

VOICES OF CHANGE: CIVIL SOCIETY'S JOURNEY IN ALBANIA'S DEMOCRATIC EVOLUTION



1990 – 2022





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C o n t e n t s

- 05 ABBREVIATIONS
- 06 FOREWORD
- 08 ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
- 11 INTRODUCTIONS

13 I. CIVIL SOCIETY FOR DEMOCRACY AND GOOD GOVERNANCE

- 14 ***I. The Rule of Law and Human Rights***
- 14 The Contribution of Civil Society in the Protection of Human Rights
- 17 Development of the Legal Framework and Policies for Children's Rights and Protection
- 19 Promoting Child-Friendly Justice for Children in Contact and in Conflict with the Law
- 21 The Law on National Minorities
- 22 Contribution of CSOs to the drafting and improvement of the legal framework in the field of disability
- 26 Opposing the "Anti-Defamation Package"
- 28 Social re-use of confiscated assets from organized crime
- 30 The contribution of civil society to the drafting and approval of the law on public consultation

- 32 ***I.2 Free and Fair Elections, Fighting Corruption, and Increasing Transparency***
- 32 The contribution of civil society in electoral processes
- 35 Reducing corruption and increasing transparency in the private sector – Creation of the National Registration Center (NRC) and the National Licensing Center (NLC)
- 36 Assessing Corruption Gaps in Albanian Legislation
- 38 Reduction of corruption through the law "On Whistleblowing and Whistleblowers Protection"

- 40 ***I.3 Participation in policy-making and decision-making processes***
- 40 Towards a more developed, active, and sustainable civil society
- 43 Citizens and stakeholders' participation in the administrative-territorial reform of the country

- 45 Building institutional capacities for public engagement and public consultation
- 46 Multi-Functional Platform in Support of Local Democracy
- 48 Contribution of civil society to digital democracy
- 49 Democracy as a Procedure: Petitions

53 II. PROVISION OF SERVICES FOR GROUPS IN NEED AND THE WIDER COMMUNITY

- 54 Protection and Reintegration of Victims of Trafficking
- 56 Establishment and Operation of Centers for Child Protection
- 58 Harm Reduction for Drug Users and Prevention of HIV/AIDS and STIs
- 60 Integrated social services for the family
- 62 Quality and accessible services for people with disabilities and their parents
- 71 Residential Services in Support the LGBTI+ Community
- 72 Development of Volunteerism in Albania

77 III. THE CONTRIBUTION OF CIVIL SOCIETY TO GENDER EQUALITY

- 78 Reproductive Rights of Girls and Women and the Law "On Termination of Pregnancy"
- 79 The Contribution of Civil Society Organizations to the Family Code
- 81 Improvement of the Legal Framework for Domestic Violence
- 83 Increasing Women's Participation in Politics and Decision-Making
- 85 Provision of Services to Support Women and Girls Surviving Violence

89 IV. ENVIROMENTAL PROTECTION

- 90 Green Lungs for Our Cities
- 91 The contribution of Civil Society in Waste Management
- 93 Fostering public participation in environmental decision-making
- 96 Protection of Wildlife and Areas of Natural Importance
- 99 Protection of the Vjosa River Valley – Vjosa National Park

Abbreviations

ADRF	Albanian Disability Rights Foundation
AHC	Albanian Helsinki Committee
AOS	Albanian Ornithological Society
ASPA	Albanian School of Public Administration
BE	European Union
CDO	Coalition of Domestic Observers
CPU	Child Protection Unit
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
CSO	Civil Society Organizations
FATF	The Financial Action Task Force
HIDAACI	The High Inspectorate for the Declaration and Audit of Assets and Conflict of Interest
IDRA	Institute for Development, Research and Alternatives
NBC	National Registration Business Center
NLC	National Licensing Business Center
NPO	Non-for-Profit Organization
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PA	Partners Albania for Change and Development
PPNEA	Protection and Preservation of Natural Environment in Albania
REC	Resource Environmental Center Albania
TAR	Territorial Administrative Reform
UNDP	United Nations Development Program



Juliana Hoxha

Director

Partners Albania for Change and Development

Forward

I am very honored to introduce this seminal publication of Partners Albania for Change and Development (Partners Albania), that provides a comprehensive overview of the civil society sector in Albania from the year 1990 to 2022. It stands as a testament to the transformative journey of civil society organizations (CSOs) in the post-communist landscape of Albania, highlighting their significant role in fostering democratic participation, advocating for human rights, combating corruption, and addressing various social needs.

As Albania transitioned from communism, civil society emerged as a cornerstone in the establishment and development of democratic institutions and processes. The publication showcases the influential role played by CSOs in shaping laws, public policies, and institutional reforms. It captures the essence of these organizations' efforts in championing gender equality, environmental protection, and providing services to marginalized groups, thus reflecting the diverse spectrum of their contributions.

However, the document also acknowledges the challenges faced by the civil society sector in Albania. It provides a balanced view, discussing the obstacles and limitations that have impeded the sector's effectiveness and growth. Through a consultative process involving various CSO representatives, this publication not only highlights the achievements but also serves as a repository of best practices and initiatives that have marked the sector's role in the country's development.

For Partners Albania, as the authoring organization, this publication is not just a chronicling of events; it reflects our commitment to transparency, innovation, and inclusiveness. It serves as both a historical account and a strategic roadmap, outlining our vision for a robust, effective, and inclusive civil society framework in Albania. As a resource, it is invaluable for academics, policymakers, and all stakeholders interested in the civil society sector's role in shaping modern Albania.

In conclusion, I invite readers to delve into the narrative of civil society in Albania, reflecting on the past lessons and looking forward to the future. On our end, we remain dedicated to fostering positive change and development, loyal to our mission, deeply embedded in the principles of sustainable development and democratic participation.

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INTRODUCTION

Civil Society in Albania

Civil society in Albania has had a short but intensive history in its development since the 1990s. Human rights organizations were among the first to be established, with the first formal organization founded in December 1990 - the Forum for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, which was later named "Albanian Helsinki Committee."

The other large group of non-governmental organizations and interest groups that developed were women's rights organizations. In addition to human rights and women's organizations and associations, the post-communist transition period saw the development of new forms of organizations known as "think tanks." Other areas that received attention included services, youth, environment, economic development, and media.

In the early 1990s, with the contribution of civil society was drafted the new Constitution of Albania, which became an important tool for promoting democracy and human rights. At the same time, civil society helped build new democratic institutions in the country and improve democratic systems and processes. The 1997 crisis and the war in Kosovo, as well as the housing of one million refugees from Kosovo in Albania in 1999, mark two other important periods for the country, where the role and contribution of civil society were very important and supportive in coping with the "extraordinary situation" and the civil emergency in the country.

In the early 2000s, many new organizations were established in various fields. While traditional civil society organizations, such as those in the fields of human rights and environmental protection, remained consistently active, new organizations focusing on social and technological innovation also emerged.

In recent years, civil society has helped address successive crises such as the devastating earthquake of November 26, 2019, and the Covid-19 pandemic, both at the local and national levels, by mobilizing their resources to provide support during the emergency period. They served as information link points between affected families and those providing food and other necessary materials.

In 30 years of civil society development in Albania, the sector has made significant progress. Civil society organizations have become influential factors in the social, economic, cultural, and political life of the country. Today, civil society in Albania is diverse and includes various organizations that focus on and contribute to addressing the country's social, economic, environmental, cultural, technological, and political challenges.



I.

*CIVIL SOCIETY FOR
DEMOCRACY AND
GOOD GOVERNANCE*

1.1 The Rule of Law and Human Rights

THE CONTRIBUTION OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Civil society plays a critical role in protecting and promoting human rights, being a voice for those who might otherwise not be heard. It monitors and reports human rights violations, pressures governments and institutions to take corrective action, and helps educate and raise public awareness about human rights. Through these actions, civil society organizations contribute to building a fairer and more conscious society.

Good Practices of the Albanian Helsinki Committee

Since its establishment on December 16, 1990, the Albanian Helsinki Committee has played a leading role in educating Albanian society about the international human rights framework. The AHC's activity abroad is known as a result of public reactions, open statements, and contributions made to the Venice Commission on important issues such as: extending the mandate of the vetting bodies; cases of loss of life of citizens deprived of their liberty under the supervision and authority of public institutions; restrictive government measures of a shrinking nature taken against the civil society space in the country and region, etc.

In recent years, due to the development of important reforms in the country, as well as the consequences generated by external factors in the political and social context in Albania, the AHC has proactively contributed to the implementation of the Justice Reform, the establishment and proper functioning of the new governance bodies of the justice system; the fight against corruption and the involvement of youth and the general public as key actors in promoting accountability, transparency and responsibility of state authorities; preventing and combating terrorism and violent extremism, with a special focus on hot-spot areas in our country, as well as penitentiary institutions; monitoring the level of respect for fundamental human rights and freedoms, through verification and monitoring visits in the field and in responsible institutions; combating illegal trafficking in human beings and monitoring the guarantee of procedural rights for migrants and asylum seekers; as well as providing legal and technical-legislative assistance to citizens, informal groups of citizens and representatives of civil

society organizations, to address various social causes or issues affecting their interests, through petitions, legislative initiatives to the Parliament of the Republic of Albania, or referrals to the Constitutional Court for elements deemed to violate constitutional and conventional provisions.

The death penalty and the discussion about it became an important issue after Albania's accession to the Council of Europe in 1995. On November 10, 1999, the Albanian Helsinki Committee took the initiative of organizing a roundtable on the death penalty, with the valuable participation of jurists, justice professionals, and psychologists. The European Convention on Human Rights had excluded this action and prohibited its implementation in peacetime. Albania was asked by the Council of Europe to abolish the death penalty. As part of the roundtable organized, international and global statistics were also highlighted. The Albanian Helsinki Committee requested the President to replace the death penalty with life imprisonment. The Constitutional Court, through its December 1999 decision, took into considerations the issues raised by the AHC, giving a final solution by abolishing the death penalty in our country.

The Albanian Helsinki Committee, in defending the high interests of the general public, has set in motion the Constitutional Court for 9 legal and by-legal acts, the provisions of which, from the AHC's perspective, clash with the Constitution or with the conventional acts ratified by the Republic of Albania. In 7 cases, the Constitutional Court has accepted the AHC's request, and these cases correspond to important issues for the public interest or affected communities, such as: the use of the polygraph on employees of the State Police and the Republican Guard; wiretapping and tracking of perpetrators of criminal offenses by the State Police, without prior approval from the Prosecutor's Office; incrimination of suspected perpetrators for intentional spread of infectious diseases due to negligence, or in cases where serious health consequences resulted from the commission of the criminal offense, etc. After being set in motion by the AHC, the Constitutional Court on its own initiative decided to repeal some of the provisions of the Criminal Code that provide for fixed sentences, as well as the abolition of the institute of sentence reduction or the imposition of a more lenient type of punishment since for criminal offenses that provide for up to 3 years in prison, the generally provided minimum was 5 days in prison and a fine was previously provided for as a type of punishment.

The Albanian Helsinki Committee has provided free legal aid to citizens unable to afford it and in difficult socio-economic conditions, ensuring they are represented by a chosen lawyer. Legal representation of citizens' interests has been provided in country and international courts, including the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg.

During its approximately 32-year activity in our country, the Albanian Helsinki Committee has systematically monitored the prison system and closed institutions (including police stations and accommodation facilities for asylum seekers/refugees). The purpose of these missions has been and remains the verification of the situation and level of respect for the fundamental rights and freedoms of citizens by public and private entities. After continuous appeals, based on the concerning findings and inhumane treatment in the Zaharia prison, where citizens against whom the Court had imposed a “medical measure” had been isolated for decades, the Albanian Government was adamantly called upon to take measures for the closure of this institution. After years of institutional silence, the AHC has represented the legitimate interests of citizens belonging to this vulnerable community, to the local and international judicial institutions. After the closure of the Zaharia prison in November 2021, and in the absence of the establishment of a special institution, and the transfer of citizens to two buildings of the Lezha prison, the AHC has called for measures to be taken to rigorously implement the decision of the Strasbourg Court. The AHC has maintained the public stance of considering this transfer as a temporary solution, and the need to take steps to expedite the guarantee of dignified treatment according to legal criteria and standards for this category of patients.

The Result

Civil society organizations have played a crucial role in protecting human rights in Albania and strengthening democracy in the country. Representation and protection of Albanian citizens in national and international courts, providing free legal aid to hundreds of citizens, and changes and improvements to the legal framework and policies are some of the main outcomes of the Albanian Helsinki Committee’s activities over the years.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND POLICIES FOR CHILDREN’S RIGHTS AND PROTECTION

After the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1992, Albania adopted the Strategy for Children and Action Plan for the period 2001-2005 in support of the Constitution and Convention on the Rights of the Child, as a result of the efforts of civil society organizations to

improve the legal framework for guaranteeing children's rights. The first strategy for children also brought about the establishment of the first child protection structures at the central and local levels.

With the support of civil society organizations and in cooperation with the child protection secretariat at the Ministry level, in 2008, the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities (MLSAEO) developed the framework law "On the Protection of Children's Rights". The law, adopted in 2010, defined children's rights and protection, the authorities responsible for enforcing these rights, as well as special care for children. This law enabled the official recognition of the Child Protection Unit (CPU) based on the previous piloting and the creation of multidisciplinary groups for the protection, referral and case analysis of children at risk in the municipality/commune territory. These new structures, fully supported by civil society organizations for their establishment, equipment, work protocols and capacity building, brought about a development in setting up a comprehensive and functional child protection mechanism with dedicated structures and personnel to provide this service. This law supported the strengthening of a comprehensive and functional mechanism for child protection and the guarantee of children's rights.

Following the improvement and strengthening of mechanisms to guarantee not only the protection but also the full rights of children, a new Law on Children's Rights and Protection was proposed. Local and international civil society organizations such as Terre des hommes, World Vision, Save the Children, UNICEF, the National Association Education for Life (SHKEJ), the Initiative for Social Change ARSIS, Partners for Children, etc. were very proactive in this process. Law no. 18/2017 "On the Rights and Protection of Children" in the Republic of Albania was adopted on 23.2.2017 and entered into force on 9.6.2017. The law defined the rights and protection enjoyed by every child, the mechanisms and responsible authorities that effectively guarantee the exercise, respect, promotion of these rights, as well as the special protection of the child.

Civil society organizations made efforts to legitimize this protocol not only in the context of implementing the law on the protection of children's rights but also in engaging the main Ministries responsible for the issue of child protection. For this purpose, with the efforts and support of civil society organizations, an interministerial order was approved and signed between the four main ministries responsible for the issue of child protection in Albania: the Ministry of Social Welfare and Youth, the Ministry of Interior Affairs, the Ministry of Education and Sports and the Ministry of Health. This order required all child protection professionals, including members of

the multi-disciplinary/intersectoral teams from the health, education and law enforcement sectors, to apply and respect the “Work Protocol for Child Protection”.

Another contribution was the drafting of the first National Action Plan for the identification, immediate intervention, and protection of children in street situations in Albania. This process contributed to the drafting of the first guide for field teams for the identification, immediate intervention and protection of children in street situations, as well as in the DCM no. 129, dated 13.3.2019 “On the procedures for the identification, immediate assistance and referral of economically exploited children, including children in street situations”, initiated and supported by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

Throughout the global COVID-19 pandemic, the Ministry of Health, and Social Protection (MHSP), with the support of Terre des hommes and Save the Children, drafted and approved the by-legal act no. 253 dt.10.04.2020 “On the management of cases of children in need of protection during the natural disaster period due to the Covid 19 epidemic”.

Also, the implementation of the law on child protection brought suggestions for improvement, including not only measures for the protection of children but also for guaranteeing their rights. For this purpose, in 2017, the revised law on children’s rights and protection was adopted. This new law also strengthened the child protection mechanism by including the protection and emergency measures for the protection of children, including procedures, structures, and specialized personnel for child protection.

This law contributed to the adoption of a series of by-legal acts to strengthen the child protection system. 236 child protection workers have been employed in the Child Protection Units throughout Albania, which accounts for almost 52% of the workers needed and requested to meet the needs for child protection and guarantee their rights. According to the 4-year monitoring report of the National Agenda for Children’s Rights 2017-2020, out of 236 employees, only 45 work full-time in this position at the Child Protection Units.

Also, an important initiative within the framework of guaranteeing children’s rights and their protection as a result of a multi-year commitment of organizations such as Save the Children, Bethany, UNICEF, the Initiative for Social Change ARSIS and the SOS villages in Albania, is the drafting of the National De-institutionalization Plan, by decision no. 706 dated 09.09.2020. This plan came as an effort to transform residential social care services into community-based services with a family base.

Civil society organizations in the field of child protection have undertaken the initiative of

drafting Local Child Protection Plans at the municipal level, initially as separate plans, and later as integrated plans in the local social plans. Save the children has assisted the Municipalities of Gjirokastra, Shkodra, Burrel in drafting child protection plans which have been approved by a municipal council decision.

