Given the current level of CSOs development in these areas, the lack of financial and managerial staff became an impediment, especially with regard to legal issues and taxation systems in Albania.

## **3.5 Testimonies**

### **1. Berat County: Local government and civil society, a developing alliance – Interview with Mr. Petrit Sinaj, Chair of Berat County**

#### ***Do you think that the local government has done enough to encourage and involve civil society partnerships? What about the business?***

Personally, I think the current level of cooperation is still insufficient. There are various factors that affect this, but, among the most important ones I would mention: lack of local strategies and related mechanisms for a wide inclusion of sick society and businesses in issues and projects that concern the community. NPOs in the Berat region, due to lack of funding or physical distance from the main donors have failed to strengthen and represent or present themselves in a meaningful way before the local community and government. This has lead to weak relations between the local government, the NPOs and the community. The same situation is the same for local businesses which with few exceptions have lost interest to get involved in local initiatives of humanitarian and social character.

#### ***Are the interests of the region's civil society included in the local government's platforms?***

At present, there are few organizations that operate and they are unstructured, with untrained staff that tends to move away frequently. In addition, they fail to represent all of the issues of disadvantaged groups. On the other hand, local government has not paid the necessary attention to the community's needs to organize themselves in NPOs in order to be better able to identify and present solutions to the issues they face and which fall under the local government's responsibilities. In general, NPOs work with the local government only on the implementation of

specific projects or when the donor has specifically asked for this.

The new strategy that is being drafted in cooperation with UNDP foresees a greater role of the civil society, the private sector, interest groups and other community representatives.

***According to you, what could be a model for the encouragement of a tri-lateral partnership: local government – civil society – business?***

A successful example of tripartite cooperation in the Berat County has been the project of the “Daily Center for the Support and Integration of Senior Citizens.” The project that aimed the improvement of the quality of life for this group was implemented by the Red Cross, Berat Office, with the support of the local government. Other activities that can lead to a deeper cooperation between the parties could be the organization of an annual forum with the participation of NPOs, local government, businesses and community. Another instrument could be the drafting of a cooperation strategy for specific issues such as: support for the homeless, tourism promotion, support for the Roma community, integration of senior citizens, etc.

***What is the specific role of the local government within these tripartite partnerships?***

Identification of needs of all the community, not just one group; establishing priorities for development and interaction between parties; budget planning to include funding for services that are related to these needs. Also, selection and involvement of NPOs and local businesses in this partnership is the responsibility of the local government, creating thus the conditions for a favorable cooperation, trustworthy and with concrete results for the good of the community.

**2. Antigonea, “Little Europe” within the great Europe – By Ylli Muho, chair of Commune of Antigone, Gjirokastër.**

Cultural heritage at the service of economic and social development in the Antigone Commune, a project that marked progress and continuity in the Antigone Commune

On behalf of the Antigone Commune leading staff I would like to thank the staff at AMCC, ECSRA program, UNDP and IDM for finally focusing on the remote and rural areas and becoming partners in the initiative of the Antigone Media and Culture Center project “Cultural heritage at the service of education, economic and social development in the Antigone Commune.” Programs like “Strengthening of Civil Society in Albania’s Rural Areas” are especially helpful. I must stress that these programs are especially valuable to revitalize communities that suffer from apathy and poverty, but which are rich in human values, traditions and cultural heritage values.

The precious and valuable resources of the Antigone community are extraordinary, in particular its ethno-cultural makeup: Christian Albanians, direct heirs of the

Lunxhëri ethnographic traditions; Lab people –Muslim farmers who came from the Kurvelesh mountains of the “Labëri” region before the WWII; Aromanians or Vlachs who moved to the region in the 1960s; Albanians from the Zagori and Përmet regions; as well as Greek minority. Naturally, this represents a great human and ethno-cultural wealth which such projects would ‘provoke’ and lead to revitalization. This rich ethno-cultural cohabitation has created a perfect model for excellent relations, to the extent that it resembles the greater model of European cohabitation. Seeing this model and mentality of cohabitation, why not call Antigone “Little Europe” within the greater Europe?

Traditionally, the locals, those coming from Labëria and the Vlachs are connected by two traits: firstly, farming has been the source of their existence and development – breeding goats and cows – and other passions like vineyards, beekeeping, and poultry farming. Secondly, both communities have a tradition of immigrating and frequent movement.

This wonderful community is entitled to living with tourism income if you consider its ancient customs, values, mores and other shared traditions – handicrafts such as wool knitting, wool spinning in distaffs and looms, generosity and hospitality, the beauties that nature and God has bestowed on them, coupled with the great resources of the areas and the ancient site of Antigone.

