



# **INVOLVEMENT OF CITIZENS AND COMMUNICATION WITH LOCAL GOVERNMENT MUNICIPALITY OF SHKODRA**

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# CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT IN THE CO-CREATION AND PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE

Existing practices and room for improvement

Reflections and Recommendations

**FINAL REPORT ON THE INVOLVEMENT OF CITIZENS AND COMMUNICATION IN THE LOCAL DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES**

**FINDINGS OF THE REPORT BASED ON THE WORKSHOP ORGANIZED AT THE MUNICIPALITY OF SHKODRA**

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# INTRODUCTION OF THE PROGRAMME AND THE ORGANISATION SUPPORTING THE WORKSHOP

Considering the shared value and common understanding upon the role of local government and Public Administration in the Western Balkan Region, the Austrian Association of Cities and Towns (AACT) and KDZ (Public Administration Research Centre) implement the programme “Building Administrative Capacity in the Danube Region and Western Balkans”, a programme co-funded by the Austrian Development Agency (ADA). BACID started 2014 with the support of ADA.

The BACID programme is a follow-up of the LOGON Network - Local Governments Network of Central and Eastern European Countries, an EU funded project implemented by the Austrian Association of Cities and Towns in partnership with the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) and 24 local government associations from 19 countries. It lasted from 1998 to 2005. The purpose of the project was exchange of know-how of local governments in EU Member States on how to build capacity for effectively dealing with EU policies and the challenges and opportunities of EU membership, where local governments and their associations from “old” EU members supported

“new” EU members in accession process. Publications developed during the Project on the role and obligations of local governments in the EU are available on the webpage Publications.

The associations of local governments of the Western Balkans, that participated in the LOGON Network as partners or associates, are all members of NALAS - Network of Associations of Local Authorities of the South-East Europe ([www.nalas.eu](http://www.nalas.eu)). AACT and KDZ are close partners to NALAS from its beginnings, and in 2015, AACT became an associate NALAS member. Through this cooperation, as well as other partnerships with municipalities, local government associations, ministries, and international organisations in the region, AACT and KDZ continue the know-how transfer in the fields related to European Integrations and modernisation of public administrations.

The objective of BACID is to strengthen the governance structures of the target countries and to support the European Integration process with focus on local and regional governments. The Programme is based on two relevant regional strategies, EU Strategy for the Danube Region and SEE 2020 Strategy.

## MUNICIPALITY OF SHKODËR

**T**he Municipality of Shkodra has 11 administrative units and currently administers one city and 93 villages and is the largest municipality in northern Albania. According to the 2011 Census, it has a total of 200,889 inhabitants. The geographical position and climatic conditions of this municipality favour mainly the agriculture and tourism industries. The Municipality of Shkodra offers great natural conditions for the development of coastal and lake tourism as it includes in its territory the coast of Velipoja and Shkodra Lake. This municipality has a considerable potential in the development of mountain tourism such as in Theth, and cultural tourism due to the many attractions offered by the city of Shkodra itself.

Shkodra is a university city and the only one in the north of the country.

In terms of political composition, the Municipality of Shkodra is unique in the entire political history of the country in 30 years of democracy. The municipality is today presided over by the mayor Ms Voltana Ademi who emerged from the 2015 local elections. The political debate intensified due to the political decision of the opposition and other opposition forces prior to the 2019 local elections which later resulted in the boycott of the same, finally elections were held with only one party on the ballot. The process of installation of new mayors in the 60 municipalities of the country (except for the Municipality of Shkodra, 61) was followed

by the mandate granted to the local government, entirely composed of representatives of the ruling party (Socialist Party). A process that was assessed as uncompetitive by many civil society organisations in the country. A decisive factor for the continuation of Ms. Ademi's mandate at the helm of the Municipality was the resignation of the candidate proposed by the ruling party because, according to the allegations of the other political party, a criminal record was allegedly present as he had been convicted and expelled from the Italian court in 2013. Under these circumstances and in a political context blamed for the interference of other institutions in the work of the Municipality of Shkodra, the municipal council was established, composed of 51 councillors proposed by the ruling party.