The Result

Child protection civil society organizations in coalition, have contributed to advocating for a dedicated children's law to recognize the structures and mechanisms established for child protection. The adoption of the children's law has brought about some achievements: 1) The inclusion in national legislation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) as a legal obligation as a signatory and ratifying country; 2) The recognition and institutionalization of the Child Protection Unit (CPU) as the basic structure for child protection; 3) The creation of local and central mechanisms for the protection of children's rights. Even after the adoption of the first law on child protection, civil society organizations have worked hard to improve and revise it, based on the challenges identified during its implementation.

PROMOTING CHILD-FRIENDLY JUSTICE FOR CHILDREN IN CONTACT AND IN CONFLICT WITH THE LAW

Civil society organizations have worked together and developed a strong partnership in the field of juvenile justice, particularly in establishing juvenile justice mechanisms, providing child-friendly justice for children in conflict/contact with the law, particularly targeting vulnerable groups, as well as modelling relevant services in terms of prevention, treatment, and re-integration of children in contact/conflict with the law. This intervention served as a basis for the significant advocacy work carried out by civil society to legalize the approach of juvenile justice and to develop a specific Juvenile Justice Code.

Good practices of civil society for child protection centers

Save the Children (SC) in cooperation with the Albanian Foundation "Conflict Resolution & Reconciliation of Disputes" (AFCR) and the Center for Integrated Legal Practices and Services (CILPS), have provided a set of interventions in the field of juvenile justice, aiming at promoting and creating child-friendly services and opportunities for children in contact with the law.

These interventions have included capacity building for justice system professionals on: the child-friendly justice approach and its application in the justice systems in our country, alternative sanctions and restorative justice; mediation and conflict management, etc., as well as the development of manuals and work protocols for justice system professionals (police, prosecutors, judges, bailiffs) as well as professionals of social services (social workers and psychologists) to provide child-friendly services for children in conflict and contact with the law and the application of restorative justice. Another valuable intervention was the creation of child-friendly spaces for children in conflict with the law within the Regional Police Directorates and the rehabilitation of existing structures.

Interventions by the civil society sector focused on children, from organizations such as Save the Children, Terre des hommes, UNICEF, etc., have supported the creation of an integrated referral mechanism for children in contact with the law who are below the minimum age of criminal responsibility. This mechanism is implemented with protocols signed between key actors involved (judges, prosecutors, police, social services, probation offices) to ensure a coordinated approach based on proper assessments of needs and focused on the best interests of the child.

The Result

Restorative justice for children in contact with and in conflict with the law has developed over the past decade due to the interventions of civil society organizations. Over the years, these organizations have managed to establish and strengthen an inclusive juvenile justice system through advocacy for policy development aimed at preventing juvenile crime, protecting children at risk, and those in contact with the law, with particular attention to child victims and witnesses. Additionally, the introduction and implementation of alternative sentencing mechanisms for children have been achieved, aiming to remove children from formal legal processes and reduce the use of pre-trial detention for minors in contact with the law, by strengthening access to adequately monitored alternative measures to ensure their effectiveness.

THE LAW ON NATIONAL MINORITIES

Civil society plays an essential role in protecting and promoting the rights of national minorities, ensuring that their interests and concerns are part of the public dialogue and political agendas. It helps in detecting and combating discrimination, supporting minority cultures and languages, encouraging their equal representation in governing structures, etc. Civil society organizations work diligently to raise awareness among society and the government about the importance of respecting and supporting the rights of these communities.

CSOs in Defense of the Roma Minority and the New Law on National Minorities

The “Institute of Romani Culture in Albania”, in partnership with “Roma Active Albania”, “Voice of Roma” and USHTEN, as part of the National Advocacy Coalition for Roma in Albania - NACRIA and in collaboration with civil society organizations operating in the field of human rights, has actively participated in the consultative processes to complete the normative framework on the protection of national minorities in the country. For this purpose, in 2017, IRCA coordinated the collection of comments and recommendations from Roma civil society on the draft law on the protection of national minorities. Likewise, in 2018, a complete analysis was sent on 12 draft decisions of bylaws for the implementation of the law on the protection of minorities. Although 9 of these draft decisions have been approved, the consultation process for the last 3 draft decisions is still ongoing.

After the adoption of the law, the Roma civil society organizations in Albania have also consulted with representatives and activists of national minorities in Albania, and taking into account also the recommendations of the resolution on the fourth report that Albania has submitted for the implementation of the Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, they have submitted their recommendations for the three draft decisions still in the process of being approved.

The Result

Until 2017 there was no specific legal framework for the protection of minorities. The rights of minorities were defined in various laws of the country's legal system, allowing several deficiencies in the recognition of minorities as well as in the protection of their rights. The rights guaranteed by the Law include the right to freely express their affiliation, to preserve and develop their identity, specific elements that characterize the life of their community, learning their mother tongue, cultural activity, exercising religious worship, etc.

For the first time in the history of the Albanian state, this law includes a definition that excludes inconsistencies in the legal criteria required for the recognition of minority status. According to the definition, Albanian legislation officially recognizes nine minorities, Greeks, Aromanians, Roma, Serbs, Montenegrins, Macedonian, previously recognized as minorities but without any legal basis, as well as Bosnians, Bulgarians and Egyptians who were recognized as national minorities for the first time with the adoption of the new law. Also, the law eliminates the division between the categories of "national minorities" (a status previously held by the Greek, Macedonian, Montenegrin and Serbian minorities) and "linguistic minorities" (a status previously held by the Roma and Aromanian minorities). The new law includes all minority groups in one category, that of national minorities, excluding any discrimination based on their status.

CONTRIBUTION OF CSOS TO THE DRAFTING AND IMPROVEMENT OF THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK IN THE FIELD OF DISABILITY

Civil society is a key actor in protecting and advocating for the rights of people with disabilities, striving for their better and equal inclusion in society. It contributes to raising public and government awareness of the issues faced by this segment of the population and promotes the creation of suitable and accessible environments for all. Through the activities of civil society organizations, the importance of equal treatment and the guarantee of full rights for persons with disabilities is emphasized, helping to build a more aware and inclusive society.

Non-governmental organizations in the field of disability have had a significant impact on

changes and improvements to the legal framework and policies in Albania. The above changed the vision of treating disability, treating it as a human rights issue and orienting the assessment and treatment approach towards the bio-psycho-social model of disability, in accordance with international standards. Over the years, disability organizations have strongly influenced the mainstreaming of disability issues into laws and policies drafted for all Albanian citizens.

The impact of organizations in the field of disability led to the inclusion of some of the most important services in the legal framework, in accordance with age, for persons with disabilities. This also changed the approach to equal inclusion in education, employment, and vocational training by ensuring accessibility and reasonable accommodations for every child and adult with disabilities. These changes were significant and addressed disability as a responsibility shared by many sectors and institutions in Albania.

Since 2006, organizations in the field of disability have been periodically involved in monitoring the implementation of the legal and policy framework in the country, as well as in preparing shadow reports focused on the implementation of international documents and conventions ratified by the Albanian State.

Some of the initiatives and contributions of organizations in the field of disability, which have played a crucial role in drafting and improving the legal framework for disability, are presented below.

Drafting and improving the legal framework

Organizations working in the field of disability such as the Albanian Disability Rights Foundation (ADRF), the “Help Life” Association, Save the Children, World Vision, MEDPAK, the Association for the Assistance of the Mentally Handicapped, the Association of Disabled Workers of Albania, the Association of the Blind of Albania, the Albanian National Association of the Deaf (ANAD), Down Syndrome Albania, Jonathan Center, the Association for Women and Children, the Association of Paraplegic and Tetraplegic Individuals, etc. initiated the drafting of specific laws for different disability groups in the early years of the transition process in Albania (1994-2000). Subsequently, in the period 2002-2022, they were involved in a process of advocacy, cooperation, consultation and partnership with the government in drafting policy documents and laws, through which disability was treated as a multi-sectoral and multi-dimensional issue.

NPOs in the field of disability took the initiative to include disability and related issues in laws and strategies on employment, services, infrastructure, education and electoral processes. More than 25 legal and sub-legal acts, as well as policy documents related mainly to the rights of people with disabilities, have been improved due to the lobbying and advocacy efforts of NPOs in the field. Interventions have focused on all areas, including the field of social services.

Some of the key legal proposals have aimed at and addressed the drafting and amendment of the legal and policy framework as follows:

Some of the key legal proposals that have aimed at and addressed the drafting and amendment of the legal and policy framework, are as follows:

- Ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities by the Albanian Government (Law no. 108/2012).
- Ensuring accessibility, as a prerequisite to guarantee access to services, becoming part of the drafting process, as well as the approval of documents and laws that guarantee the rights of persons with disabilities. Advocacy and legal expertise enabled the drafting and approval of: (i) the Package of Urbanistic and Architectural Norms (approved by the Council of Territorial Regulation in December 2003); (ii) Urban Planning Regulation, which includes the Package of Urban Planning and Architectural Norms, approved by the Council of Ministers in June 2004; (iii) Law "On Territorial Planning", approved in 2009; (iv) VKM No. 1503 "On the approval of the regulation for the use of spaces by persons with disabilities", approved in November 2009.
- Expertise in legal changes related to the employment of people with disabilities, including changes to the Employment Promotion Law, the Labor Code and secondary legislation.
- Education: In the early 2000s, NPOs started to promote inclusive education in Albania. In 2002, the Ministry of Education and Sports approved for the first time the "Preschool Education Normative Provisions", which included the concept of inclusive education. Law No. 69/2012 "On Pre-University Education", broadly included the concepts of inclusion in education of children with disabilities, again thanks to the influential efforts and expertise provided by civil society organizations.

- Social Protection: Since 1994, organizations of people with disabilities have assisted in improving the social protection laws, such as the law “On the status of the disabled”, the law “On the status of the blind”, “On the status of individuals before tetraplegia”, the Law “On the recognition of sign language”, as well as the drafting of the “Standards of Social Care services”.
- Rights of girls and women with disabilities: NPOs have promoted gender equality, empowering girls and women with disabilities and helping them take a leadership role in important public issues. Issues of violence against girls and women with disabilities are included in Law No. 47/2018, “On measures against violence in family relationships”, as well as in the National Strategy for Gender Equality and the Action Plan, 2016-2020.
- National Strategies and Action Plans: Organizations have played an important role in the design and adoption of national strategies for people with disabilities such as the National Action Plan for Persons with Disabilities 2016-2020 and 2021-2025 as well as for positive changes in Law no. 93/2014, dated 24.7.2014 “On Inclusion and Accessibility for Persons with Disabilities”, but also in the drafting and approval of political documents of the legal framework, including the Constitutional Reform, the Political Document for Social Inclusion 2016-2020, Law no. 22/2018, “On social housing”.
- Advocacy and expertise for the drafting of local plans: Civil society organizations have helped in the drafting of local plans for people with disabilities, with a focus on guaranteeing social services.

The Result

Organizations working in the field of disability have played a crucial role in protecting the rights of persons with disabilities in Albania. By focusing their interventions on advocating for the drafting and improvement of legislation for the rights of persons with disabilities, these NPOs have contributed to the adoption of over 25 legal acts and policy documents that protect and guarantee the rights of this category in society. These include issues such as physical and environmental accessibility, information and communication, inclusive education, employment and vocational training, social protection, and the rights of girls and women with disabilities, as well as equality under the law and access to justice.

Their impact in promoting and enabling the inclusion of disability issues in laws and policies for all, changing the perspective on disability treatment, and addressing it as a human rights issue are some of the concrete achievements of initiatives undertaken by civil society organizations in the field of disability. The results are evident in the increased inclusion of persons with disabilities in Albanian society.

OPPOSING THE “ANTI-DEFAMATION PACKAGE”

Civil society plays an essential role in protecting and promoting freedom of the media, an important pillar of a state's democracy. It draws attention to, denounces, and opposes any attempt at censorship, interference with the independence of journalists, or restrictions on freedom of expression. Civil society organizations support journalists in difficult situations, hold authorities accountable for attacks on the media, and help educate the public on the importance of a free and independent media. Through monitoring, reporting, and advocacy, civil society contributes to creating an environment where the media can function without fear and where freedom of expression remains a priority.

The Role of Civil Society in Opposing the “Anti-Defamation Package”

In December 2018, the Albanian government made a series of amendments to Law No. 97/2013 “On Audiovisual Media” as part of the so-called “Anti-Defamation Package”.

According to the explanatory report accompanying the draft law, the purpose of this legislative initiative was to discipline the media in general and online media in particular, due to their increasing influence in various aspects of the country's public life.

The reaction of civil society organizations such as BIRN Albania, Civil Rights Defenders, Citizen Channel, Faktoje Center, Albanian Media Institute, Albanian Institute of Science, Albanian Media Council, Res Publica Center, Albanian MediaLook Center, Albanian Center for Quality Journalism, Association of Professional Journalists of Albania, Union of Albanian Journalists, etc., was immediate. They joined forces to oppose the anti-defamation package.

For more than a year, the draft law was the subject of debate between the government, civil society organizations, and parliament. Despite the amendments presented in the various drafts by experts engaged by international organizations, the fundamental purpose of the draft law to regulate online media through an administrative entity was not changed.

According to local and international media freedom organizations, the regulation of online media through an administrative body - whose members are elected by political parties - went against international best practices, which emphasize that self-regulation is the most effective way to combat disinformation, propaganda, and fake news.

Until the vote in parliament, human rights and media freedom civil society organizations reacted several times against the so-called "anti-defamation" package, calling for the rejection of the drafts. Although the parliament held consultations with representatives of the media, civil society, and journalism academics before the vote in December 2019, civil society organizations considered the process non-transparent and stressed the lack of access to the various draft laws. As a result, the vote on the draft law in parliament on December 18, 2019, took place in an atmosphere of mistrust, with journalists and civil society activists protesting outside parliament.

The continuous opposition and protests by civil society actors led to the non-decree of the law by the President of the Republic on January 11, 2020, and the consideration of the amendments proposed by the Venice Commission. The latter's opinion, published on June 19, 2020, once again confirmed the importance of the concerns raised by civil society organizations and the negative consequences that this law would have on media freedom if passed in the proposed format. This recommendation was also included by the European Commission in the conditions set for Albania in the country's European integration process.

The Result

All the steps taken made it clear that the resistance and scrutiny of such an act were strong and determined. As a result, the draft law, which would have had significant implications if it had passed, never managed to gain the necessary support to pass in parliament. This failure made it clear the need for self-regulatory mechanisms and initiatives that would better respect the involved interests and concerns. While parliament has the right to propose and review laws, this intervention by different actors demonstrated the power of participatory democracy and the importance of dialogue and consensus.

SOCIAL REUSE OF CONFISCATED ASSETS FROM ORGANIZED CRIME

The progress in implementation of the Justice Reform and establishment of its institutions increased the focus on tracking crime-related revenues through asset recovery. In this context, there emerged a growing potential for the social re-use of confiscated assets from organized crime, presenting a clear opportunity to demonstrate that the legitimate economy can be more efficient than the illegal one, by aligning public interest with economic sustainability.

C.A.U.S.E – Confiscated Assets Used for Social Experimentations

In 2016 Partners Albania, in collaboration with the Agency of the Administration of Seized and Confiscated Assets started the implementation of C.A.U.S.E – Confiscated Assets Used for Social Experimentations, financed by the European Union. The first initiative of its kind in Albania and the Western Balkans, C.A.U.S.E established a model of social re-use of confiscated assets from organized crime by civil society organizations in the region, as a valid tool to reaffirm the value of legality and citizens' actions against organized crime.

Applying an innovative approach, focused on the promotion and development of the culture of social entrepreneurship and fight against organized crime, C.A.U.S.E provided knowledge, skills and financial support to CSOs for the establishment of social enterprises in confiscated assets from the organized crime.

The first three social enterprises established on confiscated properties were:

KeBuono, a social pastry that offers a variety of pastry products, as well as integration activities with children and parents, adolescents, students, and women, aiming to build a culture of legality and nonviolence in the community.

KinFolk Coffee Library, a social initiative that transformed a confiscated asset into a friendly environment for young people.

Social Crafting Garage, a workshop where women and girls - victims or at risk from the organized crime and domestic violence, make handicrafts using natural stones from the beach (colorful, one color, -at, rock, glassy, etc.).

The Result

CAUSE managed to transform three confiscated assets from the organized crime in three different cities of Albania into environments that provide:

- Education, employment and integration opportunities for marginalized groups, affected or in risk to be affected by organized crime;
- Products and services for citizens;
- Social, cultural and awareness raising activities for the community.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF CIVIL SOCIETY TO THE DRAFTING AND APPROVAL OF THE LAW ON PUBLIC CONSULTATION

Before 2014, the public consultation process in Albania was not formalized and oriented towards citizens and civil society. Although there were efforts to engage the public and civil society in decision-making, this process was sporadic and formal. Despite cases where different governments held consultative meetings on some specific issues, the lack of a clear legal and regulatory framework made this process unpredictable and without a clear structure. Although many NPOs and civil society organizations were active and tried to influence policymaking, they faced difficulties in their continuous and structured involvement in the consultation process. After 2014, with the help of international organizations and pressure from civil society, Albania has undertaken important reforms to improve the public consultation process and move towards more inclusive and democratic governance.