The first proof of this orientation have been given: large herds of sheep, goats and cows, new vineyards and houses, two-three houses that have turned into hostels for foreign tourists, milk processing factories, an artisanal center for wool processing, a new bakery, a new implant for snail farming and more of these are expected in the future. Of course, under the leadership of the commune these economic conditions suitable for the development of cultural tourism, echo-tourism, mountainous tourism, sports and adventure, horse riding, alpinism, etc, will be supported and encouraged so that they become a traditional way of living and working.

The Antigone commune is made up of five villages: Asim Zeneli, Arshi Lengo, Sarqinisht, Krinë and Tranoshishtë. It has a total of 2500 residents with a relatively young population (median age is 35) and a total of 400 families. The commune lies in a total area of 2800 ha, of which 771 ha is planted, 1,739 ha are pastures, and 180 ha are forests. It is worth noting that the number of residents and households after the 1990s has increased, contrary to what has happened to other areas. The new road that connects Gjirokastër and the Antigone Archeological Park also connects the five villages of the commune. The proximity to Gjirokastër (only 3 km from Arshi Lengo) enables agricultural and livestock produce to reach the market easily and fast. The villages also see education as important. Over the last years, 250 senior science and culture specialists have emerged from the area.

I would like to take advantage of this opportunity to thank profusely the UNDP office, the ESCRA project and the Institute for Democracy and Mediation, as well as the Cultural Media Center of Antigone, and to call on these partners to further strengthen cooperation through more comprehensive projects in the future.



# **PARTNERS FOR CHANGE: JOINT INITIATIVES ECSRA AND CSO'S IN RURAL/REMOTE AREAS**

## **4.1 Joint initiatives framework**

More than 40 CSOs presented their ideas and initiatives in the "Fair of Ideas" to be implemented in the rural and remote areas of the regions in: Lezha, Elbasan, Berat and Gjirokastër. This fair of ideas served to select and to financially support initiatives of 20 CSOs through small grants during the period august-november 2012. The initiatives adressed a variety of community problems in the rural and remote areas in the respective regions.

The selection of the initiatives was based on the general objectives of ECSRA project, namely enhanncing capabilities of local civil society organisations and development of priorities in the regions where they operate. The criteria taken into consideration during the evaluation of the presented initiatives in the "Fair of Ideas" consisted in addressing real problems of the local community, implementation and geographical coverage in the rural and remote areas of the respectie regions, partnership component with the local government units or business community etc.

Initiatives focused mostly in raising awareness campaign for environment protection, gender equality and increasing women and overall community participation in the local governance and enhanacing capabilities of rural CSOs. In addition, initiatives were noted targeting needs of vulnerable groups, namely roma community needs, youth in rural areas and encouraging cohesion among minority groups. Moreover, some initiatives aimed to stimulate rural business and influencing agriculture development policies.

### **In this regard, the initiatives supported under ECSRA project include:**

- Information Center Aarhus – Vlora– "Eco-Youth Clubs – an initiative for environment protection".
- Antigonea Media Culture Center (AMCC) – Cultural heritage for promoting education, economic and social development in Antigonea Commune.
- Center for Agro-Environmental and Economic Management (CAEEM) – Mon-

itoring and evaluation of the policy of direct support to agricultural development in Lezha region.

- Environment Protection, Education and Rehabilitation Center – EPER Center – “Clean and healthy Skrapar”.
- Women Forum Elbasan – “Increasing community participation in local good governance through raising awareness on this right”.
- “Different Woman” Association Librazhd- Women and their role in promotion of values and cultural heritage.
- Heifers’ International Project (HIP) – Establishment of the network of farmers’ associations in Karina, Perparim, Sinaballaj, Gjocaj and Pajova communes in Elbasan region to enhance capacities for sustainable of small rural/family business and environment protection.
- Protection of urban and rural women rights– Strengthening capacities of rural CSOs and local government institutions in Berat to improve the public services for the community.
- Albanian International Section (CIOFF) – Promoting cohesion and dialogue among majority, cultural minorities and ethnic groups.
- “Useful to Women” Association Elbasan branch - “Young people are the actors, partners and main leaders of social change in a developing country”.
- “Roma of North” – Screening the concrete situation of Roma community under Roma Decade.
- Center for “Agricultural Extension Elbasan” AEE–“Raising awareness on capacity building for women participation in decision-making and their vocational education in Shirgjan, Belesh and Gostime Communes – Elbasan”.
- Natural Resources Association in Gjinjar Commune – Tourism and mixed traditions for sustainable development.
- “Social aid for Women Head of Households” Association – Gender Equality: A fundamental right!
- “Tjetër Vizion” Association – Promoting best practices among Women Clubs in Gjergjan, Gostime and Shushice communes to improve participation of rural women residents into local governance and development
- “Orphans in Focus” Association, Berat region- “Creation of the association structure and improving leadership capacities in municipalities and communes of Berat region”
- “Women Vision of Change” Association Lezha - Improving women access in the decision-making process.
- Youth Committee Lezha – Youth actors for change and development.
- Hope for poor, Lezha - “We are also part of civic community”
- Gjirokastra Conservation and Development Organization (GCDO) – Partnership Forum for Tourism Development in Gjirokastra region

