

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

(Open Access)

**Citizen Participation and Local Good Governance ; Case Study – Kukës Region**MAJLINDA SHEHU (GJANA)<sup>1</sup>, PETRIT DOLLANI<sup>1</sup>, DORIANA GJUTA<sup>1</sup><sup>1</sup> Faculty of Economics, University of Tirana, Albania**Abstract**

Citizen participation is a wide spread topic and its importance and contribution to a healthy and developing democracy is huge. There are various forms of citizen participation that are known in the literature and in practice; ranging from general consultation and submission of comments on the draft laws via email to direct negotiations, based on strategic partnership agreements; from public debates to bodies led by the civil society organizations (CSOs). This paper aims to present an overview of citizen involvement in participatory democracy at the local government level, and also a study / survey on the three municipal councils of Kukës region conducted in a 1-year period (January-December 2012), where we have tried to present the applied practice of citizen participation in these important bodies of local decision-making, and to bring perspective and perception of citizens on local good governance, transparency and the level of citizen participation in decision-making.

**Keywords:** Citizen Participation, Local Governance, Good Governance

**Introduction**

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) [6], defines the concept of governance as:

the exercise of political, economic and administrative authority in the management of a country's affairs at all levels. Governance comprises the complex mechanisms, processes and institutions through which citizens and groups articulate their interests, mediate their differences and exercise their legal rights and obligations

There are four important aspects to understand about the concept of governance: Firstly, 'governance' does not only refer to the actions of national (and local) governments but also to other actors outside the realm of formal authority and institutions. In other words, at state level, the actors exercising governance include: central government, local government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community-based organizations (CBOs) and the private sector.

Secondly, 'governance' is not a synonym for 'management' but is essentially broader in scope covering aspects of administration, management and implementation. Thirdly, it emphasizes the process and complex relationships between the different actors and priorities involved. Fourthly, the term by itself does not denote to producing either positive or negative results. This is why the concept of 'good governance' is used.

In the context of local governments, the UNDP notes that "Decentralising government enables people

to participate more directly in governance processes and can help empower people previously excluded from decision-making."

The effects of inadequate governance to residents, especially the poor, are multiple. Without participation the needs and priorities of the poor people are not taken into account. Bureaucracy and non-transparent processes in the administration of local governments result in lower levels of revenues, and therefore also lower levels of spending on various social programmes.

**Methodology**

This paper was based on theoretical research methods and empirical data in the field. The used theories are works and researches of foreign authors and data from reports of civil society organizations working in the field of participatory democracy<sup>[2]</sup>. While empirical data consist in questionnaires and examination in the field through direct monitoring of the issue which will be addressed. We applied questionnaires to citizens in order to get their opinion on the functioning of local government and their level of participation in decision-making.

Questionnaires and direct monitoring are sufficient to address the findings and to base the arguments. The study extends the period January-December 2012, at 3 Kukës district municipalities, namely Kukës Municipality, the Municipality of Kruma and the Municipality of Bajram Curri.

## SCORECARD Methodology

For the implementation of the monitoring process of the local councils we have used a methodology, a community-based monitoring tool (Community Based Scorecards) which is a hybrid of social audit techniques, community monitoring and citizen reporting cards [3].

Being a highly flexible methodology, which makes it quite usable, we used in this monitoring process "decision makers" as the analysing unit and it focuses on the local level monitoring of decision making units. Consequently, this process aims at addressing and improving quality, efficiency, and accountability of the services that the decision-making authorities offer to community through direct observation and monitoring of council meetings.

For this purpose we have presented and analyzed in general the performance and engagement of local councilors and political parties in the following categories:

1. Making proposals in the agenda
2. Participation in the discussions during the sessions
3. Participation in discussions on behalf of the group members
4. Performance of Commissions
5. Absence in sessions
6. Unparliamentary language
7. Citizen participation in meetings

The estimates are based on direct and objective observation of the proceedings of the municipal councils.

Meanwhile, within this monitoring process we used the "community" as an analysing unit through the questionnaire, in order to monitor and evaluate the performance of services, projects and works of the administrative units of government (local councils) from the viewpoint of the community.