Adoption of the law “On notification and public consultation”

On October 30, 2014, Albania adopted the law “On notification and public consultation”, no. 146/2014, an act entirely dedicated to the procedures to be followed for an effective public consultation process. This law entered into force in May 2015. The law on notification and public consultation came as part of the package proposed by civil society to meet the need for more transparent governance and the undertaking of policies and legislative initiatives including interested citizens, NPOs, etc.. Respublica Centre, The Open Society Foundation in Albania and other civil society actors, encouraged the adoption of this law and contributed during its drafting and consultation.

The law was adopted three years after the Albanian government’s engagement in the Open Government Partnership (OGP) with an active role of civil society organizations (BalkanInsight, 2014). The progress made at that time with the contribution of civil society is also noted in the 2014-2016 OGP report, as well as in the 2014 IPA program. Also, Albania’s ranking in the “Nations in Transit 2015” Report improved somewhat as a result of these legal changes (Freedom House, 2015). NPOs have played a very important role in drafting the law and lobbying for its adoption. Subsequently, some organizations such as the Open Society

Foundation in Albania, Respublica Center, Partners Albania for Change and Development, the Institute for Democracy and Mediation, etc. have monitored the continuity of the law's implementation by providing concrete recommendations for its improvement.

The Result

Civil society has played an important role in the public consultation processes in Albania, becoming the voice of citizens and striving to make decision-making as inclusive as possible and reflective of everyone's interests. For all critical legislative changes and various policies that have been adopted or are under consideration, civil society organizations have helped organize meetings, public debates, and information sessions to understand citizens' concerns and get their opinions.

Through these interventions, civil society has emphasized the importance of transparency, participation, and informing of citizens. This has helped create a new culture of decision-making, where the government and other institutions are more sensitive to the needs and demands of the public.

However, the public consultation process still faces many challenges to ensure it is not merely a formal procedure but a key instrument for ensuring that decision-making is balanced and fair. The interaction between civil society and institutions is also not yet meeting the expectations of democratic and transparent governance, and there is still much to be done in building mutual trust and increasing transparency and accountability.

I.2 Free and Fair Elections, Fighting Corruption, and Increasing Transparency

THE CONTRIBUTION OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN ELECTORAL PROCESSES

In any democracy, the electoral process is a crucial moment for determining the country's governance. In Albania, civil society has played an important role in the electoral process through monitoring and reporting on the process, as well as encouraging active citizen participation in elections. Albanian civil society has a long and rich history of engagement in electoral processes, closely following the process, regularly reporting on how elections are conducted, and exposing various cases of electoral corruption.

Good Practices of the Society for Democratic Culture

One of the non-governmental organizations that has played an important role in this regard is the Society for Democratic Culture (SDC), which has monitored all electoral processes since 1992 [including 9 parliamentary elections (1992, 1996, 1997, 2001, 2005, 2009, 2013, 2017, 2021), 8 local elections (1996, 1998, 2000, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019) and 2 referendums (1994, 1998)] and engaged around 1000-1500 independent observers across the country in each electoral process. SDC is one of the first non-governmental organizations in the country that has followed the work of the Electoral Reform Commission throughout and has contributed with specific recommendations to help finalize a final document, which would contain all the common points identified by political forces with consensus among them.

In the period 2005-2017, SDC together with KRIIK - Coalition for Reform, Integration and Consolidated Institutions; Albanian Institute for the Development of the Electoral System; Association for Women and Children, Kombinat Center; etc. initiated and led for more than a decade the Coalition of Domestic Observers (CDO), bringing innovation in empowering the voice of civil society and becoming an important factor in making a concrete contribution to restoring citizens' trust in the electoral process, the importance of their vote and the institutions that properly administer their vote.

SDC has created a positive experience by implementing activities related to Local Governance,

increasing citizen pressure to increase transparency of local government, as well as to raise citizens' awareness to seek and use alternative mechanisms of direct democracy in their communities, through petitions and local referendums.

In 1999, SDC achieved an important success by depositing 66,668 signatures of citizens collected in two weeks, for the Ratification of the Charter of Local Autonomy. This was an important victory for civil society, which proved its power and influence in the country's democratic processes. With the consolidation and standardization of electoral processes, the concept of electoral corruption has been further elaborated.

Good Practices of the Albanian Helsinki Committee

Since 1996, the Albanian Helsinki Committee has periodically monitored electoral processes in our country, whether parliamentary or local government elections. The recommendations made by the AHC to political subjects, the electoral administration, judicial and law enforcement bodies, as well as to the legislative and executive branches, have also been cited in OSCE/ODIHR reports and opinions issued by the Venice Commission. These recommendations have contributed to the realization of fair, meritocratic, and free processes. A significant contribution to the election monitoring process has been provided by 8 correspondents engaged in 8 different regions of the country, including Fieri, Gjirokastra, Vlora, Durrësi, Elbasani, Korça, Shkodra, and Kukësi.

Good Practices of NPOs Working in the Field of Disability

Since 2003, CSOs in the field of disability have been consistently involved in recommending and subsequently implementing significant changes to the Electoral Code of the Republic of Albania, related to ensuring access to elections for persons with disabilities. The Albanian Disability Rights Foundation (ADRF), through a lengthy advocacy process, successfully enabled, for the first time in 2003, the inclusion in the Electoral Code of the Republic of Albania of the right for persons with disabilities to vote in a direct, secret, and equal manner. This included accessible information and communication before elections, creating accessibility conditions in environments both inside and outside the polling station, and providing accessible electoral materials in accordance with the category of disability.

ADRF has continuously monitored electoral processes from the perspective of inclusion of persons with disabilities, preparing monitoring reports that have served as evidence for changes and reviews of laws and operational practices.

The Result

Civil society organizations have played a crucial role in monitoring all electoral processes in the country since 1990, including local and parliamentary elections as well as two referendums. They have engaged thousands of independent observers across the country. In the framework of the Coalition of Local Observers, the largest monitoring action coordinated and implemented in Albania, over 3,000 independent observers are trained and engaged.

These organizations have also been actively involved in public consultations and discussions with institutions and political parties regarding the necessity of electoral reform. Some of the recommendations that have been implemented over the years include: amendments to the Electoral Code regarding the voting rights of Albanians living abroad; use of technology at the national level to improve electoral processes; introduction of open lists for candidates in all electoral processes; establishment of mechanisms and improvement of party finance declaration forms to enhance transparency in the financing of political parties during election campaigns; legitimization of civil society actors in the process of appeals to the new structures of the Central Election Commission (CEC) and the Constitutional Court etc.

REDUCING CORRUPTION AND INCREASING TRANSPARENCY IN THE PRIVATE SECTOR - CREATION OF THE NATIONAL REGISTRATION CENTER (NRC) AND THE NATIONAL LICENSING CENTER (NLC)

In 2006, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) launched a transformative initiative known as the Millennium Challenge Corporation. This initiative aimed to reduce corruption and improve transparency and performance in three key areas of public administration: i) Tax administration 2) Public procurement 3) Business registration. The initiative addressed the lack of transparency and public involvement in the monitoring process, through a dual approach that included reforming the process through legal improvements and information technology solutions, as well as a broad nationwide public awareness campaign to promote the role of civil society in the process of monitoring and controlling the government.

Establishment of NRC and NLC

During the years 2006-2008, several innovative e-governance systems were established, including the National Registration Center (NRC) as a single point of business registration; an efficient e-procurement system; as well as facilitated tax services through e-services. Building on this progress, continued the work in several directions including as following:

Tax Administration: The restructuring and modernization of the tax administration was carried out with the aim of spreading services such as e-tax, conducting tax audits based on risk analysis, strengthening collection, processing, as well as internal anti-crime and anti-corruption investigative functions, and the structures of the Taxpayer Advocate and the Tax Advisory Council were established.

Business Licensing: Following the successful model of the National Registration Center, the National Licensing Center (NLC) was established and its operations in Tirana and other cities were supported, offering one-stop-shop services.

Territorial Planning: Based on the "On the Territorial Planning" Law of April 2009, a Territorial Planning Register was established with the aim of increasing transparency and reducing opportunities for corruption in planning and permitting processes through the application of IT applications, which were also piloted in the municipalities of Tirana, Shkodra, Fieri, Vlora, and Pogradeci.

Engagement of the Private Sector and Civil Society: Through assistance aimed at capacity building, the engagement and contribution of civil society organizations in monitoring the reforms supported by the program, providing their policy change recommendations, and advocating for the improvement of anti-corruption measures was supported.

The Result

The Institute for Development Research and Alternatives (IDRA) has played an important role in designing and implementing a sustainable Monitoring and Evaluation system as a main pillar in measuring progress and fulfilment of the objectives of the Millennium Challenge Corporation project. Furthermore, the Institute's involvement included conducting broad surveys with businesses, which played a key role in measuring the effectiveness of the project's interventions. These surveys not only provided the key points of progress, but also served as an important mechanism for incorporating citizens' and businesses' views with updated data into the project's strategy.

IDRA's dedication was also evident in the development and implementation of an interactive training program for the staff of the National Registration Center. This program worked to build the capacity of the NRC staff by equipping them with the necessary skills to guide the new systems and technologies being implemented.

ASSESSING CORRUPTION GAPS IN ALBANIAN LEGISLATION

The assessment of corruption proofing is the analysis and examination of draft laws and bylaws, highlighting the potential gaps and risks that could lead to corruption, regardless of whether these risks were intentional or not. The gap assessment is important for improving the legislative drafting process, on one hand creating a form of public pressure and on the other serving Parliament as a reference source during the discussions of draft laws.

Initiative for the assessment of gaps for corruption

The Assessment of Corruption Proofing in Albanian Legislation is an initiative of the Institute for Development, Research and Alternatives (IDRA) within the framework of the Matra Program of the Dutch Embassy. The overall goal of the initiative was to introduce and implement a system for assessing gaps for corruption in Albanian legislation, for all draft laws and acts before their approval in Parliament. The corruption gap assessment system analyzed draft laws and normative acts, highlighting the potential gaps and risks that could lead to corruption, regardless of whether these risks were intentional or not. The corruption assessment technique aimed primarily at closing gaps for corruption in proposed legislation, focusing on preventing corrupt actions that could result from poor drafting of legislation.

The practice of assessing gaps for corruption also aimed to improve the legislative drafting process by excluding risks such as: expanding discretionary powers from delegating provisions; parallel provision of duties; difficulties in understanding and enforcing scattered laws; misinterpretation of unclear referral provisions; uncertainty created by legislative gaps; excessive freedom of action for officials due to lack of clarity in administrative procedural rules; lack and inadequacy of supervisory mechanisms and those where the right to appeal against decisions and actions of public authorities is exercised, etc.

The Result

Within the framework of the initiative, 64 legal acts were assessed by the team of legal experts, of which 27 (twenty-seven) were draft laws and draft decisions, 7 of which were adopted in parliament until the time of tracking the acts, in September 2017. The rest were in the process of review and approval. The Institute for Development, Research and Alternatives (IDRA) has carefully tracked the adoption of acts to measure the impact of the project to identify corruption in Albanian legislation. This tracking consisted of assessing whether the recommendations given by the experts were taken into consideration or not. The assessment showed that for the recommendations suggested by the experts for seven acts, out of a total of 23 recommendations for these legal acts, 18 were taken into consideration and accepted, while 5 were not accepted.

REDUCTION OF CORRUPTION THROUGH THE LAW “ON WHISTLEBLOWING AND WHISTLEBLOWERS PROTECTION”

The adoption of the legislative initiative “On Whistleblowing and Whistleblower Protection” came as part of the development of legislation in the country aimed at preventing and combating corruption in the public and private sectors. Law No. 60/2016 “On Whistleblowing and Whistleblower Protection” aims to prevent and combat corruption in both the public and private sectors, encourage the reporting of suspected corrupt actions or practices, and protect individuals who report these practices.

Development of the legal and regulatory framework

Following the adoption of the law in 2016, Partners Albania for Change and Development, in collaboration with the National Coordinator Against Corruption, the High Inspectorate for Declaration and Audit of Assets and Conflict of Interest (ILDKPKI), and the Commissioner for the Right to Information and Protection of Personal Data, worked within the Matra Program of the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, to develop the secondary legislation supporting the implementation of the Whistleblowing and Whistleblower Protection Law. This included establishing the regulatory framework for law enforcement, strengthening the capacities of responsible institutions, and launching a broad public information campaign.

Partners Albania, in cooperation with national and international experts, facilitated the process of drafting secondary and regulatory acts through an extensive public consultation process. This process collected feedback from all actors and interest groups to improve legal mechanisms and policy measures for detecting and preventing corruption, as well as strengthening the institutions responsible for implementing these mechanisms.

About 2,000 public institutions at the central level, government agencies, municipalities, businesses, civil society organizations, media representatives, donors, and international development agencies in Albania, participated in the consultation process. Partners Albania organized regional consultative meetings in major cities such as Tirana, Shkodra, Elbasan, Korca, and Fieri, with the participation of around 250 representatives from the public and private sectors, civil society, and the media.

Informing institutions and the general public

In continuation of the development of the legal framework, and with the aim of increasing public awareness about this new legislation, Partners Albania launched a broad public information campaign through visual media, print media, and social media, accompanied by visual elements in different cities. This awareness-raising media campaign was considered crucial for providing comprehensive information to the public on how to report and the protections that the legal framework offers to whistleblowers.

Capacity building for the institutions to implement the law

Partners Albania, together with experts and partner institutions, worked on building the capacity of HIDAACI staff, the main institution responsible for implementing the law. They also assisted HIDAACI in preparing formats for internal and external whistleblowing reports, registers, and reporting formats. Another important component of this initiative was the inclusion of a training module on the law “On Whistleblowing and Whistleblower Protection” in the curriculum of the Albanian School of Public Administration (ASPA). In collaboration with ASPA, representatives from the units responsible for whistleblowing in public administration institutions were trained to enhance their capacities in implementing this law.

The Result

The adoption of Law No. 60/2016 “On Whistleblowing and Whistleblower Protection” represents a significant development in Albanian legislation aimed at preventing and combating corruption in both the public and private sectors. The law provides a range of protections for individuals who report suspected corruption activities or practices within their workplace, as well as obligations for public authorities and private entities regarding whistleblowing.

The implementation of the whistleblowing mechanism has been positively received and welcomed by the European Commission and other international institutions as a key component of anti-corruption legislation, in line with the European Commission’s recommendations for opening accession negotiations with the European Union. As of 2021, a total of 889 responsible units have been established across the country to implement the law, including 362 in public institutions and 527 in the private sector. Although the number of whistleblowing reports remains relatively low, such reports are still submitted annually.

I.3 Participation In Policy-Making And Decision-Making Processes

TOWARDS A MORE DEVELOPED, ACTIVE, AND SUSTAINABLE CIVIL SOCIETY

Creating an enabling environment for civil society organizations is one of the prerequisites for the development of democracy and the rule of law. To have a strong and sustainable society, it is important to support and develop the environment in which civil society operates. This would create the necessary conditions for citizen engagement and to address challenges in the country's political, social, and economic development.

Creating an Enabling Environment for Sustainable Civil Society Development

Partners Albania for Change and Development has played a key role in promoting an enabling environment for civil society in Albania. Since its establishment in 2001, Partners Albania has served as a resource centre for the civil society sector, continuously focused on providing support to civil society organizations and encouraging cooperation within the sector to create a more enabling environment.

Partners Albania's main role and contribution in this direction has been: (I) Developing an enabling environment for the advancement of the civil society sector, through research, monitoring, leading and facilitating debate within the sector and cross-sectoral dialogue, for the development of policies supporting the sector, based on the best international standards; (I) Introducing innovative practices that impact the development of the sector, increase its sustainability and its role in bringing about social change for the benefit of the public/groups in need; (I) Strengthening CSOs in developing performance standards and increasing the credibility, transparency and public image of the sector, in strengthening democracy, the country's development and its integration into the EU; (I) Strengthening the leadership of CSOs and local communities (local groups and individuals), towards a more active and sustainable civil society, with a significant impact on strengthening democracy.

Since 2019, Partners Albania has been playing its supportive role for the sector in a more structured and organized way, through the National Resource Centre for Civil Society in Albania - an information and service delivery platform that contributes to strengthening the capacities of civil society to be more effective, transparent, accountable and independent actors and

in creating an enabling environment for civil society, participatory democracy and Albania's integration process into the European Union.

Over the years, Partners Albania has been the largest provider of training and technical assistance to the non-profit sector. Since 2001, more than 5,000 training days have been provided for over 26,000 local and international beneficiaries. Capacity building programs, especially in the last five years, have been channeled through the National Resource Centre for Civil Society. Partners Albania has also facilitated various consultation processes for international organizations, contributing to important reforms and strategic documents for Albania.