## 4.2 Implementation of activities and expected results:

In overall, the implemented activities in the framework of initiatives supported under ECSRA aimed to raise awareness of communities into a variety of important issues. Thus, activities included organisation of roundtables with local government and community representatives, various trainings, studies of agricultural potential in the project targeted areas, environmental actions and organisation of fairs to achieve a more considerable and all-inclusive impact in the targeted regions. Considering that the grant was limited, CSOs had foreseen effectively the grant allocation and in many cases they had established partnership with local stakeholders of local government and business community to implement their activities. The following section summarizes the main initiatives and activities of CSOs supported by ECSRA.

### 1. Gjirokastra Foundation, Gjirokastra

The fourth National Fair for Heritage and Handicraft was organised in Gjirokastra during 28 - 30 September. Traditionally, the fair is organized in the city bazaar at the end of September during heritage days and is organised by "Gjirokastra" Foundation (former GCDO) in partnership with other institutions. 120 artisan works from Albania and Kosovo were presented to visitors. The fair is the biggest event organised regularly in Albania for the Albanian handicraft, which is accompanied by additional activities addressing cultural heritage and is transformed into the most important event in the city.

Its activities corresponded with the celebrations for the 100 anniversary of national independence and a special exhibition was organised in this framework with handicraft products. The second day, the pavilion of Gjirokastra dishes was opened, distinguished all over the country and characterized by spices and herbs. A competition was organized during the fair and special prizes were given by foreign and Albanian specialist of heritage such as: "The best handicraft product", "The best product dedicated to the 100th Anniversary of National Independence", etc. The fair included some entertaining activities as well.

As usual like in previous editions, a round table was organized to discuss on the problems of handicraft, heritage and tourism. The topic of this year was "Coordinated attempts for the development of touristic products in Gjirokastra region, establishment of an active Forum for the organisations of Fairs in the future". This roundtable was organised as a follow up of the project activities "Partnership Forum of Tourism Development in Gjirokastra Region".

This project aimed to enable partnership between private, public and civic sector to improve the touristic offer in Gjirokastra region through the establishment of the Forum for Tourism Development in Gjirokastra. The forum designed a resolution targeted to all members of the local community and elected its leadership, while the first donations were collected in order to publish a calendar of the annual implemented activities in the region, to create a website for regional tourism and to further continue with the donations for the upcoming year. The forum activity will continue in this direction with the local communities.

## **2. AARHUS Vlora**

Eco-Youth-Clubs initiative – an example for environment protection aimed to raise awareness of young people and citizens on environment protection. The target group was composed of 600 young people, students and environmental activists in Permet region.

The implemented activities in the framework of the project included:

### **A. Establishment of 5 Environmental Eco-Clubs with young people and active citizens supporting the environmental cause.**

30-40 young people were involved in each eco-club. The process of selecting the steering committee structure/leaders was interestingly democratic through hidden voting with or more proposals for each post. The proposed candidates presented their platforms and strategies on the role they will play while being in the leading position for 3 months and for the sustainability of the action.

### **B. Organisation of raising awareness activities**

Students, young people, members of eco-clubs and active citizens participated in the actions for the cleaning of territories near schools or in their resident quarters of cities in order to sensitize citizens and local government for environment protection. The members of eco-clubs organised meetings with local government in order to define the right venue for the organisation of this activity based on the territory and the environment suffering from waste and where the visibility is guaranteed for citizens and the community. The local government ensured the necessary equipment for the transportation of the waste bags collected by students of Eco-Clubs.

### **C. Organisation of an awareness raising activity with young people and activists from all eco-clubs**

At the end of the initiative, a final meeting was organised in Përmet, with the participation of members of Eco-Clubs' members from each area, Permet, Këlcyra, Ballaban, Petran and Piskova. Representatives of local government units (communes and municipalities) participated in this event. It was agreed to establish the network of Eco-Clubs Permet. In addition, young people of Eco-Clubs designed concrete action plans for environment protection, which were transmitted to local authorities of every commune and municipality, so that they can consider them for the design of their annual local action plans.

## **3. CIOFF, Gjirokastra**

Albanian International Section (CIOFF), Albanian Section in Gjirokastra implemented the initiative that aimed to promoting cohesion and dialogue among communities living in our country during September-November 2012 targeting majority, cultural minorities and ethnic groups living in this geographic space. The project generalized the positive multi-annual experience in Permet city. This initiative involved young people of high schools without any prejudice in the organisation of an essay competition "Different but Equal". More than 32 young

people promoted their social humanism and encouraged dialogue among them

#### **4. “Different Woman” Association**

The initiative “Increasing women participation in decision-making processes” aimed to strengthen the partnership between communities and decision-making bodies for a democratic and all-inclusive governance. The two targeted communes were Commune of Kallment and Commune of Kolsh in Lezha region. The proposed activities for achieving this aim consisted mostly in informing activities about the decision-making of the Commune Council, supporting and initiating the partnership between the women community as the most vulnerable and lacking access to community decision-making design with representatives of the Commune Council.