## CASE STUDY – KUKES REGION

### *Monitoring overview of City Councils Meetings*

#### *The Preparatory phase*

In the first phase of this process, preliminary meetings were held with Heads of Municipal Councils of Kukes, Bajram Curri and Kruma and with the Mayors. The aim of these meetings was to introduce the purpose of this monitoring process and making proposals for cooperation with the Municipal

Councils, Kukes, Bajram Curri and Kruma, in order to increase transparency and citizen participation in governance. At this stage it is worth noting that the Heads of City Councils of Kukes, Bajram Curri and Kruma and the Mayors have been very cooperative and non-obstructive.

The entire monitoring platform is based on the Law about the Organization and Functioning of the local governance [4]. The monitoring conducted during the first six months of the year served to gather information and prepare all modalities and practices that will be required to perform monitoring process and to determine the main lines in which the monitoring will be focused. Thus, during the preparatory phase is monitored the deadline and the way how the council meetings are made public, the delivery time of materials to councilors, determining the agenda of the meeting and fulfilling it.

### *Monitoring Overview – Kukes City Council, Bajram Curri and Kruma*

During this period, we have monitored 9 City Council meetings in Kukes, 6 City Council meetings in Kruma and 10 City Council meetings in Bajram Curri. All these meetings have been scheduled.

The main issues that were reviewed during the meetings were generally draft decisions. Each meeting has been attended by the municipal administration, according to the reviewed draft decision. Also, occasionally representatives of the Police, Road Traffic, representatives of Water Supply and Sewerage, citizens, (on May 14, 2012 the meeting was attended by three citizens, one man and two women who asked the council to include them in the list of beneficiaries of homelessness and Economic Assistance, whose names were approved) the media and journalists were present to provide information / report to the Council on the situation of drinking water, environment and streets of the city.

In addition to project decisions that the Council has the task and function to deal with, there are issues raised and treated by the counselors such as: disruption of water supply and sewerage systems and non-interference to improve it, improving road infrastructure, moving gambling from urban centers in Kruma Municipality, making public council decisions so that every counselor can access and revise them, etc.

### *Transparency and Media*

Decentralization and local self-governance are essential elements of public administration reform in

many countries. In order for decentralization to achieve its objectives - improving public services through approaching them to the citizens - one of the necessary ingredients is transparency.

In this context, it is needed to be analyzed for purposes of the study, the level of transparency of our local government to citizens and local decision-making unit specifically such as municipal council. For this reason, we have constantly monitored during this period the website of Kukes Municipality and Local Media TV Kukes, since these tools of information are almost more accessible by citizens.

The monitoring results have highlighted that the date and time of City Council meetings are made public in the official website of the Municipality<sup>[5]</sup> 3-4 days before the meeting and also a public notice has been posted on the bulletin board at the municipality. Also a notification is made in the Local Media, Kukes TV a day before the meeting.

Media has been present at all meetings of the Kukes City Council, but not all the session is broadcasted in the media. Monitoring media we noted that the municipal council meetings were broadcasted in a chronicle of 5-7 min in news bulletins.

However, this does not indicate data on the number of citizens who are informed on municipal council meetings and issues discussed. This aspect of monitoring we have developed it in a different form, through the questionnaire, the findings of which will be represented in this study. In this section we have identified ways in which a citizen has the opportunity to be informed and to participate in local decision making.

## **Conclusions / Results of the monitoring process**

### *Making proposals in agenda*

Almost in all meetings, the agenda of the plenary sessions has been subject to changes, there were proposals to various points that have been discussed to be included in the agenda. In all cases the agenda of the plenary session is preliminarily set few days before (5 days), and the councilors have been requested to give suggestions for issues to be addressed and included in the agenda, although almost no case has been operating this formality.

The agenda is read at the beginning of the session by the Chairman of the Council who throws to vote for approval by councilors. Generally, contestations were not made regarding the agenda, except for those

cases where recognition in advance is sought from councilors with possible additions made to the agenda and time available to review the documentation.

### *Participation in the discussions during the sessions*

The scale of members participation in discussions of the draft decision is almost satisfactory. This is reflected by their participation in debates on various aspects of the draft decision, by raising the issues and proposals to discuss during meetings.