As an initiator and facilitator of advocacy initiatives in the sector, Partners Albania has contributed significantly to the dialogue between the non-profit sector and government institutions. This includes influencing legislative initiatives and strategic documents crucial for the civil society sector, such as various laws for non-profit organizations, VAT reimbursement for non-profit organizations, public procurement, volunteerism, etc. Partners Albania has also played a key role in drafting the legal framework for the National Council for Civil Society (NCCS).

For more than a year, during 2020-2021, Partners Albania initiated and facilitated the sector's advocacy effort to improve the draft law "On the registration of non-profit organizations". This government initiative came as an effort to address one of MONEYVAL's recommendations. The process of this legislative initiative was accompanied by a heated debate between the non-profit sector on one side, the Ministry of Justice and Parliament on the other. The criticism from the non-profit sector was twofold. First, regarding the consultation process and its transparency, especially from the government, and second, regarding the content of this law. As a result of the broad mobilization of the non-profit sector led by Partners Albania and the legal analyses and proposals submitted, 32 articles of the draft law were amended, with the main change being the exercise of the right of associations without the obligation to be registered.

Since 2020, Partners Albania has undertaken a series of initiatives in the frame of the prevention of money laundering and terrorist financing for NPOs, empowering civil society organizations to engage proactively in an enabling legal environment within the framework of money laundering prevention and the fight against terrorist financing. The initiatives have consisted of drafting and analyzing the legal and regulatory framework in the country for money laundering prevention and the fight against terrorist financing, as well as developing an educational and awareness-raising campaign for the sector on this issue. Furthermore, as part of these initiatives, various

national and regional roundtables have been organized with relevant key actors, advocating for an appropriate legal environment for the activity of CSOs in the country. In 2022, Partners Albania published the first Terrorist Financing Risk Assessment Methodology for the NPO Sector in Albania. The report, prepared in cooperation with the General Directorate of Taxation, closely aligns with FATF requirements and guidance, and as FATF guidance recommends, it is prepared through a collaborative approach involving CSOs, state and law enforcement institutions, the financial sector, and religious communities, recognizing their shared interest in combating the terrorist financing (TF) risk through their participation in the Supervisory Body of the NPO TF Risk Assessment Methodology.

With the initiative of Partners Albania, after an almost two-year active process of consultation and collaboration among civil society organizations across the country, the Code of Standards for NPOs in Albania was launched in 2021.

The National Resource Centre for Civil Society, which also plays the role of the Code's secretariat, promotes the Code of Standards, and facilitates its implementation in Albania. The Code introduces a self-regulatory mechanism for the sector, aiming to establish a common agreed standard for the sector's activity, beyond legal obligations, to guide CSOs towards improving transparency and effectiveness of their work, as well as increasing public trust.

The Result

Through advocacy initiatives and capacity building efforts, Partners Albania has contributed to the growth of civil society organizations, promoted democratic engagement, and facilitated cooperation between civil society and governing institutions. Its work in policy advocacy, resource mobilization, and strengthening the legal framework has contributed significantly to increasing transparency, accountability, and participatory democracy, thereby empowering civil society to effectively address social challenges and promote positive change in Albania.

Through research, policy analysis, and advocacy initiatives, Partners Albania has worked to improve the legal environment by proposing reforms that improve the tax treatment of NPOs, streamline registration procedures, reduce bureaucratic barriers, and ensure the protection of CSO rights and freedoms; guarantee and facilitate the inclusion of civil society in consultative and decision-making processes, etc.

CITIZENS AND STAKEHOLDERS' PARTICIPATION IN THE ADMINISTRATIVE-TERRITORIAL REFORM OF THE COUNTRY

The year 2014 marked the launch of one of the most important reforms in the country, the Territorial Administrative Reform (TAR). The main goal was to increase the efficiency of local government units, at lower costs, more capable of providing better services and giving citizens and communities more access to these services. The TAR aimed to further advance democracy and strengthen governance in the territory and promote economic efficiency through integrated planning in a more consolidated territory. In this framework, the Albanian government, with the help of donors, initiated an extensive consultation process to create a structured platform for gathering citizens' opinions regarding the proposed territorial reform.

Public consultation on Territorial Administrative Reform (TAR)

Partners Albania for Change and Development, the Institute of Urban Research (URI) and the Institute of Public and Private Policies, in the frame of the project for the Support of Territorial Administrative Reform - STAR, supported by the international donor community in Albania (United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Swiss Cooperation Office in Albania, the Swedish Embassy), organized an extensive consultation process throughout the country in order to collect opinions and recommendations on the new administrative – territorial division.

In the 12 regions of the country, 36 consultation meetings were organized with the participation of citizens and representatives of stakeholders in Fieri, Saranda, Lushnje, Vlora, Ballshi, Himara, Berati, Kuçova, Skrapari, Tepelena, Gjirokastra, Përmeti, Shkodra, Kukësi, Lezha, Korça, Elbasani, Tirana, Durrësi, Dibra, etc.

About 2000 representatives of local organizations, businesses, universities, vocational schools, local media, young people, and active citizens, became part of the preliminary consultation process and gave their opinions on the proposed reform and models. The opinions and recommendations collected at the end of the process were sent to the government and international institutions involved in the process.

Voice of Citizens for Territorial Administrative Reform

Another initiative within TAR initiated by the Albanian government with the financial support of the STAR Project and implemented by IDRA was the “Citizens’ Voice Survey”. In order to include the voice of citizens as well as in accordance with the requirements of Law No. 8652 “On the Organization and Functioning of Local Government”, through a structured questionnaire, the opinion of about 16,000 adult citizens (18 years and older) divided according to samples of functional areas from the proposed variants was obtained, if they were supporters of the territorial map with 39, 47 municipalities or 61 municipalities. The report with the main findings was presented to the Assembly of Albania before the approval of the territorial reform.

In the presentation of the report at the Parliament of Albania and at the Territorial Reform review meeting in the Territorial Reform Commission, the findings of the report for each proposed version were presented, and it was recommended to include civil society and its mechanisms to increase awareness and educate the public about the territorial reform.

The Result

The implementation of TAR brought about a reorganization of local government units, bringing their number to 61 municipalities. As a result of an extensive consultation process throughout the country, citizens and stakeholders had the opportunity to be directly involved in the process and express their opinions regarding the reform.

BUILDING INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITIES FOR PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AND PUBLIC CONSULTATION

Consultation and effective public engagement, apart from the legal obligation of Local Government Units, is an important process that contributes to a good and sustainable local government.

Public consultation in local self-government structures

During 2014 - 2017, the legislation on citizen participation and engagement in the decision-making of local self-government structures underwent positive changes, making citizen participation in public consultation mandatory for the governing institutions. Despite this, the implementation of the legislation proved difficult and confusing for the administration of local institutions. The approved legislation needed additional by-laws which could further specify aspects such as the implementing procedures of the law, the sanctions in case of non-implementation of the law, definition of monitoring and controlling institutions, etc. In summary, we can say that the Law should have set mandatory national minimum standards regarding Public Consultation.

Partners Albania, as part of the STAR2 project, worked throughout 2018 to assess the situation across the country regarding public participation and consultation at the local level, as well as the legal and regulatory framework and the practical implementation of these processes. According to the assessment, the structure of the coordinator for public consultation was missing in most of the Municipalities. Regulations and institutional practices for organizing consultative processes with citizens, were also lacking.

To support Local Self-Government Units (LGUs) in improving governance processes in their respective municipalities, Partners Albania held information meetings in all municipalities in the country, focusing on the need and on the legal obligation to appoint the public consultation coordinators, and also drafted the Guideline Manual for Public Engagement and Consultation. The manual offers detailed guidance on planning, standards, and methods for organizing public consultations. Partners Albania organized 12 consultative roundtables to discuss the manual with representatives from 61 municipalities and provided dedicated training for the Coordinators on Public Consultation and Notification, who were appointed following the meetings in each municipality.

In the following, Partners Albania also designed an evaluation system to help all local self-government units in their work in terms of engagement and public consultation. The system is based on the measurement of several standards related to consultation processes, which were presented as part of 16 Regional Training Programs with representatives of 61 Municipalities.

The Result

As a result of this initiative, 541 public administration representatives were involved and engaged in the consultative meetings and the capacity-building program for implementing public consultation legislation, based on identified needs. In every municipality in the country, Public Consultation Coordinators were appointed and made public. Additionally, the Guideline Manual for Public Engagement and Consultation was drafted and made available to local self-government bodies, standardizing the consultation practice nationwide. In collaboration with ASPA, the training module on 'Public Engagement and Consultation and the Measurement and Evaluation System for Consultative Processes' was integrated into ASPA's curriculum, contributing to increasing knowledge and skills of local administration for organizing consultative processes, and enhancing competences in measuring and evaluating such processes, aiming to improve their efficiency.

MULTI-FUNCTIONAL PLATFORM IN SUPPORT OF LOCAL DEMOCRACY

Multi-functional platforms are essential for strengthening democracy at the local level as they promote transparency and facilitate citizen participation. By providing an open approach to information and enabling a quick and efficient interaction with the administration, they help increase trust in local institutions. These technological tools allow for public consultations, discussions and other interactions that deepen the sense of inclusion and participation, while also increasing administrative efficiency. Furthermore, cooperation between different sectors becomes easier, creating an environment where local democracy can be improved through a continuous and constructive interaction with citizens.

PortaVendore.al

One of the contributions of civil society in Albania to local democracy are the initiatives of various platforms that provide understandable and simplified information for citizens. One of these successful cases is PortaVendore.al, an online platform that serves as a resource center for information about local government.

The platform is an initiative of the Open Society Foundation for Albania (OSFA) and Leviz Albania (LA), implemented with the support of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation.

PortaVendore.al informs on the responsibilities that municipalities have, based on their functions and administrative services at the local level, also creating digital cards for the main services.

Moreover, the platform provides open data on how local authorities govern, making it possible for citizens to have easy and quick access to their information.

The platform has contributed to creating an enabling environment for local democracy by placing journalism and local activism at its core as two engines driving the addressing of issues and promoting transparency and accountability from local government units. PortaVendore.al has become a reference point for data and information on local democracy.

The Result

The online platform PortaVendore.al has served as a virtual library of information, easily accessible and understandable for both citizens and journalists. It offers information about the responsibilities and duties of local government, as well as the mechanisms available for citizen participation in local decision-making. It has been an important space for developing constructive journalism based on data and evidence on local issues. Furthermore, the platform has provided opportunities to promote community civic movements in support of local democracy, showcasing successful models and lessons learned from their practices. As an amplifier of citizen voices, PortaVendore.al has supported advocacy for issues of vital importance to citizens. At the same time, the platform functions as an online database with projects and studies related to local self-governance in Albania.

CONTRIBUTION OF CIVIL SOCIETY TO DIGITAL DEMOCRACY

Civil society and digital democracy are two concepts gaining increasing importance in Albania, as in many other countries. While civil society is a crucial force in overseeing and promoting democratic governance, digital democracy provides tools and platforms that can help strengthen this role. With the expansion of technology and internet use in Albania, digital democracy is becoming a key tool for citizen engagement. Online platforms enable public consultations, voting, discussions, and other interactions between citizens and public institutions, offering opportunities for broader and deeper participation in the democratic process.

CSO initiatives for digital democracy.

Since 2015, Leviz Albania (LA) has focused on empowering social actors at the local level to support democracy, enabling civil society organizations, informal groups, and individuals to engage and participate in local democratic processes, increasing the demand for transparency, accountability and effective public services. LA has established a network of local partners, carried out various complementary interventions, and achieved wide geographical outreach, gathering knowledge on the mechanisms that shape the effectiveness of democracy support and citizen engagement at the local level.

Grant recipients of LA (organizations, individuals, and informal groups) have been supported in using digital tools to promote local democracy, mainly through the use of digitization for monitoring electoral promises or municipal services, to increase transparency and strengthen accountability. These tools have also been used to raise awareness and empower citizens or specific groups, such as youth and disadvantaged groups, to be more active and participatory, monitor, and interact with local government.

The creation of online platforms for monitoring, transparency, accountability, and giving a voice to citizens has been the primary approach used. However, the main challenges remain: first, the financial sustainability of these platforms; second, their integration with existing local government or civil society platforms; third, their mass usability by citizens beyond the duration of the projects that developed them; and fourth, the transition from monitoring to action and the creation of communities for engagement and mobilization.

The Result

As a result of Leviz Albania's initiatives and its support for civil society actors at the local level, digital democracy has gained significant momentum in Albania. Organizations and individuals have successfully utilized digital tools to monitor and promote transparency and accountability in local governance. The creation of online platforms has facilitated citizen participation and increased awareness, particularly among specific groups such as youth and small local communities. However, this is just the beginning, and there is still room for digital democracy practices to be consolidated and established as priorities for the future.

DEMOCRACY AS A PROCEDURE: PETITIONS

Democracy as a procedure emphasizes the importance of the methods and tools through which citizens can participate and influence decision-making. One of the classic tools for citizen inclusion is petitions, which provide a direct form of expressing public will and demands to authorities. Civil society, on the other hand, plays a crucial role in this context by helping to stimulate, organize, and support these initiatives. It acts as a bridge between citizens and government structures, ensuring that the public's voice is heard and considered. Below are some concrete examples from the initiatives of Civic Resistance.

The Petitions Initiative

Civic Resistance has supported citizens and social groups in fulfilling their demands from local government units through both physical and online petitions, bringing about concrete changes in the budgeting and work plans of the respective municipal units. By combining civic and democratic education with elements of digital democracy, Civic Resistance has achieved tangible results and contributed to the improvement of local democracy.

The Citizen IN application was created as a platform that enables, for the first time, electronic signatures for petitions and initiatives, which are recognized, reviewed, addressed, and often resolved by several municipalities in the country. This platform serves not only citizens to address issues but also organizations and groups to channel causes into Municipal Councils, as well as municipalities to identify problems through direct democracy. This practice allows for the balancing of power, in the absence of a healthy representative democracy, by empowering participatory democracy and directly engaging and mobilizing citizens for effective participation in decision-making.

The Result

Civic Resistance has contributed to encouraging citizen engagement in local governance through support for both physical and online petitions, thereby influencing the budgets and work plans of municipal units. The Citizen IN application has provided an innovative tool for the electronic signing of petitions, facilitating interaction between citizens, civil society organizations, and municipal councils. This has helped to strengthen participatory democracy by increasing transparency, accountability, and citizen involvement in local decision-making processes.



II.

*PROVISION OF SERVICES
FOR GROUPS IN NEED AND
THE WIDER COMMUNITY*

PROTECTION AND REINTEGRATION OF VICTIMS OF TRAFFICKING

Trafficking in human beings as a phenomenon in Albanian society emerged after the overthrow of the system in the 1990s. The major political and economic transformations of the country immediately led to facing some previously unknown phenomena.

With the opening of borders, but also with the Albanian state facing some economic, political, and geographic changes, the phenomenon of trafficking immediately flourished and spread massively.

Civil society organizations, through the initiatives undertaken, have played a crucial role in the protection and reintegration of victims of trafficking in Albania, which is involved as a country of origin, transit and destination for human trafficking.

The Contribution of the National Coalition of Anti-Trafficking Shelters

The National Coalition of Anti-Trafficking Shelters (NCATS), since its creation in 2007, has made an important contribution in establishing centers for victims of trafficking and providing quality and comprehensive services for the protection and reintegration of victims of trafficking in Albania. The Coalition consists of 3 Organizations: "Different & Equal", the Psycho-Social Center "VATRA" and "Another Vision", which also represent the 3 centers for victims of trafficking, as well as the National Reception Center for Victims of Trafficking (NRCVT), a state center under the Ministry of Health and Social Protection.

The Coalition has played an important role in supporting victims of trafficking and has contributed to raising awareness of the public about this phenomenon.

Over the years, NCATS has provided counselling, legal and psychological assistance, training and social assistance for victims of trafficking, ensuring an integrated and interconnected approach to their treatment through cooperation with relevant state and local institutions. The Coalition has called for the establishment of a clear and consolidated system for the identification, treatment and protection of victims of trafficking in the country.

The Coalition has also been involved in the drafting and implementation of Anti-Trafficking Strategies and Action Plans over the years, regularly reporting to the Office of the National Anti-Trafficking Coordinator (ONATC).

The establishment of the National Referral Mechanism for the Protection of Victims of Trafficking in 2005 is another important contribution of this coalition, along with the contribution to the drafting and approval of the “Standards of Social Care Services in Residential Centers for Trafficked Persons or Persons at Risk of Trafficking” in 2017.

The Coalition has helped improve anti-trafficking legislation in Albania and create the Reintegration Program for Victims of Trafficking in Albania through an innovative three-phase model. It has also been involved in advocacy initiatives with the Albanian government for financial support of services for victims of trafficking and their children, achieving the provision of part of the funding. In 2013, the coalition established Mobile Units as part of the three centers for the identification and referral of potential victims of trafficking. Most recently, the coalition has undertaken an initiative for a special law on the protection of victims of trafficking, an initiative which, as a result of advocacy efforts, has been included as an activity in the 2021-2023 National Action Plan.