Despite such political encumbrance, what stood out during the workshop discussions - and what should be welcomed - is precisely the consensus of the leaders of the Shkodra municipality and the members of the municipal council to cooperate and operate for the benefit of the public without any party logos. Although the municipal government requires municipal councillors to be independent, the political system induces them to run and be elected under party logos. The municipal council as a representative body of the municipal government under Law 8548/1999 has three main roles: 1. representative, 2. decision-maker and 3. Supervision The council is composed of 51 councillors.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Information included in this report presents the current status of local government leaders' relationship with citizens in the context of citizens' involvement and engagement in local decision-making. This report provides a clear picture of Shkodra Municipality and the communication channels used to bring citizens closer to local government with regard to public services, economic development and the functioning of local democracy.

One of the objectives of the workshop held on 19 March 2021, enabled by the bacid.eu programme, was to map existing forms of citizen involvement in local government and identify new forms implemented in the city of Shkodra. The ways of communication used by the local government to inform the public or to take part in public debates were part of the debate and analysis in the workshop organised with representatives of the Municipality of Shkodra but also with active voices from the city.

From these discussions, two essential issues were identified that seem to redefine the nature of the relationship between citizens and local leaders to address concerns and the common good in these times:

- The nature of the problems requires greater cooperation and an approach that allows external institutional partners, such as citizens, to be involved. In this context, the right form and path to satisfactory results require action.
- The new form of technological communication not only reduces financial costs, but accelerates interaction and problem solving. The difficulty in going through this process is related to the human and financial resources of the institution itself.

The complex nature of the problems, and in many cases the inability to find solutions to them, has, of course, set political decision-makers, local decision-makers, the media, academics and civil society in motion - towards new ideas and reflections on how public decisions should be taken today. This report presents exactly these ideas by engaging the voices of all actors involved in the participatory governance process. This report presents opportunities and strategies to be followed for continuous communication. In recent years, almost all over the world, there has been a strong trend and an outbreak in the interest for the opportunities in and creation of advanced forms of direct public participation in government. This is certainly happening through the lens of democracy revitalising, providing local community drivers for engagement, and with the ultimate goal of improving the services provided.



# INTRODUCTION

If we want to measure the level of opportunities offered by the Municipality of Shkodra and the challenges that this institution faces in terms of policymaking and decision-making with citizens, we must first build a map on previous experiences and current activities concerning citizens' involvement in local decision-making. For this reason, the Centre for Public Administration Research (KDZ) through the bacid.eu programme supported a one-day workshop -offered by its expert Mrs. Ramadani, which included important discussions of active citizens in various sectors as well as employees and leaders of the Municipality of Shkodra on communication first inside and later outside the institution channels with the public. This workshop focused on communication with citizens and their engagement in local governance, was held on 19 March 2021 through the Zoom platform. The workshop was an important step in raising awareness and pave the way for the launch of a new practice of co-production and creation with citizens through better internal and external communication. The creation of mechanisms that promote and improve local democracy, in parallel with the construction of bridges for dialogue with citizens, is the approach that local government needs now more than ever. This is also due to the Administrative-Territorial Reform that started in June 2015 and has had a significant impact on administration and the quality of service-delivery. In a municipality which has already expanded due to the reform, delivering quality and efficient services to the citizens of this municipality still remains a challenge. During the discussions but also during the process of elaboration of the information obtained from the workshop, materials, documents and strategies were consulted in parallel, such as: municipal budget for 2021, Law 119/2014 on the right to information, Law 135/2015 on the organization and functioning of local self-government, Law 114/2014 on public notification and consultation, the municipality's own website on internet, the pages on social networks such as Facebook and Instagram.

The main conclusion reveals that in addition to the need to strengthen cooperation with citizens, increase synergy and design consistent and more strategic internal communication, it would be important for citizens to be informed and to gain more

understanding of their involvement in the policy design and decision-making processes. This would first of all help the institution itself to discover new opportunities and enrich its public involvement practices, which do not necessarily have to be centred on the public consultation law, as confirmed by the participants. Secondly, it would improve external communication, which is very important for the relationship between local leaders and citizens. A total of 29 colleagues participated in this workshop, experts in the field who shared their views on the issue. 22 of them were chief officers and specialists from different departments of the municipality (list of departments attached as Annex I). A considerable number of opportunities and challenges were launched on the virtual table through short presentations, questions and answers being discussed and structured group work. Furthermore, the opportunity to bring together professionals and representatives of the municipality on the same day further strengthened cooperation and highlighted the potential synergy for activities and projects that could follow from this relationship. It should not be forgotten that despite the coordination of the above-mentioned structures and the cooperation, communication and dissemination of information focusing on concrete issues, there were still important elements missing in this process. This report, based on all the activities and work of the municipality, offers a number of recommendations for improving communication channels with the public. In the course of the discussions, it was noted that new energy is coming from local government, civil society organisations and public voices in mobilising and involving the public in planning and policymaking. Deep community involvement remains a complex and time-consuming issue. However, the aim of such initiatives is to create common spaces between citizens and local government leaders, expand citizens' access to information and resources, and, most importantly, create opportunities for the public to play an active role in setting priorities and agendas - all of which are essential to the success of local government. To reach this goal, of course, the chain of local government, civil society and institutions or external partners must think of new ways and strategies that go beyond the traditional "public meetings/consultations".