It is noticed that the draft decisions are approved by majority of votes and characterized by few discussions and arguments. Most of the discussions are on issues not included in the agenda raised by councilors. The draft decisions voting is made in the ongoing debate, occasionally without the vote of the opposition councilors. Often councilors comments are not related to the agenda, and pass on personal and political overtones. This makes difficult the approval of draft decisions and constructive debate for the benefit of citizens.

### *Participation in discussions on behalf of the group members*

During all sessions it is noticed a commitment and participation of the heads of the groups in discussions of issues on behalf of group members. This is shown by the fact that they are first looking to take the floor during discussions.

### *Performance of Commissions*

There are problems with the functioning of the Municipal Councils commissions because they are not regularly followed by all councilors and not published anywhere.

### *Absence during sessions*

Participation of members at meetings is an average of 18-20 members per meetings in Kukes City Council, 10-15 members per meetings in Kruma and Bajram Curri City Council. Mayors of Kukes, Bajram Curri and Kruma Municipality have attended almost all meetings, and in their absence there were always their representatives in order to be in direct contact to the concerns of citizens;

A phenomenon that is obvious during this monitoring period is that the councilors stand just a few minutes at the meetings and then leave and come only in the last minutes to closure.

The monitoring shows that there is no plenary session starting on schedule/on time. Delays range from 10-15 minutes and 15-30 minutes. Generally, the duration of the meetings varies from 60-120 min.

#### *Unparliamentary language*

It is worth mentioning too much use of informal language, private loud conversations between councilors during discussions, keeping turned on the phone during meetings and telephone conversations, as well as smoking although not allowed, a lack of seriousness to listen to their colleagues during the discussions. There are many occasions when members did talk and interfere disrespecting the order. Occasionally there have been very tough discussions.

#### *Citizen's Participation in meetings*

Citizens present at the meeting have had almost in all sessions of the three councils monitored. There aren't proper structure for citizen involvement, unless citizens themselves take part in the meeting on their own initiative after they have listened the notice of the meeting in the local media or from advertisements in the bulletin board. In the monitored meetings, at the beginning of the session, as the agenda was presented, the chairman of the council asked the present citizens to express their concerns and problems whom the mayor or the council give them direct answers. Generally, citizen concerns were related to Financial Assistance Scheme and their involvement in the scheme.

#### *General Overview*

**City Council Meetings:** According to the local governance law, every citizen is free to attend open meetings of the City Council and in this case it was not necessary to obtain an authorization to attend meetings; thus attending City Council meetings has been free and open and this is also cited by the chairman of the council during meetings;

**Gender balance:** In terms of gender balance, the three leaders of Kukes City Council Meeting, the chairman and secretary are male while the deputy is female; Kukes City Council is composed of 25 members in total, 23 males and 2 females. From 5 Commissions operating in Kukes City Council, only two committees are composed of the only two female councilors:

- i. Mandates Commission (3 males)
- ii. Economy, finance and budget commission (5 males)
- iii. Urban Planning commission, public services and property (7 males)
- iv. Order, Civil Emergency, health and other social parenthood commission (4 males + 1 female)
- v. Education, Culture, Youth, Sports, Media, Civil Society and Personalities Assessments Commission (5 males+1 female)

While Bajram Curri City Council consists of 15 members in total, 9 men and 6 women councilors. From 6 Commissions operating in Bajram Curr City Council, only three committees are headed by women councilors;