The elected person from the target group enabled the organisation of individual and small group meetings with the women of the villages in the targeted communes. In addition, two group trainings have been organised, one only with women focusing on raising awareness on gender equality and designing some proposals that require the intervention of the Commune institution. The participants of the second training were a mixture of women representatives and commune council, where discussions took place on the implementation of the recommended proposals.

Women raised concrete and important issues concerning their community life. During discussions it was mentioned the emergent need of including community in the design of the local strategy and the annual budgeting could be the only way to guarantee a fair and all-inclusive distribution of the capital investments by the commune. Council representatives responded positively to some of the raised issues and shared their willingness to address the other issues in the draft-budget of the upcoming year.

#### **5. “Protection of Urban and Rural Women Rights” Association, Berat**

The aim of this initiative was to strengthening capacities of rural CSOs and local government institutions in Berat to improve the public services for the community. During the first month of project implementation, meetings with civil society organisations and representatives of local government were organised in the region of Berat. The meetings aimed to introduce the initiative and to define the beneficiaries benefiting from the training package. It was made possible during the meetings to briefly introduce the issues covered by the trainings and the other activities in the framework of the project. Trainings with rural CSOs operating in Berat region local governance structures were organised to contribute in the achievement of the main aim. Topics of organised trainings included: 1. Organisation Development and Human Resource Management and 2. Project Cycle Management

The implementation of this initiative was an investment for the institutional development, leadership, project and programme management and establishing networks and partnerships to sustain the initiative and to ensure the institutional sustainability...

## **6. Natural Resources Association in Gjinar Commune**

NRA undertook the initiative “Tourism and mixed traditions for sustainable development”. This initiative aimed to activate commune residents on promoting the natural and traditional values of this touristic area. It involved all commune residents belonging to all age groups from the young generation up to the third age. The initiative engaged the commune residents to increase their activism for participation in decision-making, to promote values and to provide proposal on tourism development in Gjinar. Each activity concluded with a discussion from each participant on how they can contribute to a better tourism development and value promotion for sustainable development.

Additional activities in the framework of the initiative consisted in the natural guide of touristic Gjinar, village meetings, raising awareness campaigns, environment cleaning, meetings and trainings of elementary and high school students to build their capacities to organise a raising awareness campaign on their own and a final meeting reviewing all implemented activities.

## **7. “Women Forum” Elbasan**

The regional initiative “Strengthening Capacities of Civil Society Organisations in Rural and Remote Areas” covered geographically the city of Elbasan where “Women Forum” organisation concluded the activity cycle foreseen in the framework of the project “Increasing community participation in the local good governance through raising awareness on this right”. The focus group discussed on: “Social services, health conditions and education” took place in Shushica Commune of Elbasan region. The specific objective of this activity was to inform the community on the situation of social, health and education services, increase transparency of service providers and responsibility commitment of service providers to ensure solutions to the raised problems.

The meeting aimed to stimulate active citizenship and improve governance at local level. The meeting clarified some terminology on economic aid, respective legislation and later presentation of the drafted questions of this focus group focusing on social conditions such as economic aid, transport, medical treatment, education; and other actual concerning issues such as family violence. After having participated in the meeting and receiving information on WFE services, they asked for help to find solution for their own and relatives’ problems. According to the organisers the meeting was held with a partnership spirit among community members and representatives of local institutions, which will influence significantly in finding solutions for community problems.

## **8. “Different Woman” Association, Lezhë**

In the framework of ECSRA project, “Different Woman” Association – Librazhd” implemented its activities related to values of cultural heritage in Librazhd area through the organisation of the Fair of Values and Cultural Heritage. A series of meetings were organised beforehand with the participation of girls and women inhabitants. The first meeting opened the series of activities of “Different Woman”

Association and the participants received information on the initiative and discussed with each other on its implementation. The second meeting was focused on the analysis and evaluation of the process of the organisation of the fair, namely the assigned duties assigned to women and representatives of local communities, challenges they encountered and the ways how to overcome these obstacles. Other trainings were developed in small groups in the villages where women live to observe directly how they are organised and coordinated with each-other. "The Fair of Values and Cultural Heritage" was held on 22 September 2012 in Librazhd with a considerable participation of resident women and girls, who presented their handicraft works and traditional dishes of the area for the guests. Women from Egyptian community were given the opportunity to present their handicraft works. Various distinguished celebrities and associations working in this field participated in the fair.

