Journal of Liberty and International Affairs | Volume 10 · Number 1 · 2024 | eISSN 1857-9760
Published online by the Institute for Research and European Studies at www.e-jlia.com

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(*) Corresponding author
Peer review method: Double-blind
Original scientific article
DOI: https://doi.org/10.47305/JLIA24101089h
Received: 15.01.2024 · Revised: 02.02.2024 · Accepted: 03.02.2024 · Published: 14.04.2024

EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES IN KOSOVO: THE VITAL ROLE OF LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT IN ADVANCING EDUCATION AND CURBING DEVIANT BEHAVIOR

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Abstract: *Local communities play an essential role in developing and organizing their lives for joint betterment. Local self-government, through local democratic mechanisms, involves the community as part of the public policies, showing the sign of the development of the local democracy. This research aims to analyze the communication and collaboration between the local government and local communities in Kosovo, focusing on their role in the development of education and the reduction of deviant behavior, intending to create a better social environment for the community. The research methodology employed for this paper is as follows: library research, qualitative research, and the analysis of the laws in power related to the topic. There will be field research working with two focus groups belonging to the municipality of Prishtina, considering their ethnic component. General results show that communities are still in the development and organization phase, whereas their participation in the process of public policies is still under the average level. Social audits can be mechanisms for development, organizing the community, and involvement in local government policies.*

Keywords: *Development; Communities; Local Self-Government; Local Democracy; Public Policies; Education; Deviant Behavior*

INTRODUCTION

Local self-government plays an essential role in offering public services to all citizens. It is considered the first step of cooperation between the citizens and the local government. According to the system in place, the government has regulated the structure and governing system, including the local one. However, local self-government "is the expression of society's democratization, of the realization basic political, social as well as economic rights that constitute the expression of aspirations of human rights which independently organize and govern their communities obligations within the premises they live and work" (Morina 2021). The term and concept of local government "primarily relate to exercising authoritative power within a specific territory. Local self-government can be viewed as the initial stage of democracy, as it is the primary avenue through which citizens can access public services" (Kamberi 2023).

In this regard, local self-government is a governing unit within a specific territory that aims to offer public services to all citizens. In Kosovo, based on the Law on Local Self-Government, which states, "the municipality is the basic unit of local self-government in the Republic of Kosovo, made up of a community of citizens of a specific territory defined by law and shall exercise all powers which are not explicitly reserved for the central institutions" (MLGA - Law No 03/L-040 on Local Self-Government 2008). A definition that is more or less the same

for the Law on Local Self-Government is found in North Macedonia, which highlights that "the municipality is part of local self-government, as a community of the citizens of a specific territory, defined by law, which through units and administration and public organized activities, enables fulfilling their rights as described by law" (Law on Local Self-Government 2001). Local self-government is synonymous with local government because local government structures are elected for a term to represent citizens through free voting and democratic elections, which are monitored by institutional mechanisms. The function of local government is closely connected to two main issues: a) offering of public services, and b) cooperation with local communities, representing them in higher level government institutions and enabling their participation in policy and decision making.