**Demographics:** Among councilors, most of them are male, while a significant proportion of councilors are not young;

#### *Questionnaires Analysis – Perception of Citizens for the Local Good Governance*

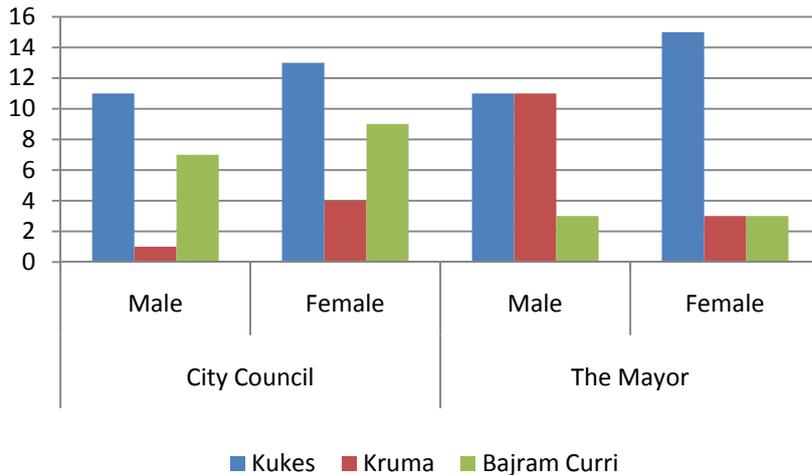
In the framework of the study, during the May-June 2012 period, a survey was conducted to analyze the local good governance in Kukes, Bajram Curri and Kruma municipalities based on the perception of citizens, voters and their representatives in decision-making. In this survey 51 people participated in Kukes Municipality, 20 persons in Kruma Municipality and 22 persons in the Municipality of Bajram Curri. Age group of respondents ranged from 20 and less - 60 + years. The total interviewed are 22 men and 29 women in the Municipality of Kukes, 10 males and 12 females in the Municipality of Bajram Curri, 11 males and 8 females in the Municipality of Kruma. Their level of education ranged from 8-year to postgraduate level

Drafting of the questionnaire was focused on several issues in order to extract data about the knowledge and information that citizens have about how local government works, what is the role of citizens in local decision making, how transparent is the local government to its citizens, what is the role of elected local councilors, if they really represent the interests of citizens, etc.

Local government bodies being closer to the citizens and their interests, are taking more and more responsibility and competences in the framework of the decentralization process, to organize and run governance in the local level. Continuity of governance in local level is provided precisely by local government units, which exercise their authority independently from the central government. But this autonomy in decision-making should be seen in different dimensions. Often it can also be misinterpreted.

The general perception of citizens on the decisions taken at the local government results such as:

In the Municipality of Kukes (Figure 1), 47% of respondents answered Municipal Council and 51% responded the Mayor. In Kruma Municipality (Figure 1), 25% of respondents answered Municipal Council and 70% responded the Mayor. In the Municipality of Bajram Curri (Figure 1), 72% of respondents answered Municipal Council and 28% responded the Mayor..

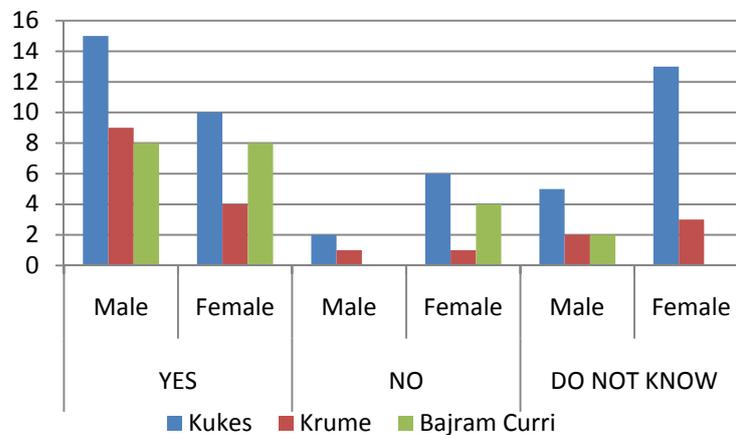


**Figure 1:** Respondents answers on ‘Who makes the decisions in LG?’- Kukes, Kruma and Bajram Curri Municipality

Practically, City Council meetings are held not less than 1 time per month as defined by the Council itself and they are valid if attended by at least 50% of the total number of Board Members.

But it turns out that a significant proportion of respondents (41%, 17 women and 4 men, Kukes Municipality) are not aware of how often the City Council meets, while 52% of respondents answered once a month (of these 10 are females and 18 males),

- In Kruma Municipality 90% answered once a month (of these 11 were males and 7 females), and 10% Do not Know (of these 1 male and 1 female).
- In the Municipality of Bajram Curri, 64% answered once a month (from these 7 are male and 7 female), and 36% Do not Know (from these 3 men and 5 women).