## Public Inclusion and Participation

*What is public involvement and why is that important?*

**T**rying to involve the public in putting key issues on the local agenda can be seen as the moment of transformation of the architecture of local democracy. Participatory democracy has a history dating back to the 1960s and has its roots in the demands of social groups such as human rights movements or women's movements for greater participation in government decision-making. Subsequently, this approach was broadened by emphasising the need and importance of citizens to participate in the reform of institutions and their democracy by giving more significance to direct participation. Nowadays, these demands take institutionalised forms that also affect the trust citizens have in local government affairs. In this spirit, opening up local government to citizens' opinions and demands makes it even more inclusive, strengthens integrity and prevents corruption. In other words, participation is getting involved, sharing one's opinion with someone and acting together with the group in which an individual is placed. The level of public participation in public affairs certainly depends on the legislation in place, which should not only be recognised by the public but also go hand in hand with the interests and principles they follow. Furthermore, to be able to

ensure that participation has this effect and provides results that improve the quality of life of communities, this process requires that the members of these communities are well informed.

*“Consultation with the public is not optional but a mandatory legal procedure.*

*The right to information and participation, whether at local or central level, is a constitutional right. Therefore, it is not a right that is granted to us by an organic law or an internal regulation of the institution. It is a constitutional right to be exercised in our daily lives and unfortunately, citizens and others find themselves lacking in elementary legal culture and discussions often lack a deep technical-legal basis.”*

**Roland Dodani-**

*Former Dean of the Faculty of Law; Head of the Department of Public Law, University of Shkodra “Luigj Gurakuqi”*

This report opines that citizen involvement and engagement is not only limited to the use of the term “citizens” or “local community” but also to that of the public as a whole.

\* \* \* \* \*

## Why the collaboration between the local government and citizens is crucial?

**O**ne of the main and most important reasons for the creation and running of new cooperation methods between local authorities and citizens, especially in the current political situation in Albania, lies in the need to increase citizens' trust in institutions. The main advantage of this process is undoubtedly the improvement of democracy which increases the belief that change is possible. On the other hand, local government has a golden opportunity to use the resources, da-

ta and knowledge of communities to produce quality services and high standards of living for citizens. Certainly, mechanisms must be put in place to help and contribute to the common goal of meaningful and sustainable economic, social or environmental development for this to happen. It should also be noted that public participation will not necessarily please all citizens because different groups have different opinions and concerns. However, including those in the early stages of the process do help to build consensus.

## Patterns and models of public involvement in local governance – European practices

**A**lthough local officials face difficulties in encouraging the public to participate widely in public discussions, this difficulty is often related to the message that leaders themselves ‘sew’ to the local community, as well as the model they follow during the process. It is already known that the legitimacy of the process and the achievement of results depend entirely on the widest possible participation of citizens and their inclusion. Therefore, identifying those groups behind the discussion topic is also the first step. Furthermore, the way in which this step is followed by the other links in the chain also shows the level of achievement of the applied model. If we refer to the model that the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) reflected in its 2020 report which is based on several case studies related to the topic, we can understand that from the 12 different models of citizen involvement in discussion and decision-making processes that apply in democratic countries today, the Municipality of Shkodra can hardly be associated with only one of them. As a matter of fact, the efforts made by governments, both local and central, in many parts of the world, testing or implementing new ideas for co-government with citizens are closely linked to the political, cultural and historical context of a country. This is why Albania, as an EU accession country, with the support of civil society and international organisations in the country, started to apply such processes in Shkodra Municipality. However, despite the good will of the local government and the commitment of civil society, cooperation with citizens is weak due to the lack of institutional capacity but also the willingness to develop public policies together with citizens and find consensus on solutions. Given the path Albania is on today, European integration is not a question of power rather than a transformation of society as a whole. In this context, the entire local government has embraced the European practice of open government for years. In these practices, the emphasis of the work of local leaders is on the obligations that municipalities must fulfil as political criteria and that have to do with democracy, law enforcement and human rights. In this spirit of Albania’s accession to the European Union, it is important to work to assure citizens that the services provided will be brought closer to European standards to the point where these services will be provided in the same way as they are provided to citizens of the European Union.