The Result

Civil society organizations have played an important role in the protection and reintegration of victims of trafficking in Albania. The contribution of organizations in this regard is multi-dimensional, including raising public awareness about the risks and consequences of human trafficking; providing essential services for victims of trafficking, including shelter, health services, and psychological and legal counselling; as well as support for victims of trafficking to build new professional skills and integrate into the labor market. Organizations have also contributed to increasing the capacity of law enforcement and other responsible institutions to identify and protect victims of trafficking.

The National Coalition of Anti-Trafficking Shelters (NCATS) has played a crucial role in the establishment and operation of shelters and the provision of services over the years for victims of trafficking, the drafting and implementation of anti-trafficking policies and strategies, as well as raising public awareness about the phenomenon of trafficking. The Coalition has provided counselling, legal aid and training for victims of trafficking across the country. NCATS has also helped in the creation of the National Referral Mechanism.

ESTABLISHMENT AND OPERATION OF CENTRES FOR CHILD PROTECTION

Civil society has played a key role in shaping new protective services, some of which have focused on establishing centers for child protection, community-based services and outreach. Civil society has directly contributed to the establishment of centers by offering packages of direct reintegration and rehabilitation services. These services help children cope with the traumas and challenges they have experienced and prepare them for a better and safer life. Civil society has also assisted in improving child protection services through regular monitoring and evaluation of the services provided. This helps to ensure a high standard of services and address any gaps and challenges that may arise.

Good Practices of Civil Society for Child Protection Centers

In 2003, civil society organizations such as Save the Children (SCiA), Terre des Hommes (Tdh), FBSH-DN, the National Education for Life Association (SHKEJ), and ARSIS, in cooperation with the Municipality of Tirana, established day centers for street children as service models to offer a comprehensive package of interventions for street children as well as children at high risk coming from vulnerable communities. Another Day Center for street children based on the model of the Tirana centers was established in the Municipality of Shkodra, as a collaboration between SCiA and the Municipality of Shkodra in 2012. The creation of the network of centers for street children was followed by the establishment of a unified database for the registration of identified children, enabled by SCiA in 2014-2015. This service model was followed by the establishment of community centers in several municipalities, which developed into more consolidated models serving several vulnerable categories, accompanied by the adoption of service standards for multidisciplinary community centers as an initiative of Tdh.

In 2009, in cooperation with the civil society organizations Tdh Albania and Kosovo and SCiA, the agreement for unaccompanied minors exploited at border points and in neighboring countries “Mario-Protection of Children on the Move” was established, as the first model of experience exchange between Albania and Kosovo for the establishment of a referral mechanism for each identified case. This cooperation also led to the adoption of the Additional Protocol “Intensifying Cooperation in the Fights Against Trafficking in Persons and Enhanced Identification, Notification, Referral and Voluntary Assisted Return of Victims and Potential

Victims of Trafficking, in particular Children, in addition to the Agreement between the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Albania and the Government of the Republic of Kosovo “On Cross-Border Police Cooperation” and the adoption of the Additional Protocol between the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Albania and the General Secretariat of the Government of Montenegro “Intensifying Cooperation in the Fight against Trafficking in Persons and on the Enhanced Identification, Notification, Referral and Voluntary Assisted Return of Victims and Potential Victims of Trafficking”.

In 2010, UNICEF in cooperation with the Municipality of Tirana piloted the first emergency service for high-risk and abused, neglected, trafficked, exploited children, children without parental care, street children, etc. in Albania at the national level. This service provides emergency protection for children 24 hours a day, 7 days a week from 72 hours up to 11 days and continues to be the only service at the national level that responds to the child protection system. From 2011 until today, around 1200 high-risk children have been assisted. In 2021, the Municipality of Durres in cooperation with the World Vision organization established the emergency center for children in need of protection/mothers with children as a partnership supported by the social fund and referring to the emergency service standards drafted by the national emergency service model of the Nisma ARSIS. The emergency service center for Albanian repatriated children in Albania was established in 2022 by SOS Children’s Villages in cooperation with the State Agency for the Rights and Protection of the Child (SARPC).

The purpose of specialized services for children is to provide comprehensive support for children in need of protection or assessed at a medium to high level of risk, as victims or at risk of life. Child protection services were initially established by civil society organizations and then developed to offer specialized services for categories of children such as exploited children, trafficking victims, abuse victims, children in street situations, etc.

In recent years, there have been many developments regarding the legal, policy, and institutional framework for people with disabilities in Albania. All these reforms are oriented according to the key principles outlined in the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, as well as towards the inclusion of people with disabilities in social life, education, employment, and independent living. Civil society organizations have undertaken initiatives to establish community services for children with disabilities.

The Result

These service models have been replicated in other municipalities as well and supplemented with standards and protocols approved by the Ministry of Health and Social Protection. The types of support for children in need of protection and at high/immediate risk include medical, psychosocial support, short-term accommodation, trauma treatment, counselling, information, prevention, referral, reporting, case management facilitation, direct services to meet primary needs such as shelter, transportation, medication, legal services, etc. These services at the local and national levels have supported the child protection system and have offered safe and standardized specialized services.

HARM REDUCTION FOR DRUG USERS AND PREVENTION OF HIV/AIDS AND STIS

In the 90s, with social changes and increased traffic due to our country's favorable geographical position between east and west, drugs and their use, mainly by young people, turned into a serious phenomenon with severe social and economic consequences for Albanian society. According to a recent assessment, in 2019 there were about 7,000-8,000 problematic drug users in Albania, while the total number of users of all drugs is now estimated at around 90,000 people. This is an approximate figure, based on the opinion of experts in the country. Accurate statistics on the number of users are still not available. Among the most used drugs are opiates (mainly heroin), cocaine which has seen a considerable increase in recent years, and cannabis, but there is also the use of new psychoactive substances that present an increased risk, especially for young people.

Contribution to reduction of harm and prevention of HIV/AIDS and STIs

Since its establishment in 1992, the organization Aksion Plus has played an important role in raising awareness in society, especially among young people, about the prevention of HIV/AIDS, Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs), and drugs and the consequences of their use.

In 1992 was organized the first national conference "Will AIDS forget to come to Albania?" in cooperation with the Ministry of Health, which has fostered the sensitization of public opinion and

awareness of the need for measures to prevent and treat this disease.

In 2000, Aksion Plus established the first Harm Reduction center, a pragmatic philosophy for drug users. Later, in 2005, Aksion Plus introduced Methadone Maintenance Therapy (MMT), a very beneficial therapy for opiate users, which has helped in their treatment and rehabilitation (licensed by the Ministry of Health). The provision of therapy and services for drug users by Aksion Plus has continued since 2005 (from 2007 onwards with support from the Global Fund, through the Ministry of Health and Social Protection). In this regard, Aksion Plus has also provided services in prisons and police stations, becoming an intermediary between the state and users. Aksion Plus has cooperation agreements with the Ministry of Justice and the Probation Service for services to convicts. Methadone Maintenance Therapy centers, in addition to those in Tirana, have been opened in various districts of Albania such as Durres, Vlora, Korça, and Elbasan, etc., serving about 980 daily clients, as well as 120 people serving sentences in prisons (Institute of Executing Penal Decisions - IEVP). This is an important contribution to the rehabilitation of drug users and helps reduce harm in society.

Methadone centers offer a friendly, low-threshold, and community-based service that creates an appropriate environment for methadone therapy clients, as well as for their parents or family members who need support and guidance to overcome the severe consequences resulting from long-term drug use.

A very important part of Aksion Plus's activity since its creation is informative and awareness-raising activities. Thus, since the 90s, the organization has continued to undertake initiatives and develop programs to inform and educate young people in schools and universities, or even young people who are not part of the education system, for their prevention and sensitization regarding drug use and HIV/AIDS.

Also, Aksion Plus has undertaken the development of other important initiatives in this direction such as cooperation with the Probation Service, where drug users who had committed legal violations performed community services at the organization instead of other types of punishments; the "World of Change" initiative, to increase awareness of young people and public opinion about drug use, and support in the rehabilitation of former drug users, etc.

In coordination with international partners and networks, Aksion Plus has advocated for a legal framework for drugs that is not merely punitive but promotes support and better psycho-physical health of people who use various substances.

The Result

A direct result of Aksion Plus's decades-long work and collaborations with partner organizations in the country, donors, and state institutions, is the establishment and operation of specialized centers such as The First Harm Reduction Center in 2000, and subsequently in 2005, methadone therapy centers in eight districts of the country and Tirana, which offer specialized services for drug users (trainings, focus groups, counselling from doctors and psychologists, testing for HIV and other infections transmitted through blood or unprotected sexual relations, referrals of cases to other institutions) and help reduce harm as a result of drug use. The establishment of centers and provision of services have contributed to improving the health and well-being of people suffering from diseases related to drug use and have helped raise public awareness and recognition of the need for prevention and treatment measures for these problems.

Aksion Plus has made a valuable contribution to the prevention of HIV/AIDS/STDs in high schools in Tirana and other districts and introduced in 2000 the initiative "Psychologist and social worker in high schools". The initiative was embraced by institutions and for years now, social workers and psychologists have been part of the psycho-social service team in every school across the country.

INTEGRATED SOCIAL SERVICES FOR THE FAMILY

Integrated services for families in need include services for children's education, services for the social development of the family, services to facilitate vocational training, services to facilitate employment and self-employment, and services related to community development in general. The services offered aim to foster participation and help the social development of the family.

Good Practices of Civil Society

For years, the Organization "Help for Children (HFC)" has been providing services to families in need, based on the philosophy of integrated case management. The services start with the

identification of the family or individual in need and accompany them until they are empowered and solve the problem. A stronger family means a stronger and consolidated society.

The social worker in the municipality is a key point in the integrated case management process. The cooperation between the municipality and the Labor Office should be a continuous process. The social worker in the municipality must follow the progress of the beneficiary in need, even when he refers him to employment or professional training, e.g. when he is taking a two-week course, 'Smart Start' at the Employment Office. Likewise, cooperation is a fundamental condition in the relationship established with local institutions of social services. The organization's services are offered near the communities in need. The organization has also established a cooperation network in the areas where it offers services with Egyptian and Roma organizations, NPOs working for women, the business community, and businesses that are licensed to provide professional courses, since not every municipality has public providers of this service. Annually, there are 350 families served and about 1000 individuals, members of the families served.

Some of the qualities that make the service effective in supporting groups in need are: (i) focus on the family; (ii) creation of models and its institutionalization; (iii) coordination of work both with institutions of social services, as well as with those of employment and professional training; (iv) long-term service support.

The SHKEJ organization also has a rich and long experience in providing services to groups in need. The main beneficiaries of these services are children and young people at risk, as well as their families; individuals who come out of the economic assistance scheme, members of the Roma and Egyptian community, people with psychosocial difficulties, young people in conflict with the law who have completed the period of punishment, etc.

The community service, which is offered through two Community Centers, targets vulnerable families and in deep economic/social difficulties (mainly from the Roma/Egyptian community), children/young people in street situations, children at risk of dropping out of school or who have dropped out, children outside the social protection system, young people at risk of using narcotic substances and dangerous/antisocial behavior, girls who are involved in early marriages, young people who want to raise competences and skills as well as bring change in social and economic in the community. In addition to services in the community, close to the family and in the community centers, SHKEJ offers counselling services to promote employment, self-employment, professional training.

The provided services consist of:

1. Community services at the center for children aged 3-14, which include educational activities such as classes for illiterates, school support, pre-writing and reading activities, equipment with the necessary school tools, psychological, health and hygiene care and support, healthy food meals, as well as orientation, referral and support for registrations in kindergartens, nurseries and schools
2. Community services at the center for young people aged 15-21, such as: various social and educational activities, training, assistance with didactic school materials, registration in professional courses, employment orientation, entertainment activities outside the premises of the center, direct assistance in special cases, artistic activities according to talents and abilities
3. Services for families, such as orientation, referral, counselling and accompaniment for employment, health care, support for administrative and legal issues, training/information sessions on positive parenting, as well as direct assistance in emergency cases such as: rent payment for a certain period time, payment of medicines, clothing, food, hygienic products, various administrative/legal payments, economic counselling, support for the establishment of economic initiatives.

SHKEJ's long experience of 17 years in recognizing vulnerable communities and orienting their needs, as well as in providing direct services to address these needs, is one of the advantages of the service. The variety and the easy access to the direct provided services from the beneficiaries are the elements that make this service more effective and with an immediate impact.

QUALITY AND ACCESSIBLE SERVICES FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES AND THEIR PARENTS

People with disabilities are more exposed to the risk of poverty and vulnerability throughout the life cycle: (i) children with disabilities have less access to quality education and rehabilitation services for their age and are more at risk of being placed in residential institutions and experiencing violence compared to other children; (ii) people with disabilities of working age have less opportunities to be employed and remain dependent on disability cash benefits; (iii) the prevalence of disability among the elderly increases with age, which causes them to

remaining disadvantaged and often forgotten to be included in social protection systems; (iv) people with disabilities have specific needs and demands due to their disability; (v) people with disabilities need technology and equipment of different typologies, which play an irreplaceable role in enabling mobility, communication and access to information, making it possible to increase autonomy and improve their quality of life and that of their families; (vi) the lack of accessible services increases the cost of living for people with disabilities compared to those without disabilities.

To address the risks, barriers and inequalities, people with disabilities should have access to programs that improve access to services throughout the life cycle, services that should take into account the diversity of this population in terms of the level of impairment and functioning, but also factors related to age, gender, residence and ethnicity.

From the early years of transition, organizations in the disability field initiated the provision of important service models for people with disabilities and their families. Even today, they continue to be the most potential providers of different typologies of services for children and adults with disabilities.

Below are listed some of the good service models offered by civil society organizations in Albania.

Provision of supporting equipment for people with disabilities

The Albanian Disability Rights Foundation (ADRF) has been providing the wheelchair service since 1996 for people with disabilities across the country. Wheelchairs are customized at the “Mirësia” workshop in accordance with the individual assessment of specialized staff for each person in need of this service, respecting WHO standards. Training for wheelchair users and their families is part of this service. The technical staff provides theoretical and practical training on the use and maintenance of wheelchairs. New standard wheelchairs for urban and rural areas offer better opportunities for adaptation based on the physical and health specifics of people with disabilities. ADRF provides training in all regions of the country for social administrators, in cooperation with the Regional Offices of the State Social Service, aiming for the wheelchair service to be part of the system of services offered by state structures across the country.

The wheelchair provision service begins with a detailed assessment process of the physical, environmental and health needs of individuals with disabilities, in accordance with the standards

of the World Health Organization. This ensures that the wheelchair is adapted to the needs of each individual. Certified specialists perform the assessment process in collaboration with the person with disability and provide customized wheelchairs according to their needs.

The service includes the provision of the appropriate wheelchair, after the assessment process, including ordering, assembly, and adjustment if necessary. User and caregiver training is part of the service, providing necessary information on wheelchair use and maintenance, as well as ongoing technical and clinical support. If needed, users will be referred to other services for additional support.

Supported employment service for people with disabilities

ADRF has been offering the Supported Employment service since 2010, which focuses on people with disabilities with the aim of providing the necessary support for employment. The service includes:

- (i) Information and training on labor market skills;
- (ii) Professional profiling and development of individual employment plans;
- (iii) Mediation for vocational training, employment and securing the workplace;
- (iv) Information, counselling and training for employers on employing people with disabilities, including advice on providing reasonable accommodation at all stages of employment;
- (v) Assistance and follow-up during the employment phase, including support in the phase of entry/placement in a job position, for professional development and personal integration;
- (vi) Long-term counselling and supervision, including monitoring and assistance in conflict situations, etc.

Resource Center for Disability

Since 1996, the “Resource Center for Disability” of ADRF has provided information, orientation, counseling for people with disabilities and their families, organizations of people with disabilities and service providers. Counselling and orientation towards social, health, educational services, etc., is carried out in accordance with the needs of clients. ADRF, over the years, has prepared and published a wide range of informative materials in the field of disability, over 170 different publications, from simple information sheets, guides, manuals, evaluations

and studies, most of them in alternative formats, to enable information for all categories of people with disabilities.

1000 people with disabilities have been included in the service in the municipalities of Tirana, Elbasan, Vlora, Shkodra; 300 of them were employed in the open labor market or internships; 200 have benefited from professional training; 200 businesses have been informed and made aware.

The pak.al platform

An online platform, <https://platforma-pak.al/>, for the first time since 2020, offers accessible information in alternative formats for people with disabilities. The platform is organized in the form of a training module (E-Training) and aims to increase the knowledge and capacities of the staff of institutions, civil society organizations, people with disabilities, as well as society on issues of disability and equality.

Part of this platform is also an online library, which serves as a resource center for legislation and policies on people with disabilities.

Protection of the Rights of People with Disabilities

The Association for the Protection of the Rights of People with Disabilities (MEDPAK), established in 1993 by a group of parents in the City of Librazhd, continues to work to improve services for people with disabilities. MEDPAK offers day care services for adults and therapy for children (speech therapy, physiotherapy, and psycho-social counselling) in several municipalities of the country. To provide a service of the highest quality and as close as possible to the residences of people with disabilities, MEDPAK works continuously to empower parents of children with disabilities to organize in an association to lobby and advocate as a group for providing services as more dignified and based on the standards approved by the Albanian government. The established centers keep parents informed of any legal changes and cooperate with the branch of the MEDPAK association in that municipality to provide the best possible services for every person with disabilities.