**Figure 2:** Respondents answers on “Are the City Council open to the public?” – Kukes, Kruma and Bajram Curri Municipality

According to the law Council meetings are open to the public and every citizen is allowed to attend any such meeting, in accordance with Council’s Rules[4]But how well informed are citizens if they are open to the public, we have the following results:

In the Municipality of Kukes (Figure 2), 49% answered YES, 16% answered NO, 35% responded Do not Know. In Kruma Municipality (Figure 2), 65% answered YES, 10% answered NO, and 23% responded Do not Know. In the Municipality of Bajram Curri (Figure 2), 73% answered YES, 18% answered NO (females) and 9% answered Do not Know (males).

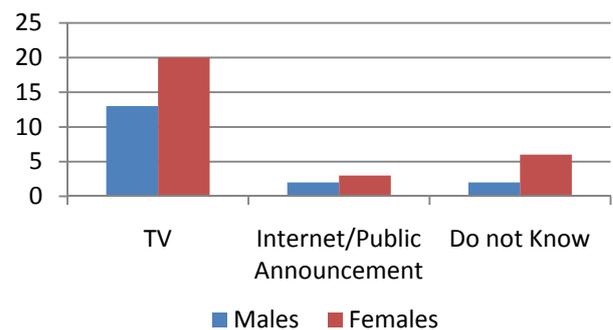
Generally, the meetings of the Council are notified in public by the Secretary of the Council, and in his absence by the Chairman or the Deputy. The notice shall include the date, place, time and agenda of the meeting. The Secretary shall notify all persons or organizations who have requested to receive regular notice of any meeting of the Council. Notice of the meeting to the public is made via:

- Local media;
- Publication on the website of the Municipality;
- Publication in the municipal hall / information office;
- Phone.

But despite that the publication of the notice of meeting and notification of interested persons are established in the law we note that these are not always respected. From the assessment on the ground, we verify that communication issues and transparency in relations to the public are key issues affecting the efficient functioning and being closer to the needs of the public as well as having a proper structure for citizen participation in decision-making.

Generally, a good part of the respondents of Kukes Municipality (Figure 3), (65%, 13 males and 20 females) expressed that the information about council meetings they take it from TV (Council meetings are published in the News Edition of the Local Media TV Kukes, a day before). 16% responded Do not Know and 4% others through the municipality's website.

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**Figure 3:** Respondents answers on “In which way the citizens get informed about the decisions taken by the City Council?” – Kukes Municipality

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The respondents of Kruma Municipality stated that they have no information on decisions issued by the City Council meetings, have no information on ways of informing citizens, some of them said they are informed by the council members.

In the Municipality of Bajram Curri respondents stated that they get information through public announcements and privately through councilors.

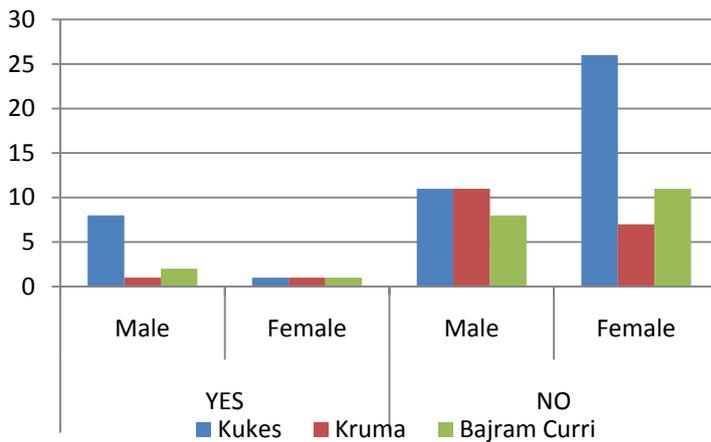
According to surveys it results that a very small proportion of people have an interest and participated in meetings of the Council.

In the Municipality of Kukës (Figure 4), 9 people expressed YES, they have participated in the meetings of the municipal council of these 8 men and 1 woman and 37 persons have expressed NO, of these 26 females and 11 males and their main reasons were related to lack of interest mostly, lack of information and because the perception of people is that these are only formal meetings.