*“If we talk about services, we have to be realistic about what we as citizens experience in our daily lives, and to be honest, they are outside European standards. You cannot talk about the European Union and their models when in 2021 one is still discussing infrastructure, schools and heating. It is certainly not the fault of the citizens but of the government’s policies over 30 years of democracy and the recent pandemic which has only illustrated how weak our institutions are.*

*When we talk about the European Union, we should indeed bear in mind that local government has no direct link either to institutions, organisation or process, however, if we have a close look at the 70-80% of the *acquis communautaire* - which is European Union legislation - it has a local impact and is enforceable by local government.*

*In this context, if we want to talk about open government and its relation to European models, we have to ask ourselves what we mean by open government. What I mean is that this term is not only related to a beautiful and well organised website where we often find a lot of information. Governance is actually much more than that. It is about the influence of the citizen at all stages of the information and not only when it is being written. The citizen should also be informed about changes that occur. The changes that the institution undertakes ought to be published and accessible.*

*The question here is: how much interest do we awaken in citizens for a reaction? What communication methods do local leaders choose to stimulate the interest of citizens? Thus, I think that the effective basis of citizen participation can be found in the provision of accurate, complete and timely information.”*

**Arenca Trashani**

*Former Minister of European Integration  
Pedagogue-Shkodër*

As local government in Albania has started to change the institutional architecture of relations with citizens trying to walk also under the references of SDGs, we see how its approach to citizens’ involvement in decision-making processes has a lot to improve. However, by referring to the European models and practices that have been implemented today, we could understand what a suitable model in our socio-economic and cultural context is to be envisaged.

Referring to the 4 most practised models in the world, they are associated with the tools employed to achieve their objectives. Thus, in the first model, the recommendations of well-informed citizens on policies include citizens’ assemblies, juries or citizens’ groups, consensual conferences where citi-



**Figure 1. Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions: Catching the Deliberative Wave**  
 (source) OECD (2020)

zens raise questions and experts respond to the issues at stake. The second model involves a more hybrid initiative known as G1000 and originates from the idea of when a democracy is undergoing a crisis. The diagnosis underlying this initiative comes from the assumption that politicians fear when citizens are free and able to make decisions. This instrument goes through three stages which are: public consultation - in-depth discussions with expert groups - preparation of policies and involvement of citizens' opinions. The difference between this tool and the other tools we use is that there is no need for government funding or research funding. This model also includes the citizens' council, dialogue with citizens, questionnaires, and perspectives from around the world (known as views) but these are rare cases that have been used a total of 3 times. All the same, they are also recommended as a tool at national and local level. The third model only includes reviews of initiatives taken by the citizens themselves. The fourth model is based on the model of "Eastern Belgium" known as "Ostbelgien" which created a mixed structure between the assembly and the citizens' council operating in parallel with the

regional parliament. It is a very interesting structure because of the purpose for which it was created, serving a small German-speaking community in Eastern Belgium. This structure has in its composition 24 people who are there for 18 months and can change every 6 months. This council has two tasks. The first task is to set the agenda, which means that they are to raise issues. The second task is that they look for answers, but do not give them. This council determines the number of participants and the duration. Then, when they are ready, they present the recommendations that have emerged from this process to parliament, together with the local councillors. The members of parliament not only listen to them, but also engage in a debate where the parliament and the government with the relevant committees and the minister responsible respond at a later date. No more than a year later, the parliament has to say what has been done with the recommendations of the citizens. If nothing has happened or changed, they have to state the reason in writing.

The city observatory is also included in this model.

\* \* \* \* \*

## What is currently happening in the Municipality of Shkodra?

While the importance and necessity of citizen engagement and the positive benefits that derive from this process are widely seen and understood around

the world, it should be noted that in countries such as Albania, where politics is often difficult to separate from society, this is a process that is advancing, even if at a slow pace.

The following table presents a summary of the

entire process through which communication with citizens is achieved, their engagement and the tools used by the Municipality of Shkodra to achieve results.