In these Centers, today, the services are provided to about 200 people with disabilities, most of them children. We work with children to train them from early childhood and to have a quality education for them and their employment in the future.

Also, the provision of services has helped parents and families of people with disabilities to lead a more active life in society. The work with the parents consisted of informing them about the rights of the disabled and empowering them as a group to advocate and lobby at the local level. Thus, MEDPAK now has 9 branches in 9 municipalities where it has worked with various projects.

Early intervention services & developmental therapy for people with disabilities with Down Syndrome and Autism Spectrum Disorders

Down Syndrome Albania (DSA) has been providing early intervention services and developmental therapy for people with disabilities with down syndrome and autism spectrum disorders since 2014. Services are provided in a specialized manner at the center through various therapies or on the premises of the beneficiary's home. The specialized service includes therapies such as: physiotherapy/psychomotricity, developmental therapy, speech therapy and therapy with the ABA method. This service is on a therapeutic session basis. Near the PRO PAK service center in Tirana, a multidisciplinary team of specialists operates, which provides the initial assessment of the case and the design of the case intervention plan for a certain period (9 months or 1 year). In addition, the team offers occasional early consultations with the families of the children benefiting from the service, as well as individual and/or group counselling sessions for parents.

The number of beneficiaries is around 100 per year, including children with disabilities and their parents or family members. The services of early intervention and the provision of various therapies at DSA aim to strengthen the family, in order for the family to continue to support the child in different contexts, within family routines. Through therapeutic interventions, the staff supports the child to reach developmental stages and is inclusive in different contexts. Also, depending on the needs of the child and the family, the center also offers support in other contexts such as: daycare, kindergarten, and school.

Early intervention services for children and independent living for people with intellectual disabilities

The "Help the Life" association offers an early intervention service, a service established and implemented in 2000. It offers the possibility of support and treatment for children who

exhibit developmental difficulties and autism spectrum disorders. The therapeutic programs of intervention and treatment of difficulties, which appear in children during the first years of childhood, respond to the needs of the child and are planned to be implemented in natural environments, where the child grows and develops, such as the family, early education institutions, or is the center-based service implemented under the care of multidisciplinary team specialists, with the child at the center.

About 145 children with disabilities receive services each year. Early intervention services provided at the center include: (i) psychosocial assessment of the child; (ii) consultations, specialized therapies based on needs such as: developmental therapy according to the Denver Early Intervention Model, speech therapy, sensory room therapy, group therapy, support for parents, family therapy, child support program in institutions of early education, family support program and training of parents on how to work with the child in the family environment.

Since 2000, the association also offers the service of Independent Living, whose philosophy is oriented towards the participation and inclusion of young people with disabilities, over the age of 21, and aims at training, promoting social integration and their inclusion in normal contexts of life, interacting with the world around. The dedicated and professional team offers services for independent living based on a multidisciplinary service method, living in apartments for independent living with support, and in accordance with social care standards of services for people with intellectual disabilities. Based on the independent living model, work is organized to implement the service structure of independent living in apartments, which are adapted to offer 15 young people with disabilities the opportunity to live an independent life with/without support.

Community Day Centre

The OAZ Foundation has established and operates through the community day center “New Hope”, a center that offers specialized services and various therapies for children and young people with disabilities of different categories, to develop and improve standards of their livelihood. The center is the only one that offers such services for this target group in the Mat e Klos area. The center is open every day for beneficiaries from 07.30 to 15.00. Some beneficiaries who live in villages leave after eating lunch, while others come to the center at lunchtime after finishing school. Taking into consideration the difficult economic conditions in which the families of these children and young people live, in addition to the psycho-social service, the

beneficiaries are offered free lunch and transportation, and supporting equipment is sent to them at home, such as wheelchairs, different materials, which parents can use while the children are at home, as well as games with therapeutic purposes. Special attention is paid to the work with the parents of the beneficiaries, who often come to the center and see how the specialist works with their children, to further continue the program at home along the same lines, to maintain or further growth of necessary skills for their children. As a result of providing this service, 40 people with disabilities and their parents and family members benefit every year.

Service of prosthetics, orthotics, rehabilitation of people with disabilities

The Light of Hope Center (LHC) has been operating in the Municipality of Pogradec since 1994. The center produces prostheses for upper and lower limbs, or those for leg and spine deformities. Likewise, the center's services are oriented towards the rehabilitation of people who have had amputations, as well as psychological treatment for them. The rehabilitation center offers its services under modern conditions and in accordance with the standards of the European Union.

The geographical scope of the service is throughout Albania, with priority in the Pogradec area. The staff of LHC consists of 11 people, who are qualified for the relevant fields. A multidisciplinary team has been set up and operates near the center. All the services offered at the center complement each other, with the ultimate goal of social inclusion of people with disabilities. The number of beneficiaries of the centre's services is about 600 people every year.

Residential family home for people with intellectual and physical disabilities

Opera Della Divina Provvidenza Madonnina del Grappa provides services in Shkodra Municipality. This service was established as part of the deinstitutionalization process in Albania, as a new concept of hospitality for abandoned and unsupported peoples, coming from public institutions, providing them with a warm family environment. The 18 people who benefit from the service are respectively aged 33-63 years old, they have gender, personal conditions, and different pathologies, for which an extra family placement different from the one of origin is necessary. The service offers: provision of basic needs (residential home-family, in which accommodation, food, health care, etc. are offered), psycho-emotional support (individual and group therapy, cognitive and behavioral therapy); ensuring safety and well-being, socialization

and occupational therapy; activity in free time, through programming determined by the multidisciplinary group in cooperation with social guardians; programming and implementation of summer vacations; maintaining contact with the biological families of the beneficiaries, for those who have them.

18 adults with disabilities live independently in family homes, supervised by specialized staff. Life inside the structure is organized as in any normal family, meeting everyone's needs. Games, entertainment, various animation activities, mountain and sea vacations, walks, involvement in community life, cultivation of interests according to everyone's capacity and maturity are realized. Beneficiaries, through ergotherapy, speech therapy and various activities organized in the structure, develop specific capacities, and instruments that increase self-esteem.

Home-based mobile service for children with disabilities

World Vision Albania offers the "Hello... Life" service a home-based specialized mobile service, designed to reach the child with disabilities at home, in the remote rural areas of Albania. A Mobile Unit comprising a team of professionals, equipped with the necessary skills and infrastructure, provides quality services for children with disabilities where they live (home).

The service is provided based on an Individual Development Plan (IDP). In parallel, the parents receive once-per month counselling session, aiming at strengthening the coping mechanisms of the situation in which they find themselves. Home-service duration depends on the minimization of the barriers that hinder the development of the child's potential. In the last year, the home-based service has been integrated with services in day care centers such as in Librazhd and Lezha and in Development Spaces such as in Prrenjas. In the context of the Covid -19 pandemic, the service brought innovation in providing online exercises and counselling, based on the Individual Development Plan, and while Albania is adapting to the new normal, the mobile teams started to practice the "courtyard visit" model to continue with the provision of home-based services. As a result of providing this service, 267 children with disabilities benefit each year.

Developmental therapy for people with disabilities

The Jonathan Centre provides services focused on developmental therapies for people with disabilities, services that began to be applied in 2000. The number of beneficiaries has been

increasing year after year, to reach about 350 beneficiaries throughout the year 2023.

Therapies offered by the Jonathan Centre help people with disabilities throughout life to participate in the things they want and do what they need to do, through the therapeutic use of daily activities (occupations). Common interventions in occupational therapy include assistance and guidance for children with disabilities and their families to participate fully in school and social situations.

The Jonathan Centre applies and includes in therapy as many aspects of development as possible, both mentally and physically. The center's specialists apply art, handwork, independence courses, etc., as recommended, and proven components to be applied with disabled people, especially disabled children.

The Result

Civil society organizations in the field of disability have contributed to providing a wide range of service models for children and adults with disabilities in Albania. The services they offer have filled the gap created by the lack of a service chain for this community provided by the central and local government. They have enabled the improvement of the quality of life for people with disabilities and their families, aiming to increase social inclusion and promote independent living.

2,738 children and adults with disabilities benefit every year from services provided by the aforementioned civil society organizations.

RESIDENTIAL SERVICES IN SUPPORT THE LGBTI+ COMMUNITY

In Albania, the rights of LGBTI+ people have been brought to public attention only during the last decade. Although the legal framework prohibits discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI+) people, prejudice, and discrimination against those with a minority sexuality and/or gender identity remains widespread in Albania. In general, Albanian social services available to groups in need are highly fragmented and non-standardized, there is a lack of specialized staff and institutions have limited capacity to address the needs of LGBTI+ people.

Good practices of the “Streha” Centre

“Streha” is the first residential center in Albania and in the region that helps the LGBTI+ community in emergency cases in terms of housing, but also offers other services for the empowerment and integration of LGBTI+ individuals. It contributes to the empowerment of LGBTI+ individuals, mainly young people, through multidisciplinary and residential services, capacity building of service providers, awareness, and advocacy to overcome barriers and difficulties encountered in family and society by the LGBTI+ community. The center’s target group is members of the LGBTI+ community, mainly young people.

The focus of “Streha” is the empowerment and social reintegration of young people at risk within the LGBTI+ community (ages 18 to 29). The service is offered in the capital of Albania, Tirana. However, it is not limited to the country and often provides housing services for young people from Albanian-speaking countries in the region such as Kosovo or Macedonia.

The work and achievements of “Streha” are focused both on providing direct services to LGBTI+ individuals, as well as on contributing to the improvement of larger protection systems and advancing the rights of LGBTI+ people through advocacy and increasing the skills of professionals in contact with LGBTI+ people.

“Streha” provides support through the provision of: Safe housing and meeting basic needs; Individual and group psycho-social counselling; Legal aid; Health services (educational sessions, health tests and dental services, mediation in obtaining health care, medication support, etc.); Mediation for the benefit of professional training; Life skills training; Mediation for employment

(assessment of professional needs, drafting of the employment plan, labor market information, stimulation to be an active job seeker, direct mediation); Socio-cultural and entertainment activities; Capacity building trainings for service providers; Advocacy campaign; Awareness activities. These services are provided 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, by 10 staff members.

“Streha” has also contributed to the review and drafting of the main political and legislative frameworks in Albania, such as the National Plan for the Protection of the Rights of LGBTI+ individuals in Albania (2016-2020).

The Result

Since its establishment, “Streha” has supported over 800 beneficiaries through the LGBTI+ residential service aged 18-29 and outside the residential service all members of the LGBTI+ community in need. Most of the cases that seek help to be part of the services, are victims of various forms of violence, mainly victims of domestic violence, evicted from home, exploited, discriminated against, potential victims of trafficking, abused, asylum seekers returned LGBTI+, etc.

“Streha” is the only long-term residential emergency service based on social care standards in Albania. Over the years “Streha” has offered 87 professional courses for the LGBTI+ community. “Streha” has also contributed to building a protection system for LGBTI+ people in Albania, strengthening the capacities of professionals involved in the protection system through training. In the last two years, more than 200 professional psychologists, social workers, police officers, teachers, etc. were trained and mentored by the staff of “Streha”.

DEVELOPMENT OF VOLUNTEERISM IN ALBANIA

Volunteerism exists in all societies and is an important mechanism that promotes social cohesion and positively impacts communities by strengthening bonds and solidarity among its members. Through volunteerism, citizens take an active role in developing and improving the environment where they live, making it more sustainable, united and responsible. Volunteerism, as part of the structure of Albanian society, is an activity whose philosophy is still evolving.

Civil society organizations have widely contributed to promoting the importance and values of volunteerism in society, especially among the younger generation. Over the last decade, positive changes have been noticed in the perception of Albanian society towards volunteerism. Additionally, the volunteerism infrastructure in Albania has significantly improved and expanded through the continuous contribution and work of civil society organizations. The Beyond Barriers Association (BBA) has played a key role in this process, including work on improving the volunteerism infrastructure, contributing to the development and recognition of volunteer work, increasing recognition of volunteerism in policymaking, introducing new volunteer schemes at local, national, regional, and European levels, bringing innovative concepts about volunteerism to diversify volunteer opportunities, and changes related to technological development.

The creation of the “Local Voluntary Service (LVS)” (2010-2016) by Beyond Barriers supported the development of the volunteerism infrastructure at the local and national level by providing expertise on the concept of volunteerism and relevant policies, capacity building for volunteerism providers and volunteers, establishing quality volunteer programs with standards, networking with civil society organizations and institutions, and awareness campaigns focused especially on youth. During LVS’s operation (2011-2016), hundreds of information sessions were organized in high schools and universities in Tirana and across the country involving almost 30,000 young people. 40 civil society organizations and institutions participated in the capacity building program to use the sustainable volunteerism model, organizing round tables with policymakers and stakeholder groups, over 3,000 young people engaged in local volunteer activities with wide impact on marginalized groups such as Roma youth, youth with

disabilities, socially and economically disadvantaged groups, etc. As a result of this success, in 2011 BBA was awarded the recognition “Best Volunteer Program of the Year”, and a year later as “Organization with High Standards in Volunteer Work”, awards given by Ministry of Tourism, Culture, Youth and Sports, National Youth Council and UN Albania.

In 2011, Beyond Barriers was selected by the SALTO SEE Resource Center as a Contact Point to promote the European Union’s largest youth program “Youth in Action” later called Erasmus+. This program is a key instrument aimed at promoting active European citizenship, volunteerism, solidarity, and tolerance among European youth and involving them in building a common future with the European Union. Now, for more than 13 years, the Beyond Barriers Association in its role as the Contact Point for Youth Programs continues its successful work by providing up-to-date information on these programs, building the capacities of organizations and municipalities to be part of Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps.

Advocacy initiative for the improvement of the legal framework

In April 2016, the Parliament of the Republic of Albania adopted Law 45 “On Volunteerism”. The Law was adopted without consultation with the stakeholders and created barriers that have had a negative impact on the development of volunteerism in the country for years. To address this non-enabling terrain and legal barrier, in 2019, Beyond Barriers Association and Partners Albania through the National Resource Centre for Civil Society, in collaboration with many other organizations interested in the field, designed activities aimed at gathering opinions of interested actors and initiated an advocacy campaign to change and improve the legal framework for volunteerism in Albania.

At the end of 2022, in response to the request of civil society organizations, the Minister of State for Youth and Children and the Ministry of Finance and Economy established a joint working group with representatives of civil society and decision-making institutions and those responsible for the implementation of the law, for the discussion the issues of the law, as well as further consultation for the drafting concrete recommendations for amending the law.

The Result

The engagement of the Beyond Barriers and other CSOs has raised public awareness of the values of volunteerism, especially in the last decade. Raising awareness among young people, mainly about the values and practices of volunteerism, has shown a significant increase, as seen from their continued interest in being active and participating in national or international voluntary programs. Additionally, over 500 young Albanians have participated in various volunteer programs in Europe, and around 400 young people from Europe have volunteered in Albania. Over 40 civil society organizations have been involved over the years and have used the European Voluntary Service (EVS) program. Furthermore, the capacities of civil society organizations on volunteerism, the volunteer management cycle, and the use of digital platforms have been enhanced, and sustainable models of structured volunteerism have been provided for civil society organizations. The development of a Volunteer Management Standards Protocol for volunteerism providers has contributed to raising the standards of volunteer work in the country.

Another important result in this field is the establishment of dialogue between civil society organizations, stakeholders interested in volunteerism, and decision-makers, resulting in the formation of a joint working group to review and improve the country's volunteerism law.



III.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF CIVIL SOCIETY TO GENDER EQUALITY

REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS OF GIRLS AND WOMEN AND THE LAW “ON TERMINATION OF PREGNANCY”

The shift in the system in Albania in 1990 left Albanian women and girls unable to fully exercise their reproductive rights. Many women and girls risked their lives by using illegal methods of abortion. Albanian society was unaware of the consequences of illegal abortions on reproductive health and the lives of women and girls. The change of system created opportunities for the establishment of the first organizations advocating for women’s rights. These organizations were also active in significant international activities at the time, which strongly encouraged and supported the need for legal abortion to be safe and accessible.

Initiative for the Law “On Termination of Pregnancy”

The initiative for drafting the Law “On Termination of Pregnancy” was undertaken by the Albanian Center for Population and Development (ACPD) and other women’s organizations that supported it, such as the Women’s Center, the Women’s Association “Refleksione,” the Independent Forum for the Albanian Women, the Useful to Albanian Women, etc.

As part of their advocacy efforts to achieve legal changes, organizations defending the rights of women and girls secured the support of international organizations, organized information and awareness campaigns for interest groups and the general public, and held a series of meetings with representatives of institutions, political parties in the country, MPs, experts, representatives of various interest groups, influential individuals in public opinion such as journalists, experts from the fields of health, social sciences, etc., to discuss and lobby for the initiative.