The main aim of these activities went beyond the simple promotion of cultural values into local communities and raised awareness of women of rural areas to better understand their role in the social and cultural life and to build their capacities for the development of the area. In addition, the activity was beneficial for the participants from the economic aspect as their products were sold stimulating business ideas for the future. One of the aims of the implemented activities was to enable an environment for women to feel equal and without prejudices and to support their own initiatives. The meetings were characterized by openness and positive relations within participants who shared their knowledge and experiences and established partnership bridges for the future.

### **9. "Social Aid for Women Head of Households" Association – Kuçova**

"Social Aid for Women Head of Households" Association based in Kuçova organised a series of activities with young people over 16 years old to present the initiative to them, its benefits and final objectives. During the preliminary meetings, 30 young people were selected and received the role of "supporters" to ensure the project sustainability. During this phase, young people with leadership potentials were selected. After having collected relevant materials, organised trainings and promotional materials, site activities initiated to raise awareness of young people to improve their behaviour related to gender equality.

Hundreds of fliers with awareness raising information were distributed to the local inhabitants to stimulate gender equality. A questionnaire on main issues of gender equality was distributed in the town of Kuçova aiming at the situational analysis. Promotional activities continued with around 30 young people wearing hats and t-shirts stamped with the project slogan, who distributed awareness raising materials. They were trained on how to improve youth behaviour related to gender equality.

### **10. "Tjetër Vizion" Association, Elbasan**

The initiative aimed to encourage best practices of Women Clubs in Gjergjan, Gostime and Shushice communes to improve participation rates of women living

in rural areas in the local governance and development. The specific objectives included:

- Promotion of partnership and dialogue mechanisms among Women Clubs in Gjergjan, Gostime and Shushice communes, insitutions and communities in rural areas.
- Building capacities and stimulating networking initiatives through exchange of best practices and trainings.

The activities in the framework of this initiative consisted in one coordinative meeting among Women Clubs in Gjergjan, Gostima and Shushica communes, which served as a networking bridge among members of these clubs, enabling them to participate in a higher degree and to critically analyze their situation (with a participation of 54 women). Moreover, 3 trainings targeting Women Clubs were organised in Gjergjan, Gostima and Shushica communes, according to the following thematic:

- "Discrimination – social and legal perspective of this phenomenon with a focus on women";
- "Human rights with a focus on women , current role of women in rural areas";
- "Participatory budgeting in Gjergjan, Gostima and Shushica communes".

The Fair of Ideas was organised in the framework of this initiative with the participation of members of Women Clubs, around 60 women. The meetings functioned as an incubator of ideas and actions for protecting and respecting the dignity and women role, stimulating a friendly environment for the civil society in rural areas. Topics underlying this fair included:

- How to advocate on the reduction of discrimination/ gender based exclusion at the regional level;
- Which concrete actions should be undertaken to improve the situation with a focus on women participation in decision making processes;
- How to implement the "Participatory budgeting" at the commune level.

## **11. Center for Agro-Environmental and Economic Management (AEEM-CENTER)**

During the implementation of the initiative "Monitoring and evaluation of the policy of direct support to agricultural development in Lezha region" some meetings were organised beforehand with representatives of the 6 targeted communes where activities were foreseen to take place. Data on agriculture supported sectors were collected during these meetings, number of grants given, total grant allocation, the surface of the planted area during the time period 2007-2011. In addition, main directions of agricultural and rural development were presented in Lezha region and the advantages of the policy support in this region. Furthermore, the methodology of the initiative undertaken by AEEM in the framework of ECS-RA project was presented. Findings resulting from the monitoring undertaken by

A EEM were confronted with and discussed with representatives of the respective commune, Directorate of Agriculture, farmers of the commune and representatives of A EEM-Center. During this process and this initiative the farmers of the area were given the opportunity to express their discontents on the problems, weaknesses encountered and to propose some measures of improvement.

Another activity that served to fulfil the objectives of this initiative was to conduct interviews with farmers, around 20 interviews; in addition 2 processing factories of agricultural products owned by the farmers of the area were visited in order to get acquainted with the trade problems of agricultural products included in the supported schemes. During the open meetings the methodology was presented accompanied by research findings and some proposals were provided for farmers, agriculture specialists and policymakers. Data collected during this study are integrated in a report that will be disseminated to decision makers, agriculture specialists at the commune and region level and it is expected that they take into consideration the results of this independent study.

## **12. Center for "Agricultural Extension Elbasan" AEE- Elbasan**

The initiative "Raising awareness on capacity building for women participation in decision-making and their vocational education in Shirgjan, Belesh and Gostime Communes - Elbasan" responded to the needs of the selected target group and had a positive and evident impact. It combined a series of topics and activities on raising awareness of women and men on the importance of women participation in decision-making and the legislation in force, as well as the national strategy and the action plan on gender equality in these areas, which was not covered before this activity and provided to all participants the relevant information.