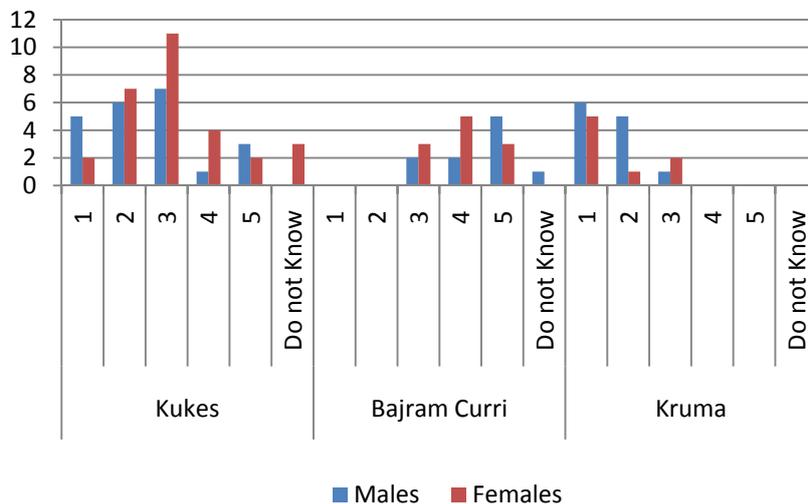
In Kruma Municipality (Figure 4), 2 people responded YES (1 female and 1 male) and 18 people responded NO (of these 11 men and 7 women). The

main reasons for nonparticipation in this case are related to the lack of interest of the citizens, but mostly from the answers it results that people do not have information on the date of the meetings of the council.

In the Municipality of Bajram Curri (Figure 4): 3 people answered YES (1 female and 2 males) and 19 people responded NO (8 men and 11 women). People who answered NO, have given various reasons such as lack of information, lack of interest, that council meetings are open to the public, etc..



**Figure 4:** Respondents answers on “Have you ever participated in the meetings of the City Council?” – Kukës, Kruma and Bajram Curri Municipality



**Figure 5:** Respondents answers on “How open the municipal offices are to the public?” – Kukës, Bajram Curri and Kruma Municipality

In addition to this issue, it is important to know what information the citizens have if they have been consulted from the Municipality for community projects and priorities related to the development of the neighborhoods and community interests and the survey shows that in Kukës Municipality very few of them responded positively and this has happened

when undertaking projects of public utilities that provides the municipality as roads, greenery, etc., while most of the respondents stated that they have no information or this is something it didn’t really happened. Approximately, the same responses have resulted in two other municipalities of Kukës Region.

If we consider community-based groups who gather inside individuals or groups based on neighborhoods, in order to raise community awareness and community organization in taking personal responsibility for a normal citizen life, in Kukes region, such groups do not exist in a real community based.

Based on our legislation for local government it is within the jurisdiction of the local government to set up different structural elements, as well as to establish clear communication relations between them when necessary. As in the case of consultative meetings that the municipality should develop with community groups for the budget. The survey conducted in Kukes Municipality showed that more than half of respondents have no information if the municipality has held consultative meetings on the budget, 19 others expressed "NEVER" and only 3 of the respondents said that the municipality has held consultative meetings each year. The same perception is almost in other municipalities of Kukes district. In

this framework it becomes important the fact that if community gets involved in planning and consultation for budget allocation, it will have more transparency and good governance, and this is confirmed by almost all respondents in municipalities of Kukes, Bajram Curri and Kruma.

If we would estimate the fact that how open the municipal offices to the public are on a 1-5 scale (where 1 is inaccessible and 5 very approachable), the perception of the majority of respondents (male and female) is on level 3 for Kukes Municipality (Fig 5), upon level 3 for Bajram Curri Municipality (Figure 5) and below level 3 for Kruma Municipality (Figure 5).

Corruption is an obstacle to the economic development of Albania and remains a serious problem that is addressed not only to the central government level. In addition, people perceive corruption in different ways and forms. Table 1 presents the questionnaire results of what people perceive as corruption in local government.

**Table 1:** Respondents answers on "Corruption Perception" – Kukes, Kruma and Bajram Curri Municipality

<i>Corruption Perception</i>	<i>Kukes Municipality</i>		<i>Kruma Municipality</i>		<i>Bajram Curri Municipality</i>	
	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
Nepotism in hiring officials	12	8	6	2	2	-
Inequality in providing tenders	11	8	7	4	6	9
Mismanagement of public funds	12	19	7	6	4	6
Bribery to officials of the Municipality	18	23	2	2	5	6

90% of respondents in Kukes Municipality said they have heard of such cases to local government and that there were no cases to be reported for various reasons such as lack of trust and confidence to the structures, but most of the respondents indicated that the biggest cause is the lack of interest of the citizens.