Local government plays a key role in areas ranging from tourism, cultural heritage, the labour market, environmental protection, urban development or creating the environment for innovative activities, of which citizens are the beneficiaries. The citizens' involvement process cannot be limited to announcements by the city council, their open sessions, or even placing the entire burden on an individual who is responsible for announcements and consultations with the public.

The table above gives us an overview of how the

process of communicating with the public and their involvement in discussions on important public issues takes place. What is noticeable is that there has been a slight and improving shift in the form of communication. From the traditional model as simple announcements or publication of the weekly and monthly bulletin on the municipality's official website, municipal council sessions are now broadcast live on local media. Efforts are also being made for the council, with all its activities, to be present in an additional online space - within the municipality's website. All sessions will also be online and accessible to the public at all times. The use of social networks is seen by the municipality as a good technique that helped the information process and the dissemination of the message. During the period of the global Covid-19 pandemic, city leaders experi-

STEPS	INFORMATION	CONSULTATION	INCLUSION	COLLABORATION	EMPOWERMENT
<b>PUBLIC PARTICIPATION</b>	The public receives the right information and helps to understand the problem, alternatives, opportunities or solutions.	Data are obtained from the public which helps in the analysis of decisions to be taken.	Working directly with citizens coming from outside the traditional forms of municipal councils/political bodies to reassure the public that their concerns and aspirations are clearly understood and will be addressed	Working in partnership with the public on every aspect of the decision-making process, including identifying alternatives and providing most appreciated solutions.	Empowering communities / the public to make the final decisions.
<b>USED TOOLS</b>	Official website; one-stop shop; notification of the person responsible for consultations; City Council; social networks facebook and instagram	Focus groups; Questionnaires; Surveys; One-stop-shop; Co-operation with societal organisations	Not applied	Not applied	Filled-in; lacking
<b>PROBLEMS</b>	The belief that the number of clicks is considered a measure of the quality of civic perception and clarity of information	The lack of complaints from citizens is seen as a quality of service, while there is a lack of a clear structure to retrieve data from the service provided	There is no trust on the part of citizens to get involved and find common solutions with the institution. Lack of new mechanisms to persuade citizens to engage in public affairs. Election of the council despite collaboration.	Institutional difficulty in providing quality information to the citizen. Lack of professional survey for different sectors in measuring the performance of the service provided.	Lack of development of clear tools to follow all links in the chain without disconnection.

**Table 1. Process of communicating with the public in the Municipality of Shkodra**

mented with a new form of discussion with citizens on different areas, namely the online survey. The leaders themselves think that this experience has been swift since it was organised, has been effective but there is a great need for improvement with regard to the development of professional and methodological tools.

*“In this regard, we as a municipality have realized that we need assistance with the tool that we will present to get opinions and this tool needs to be as professional as possible and enable participation by everyone. This is because we*

*noticed from this experiment that there was a high number of young people participating mainly because of the use of technology, but a low number of other age groups at the same time. The participation of young people, if I had to refer to a figure, was more than 65%. Meanwhile, another thing related to the possibility of improving communication with the public is the survey regarding services provided to specific sectors. This is a point where we face difficulties because at the moment, we have not extended it to all sectors of the municipality.”*

**Voltana Ademi-**  
Mayor of Shkodra



## Youth - call for participation

**V**olunteering is an important activity and a sign of a society that reflects the way people care for each other. But it is more than that. The well-organised and functioning of the voluntary sector is a strong indicator of an active society that seeks to contribute to the country’s democracy. It also creates opportunities through the structures established by governments themselves and the climate created by them for such activities to take place. Surely a relationship with local or central government should be seen as a partnership and completely independent of the state. This partnership operates on the principle that the citizen does not expect answers to every problem they have but they are considered to be part of the game in problem solving. The youth community is one of the most promising communities in the voluntary sector. However, the infrastructure needs to be paved and stabilised by institutions. Establishing youth centres and providing free access from the community, organising activities or receiving additional services helps to strengthen the culture of volunteering.