The additional workshop part focused on professional issues such as: milk quality, techniques and milking hygiene and breast diseases in cattle, as well as harvesting olives and the necessary criteria to obtain qualitative olive oil influenced positively in the vocational education especially for the women participants, who are engaged on a daily basis with these working processes. The areas where the workshops took place are known for a developed farming and olive gardening and their vocational education on the above-mentioned topics influences directly to strengthen the performance of these processes.

## **13. "Orphans in Focus" Association, Berat**

The initiative "Creation of the association structures and improving leadership capacities in municipalities and communes of Berat region" undertaken by the "Orphans in Focus" Association Berat resulted from the need to support this social vulnerable category. Two new branches of the association were established in Polican and Corovoda at the end of the initiative. This resulted after a long process of meetings and consultations with the stakeholders coming local government, civil society organisations and businesses that can contribute with equipment of new premises. Moreover, aspects directly related to building capacities of people engaged in the structure of the association were seriously considered.

Thus, some workshops were organised regarding the legal framework on CSOs, rights of orphan children, legislation for protection from discriminations, financing aspects and fundraising capabilities.

#### **14. EPER Center, Skrapar**

The initiative "Clean and healthy Skrapar" aimed to raise awareness of the community on citizen participation in good governance and volunteerism promotion. In concrete terms, this initiative covered the geographical area of Corovoda municipality addressing issues waste management through citizen participation and volunteerism promotion. Activities include implementation of three trainings on waste management with local civil employees and undertaking information sessions on 3R (reduction, re-usage, recycle) and cleaning actions in some 9-grade schools. One of the products of this initiative was the design of a directive report "Waste management in Corovoda town" with priorities and recommendations for Corovoda Municipality. This document was consulted with local representatives and other interested stakeholders and was supported by them.

#### **15. Heifers' International Project (HIP), Lezhë**

It was made possible through the initiative "Heifers' International Project (HIP) to establish a network of farmers' associations in Karina, Perparim, Sinaballaj, Gjocaj and Pajova communes in Elbasan region . This network will enhance capacities and advocacy skills for sustainable of small rural/family business and environment protection of respective areas. Premises were created during the implementation of the initiative to strengthen the networking partnership of local farmers' associations with local government and business community. This was achieved through a series of workshops in order to build capacities of farmers. Also, a raising awareness campaign was conducted to clean and to keep the environment clean. A high rate of participation and interest was shown during this phase.

#### **16. "Useful to Women" Association - Elbasan Branch**

The association implemented an initiative with a focus on youth in rural areas and raising their awareness on the acute problems they encounter. After a series of workshops with youth from one commune in Elbasan on topics such as: protection of human rights, gender equality, smoking and its negative effects, sexually transmitted diseases (STD), domestic violence, environment protection and stimulating volunteerism. A cultural activity was organised at the end of the cycle of workshops with the participation of young people that participated in the initiative "- "Young people are the actors, partners and main leaders of social change in a developing country". Another important step undertaken during the initiative was the establishment of the youth organisation in the targeted commune where the foreseen project activities were implemented. This will serve the purpose of follow up activism and organisation of activities with the youth in the area.

## **17. "Hope for Poor" Association, Lezha**

The association targeted its initiative "We are also part of civic community" in the remote areas of Lezha city. në zonat periferike Main beneficiaries included children and youth from Egyptian community in the area. The initiative aims to acknowledge and accept youth of Egyptian community as a key , strong and sustainable pillar for development, lobbying and advocacy. In addition, increasing their representation and societal integration was one of the main concerns of the initiative.

This initiative started with a raising awareness campaign and the presentation of the project in the remote areas where activities were held. During the first step, fliers were published with a general information on the initiative and posters were prepared in order to sensitize children and youth of Egyptian community and general public. Later, a cycle of meetings were organised Në vazhdim u ndërmorën një cikël takimesh me to për të diskutuar mbi çështje që përbëjnë interes për këtë grup për të drejtat e njeriut, SST trajtimi dhe parandalimi i tyre, etj.

## **18. Youth Committee Lezha**

The initiative engaged the young people of 8 communes of Lezha region. The initiative aimed to encourage better policies and practices of local decision-makers towards youth. In addition to the extension of the geographical area, special attention was paid to the content of the meetings with young people. Various meetings were organised during the three months of the implementation period on topics such as: citizen participation in decision-making, improving leadership capabilities of young people in the respective communes etc. The meetings were organised near the premises of communes with the participation of communes' representatives, in schools and in the organisation premises.

## **19. "Roma of North" Association**

Taking into consideration the need to intervene in response to the problems of Roma people, the association implemented its activities in the communes of Lezha region with a high concentration of this minority. A bulletin containing the evidenced problems during the meetings and the interviews conducted from the members of the association during the activities of this initiative. Some of the raised issues from the participants in the meetings were: education, employment, housing and health aid.

