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# SCALING UP COMMUNITY STRUCTURES IN ALBANIA SETTING THE AGENDA FOR CHANGE

In 2015, the Parliament of Albania passed a new law on the self-governance of local communities.<sup>1</sup> This law introduced a shift in how communities and their role in urban development are viewed. Specifically, Articles 68 and 69 of the Law on Local Self-Governance specify that community structures – community councils and liaisons – will be established in urban areas. Community structures will not be elected by government officials; neither will they be used to advance political agendas. Quite the contrary, they will emerge from the grassroots.

Each neighborhood will transform into a civic space where members interact, organize, and advance collective goals.



This legal change has raised hopes among many community activists. More than 25 years of community work have led to skepticism, and often disappointment, with community-based initiatives. Oftentimes, these initiatives deepen the chasm between community members and government officials. Community groups are co-opted by irresponsible officials who view participatory spaces as an opportunity to advance personal agendas (Mansuri & Rao, 2013).

Participatory initiatives implemented in Albanian communities have several pitfalls. Often, participation in decision-making is not viewed as a fundamental right but rather as a routine act that fulfills legal obligations. Furthermore, participation is restricted to attending meetings, not questioning and contesting officials' arguments. There is widespread belief that community members are not qualified enough and their voice is not important (Dauti & Kurti, 2016). Exclusionary practices reinforce existing hierarchies and inequalities.

To support community involvement in decision making, national and international-level organizations have invested in the creation of formal participatory spaces. Formal spaces bring together community members, groups, and government officials to discuss municipal strategies, programs, and projects. However, these spaces inherit the risk of being co-opted by government officials (Gaventa & Barrett, 2012). This is especially the case in a context where community members are poorly organized and/or are concerned about the repercussions that their criticism might trigger. New evidence on the implementation of participatory budgeting raises several questions on the extent participatory tools enhance the accountability and responsiveness of government officials (Nergjoni, 2017).

The new law provides the opportunity to address these pitfalls. The rules of how community members will engage in decision making will change. Rather than being invited by government officials to join participatory spaces, community members will be the ones who create such spaces. Community structures will attract enthusiastic activists who are committed to change. The risk of being co-opted by government officials will diminish. The shift from a top-down to a bottom-up approach will challenge centralized practices of governance and empower communities.

The Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM) has played a critical role in designing and implementing community structures. During 2016 – 2017, the legal framework and the regulatory framework developed by IDM experts presented to ten

1. Law No. 139/2015, On Local Self-Governance

## BOX 1: ESTABLISHING COMMUNITY STRUCTURES IN THE MUNICIPALITY OF BERAT

Community structures were introduced to local stakeholders – municipal leaders, councilors, civil society organizations, and citizens' groups. Local stakeholders agreed to embark on the process of establishing community structures. Municipal councilors discussed the regulatory framework in open meetings and decided to establish ten community councils in the city. Because of the novelty of this experience, it was decided to pilot community councils and liaisons in three neighborhoods and then scale up the experience in the rest of the city. A large-scale awareness campaign was conducted in the three neighborhoods. A considerable number of community representatives came together to discuss the initiative and nominate their representatives in the community council. The community councils of Mangalem and Uznova were composed of seven members each.

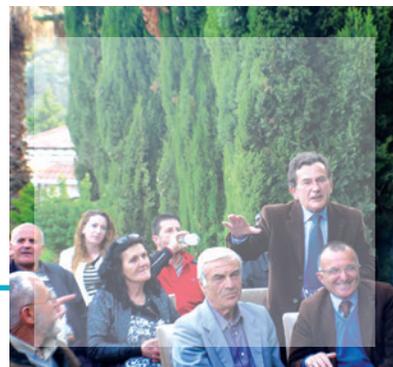
municipalities, including Tirana, Durres, Shkodra, Kukes, Lezha, Kamza, Elbasan, Korça, Berat, and Fier.

While this new approach of community structures was introduced to ten municipalities, various municipalities expressed different levels of interest. Three municipalities – Berat, Kukes, and Elbasan – expressed greater commitment to the initiative. The municipality of Kukes relied on the positive experience developed through an intervention of UNDP implemented during 2005 – 2007. More than 140 community-based organizations were established in the municipality, thus empowering community groups and building community cohesion. The municipality of Elbasan is ready to embark on the initiative, inspired by the good practice of Berat.

This has not been the case for other municipalities, even for more developed ones. In some instances, municipal leaders did not view the establishment of community structures as their priority; in other instances, they were skeptical. Some of the resistance came from the belief that partnerships with citizens might “threaten” municipal authority in the long run. The municipalities of Tirana and Shkodra remain loyal to the legacy of community liaisons that were introduced in the '90s and were appointed by municipal leaders. IDM team was quite surprised that the initiative did not find fertile ground in the Municipality of Korça. Public and private stakeholders were skeptical, as municipal leaders kept their eyes on the Municipality of Tirana. All municipal councilors, regardless of their party affiliation, supported the initiative. Civil society organizations have also been supportive. In some cases, such as Fier, civil society organizations advocated for the implementation of articles 68 and 69 of the Law on Local Self-Governance. Different dynamics were identified in various municipalities.

## BOX 2: CHARACTERISTICS OF AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT FOR COMMUNITY STRUCTURES

- Committed municipal leaders.
- Presence of champions that promote change at the community level
- Positive synergy between the municipality and the local council.
- Prior experience of officials and community members with civil society organizations and/or community-based organizations.
- Local tradition of community participation and mobilization.



However, the barriers to an effective implementation of community structures are not insurmountable. If they place community structures on their agenda, municipal and council leaders can work collaboratively with civil society organizations to implement and sustain community structures. The engagement of developed municipalities, such as the Municipality of Tirana, can produce a chain reaction - diffuse knowledge and good practices to other municipalities. Municipalities are recommended to view community structures as their main partner for effective law enforcement and development. This is the most sustainable approach of empowering communities.

## SCALING UP COMMUNITY STRUCTURES FIVE CHALLENGES AHEAD

Challenge 1: Strengthening community structures and their role in local development<sup>1</sup>.

Challenge 2: Developing and implementing mentorship programs that guide community structures.

Challenge 3: Building the capacities of government officials on how to develop and sustain partnerships with citizens.

Challenge 4: Adapting community structures to the local context.

Challenge 5: Monitoring and evaluating the impact of community structures on local development.

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<sup>1</sup> For specific suggestions on how to strengthen community structures see the *Manual on Community Structures in Albania (IDM, 2016)*. The manual provides information on the characteristics of effective community structures and challenges of community structures in the context of Albania.