*“The good thing about us is that we have young people, but the big problem is that we are preparing them to leave, to leave the country. A very small indicator is the flourishing of private centres of your languages, mainly German and English. The departure of young people is the bomb we have in our hands today. What we are doing to help the situation is the local action plan for young people, which is underway. However, in this process, difficulties were encountered during consultations and focus groups, and services that should properly be offered with the same quality both within the city and in its suburbs. The region of Shkodra is big but we face many difficulties due to many factors, one of them is the awareness of the youth community itself to increase the quality of services and the attention that should be shown to the efforts of the institutions. I must emphasize that the Municipality of Shkodra is the first municipality to have an online youth platform (shkodrarinore.gov.al) and in addition to services and free access, the youth centre Atelie operates on a voluntary basis and offers many services. Volunteering is the basis for development, and we are trying to strengthen this culture.”*

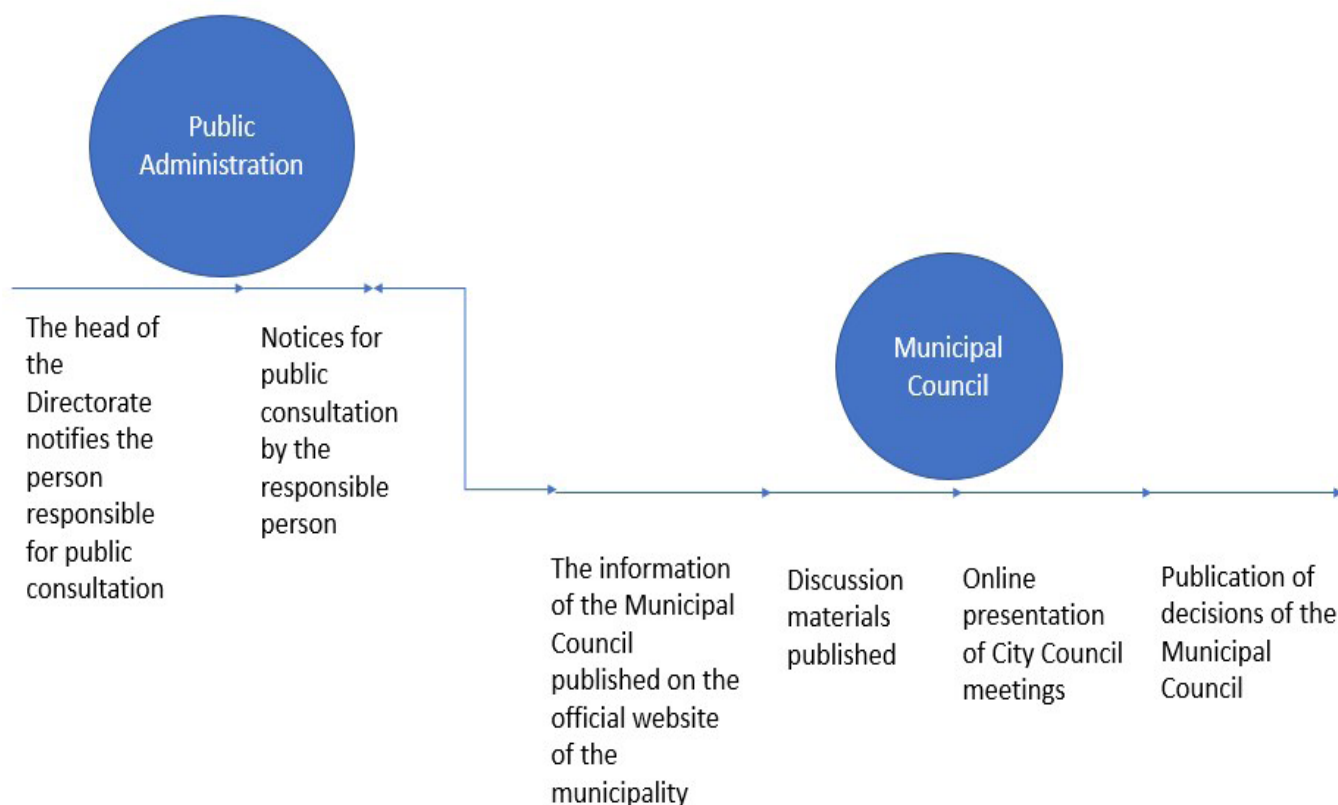
**Ëngjëll Gjogja**  
Director of the Public Youth Centre “Atelie”/ Shkodër



## Communication with public and bilateral relations

**T**he above table represents and illustrates the current situation of the Municipality of Shkodra in communicating with the public and involving communities in key discussion issues. The land this institution crosses through is broken down by three main

links, which are the online presentation/press conference of the recommendations of consultations and discussions, the publication of these recommendations and the response in concrete action to these recommendations. These links are not included in the whole chain of communication and public involve-



**Figure 2. Public Communication Scheme at the Shkodra Municipality**

Source: Author of the report supplemented by data of workshop

ment in local decision-making. The “two-sided” way of communication in Shkodra Municipality is conducted through the person responsible for public consultation. Each directorate of this institution notifies the person in charge of each activity of the department and jointly a notification to the citizens is carried out. As this is brought by the budget development directorate but also by other employees, it is necessary to improve the structure that develops and facilitates citizens’ involvement in the work of each directorate. It is important to develop a clear mechanism that keeps citizens informed not only about what is expected to happen, but also about the status of information gathered on issues under debate and concerns raised with them.