The organizations involved in the initiative also took part in important international activities such as the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), held in Cairo in 1994, where the need for legal and accessible abortion was strongly supported. Various states recognized unsafe abortion as a major public health concern and pledged their commitment to reducing the need for abortion by expanding and improving family planning services and at the same time acknowledging that, in circumstances that are not against the law, abortion should be safe¹.

¹ International Conference on Population and Development, Program of Action (1994), para. 8.25.

The issue of abortion was also discussed at that time by states in the Beijing Platform for Action during the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995.

In this international context and with the work and advocacy of organizations defending the rights of women and girls, abortion in Albania was fully legalized on December 7, 1995.

The Result

The result of the initiative undertaken by civil society organizations was the adoption by the Albanian Parliament on 07.12.1995 of the law “On the termination of pregnancy”. This law guarantees respect for every human being from the beginning of life. The principles on which the law is based are health service, the right to information, counselling, and family planning services, as well as sanctions in cases of abuse.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS TO THE FAMILY CODE

Civil society organizations have played a crucial role in drafting, amending, and implementing the Family Code. Organizations have put pressure for changes and improvements in the Family Code, focusing on children’s rights, protecting women’s rights, and human rights in general. This has helped improve the provisions of the law and create a fairer and more balanced code. Organizations have undertaken education and awareness campaigns to inform the public about their rights under the Family Code and about recent changes that may impact their lives.

CSO Initiatives for the Family Code

During the period 2002 and 2003, the Center for Legal Civic Initiatives (formerly the Women’s Law Firm), the Women’s Legal Group, and the Gender Alliance for Development Center (formerly the Women’s Center) noticed that the Family Code in force did not comply with the changes that had occurred in Albanian society after the establishment of democracy, socio-economic changes, and private property. The issues that arose, especially when property was

2- Fourth World Conference on Women, Platform for Action (1995), para. 106 (k). See also United Nations General Assembly Resolution A/RES/S-21/2 (1999) on key actions for the further implementation of the Program of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development, para. 63 (iii).

sold and girls and women were left without any benefit, prompted a strong commitment from the Women's Movement to gather the ideas of the community of women and girls regarding their challenges and to organize legal and social experts of the time to determine what should be included in the new Family Code.

A prolonged process of advocacy and lobbying began for the drafting of the New Family Code by the three organizations. As a result, on 8.05.2003, with law No. 9062, the Family Code of the Republic of Albania was approved.

The Family Code, carefully prepared by women lawyers representing the Albanian feminist movement, brought about several essential changes, such as:

- The property relations of spouses are regulated according to a regime provided for in the Family Code and by contract in cases where these relations are resolved by agreement between the spouses. The Family Code stipulated that property relations created during marriage should be regulated based on the principle of equality of rights of the spouses, with the same property regime being established for both spouses.
- The acquisition of property rights and the acquisition of possession, even in bad faith, over an item which will appear as a factual community, will be included and will be part of the category of items that are part of the community.
- Credit rights that arose before marriage but are fulfilled during marriage are not an integral part of the community. Meanwhile, those credit rights that arose during marriage but whose execution takes place after the end of the marriage are part of the community.
- Properties acquired as constructions that were not legally regulated at the time of marriage but were legalized after its end, should be considered part of the community at least in terms of the value of the materials since materials from the community were spent for the construction of these buildings during the marriage (unless proven as property acquired from personal assets).
- The marriage contract (or community by contract), the recognition of which regulated the protection of the property rights of each spouse once their passion had ended and their marital bond had ended in court. The marriage contract, included for the first time in the Family Code, is a legal act through which future spouses determine their marital regime, in principle for the entire marriage. At the same time, in the Marriage Contract, the spouses can regulate their property relations according to the regulatory provisions of the Family Code.

The Result

The new Family Code represented a positive development for Albanian society, as it was enriched with articles that protect women's rights in the family, considering them as human beings equal to men. The Family Code included valid provisions of a social nature. It provided protective measures to ensure the financial support of the family in cases where the spouse leaves the residence without cause and refuses to return. It also prohibited the disposal of the marital home and its furnishings by one spouse without the other's consent. The Code sanctioned the right to receive compensatory support from the spouse who experiences a change and inequality in life due to the division of property after the dissolution of the marriage. Especially important were the measures against domestic violence, since at that time the Law "On Measures against Violence in Family Relations" had not yet been drafted, which allows the abused spouse to seek the urgent removal of the abuser from the home through legal proceedings.

IMPROVEMENT OF THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Civil society organizations are a leading force in promoting gender equality and combating domestic violence. They play a key role in raising public awareness, influencing policies, and providing services for victims. Organizations help raise public awareness about issues of gender equality and the dangers of domestic violence through awareness campaigns, seminars, trainings, publications, and other activities. Civil society organizations influence the formation of public policies, by putting pressure on drafting, improving, and implementing laws that protect the rights of women and children and penalize domestic violence. For example, many states have adopted domestic violence legislation with the influence and lobbying of civil society organizations. Many organizations offer direct services to victims of violence, including shelter, counselling, legal aid, and psychological support. These services are vital in helping victims regain control over their lives and build a future free from violence.

Initiative for the Law “On Measures against Domestic Violence”

In 2006, the County Assistance Offices (CAO), in partnership with 9 other civil society organizations: the Child Rights Centre Albania, the Gender Alliance for Development Center (GADC), the Center for Legal Civic Initiatives, the Albanian Center for Population and Development, the Hotline Albania, the Useful to Albanian Woman Organization, the Women’s Association “Refleksione”, the Juvenile Legal Clinic, the Shelter for Abused Women and Girls, prepared and presented to the Assembly the draft law “On measures against violence in family relations”. These organizations represented 20 thousand voters, who exercised the legislative initiative. The law aimed at preventing and reducing domestic violence in all its forms and guaranteeing the protection by legal measures of family members who are victims of domestic violence. With the initiative of organizations in defense of women’s rights or the initiative of representative women in Parliament, this law has undergone a series of changes since the beginning of its implementation.

Among the most important updates are the decision on the mechanism for coordinating the work between the authorities responsible for referring cases of domestic violence; the guideline for procedures and the risk assessment model for cases of domestic violence; the guideline for procedures and the model for the order for immediate precautionary protection measures; the guideline for determining the rules for the creation of a specific database for domestic violence issues in courts and the unification of their registration. The entire legal framework built after the law’s adoption, as well as the establishment of mechanisms for its implementation, ensured coordinated inter-institutional cooperation. A central element of this mechanism is the provision of social and economic assistance for victims, many of whom find themselves without any financial means after reporting the violence and leaving the abusive partner.

The Result

The Law on Measures against Domestic Violence was essential for an effective and coordinated response to violence against women and girls in Albania. The adoption and implementation of national laws to address and punish all forms of violence against women and girls, in accordance with international human rights standards, is one of the main outcomes of the work of women's organizations in Albania. As part of hundreds of projects carried out with the support of donors in the country and abroad, tens of thousands of public employees, practitioners against gender-based violence, such as municipal employees, police officers, judges, teachers, health center staff, etc., have been trained. As a result of the extensive awareness-raising work of organizations and the provision of services, in recent years the number of women reporting domestic violence has increased significantly.

INCREASING WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS AND DECISION-MAKING

Civil society has played a significant role in strengthening women's political participation and decision-making processes in Albania. Civil society organizations have organized campaigns to raise awareness about the importance of women's participation in decision-making processes and have exerted continuous pressure for the drafting and improvement of legislation that guarantees equal participation of women in politics, including the demand for quotas for women on political party lists. Civil society has also helped create networks of women in politics, which provide a platform for sharing experiences, challenges, and lessons, and for working together to increase women's participation in policymaking. Organizations have monitored elections and other decision-making processes to assess women's participation and have provided direct support to women candidates and girls in election campaigns, regardless of political affiliation.

Initiatives to Increase Women's Participation in Politics

Under the strong influence of civil society organizations and representatives of international organizations such as the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), UN Women, the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and the U.S. Embassy in Albania, in 2008 the Law on Gender Equality in Albania was adopted, which included Article 15 on participation in the decision-making process. The Law on Gender Equality in Society introduced a quota for women's participation in politics and decision-making at the level of 30% and above. In November 2008, Albania's electoral system was reformed by introducing a proportional representation system for lists. The amended Electoral Code in 2009 stipulated gender quotas for candidate lists and membership in the Electoral Administrative Zone Commissions for the first time.

Civil society organizations, such as the Gender Alliance for Development Center, the Center for Civic Legal Initiatives, and Women's Network "Equality in Decision Making", played a significant role in lobbying and influencing the adoption of the Law on Gender Equality and the change of the electoral system. In addition, these organizations helped implement the law and promote women's participation in politics and decision-making. As a result, women's participation in decision-making increased, contributing to the promotion of gender equality at all levels of society in Albania.

The Result

The implementation of the law on gender equality has led to an improvement in the gender balance in decision-making processes, especially in Parliament. The percentage of women in Parliament has increased significantly after the adoption of the law on gender equality and the inclusion of gender quotas. The gender quota has served as a mechanism that not only increases the accountability of political parties to include more women in decision-making but also provides the space for the implementation of the legal framework for gender equality. Civil society has helped create a new political culture in Albania, where women's participation is valued and encouraged. Continuous efforts are necessary to ensure the implementation of legislation and raise awareness about the significant role of women and girls in every field of the country's political, social, and economic development.

PROVISION OF SERVICES TO SUPPORT WOMEN AND GIRLS SURVIVING VIOLENCE

Albanian associations for the protection of women's and girls' rights, which were established in the early 1990s, initially focused on addressing violence against women, a taboo topic during the dictatorial system in Albania. In this regard, the associations engaged in educating women and the public about women's rights, starting with violence against women as an extreme and widespread form of violation of their rights. In parallel, the associations began work to create services for women and girls surviving sexual violence, domestic violence, and trafficking for exploitation, as well as for the prevention of gender-based violence. This included establishing a legal basis for addressing this violence and providing necessary services such as counseling, legal and psychological support.

This commitment by the associations for the protection of women's and girls' rights in Albania was important in raising the awareness of society and promoting the rights of women and girls as an integral part of society. This dedication and commitment have also contributed to changing the culture of violence against women and raising awareness about the importance of respecting the rights of women and girls in Albanian society.

Main Initiatives for Combating Gender-Based Violence and for Services for Girls and Women

Some of the key moments in the creation of services for women and girls, survivors of gender-based violence are presented below.

In 1996, the Counseling Line for Women and Girls (HotLine Albania) was launched in Tirana, the first counseling and assistance center for women and girls who survived gender-based violence in Albania. From the beginning until today, the Line offers: telephone counseling, face-to-face counseling, free legal assistance and other referral services (for safety and protection, health care, social assistance and employment) for women and girls from all over Albania. Today the

Line operates as a national hotline 116 117 for victims of gender-based violence, including domestic violence, and offers counseling services 24 hours a day, 7 days a week (24/7).

In 1997, the Legal Aid Center for Women and Girls (today the Center for Legal Civic Initiatives), an initiative of the Women's Center (today the Gender Alliance for Development Center), was established. This center offered free legal assistance to women and girls, victims of gender-based violence, a service that is still part of the mission and activity of the Center for Legal Civic Initiatives.

In 1998, the Shelter for Abused Women and Girls ('Shelter') activity was launched in Tirana, an initiative of the Women's Association "Refleksione". The shelter provides shelter, referral services and reintegration services for women and girls survivors of violence, as well as their children.

In 1999, the Psycho-Social Center "Vatra" was established in Vlora, the first service center for women and girls, victims of human trafficking.

The Result

Women's organizations have played a leading role in preventing and addressing gender-based violence in Albania, because they: (i) established the first aid services for women and girls surviving gender-based violence and trafficking, as described above; (ii) created the models and standards for these services, which were later adopted by other service centers for women and girls surviving gender-based violence and trafficking, established by other non-profit organizations and public institutions in Albania; (iii) undertook advocacy initiatives and made significant contributions to the creation of the legal basis for addressing gender-based violence; and (iv) collected data and conducted the first studies related to gender-based violence in the country.

As a result of advocacy by the women's movement, as part of the legal obligations arising from the law "On Domestic Violence", and thanks to support from international partners, in 2014 the National Center for the Treatment of Victims of Domestic Violence was opened, and in 2018 the "Lilium" Center for the Treatment of Victims of Sexual Abuse, the first two public institutions of this kind, were opened.

As a result of this intensive work for three decades by women's organizations, with the help of international partners and with public funds, today in Albania, comprehensive services are provided for women and girls surviving gender-based violence, including: safe shelter, immediate medical support, collection of forensic evidence in cases of rape and sexual assault, short-term and long-term psychological counseling, trauma care, legal counseling, advocacy and outreach services, vocational training and employment services.



IV.

*ENVIROMENTAL
PROTECTION*

GREEN LUNGS FOR OUR CITIES

Various regional and European sources rank Albania among the countries where elevated levels of air pollutant concentration and population exposure, cause around 5,350 premature deaths and a reduction of about 184 days from the life of healthy but systematically exposed individuals. This, as a consequence of the lack of monitoring by institutions, non-implementation of legislation in force, the situation of heavy traffic, the quality of fuel, the lack of green spaces, the densification and overcrowding of cities, etc.

The “Green Lungs for Our Cities” Initiative

The initiative “Green Lungs for Our Cities” was conceived and materialized by Co-PLAN - Institute for Habitat Development, as an alternative platform as an alternative platform that aims to inform and raise awareness among local and national actors, using facts, about the importance of monitoring the urban environment to reduce the population’s exposure to a harmful environment for public health.

In the absence of official state references regarding the quality of the urban environment, Green Lungs stands today as the most interactive, transparent, and widely reaching platform in the country concerning the presentation of analyses from alternative monitoring processes of air quality, noise pollution, and the evaluation of services provided by the urban green ecosystem.

The monitoring process has been ongoing for 5 years in Tirana, Shkodra, Elbasan, Korca, and Durres, where the following are regularly published: a. The annual pollution bulletin; b. Research articles on the population’s exposure to pollution; c. Dedicated monitoring campaigns for specific sectors (construction, transport, housing, etc.). Practically, this platform involves: 8 environmental organizations, 2 universities, 14 accredited monitoring devices, over 110 volunteers in monitoring processes, and more than 10 researchers in the field of urban environment.

The Result

By December 2022, Green Lungs had accomplished the following in all the municipalities where it operates: *A complete census of urban greenery elements (15,100 trees); *Information on the seasonal average concentration of pollutants PM2.5, PM10, NO2, CO, CO2, VOC, SO2, and O3 at over 366 monitoring points; *Real-time information on the pollution index and particulates from 10 dedicated stations; *Information on the seasonal average noise levels at over 730 monitoring points.

Green Lungs managed to factor the concerns about air quality and noise pollution in urban areas, in the agendas of local and central authorities, as well as gaining widespread attention in the national media. The initiative introduced a new concept for calculating the services provided by the urban green ecosystem, which repositions greenery not merely as an aesthetic feature but as a crucial component for addressing pollution and climate-related issues in urban areas.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN WASTE MANAGEMENT

Waste management in Albania has been a significant issue since the 1990s. The lack of suitable sites for the disposal of urban solid waste and various waste streams, coupled with poor infrastructure for collecting and transporting waste from collection points in cities to final disposal sites, has led to environmental problems related to soil and river pollution, extending to the sea. The absence of infrastructure for separating waste at the source and recovering various solid waste streams that could be used as raw materials in the recycling industry has increased the amount of waste, causing concerns at disposal sites, such as fires and air pollution, and dumping along riverbanks, among other issues. In the 2010-2011 period, the country did not have any sanitary landfills, and most disposal sites did not meet hygiene and sanitary conditions for managing urban waste. Meanwhile, in the period after 2010, various businesses undertook initiatives for recycling. The government approved permits for recycling companies, mainly for plastics, paper, and metals, but without mandating them to collect a portion of the raw materials for recycling from solid waste generated domestically.

The law on waste import and the reaction of civil society

In these circumstances, the Albanian government drafted the Law on Integrated Waste Management (2011), which included provisions for permitting the import of waste. While the government's rationale was to allow the import of raw materials for the recycling industry within the country, environmental organizations and other civil society activists assessed that such a measure could also enable the entry of uncontrolled and hazardous waste from neighboring countries, which could be illegally distributed across the territory.

The initiative of the Organic Agriculture Association was joined by many other associations and activists. Among the most vocal were Lavdosh Feruni, Kozara Kati, and Adrian Klosi, among others. The "Alliance Against Waste Import" (AKIP) undertook a series of actions to express its opposition to this legislative initiative, including media communications, protests, and demonstrations in Tirana. The initiative culminated in the collection of 60,000 signatures across Albania and the call for a referendum to overturn part of the "Law on Integrated Waste Management." The documentation was submitted to the Central Election Commission for verification. This case would set the first precedent in the country regarding the exercise of the constitutional right to call a referendum by the people.

Under the motto "For a Clean Albania," several organizations have undertaken initiatives to reduce waste pollution, with one of the most notable being the campaign against the use of plastic bags. Many organizations have joined forces to promote responsible behavior that reduces waste and encourages recycling through cleanup campaigns and awareness-raising activities in schools and communities throughout the country.