## **20. Antigonea Media Culture Center (AMCC) , Gjirokastra**

The supported initiative under ECSRA project aimed to promote the cultural values of Antigonea commune and encourage business start-ups. Various mechanisms were used to fulfil this aim such as meetings with representatives of the commune and interested stakeholders in this areas, publication of newspaper during the duration of the initiative, displaying documentaries etc.

### 4.3 Results

On the overall, it is difficult to have an impact evaluation of the initiatives in the framework of ECSRA. Still, it is worth to mention that these initiatives fulfilled the project objectives and enriched it with the geographical coverage and treating various social categories, despite the fact that the grant provided was limited. The impact was evident since the end of the initiative for some CSOs, while for some others this is be long term and followed by other interventions.

Regarding this, we could mention some cases where the impact was considerable and enabled the sustainability of the initiative such as in the case of Gjirokastra Foundation. The forum for the tourism promotion enabled the establishment of a special fundraising fund with coluntary contributions of the forum members, that will be used for the sustainability of activities such as the future Fair in Gjirokastra city. A resolution was drafted under this framework to support this forum. It Steering Committee was elected and the first donations were collected. In addition, these initiatives enabled the drafting of a study and monitoring of direct support policies of agricultural development in Lezha region. The findings of this study were disseminated and were shared with all relevant stakeholders and it serve as a basis for the upcoming schemes of the support towards farmers in this area.

Taking into consideration the problems tackled by these initiatives, it is worth to mention the partnership element of the representatives of the local governance, other local CSOs and business community. Moreover, it is noted that all CSO's have paid special attention to the approach and engagement of all stakeholders that could contribute in further expanding their results.

The QKMA initiative indicates that the mayor has appreciated the undertaken initiative by the CSO and the business community has provided its support during the implementation of the activities of Gjirokastra Foundation. Moreover, establishment of structures near local government institutions to promote interests of various social groups such as orphans in Berat region, constitutes another element that was used by most CSOs in the activities supported by ECSRA.

In conclusion, despite the limited timeframe and financial resources of the initiatives supported by ECSRA, each CSO managed to fulfil its foreseen objectives and to influence in the improvement of the sectors in the intervention areas. Lastly, the initiatives increased the number of issued covered by ECSRA project and contributing with important products for the communities of the areas where they operate.





# ECSRA: BEST PRACTICES

## 5.1 Communitarian Newsletter

“The Communitarian Newsletter” was not accidentally selected since the beginning of the program as the voice of the initiative “Strengthening Capacities of Civil Society in Rural and Remote Areas”. The Community Magazine consisted in a quarterly periodical publication under ECSRA project. The magazine was transformed not only into a communication window between the public and civil society organisations, but at the same time, provided opportunities to CSOs to articulate and clarify the main challenges they encounter. This magazine was transformed into an information and communication platform among different stakeholders such as public institutions, nongovernmental organisations, businesses and communities.

### Newsletter sections

The community magazine, the periodical publication that accompanied the implementation of ECSRA initiative was conceptualized as a communication and information instrument targeted to relevant stakeholders and the interested audiences to strengthen civil society in rural and remote areas. The magazine consisted in providing updated information on the project implementation, general information on the civil society development in the four regions covered by ECSRA and reflecting all activities and realised products in the framework of this initiative.

The main sections in the “Communitarian Newsletter” were conceptualized to cover all aspects of the initiative dividing them on a chronological base: Implemented Activities, Ongoing Activities. The first four publications included general information on the social-economic situation and the level of activism of civil society organisations in every region.

The newsletter has a broader focus than the ECSRA initiative. A special section in the magazine was dedicated to the information of projects and call for proposals of donor organisations. This aimed to provide application opportunities for local organisations in order to continue their activities in the development of rural and

remote areas after the finalization of ECSRA project.

## Results

The Communitarian Newsletter was published in 6 editions with a total circulation of 300 copies per edition (1800 copies in total) during an 18 month period corresponding to ECSRA project duration. The Communitarian Newsletter was disseminated during the activities and initiatives undertaken in the framework of ECSRA in the 4 regions: Elbasan, Gjirokastra, Berat an Lezha. The community magazine during the 18 month period of ECSRA project implementation included 70 articles and reports on various activities organised in the four regions. Local organisations in the four regions of the target areas were contacted for this purpose and a close communication was established with them. Special attention was dedicated to local government stakeholders through the interviews with senior representatives on the achievements, future plans, development and partnership with civil society in their respective areas.

### 5.2 Fair of Ideas

The fair of ideas was an original and effective tool for the achievement major objectives of ECSRA– promoting civil society in rural and remote areas. It was conceptualized as an activity that aimed to stimulate concrete initiatives by civil society stakeholders and to promote a more active role of civil society through active citizenship in the benefit of the community. In this framework, “the Fair of



Ideas” encouraged initiatives and justified ideas by nongovernmental organisations with a special focus on rural and remote areas to address concrete problems and relevant community and governance issues in these regions. It also invited stakeholders from local government, donor community, business representatives to bridge them with civil society and to shape opportunities for future partnerships.