*“As part of our discussion, I would prefer to focus on two key moments in the work of the municipal council, which are separate from each other, such as the economic issue of the municipality concerning the tax package and the budget. I would rather consider this in two periods. The period before and after the pandemic in which we were able to organise meetings and discussions with citizens without restrictions and under the new*

*conditions going online. In the process of discussing the budget and the 2020 fiscal package that was approved at the end of 2019, we decided to give a very important voice to experts. In this context, a new way of communicating by the Council with citizens was envisaged in order to bring them closer and make them participate in the debates. In this context, we wanted to clarify that budgeting is a process and exercise where expectations have to be balanced with feasibility. To fulfil the mission of participatory budgeting and provide assurance to the public, we organised hearings with experts. All channels of institutional communication were of course followed, as well as communication between the executive and the administration. We managed to have a budget for 2020 with the inclusion of 90% of the recommendations received from stakeholders and with equal weight of the parties’ recommendation in this process.*

*In order to increase the interest of citizens in participating in the budget and tax package discussions, the city council itself created a Facebook page inviting citizens to participate in the discussions and this proved to be successful. Advertisements in the local media were also a tool used by citizens.”*

**Brisela Kadia**  
Head of the Municipality Council - Shkodra

## The bridging role of local media in the citizen-local leaders' relationship

The broad reach of the information source is of considerable importance when we refer to how citizens not only have an interest in being involved, but also act on public issues. The expansion of information sources certainly allows the public to form a broader but also professionally framed perspective on relevant issues. The traditional media still have a serious hand in shaping the views and opinions of communities. They obviously convey the voice of government just as they do the voices of other groups in society such as non-governmental/non-profit organisations, the voice of academics, artists and all other voices actively engaged in a society. The importance of the message is closely related to the mindset according to which the public should be given space to think, speak and act. Changing the public mindset also plays an important role in trying to improve and change the model of local government. They walk up this path side by side and are certainly helped by the debate and contributions of policy experts, civil society organisations, academics and journalists. Accurate and informative media reports also undoubtedly facilitate the way in which the public responds to change and new forms of government. The media clearly have their own logic in making news and disseminating it. Its rules, objectives and production routines influence political decision-making processes. In particular, it serves as the tool that interest groups actually use to put their voice and concerns on the political agenda. In this context, what is the relationship to be established between the citizen and the media outlet? Among other things, how much interest do the media them-

selves have in being present in the consultations held by the Municipality of Shkodra with citizens on issues of great interest, such as the discussion on municipal waste management in 2019? The discussions showed that the media pay more attention to the political leadership than to the perspective of the citizens, who in many cases use the protests to attract the attention of journalists.

*“What I have noticed in my 10 years of work is the political approach to tackling issues that are vital to the citizen. One just has to do a vox pop and realise that citizens, because they feel tired of politics, are no longer interested in direct involvement because they are not solving long-standing problems. On the other hand, information these days is not complete for the public. Among all the difficulties that institutions are going through, whereas before it was possible to have the presence of citizens or the media in the meetings of the municipal council, today because of the situation everything has gone online. This made contact with the citizen a bit difficult because the media are also trying a kind of distancing, absence. Thus, we also have information loss and channelling of information in an imprecise way.*

*On the other hand, we notice a marked shortage of active voices in our city. Unfortunately, I regret to point out this concern. When we journalists need to speak and make statements on various issues that are recently related to the pandemic, then economists, lawyers or professors will also be unwilling to speak out. This makes our mission impossible. The self-censorship of professionals is a major concern these days.”*

**Emi Kalaja**  
Journalist

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## Civil society and the benefits deriving from collaboration