The same findings we see in municipalities of Kruma and Bajram Curri where almost all respondents stated that there have been cases of corruption in local government, but they are not reported precisely because of these reasons.

Local councilors can use their role to develop effective links with the community. However, the perception of citizens about the role and work of local councilors is different. On a 1-5 scale, regarding Kukes Municipality, (1 I disagree and 5 I agree), Citizens have given their ratings on the commitment and the role of councilors in fulfilling their duties. Citizens evaluation resulted as following:

47% of respondents are of the opinion that councilors are not engaged in improving the quality of life in the local community,

45% of respondents think that the councilors put their political interests before the interests of the community,

54% of respondents think that the members abuse with their positions for personal gain,

49% of respondents think that some officials get paid without being adequate for the job position,

40% of respondents think that the officials do not commit to the delivery of services in the territory of the Municipality.

*In Kruma Municipality we have these evaluations:*

75% of respondents believe that councilors are committed to improve the quality of life in the local community,

65% of respondents think that the councilors put their political interests before the interests of the community,

65% of respondents think that the members abuse with their positions for personal gain,

75% of respondents think that some officials get paid without being adequate for the job position,

55% of respondents think that officials are somewhat committed to the delivery of services in the territory of the Municipality.

*In Bajram Curri Municipality we have these evaluations:*

40% of respondents are of the opinion that councilors are not engaged in improving the quality of life in the local community,

32% of respondents think that the councilors put their political interests before the interests of the community,

30% of respondents think that the members abuse with their positions for personal gain,

36% of respondents think that some officials get paid without being adequate for the job position,

36% of respondents think that officials are somewhat committed to the delivery of services in the territory of the Municipality (most of them have ratet 3 - Average this point).

Given these perceptions of citizens and the fact that they think elected local councilors generally do not participate in council meetings to present the needs of the community but rather to promote their political agenda, for political ambition and personal gain, then maybe councilors should be work much more to improve their role and to better meet responsibilities, to better represent citizens and to be the voice of the people on the council so that they receive appropriate services and that these services be delivered in the most efficient way possible.

### **Conclusions & Recommendations**

Based on what was addressed in the paper it can be concluded that the level of participation and community mobilization in the Kukes Region is not satisfactory, being mainly at low levels. The reasons for such a thing are numerous. Lack of tradition of participation, lack of information about the importance of participation, the unwillingness of state institutions to community involvement, etc.

In order to increase the level of community participation, it is necessary to take the following steps:

- To arrange legally the active community participation right in decision-making processes;
- To organize campaigns in order to raise awareness of the importance of community

participation and the role they may have in the decision-making process;

- To raise awareness of institutional representatives that community participation in policy making makes the implementation easier;
- To give more donations in order to help to create a culture of active community participation in matters directly related to them.
- There is a need to increase transparency in the process of communication with the public by restoring trust in institutions;
- The website of the local government units should be regularly updated with information on the budget plan, departmental activities, various projects and meetings of the City Council or the various consultations and their agenda.
- Various actors / educational institutions should be engaged in education of citizens / youth on municipal functions, simultaneously cooperating with the institution to enable the practical knowledge (eg visits to municipalities, training of officials in universities, etc.)
- Youth organizations and non-profit organizations should intensify initiatives to educate young people about the role of the municipality and the importance of citizen involvement through arranging constant trainings, contests, and internship programs, etc.. At this point it is worth mentioning the YFI organization (Youth in Free Initiative), which in collaboration with the Municipality of Kukes for several years is applying an internship program with volunteers, youth, students in the municipal administration.
- It is required more attention from the media to launching positive initiatives in this direction or various municipal activities by dedicating more space to information on these issues. This can be accomplished through an institutionalized partnership municipality-media, where in exchange of practical facilities for getting information from the media, thereof, to provide a dedicated space information on the activities of the municipality.
- Involvement of all stakeholders of society, ranging from family, school, community and media in educating and raising awareness of

citizens / youth for their potential prompting civic activism.

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