The fair was thought as a competition of ideas and innovative initiatives. It was open to all nongovernmental organisations, unions, associations and interest groups in the regions of Berat, Lezha, El-basan and Gjirokastra. Tens of ideas and initiatives were given the opportunity to be introduced to a group of experts that conducted the evaluation in the first phase of the selection.

This event organised by IDM and UNDP in partnership with civil society organisations in rural and remote areas in the regions of Lezha, Elbasan, Berat and Gjirokastra enabled 40 CSOs to present their ideas under ECSRA project and their initiatives on local projects in rural and remote areas in general. This activity attracted the attention international institutions and civil society, enabling participating CSOs to create further opportunities beyond ECSRA project.

In addition, the fair was followed by presentations and information activities among representatives of rural organisations with present donors and civil society representatives in order to encourage direct contacts and partnerships with other institutional stakeholders involved in the third sector in Albania and providing opportunities and partnership bridges in support of civil society organisations in rural and remote areas.

## **Results**

More than 100 representatives of various organisations focused in rural and remote areas shared their points of views in this fair on concrete initiatives of these CSOs to improve the community lives in the rural and remote areas in Albania. Likewise, 70 other participants, representatives of local government, donor community and private sector shared their perspectives and their plans and possibilities to support the civil society in rural and remote areas.

More than 40 project proposals were pre-selected to apply in the second phase for concrete support through ECSRA. The evaluation criteria were presented beforehand to participants and were followed in the pre-selection of project ideas. In addition, the Evaluation Committee paid attention to a fair distribution among regions, project thematic and beneficiary groups. In this way, 4 projects per each region were supported covering priority issues identified in the needs assessment as following:

- Raising community awareness on all-inclusive governance and promotion of volunteerism;
- Increasing women participation in the community life and decision-making;
- Better collaboration and establishment of partnerships among citizens, private and public sector;
- Addressing social, health and education problems targeting vulnerable groups.

### **5.3 Grant Support of civil society in rural and remote areas**

IDM was engaged for the first time in this initiative that despite the components aimed at revitalization of civil society in rural and remote areas, offered direct support through small grants. Their allocation was conducted through a transparent process organised in some phases, where the contribution of all components described in this publication was taken into consideration.

The awareness-raising and capacity-building activities contributed to the increase of the number of applications, quality of project proposals and as a result to the number of grant beneficiaries. Considering these local initiatives as joint initiatives of ECSRA and local organisations, IDM offered continuous support and guidance for the applicants and the winners during the application, selection and implementation process.

On the other hand, IDM observed through direct and strict monitoring and evaluation activities and was careful in strict, qualitative and impact-oriented initiatives. The timely and successful closure of all initiatives was achieved through a combination of these components.

#### **Results**

ECSRA supported initiatives of the following organisations according to the regions where the initiatives were implemented.

##### ***Elbasan Region (7)***

- “Heifer Albania”, Tirana
- “Women Forum”, Elbasan
- “Different Woman” Association, Librazhd
- “Useful to Women” Association Elbasan
- Center for “Agricultural Extension Elbasan”
- “Natural Resources”, Elbasan
- “Vizion Tjetër”, Elbasan

##### ***Lezha Region (5)***

- “Women Vision of Change” Association, Lezha
- “Roma of North”, Lezha
- Center for Agro-Environmental and Economic Management (CAEEM), Lezha
- Hope for Poor, Lezha

##### ***Gjirokastër Region (4)***

- Information Center Aarhus, Vlora
- Antigonea Media Culture Center, Gjirokastra
- CIOFF, Permet
- GCDO, Gjirokastër

#### **Berat Region (4)**

- EPER, Tirana
- Protection of urban and rural women rights, Berat
- Orphans in Focus, Berat
- Social aid for Women Head of Households, Kuçova

20 organisation benefited directly from the financial support of ECSRA. The geographical coverage of their activities included 15 municipalities and 45 communes in the four regions. The variation of the applicant organisations and their projects further diversified their achievements and ECSRA impact. Some case studies are mentioned below to illustrate the diversity of the supported initiatives:

- Establishment of the network of farmers' associations initiated by Heifer Albania in Karina, Perparim, Sinaballaj, Gjocaj and Pajova communes of Elbasan region.
- Establishment of Women Clubs in Gjergjan, Gostime and Shushice communes in Elbasan region through the initiative of "Tjetër Vizion" Association.
- Creation of a polyphonic group with representative of vulnerable groups in the communes of Gjirokastra region undertaken by CIOFF organisation.
- Foundation of Eco-Youth Clubs in five communes of Gjirokastra region by Information Center Aarhus
- Establishment of partnership forum of civil society in rural areas of Gjirokastra region GCDO,
- Needs assessment of Roma community in remote areas of Lezha from a Roma organisation "Roma of North etc.