The Result

The Alliance Against Waste Import became a cause with broad public support. Initially started by environmental organizations, it attracted a large number of activists and public figures who supported it and became its advocates. Waste management remains a challenge for both local and central authorities. In recent years, there have been several legal initiatives and pilot projects aimed at reducing plastic use and banning single-use plastic bags. Although implementation remains at unsatisfactory levels, thanks to the contribution of environmental civil society, public support for these initiatives and for recycling has been increasing.

FOSTERING PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN ENVIRONMENTAL DECISION-MAKING

The exercise of the right to obtain information about the state of the environment or interventions in it, as well as participation in environmental decision-making, has been a process that has evolved along with the development of democracy in Albania. Although the right to live in a healthy environment is also enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of Albania, in the early days of democracy, this right was seen as an attribute to be ensured by the state, and people benefited from it without needing to participate. The signing of the Aarhus Convention “On Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making, and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (1998)”, legitimized these rights by enabling not only affected individuals but also civil society organizations as interested public in environmental matters to act.

Good Practices of Civil Society Participation in Environmental Decision-Making

During 2000-2005, the Resource Environmental Center Albania (REC Albania) undertook an extensive qualification program to increase the knowledge on the rights of individuals and NPOs in the framework of this convention. The qualification included representatives from central and local institutions, as well as NPOs, focusing on the search for and provision of environmental information, and the organization of public participation in environmental decision-making processes.

In 2003, the Civic Alliance for the Protection of the Bay of Vlora, composed of activists and members of local environmental associations, after a series of protests against the construction of a thermal power plant in the Bay of Vlora area, approached the Aarhus Convention Compliance Committee in Geneva, suing the Albanian government for failing to fulfil its obligation to ensure proper public participation with individuals and organizations interested in the issue. After reviewing the case, the Committee deemed the lawsuit valid and requested that the Albanian government take measures to organize the public participation processes properly. Although the thermal power plant was constructed, it has not yet been put into operation, which reinforces the previous stance of civil society regarding issues in the planning, and in the economic and environmental assessment of this investment.

In 2005-2015, there was a qualitative advancement in the interaction between NPOs and state institutions regarding how information requests were addressed. This period also marks the beginnings of public participation with an impact on specific environmental issues. NPOs encountered challenges such as refusal or delays in providing the requested information, for example, concerning requests for access to Environmental Impact Assessment Reports for significant infrastructure investments. Increased public pressure and the completion of the legal framework for the right to information positively influenced the suspension of several activities with negative environmental impacts.

The planning for the construction of the thermal power plant in Porto Romano (2007-2008) and the construction of the Tirana Big Ring Road (2011) were two cases where the EDEN Center, supported by environmental and community organizations, called for comprehensive public participation processes. Informal coalitions, such as the support of 33 organizations for the cause of including local communities in the public consultation for the construction of the Tirana Big Ring Road of Tirana, enabled fairer decision-making for the affected communities and minimized social and environmental damages.

After 2010, broader public consultations on environmental acts and strategic documents commenced, with NPOs being more fully involved. In many processes, environmental organizations have criticized shortcomings in public discussion processes. The monitoring of public consultation processes with local communities affected by the construction of energy projects strengthened the connection between environmental NPOs and these communities. In 2017, EcoAlbania reported problems in the public consultation for hydropower plants on the Vjosa River. The Association Toka as well, opposed the construction of hydropower plants on the Valbona River, arguing that the construction endangered the protected area, public consultation processes were fabricated, and the obligations set by law were not fulfilled.

Assessments by international organizations regarding the implementation of the Aarhus Convention's requirements, indicated that by 2015, there had been good progress concerning the first two pillars of this convention: the right to access information and public participation. In cases where requests were denied or delayed, NPOs turned to the People's Advocate and the Commissioner for the Right to Information. However, the lack of trust in the judicial system and various difficulties in exercising the right to approach this system when the right to information

and participation was violated, had hindered the activation of the third pillar of the Aarhus Convention.

In 2015-2017, REC Albania conducted a series of qualifications for representatives of NPOs and the justice system, including the School of Magistrates. The legal interpretations of the High Court regarding the legitimacy of civil society organizations in environmental court cases, paved the way for the initiation and review of the first such cases in the Courts of First Instance.

In October 2017, the Tirana Administrative Court held hearings regarding the lawsuit filed by the Association "Toka" and 27 residents of Margegaj in Tropoja, against the Ministry of Energy, the Ministry of Tourism and Environment, the National Council of the Territory, the National Environment Agency, the Development Agency of the Territory, and the Water Basin Council. They requested the court to declare the absolute invalidity of the concession contract for the construction of the two "Dragobia" hydropower plants signed in 2009, and a series of related orders, decisions, amendments, and permits that had been issued until then. Civil society organizations, activists, and residents organized a series of protests in Bajram Curri and Tirana with the slogan "Don't Touch Valbona".

Similar judicial processes continued against hydropower plants in Vjosa, Zall Gjocaj, and other locations. The cases presented in country's courts served to gain valuable experience in addressing deficiencies in the participatory processes required by law and in arguing the negative environmental impacts. The voices of local residents began to be heard more strongly and were effectively represented by young lawyers who showed increased interest in environmental causes.

In 2018, the EDEN Center filed a lawsuit against the Municipality of Fieri, for the mismanagement of the landfill in Sheq, representing the concerns of the local community regarding air pollution and its health impacts. Among the most recent cases is the lawsuit filed by the Association for the Preservation and Protection of Natural Environment in Albania (PPNEA) and the Albanian Ornithological Society (AOS) in 2022 against the construction of the Vlora airport in the protected area of Narta Lagoon.

The Result

The Aarhus Convention remains one of the most well-known and frequently used international agreements by environmental NPOs in our country. Strengthening capacities within the NPO sector to utilize its mechanisms has increased the level of pressure and strengthened the argument for requesting and receiving environmental information and for participating in environmental decision-making, thereby protecting the interests of local communities and the natural environment.

The use of the Aarhus Convention's mechanisms by environmental NPOs has matured and empowered the voices of individuals and groups advocating for environmental protection, against the interests of state institutions and businesses. More than 20 years after the signing and ratification of this convention, the procedures for requesting and obtaining environmental information have been standardized; the right of public participation in decision-making affecting the environment has been ensured. Although these processes are far from reaching the ideal standard, they have enabled NPOs to positively impact and either prevent or minimize environmental damage.

The decisions of some judicial processes in favor of communities and NPOs, such as in the case of HPPs in Vjosa, Valbona and Zall Gjocaj, although not yet fully resolved, have created the necessary experience to organize and activate this still fragile mechanism of democracy.

PROTECTION OF WILDLIFE AND AREAS OF NATURAL IMPORTANCE

The diverse landscape, geographical position, rich relief, and favorable climate in every season of the year, have endowed Albania with suitable conditions for a very rich flora and fauna. In such a landscape, a variety of animals and plants thrive, which are invaluable and irreplaceable treasures for our country. With around 3,000 plant species, 58 mammals, and approximately 370 bird species, our country is a habitat and breeding ground for many species of international importance, many of which are endemic. Thanks to natural habitats and important forest, lagoon, and wetland ecosystems, it also provides shelter for around 80 migratory bird species.

During winter periods, the number of birds in our lagoons can reach up to 200,000. Due to the unique natural values of certain areas and the biological diversity they contain, around 20% of Albania's territory has been declared a protected area.

Uncontrolled developments and the lack of law enforcement in protecting these natural values during the transition period have led to their degradation, even to the extinction or extreme reduction of certain species and habitats. Until 2015, illegal constructions, uncontrolled hunting using illegal methods, deforestation, and forest fires, along with other pressures such as pollution and noise, significantly reduced wildlife. During this period, the government took the drastic measure of completely banning hunting through a five-year moratorium. Although it was supported as a way to curb the destruction of nature, environmental civil society interpreted it as a temporary measure that should be accompanied by concrete steps for the control and management of these activities.

Good Practices of Civil Society for Protected Areas and Wildlife Conservation

The Association for the Protection and Preservation of Natural Environment in Albania (PPNEA) undertook the monitoring of large mammals such as the brown bear, lynx, wolf, etc. in various protected areas, aiding in assessing the presence and condition of their populations. Through multi-year monitoring programs using digital technology tools like infrared cameras, important data for their protection were collected. The drafting of Species Management Plans for some of the most endangered species enabled concrete actions on the ground, in collaboration with the administration of protected areas.

The Albanian Ornithological Society (AOS), with its extensive experience in conducting bird censuses across the country, has been the sole source of data for bird inventories and population dynamics. This information is extremely valuable for key bird areas such as lagoons. Thanks to their work, our country has three internationally recognized bird areas (known as IBA – Important Bird Areas) and a Ramsar site (a wetland area designated as of international importance under the Ramsar Convention, also known as the 'Convention on Wetlands'), which is the Karavasta Lagoon.

In 2017-2018, at the initiative of AOS and with the support of 23 environmental civil society

organizations, a campaign was organized against the plans of private investors to build a 'city' resort in the heart of the Divjake-Karavasta National Park. Under the motto 'Protect the Divjake-Karavasta National Park,' the debate on sustainable development alternatives for this area opposed the government's plans for tourist developments.

Since 2020, a broad coalition of organizations and environmental experts has opposed the study conducted by the National Agency for Protected Areas to revise the boundaries of protected areas. This study served as the technical assessment for a series of decisions by the Albanian government (2021-2022) to alter the boundaries of the protected area network in our country. Although at the end of this process (January 2021), the Albanian government advertised an increase in the protected area from 18.25% to 20.9% of the territory, it resulted in a reduction of the protected area along the Adriatic coast by 11%. The affected areas, primarily lagoon zones, are considered the most important for the country's wildlife with unique natural habitats throughout the Mediterranean region.

The reduction of protected areas in Velipoje, Patok, Karavasta, and Narte was opposed by environmental NPOs and experts from academic institutions as an action contrary to the Protected Areas Law (2017) and not supported by comprehensive studies involving the scientific community. Debates in meetings with representatives of the Ministry of Tourism and Environment, protests, and media communications brought the issue to the forefront not only in the Albanian public opinion but also among international nature protection organizations such as the Bern Convention.

The coalition of environmental NPOs has brought the case to court, seeking the revocation of these decisions. Such a step is considered extremely important to prevent similar precedents in the future, where pressure for economic and tourism development in the coastal zone could irreversibly damage these values of our country.

Special programs for protecting rare species from poisoning or killing have been initiatives of environmental NPOs, focusing primarily on the protection of birds and mammals. Other organizations, such as Four Paws, have supported initiatives for wildlife protection by rescuing large mammals such as the brown bear from captivity. Media campaigns and on-the-ground actions have raised awareness about the illegal trafficking of these species.

Some of the most active organizations in this field have expressed interest in joining the Fauna Council established by the Ministry of Tourism and Environment. Although this forum is in the early stages of organization and operation, the participation of civil society in it allows for raising the voice on important issues related to the protection and management of wildlife species in our country.

The Result

The contribution of civil society organizations in this field has aimed at strengthening the recognition and technical capacities for threatened and internationally important species. The collection of concrete data on their presence and population trends directly supports responsible institutions, such as the protected areas administration, which has rather limited resources and capacities. Thanks to this contribution and support with expertise and human resources, methodologies for monitoring and Species Management Plans have been developed for several internationally important species.

Concrete actions to protect species from killing or harm, disturbance from human activity, and rescue from captivity have helped raise public awareness about the values of wildlife and its protection. Undertaking such causes as preventing the reduction of the Protected Areas Network has strengthened the capacity of environmental NPOs to advocate for specific issues that require comprehensive technical expertise to address the growing pressure from tourism development in our country's coastal areas.

PROTECTION OF THE VJOSA RIVER VALLEY – VJOSA NATIONAL PARK

The Vjosa River is one of the last wild rivers in Europe. The river is characterized by beautiful canyons in its upper course and has a wide and majestic riverbed in its middle and lower courses. Along with its tributaries, the Vjosa creates a dynamic ecosystem, a true European natural heritage. The period after 2010 was marked by chaotic and exploitative developments of rivers across the country and more broadly in the Western Balkans, primarily for energy production. The construction of small hydropower plants on the riverbeds severely damaged these ecosystems with natural values and created social problems related to water use by local

residents. Along its course in Albania, around 8 hydropower dams were planned, including two in the middle course of this river. Concessions for the construction of hydropower plants in Kalivac and Bënçë were granted around the 2000s, and part of the work had already started.

The initiative of civil society organizations “Vjosa National Park”

A broad group of civil society organizations, gathered in the river protection network, raised their voices against these developments. Along with many other rivers in Albania, such as Valbona, the Vjosa River became a symbol of citizen and civil society reaction. EcoAlbania, as the leading organization in this initiative, organized a series of activities at various levels to raise awareness about the values of this river, stop plans for the construction of energy projects that would disrupt its natural network, and declare it a protected area.

From 2014 to 2021, in support of Albanian organizations, was established a broad international coalition, supported by Riverwatch and Euronature. This coalition increased international pressure on the Albanian government to protect the river. The Vjosa River issue was internationalized through statements from celebrities in international art and politics. Declarations and media statements from international institutions, including the Council of Europe and European Union institutions, strengthened the cause for the protection of this river. Through the campaign “Save the Blue Heart of Europe,” Vjosa became a symbol for the entire movement to protect rivers in the Balkans.

Close collaboration with academic institutions within the country and in Europe enabled a number of expeditions by Albanian and foreign scientific researchers, who documented the biodiversity of this river and identified endemic or internationally significant species (2016-2022). These activities recorded 1,175 species of animals and plants along the Vjosa River, including 119 species protected by Albanian law and 39 species listed in the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species.

EcoAlbania, representing the voices of local communities, also initiated legal processes against

investors for irregularities in public consultations on energy projects and for the exclusion of local communities from these decision-making processes.

The awareness-raising activities organized for the cause included concerts in Tirana ("Don't Touch Vjosa," 2017) and Tepelena ("Vjosa Forever," 2022), international scientific conferences, exhibitions and documentary screenings, and expeditions along the Vjosa River (from its source to its delta in the Adriatic Sea) for journalists, policymakers, young people and activists passionate about nature. Projects promoting renewable energy production, instead of building dams like "Solar in Kutë" during the period 2019-2021, presented sustainable development alternatives for this geographic area, in contrast to investments that threatened the habitats and natural ecosystems of the Vjosa River.

Meanwhile, the pressure for economic development with schemes not balanced with nature in the areas along the river and its border zones, has not been mitigated. The Albanian government's plans to build the Vlora airport in the Narta area, have increased concerns among environmental organizations about the impact this infrastructure project could have on the natural ecosystems and fauna at the source of the Vjosa River. The Narta Lagoon and its surrounding area are closely linked to the Vjosa River. It is designated as an Important Bird Area (IBA) because it serves as a breeding ground for many bird species and is located along the migratory path of birds from northern Europe to Africa and vice versa. The Narta area and the Vjosa River delta are seen as two interconnected zones, creating an important bio corridor in the southern part of our country.

The start of construction and the signing of the concession contract in November 2022 were strongly opposed by this community, which demanded adherence to legal requirements for stopping construction within the protected area and conducting a Comprehensive Environmental Impact Assessment. In 2022, PPNEA began legal action against this investment.

In September 2020, the Prime Minister of Albania publicly announced the intention to declare the Vjosa River a protected area. Although this was seen as a victory for the coalition of civil society organizations, the achievement was considered as insufficient protection for Vjosa, which did not

exclude the risk of damage from energy projects. EcoAlbania and the coalition of environmental organizations continued to advocate for its protection as a National Park, offering assistance to the National Agency of Protected Areas (the responsible institution within the Ministry of Tourism and Environment) in preparing the necessary documentation.

In January 2022, the Albanian government declared the Vjosa River a protected area of the Natural Park category. Due to the natural and ecological values of this river, the coalition of environmental organizations that initiated the effort continued advocacy processes to upgrade the protection status to National Park. During 2022, the Ministry of Tourism and Environment expressed a positive stance on this issue and established a technical working group to prepare the necessary documentation and studies for such a decision. Representatives from civil society organizations were also part of the technical group.

Networking within the country and abroad amplified the voice of environmental organizations and other actors in conservation, evolving and enhancing the organization of advocacy campaigns for environmental issues in Albania. It effectively influenced political decision-making and secured broad support from the local community along the Vjosa Valley and the general public. In a public opinion survey on environmental issues as part of the campaign “You and I for the Environment” (IDRA, 2022), 45% of respondents listed the Vjosa as the environmental campaign they were aware of being actively pursued.

The Result

Environmental organizations enabled the use of various tools and methods for raising awareness and applying pressure, including scientific research, media, and environmental and political diplomacy both within the country and internationally.

Thanks to this contribution, the Vjosa River is undoubtedly ranked as a precious gem in the country's natural heritage and a unique tourist attraction for the region. On March 13, 2023, the Government of Albania declared the Vjosa River - the last wild river in Europe - a National Park.