When it comes to this important communication between the community and local leaders, civil society organisations are important contributors to the development and implementation of a more democratic process and respect for human rights. Be-

ing directly linked to the community through organisations not only increases the intensity of information simply by providing it with its own resources, but also builds dialogue and above all ‘institutionalises’ the relationship with local authorities through partnerships. Indeed, it must be said that the Municipality of Shkodra recognises a



high level of cooperation with civil society organisations and opens the door to concrete projects and initiatives. In 2020 alone, there are 20 agreements concluded between NGOs and the municipality for the implementation of various projects on the municipality's website under the partnership section. While for 2021, up to March 31st 2021, 4 partnerships have been formalised. Moreover, organised civil society influences and helps both sides to translate the municipal agenda into a language that is more accessible to the public. The monitoring and evaluation process that these organisations carry out for the work of the municipality is equally important. Discussions in this session focused in particular on the awareness and work done by civil society organisations with community members to empower them at tables with local government representatives. The work that these organisations do today with regard to the relationship between communities and local government has three directions; 1) social inclusion of all groups affected by poverty, discrimination and social exclusion; 2) working with com-

munities to protect the environment and 3) increasing citizens' participation in local government activities as part of a volunteering culture and cooperation for the public good.

*“Today there are 50 civil society organisations in the region of Shkodra that are not only active with projects and contributions, but also build bridges between communities and institutions. Getting citizens involved and giving them a real opportunity to participate in the decision-making process remains an important challenge for both the municipality and civil society organisations.*

*In my experience I would say that public hearings and citizens' involvement in these hearings have always been structured or prompted as in the projects of organisations such as the municipality when they asked for the opinion of communities on social action plans, as an example. In this respect, I would argue that no progress has been achieved. This includes the difficulty of raising the awareness of the communities themselves to participate in these discussions.”*

**Arbana Dibra Halili**

*National Resource Centre for Civil Society - Shkodra  
Office*

# CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

**T**his report does not focus on the question of how the process of public participation and engagement in local decision-making should be conducted.

As mentioned in the introduction to this paper, the report recommends where there is a need for intervention and improvement of the existing process or model provided by the municipality of Shkodra. Based on the workshop conducted with local government employees in the second half of the day, a great need emerged in all areas, on strengthening the capacities of technical staff in the operation of the process and developing mechanisms for citizen engagement in decision-making. Meanwhile, there is progress on the part of local authorities in terms of methods used to involve communities, mainly young people, through education, training or the development of participatory skills. This is mostly achieved by the ongoing work and activities of the only public youth centre in Shkodra, 'Atelie'. The municipal council has the greatest burden when it comes to citizens, and as such the members of this council are reconsidering their communication strategy with the public. A spirit of a new political culture and solidarity is also being felt among the government and the municipal council for the public good.

Nevertheless, it must be recognised that a strong focus on public participation in decision-making processes requires the will of both parties, local authorities and communities. The most difficult part for local authorities in all this reform with citizens, remains in showing a real will for public involvement and not only for legal compliance where interest groups should be represented. This is another relationship that should be monitored but also reported on an ongoing basis.

- **Challenges that the municipality of Shkodra and the municipal council must face in order to achieve a more efficient involvement of citizens.**

1. Developing informative communication with communities through the creation of short videos/ animations and producing local narratives on possible solutions.
2. Reducing time-consuming decision-making processes and identifying / creating an efficient feedback mechanism.

3. Allowing for the need to avoid the “drudgery” of public consultation only by posting notices on the website.

- **Uncomplete “feedback” mechanism.**

1. Immediate need for the establishment and operation of a specific mechanism for citizens’ perceptions and concerns about the services provided and the relationship on both sides.
2. Emphasising the main ways in which the public can evaluate and measure the services provided.
3. Representing the views of the general public and creating space for monitoring and problem solving.

- **For such reasons the below recommendations should be taken into account:**

1. A digital platform - demonstrating communication with citizens as a separate unit producing materials, information and narratives related to the daily life of communities.
2. Improving the feedback form/mechanism that is accessible to all and allows citizens to respond to the issue raised. Testing new mechanisms according to successful examples in EU countries.
3. Social networking mechanism should be developed in such a way as to be understandable and easily accessible to all groups and strata of society.
4. Specific workshops and public consultations should be conducted for each new plan/activity or policy being developed. This can be facilitated by creating neighbourhood councils that gather ideas and suggestions from the wider environment.
5. Support in the training of administrative staff and exchange of experiences in some municipalities of the European Union to see the models and practices of the country.
6. Technical materials for municipal council discussions to be summarised in non-technical language with the main points referred to in the technical document and to be available in any form of communication to the public.
7. Setting up and operating a “Network” of citizens on a voluntary basis as a horizontal structure and assisting the municipal council in discussing important community issues