This leads to the understanding that the community as a whole or a group of people with shared objectives, the feeling of belonging as an identity, and depend on one another have their rights in conformity with the legislation to be represented following the public policies considered national interest. In fact, "in a democracy, having an elected government at the center and at the state level is not sufficient. It is also necessary that even at the local level, there should be an elected government to look after local affairs" (NCERT 2015). Likewise, as stated by Cobigo et al. (2016), "since ancient Greek philosophy, the view of community has evolved and changed with the evolution of human interactions and behaviors. Aristotle described the community as a compound of parts having functions and interests in common. However, in the 19th century, the German philosopher and sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies differentiated between community and society. According to Tönnies (1957), community is represented by individuals' close social ties (e.g., family, friends, and neighbors). In contrast, society refers to abstract associations among individuals who do not share feelings and do not necessarily share space and time. In the 20th century, many authors have attempted to better define community. While analyzing these concepts, it is emphasized that "community today is characterized by some characteristics that qualify it as a community, including Physical proximity, shared, group, bounded, interaction, belonging, support, sustained, symbol, territory-free, process, diverse, tangible" (Cobigo et al. 2016, 188). By analyzing the relationship between local government and communities, in most cases, they have cooperation, which is also reflected in communities' participation in important public policy processes. It may be destructive in some cases because of their criticisms of governance and the types of governance offered. In Kosovo, the relationship between the local government and the communities is regulated by law on local government and other by-laws that regulate this relationship, more precisely, the participation of communities in decision-making, their contribution, development, organization, and other vital issues related to communities. Besides other things, this paper aims to analyze the relationship between the local self-government and the communities, including the development and organization of the communities as an essential component of the local democracy. The research also focuses on the role of local communities in Kosovo's municipalities' development. Part of this research has research questions in the form of a hypothesis, such as: What is the role of local government concerning local communities? What is the participation of the community in the process of preparing public policies? What is the role of the community in the issues of education as an agent of education and socializing and in the reduction of deviant behavior?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Modern society's development has significantly impacted the development of democracy, religious pluralism, and cultural and social aspects. The notion of rights that sometimes back were unimaginable, in current times, we are witnessing them. Since establishing the UN organization after World War II, the European Union (EU) and other international organizations have contributed to developing international policies and instruments that would pressure governments to establish such policies as part of democratic enhancement. On the other hand, it would enhance civil societies' development through formal and informal groups, local communities, and other groups, which are seen as fundamental pillars of contemporary democracy. A significant segment in this regard is the local self-government and community development. Likewise, according to the Association of the Municipalities of Kosovo, when talking about the role of the local government concerning other segments of public life, this role is to "initiate and implement policies and practices which I) promote co-existence and peace in public, II) to make sure offering of public services effectively for all citizens regardless of their gender, sexual orientation, age, education and ethnicity., and III) create adequate conditions for communities to express, save and develop their identities" (AKK/AKM 2019). While analyzing the substantial role of the local government, particularly concerning the development of the communities, it can be said that this role, besides other aspects, empowers the concept of local democracy and indicates a country concerning international rights. Mykola Bondar provides a broad definition of local democracy. He defines it as a self-governing form:

> Based on the unity of freedom and responsibility of the population at the place of residence of public authority, collective and individual rights of citizens to decide independently within the Constitution's and current legislation's limits. Direct livelihoods and the provision of municipal services are in the interests of the local community and individual citizens (Pankratova 2022).

Also, "local government is an institution, which deals with matters concerning the people living in the particular locality. It represents the microscopic interests of the locality leading to the broader concept of welfare and happiness of its people" (Sikander 2015).

That can be achieved when there is good communication between the local government and the local community by improving their position. However, many sociological theories have emphasized developing and organizing the community as crucial issues in the local authority's processes. Therefore, "the theory of community development is perhaps the most practical framework for social workers seeking lasting change for individuals and the communities and societies in which they live. It focuses on the centrality of oppressed people in the process of overcoming externally imposed social problems" (Tan 2009). The theory of social capital, which has in its focus also the development of the community, emphasizes that social capital is that set of resources intrinsic to social relations and includes trust, norms, and networks (Life can be more prosperous if there is trust among neighbors and others in the public and private sectors. In this regard, "the term social capital is currently categorized into the following types: (1) structural and cognitive forms, which are divided based on whether social capital involves socio-economic institutions and networks or relates to individual mood of mind; (2) macro (national),

also (regional and community), and micro (household or individual) levels, which are categorized based on the level of economic structure that social capital affects; (3) bonding, bridging, linking and bracing types, which are based on functions that social capital works inside one community or between several organizations and/or individuals in different communities" (Yokoyama 2006). This would lead to the understanding that human capital is among the most important, as it has social intentions, joint goals, the feeling of social and identity belonging, and belief in modern society. The development and enhancement of the community also empower the local government. Its development has been the focus point of discussion for many prominent scholars of different times, considering it the general social development. Sümer (2012), concerning the empowerment of social cohesion within the community, refers to the famous sociologist Ibn Khaldun (1406), who states:

> There must be some factor, some incitement, for the desire for cooperation to exist on a larger scale among some human beings than among others. He calls this factor *asabiyya*, a word which he borrowed from classical usage and gave a new positive meaning. The group to which an individual feels most closely attached is his clan or tribe, the people with whom he shares a common descent. However, politically, *asabiyya* can also be shared by people not related to each other by blood ties but by long and close contact as group members (p. 252).

This concept has contemporary logic and focuses mainly on the group's feelings, for which the French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1917) has also spoken about social solidarity. This concept talks about the interaction with the community. The more the community is empowered, the more it can contribute to the decision and policy-making at the local level of governance. In Kosovo, local communities are still at the initial stage. However, there are initiatives for strengthening them and participating in the public processes at the local level, like public meetings, local consultancy and advisory meetings, meetings for budget division, and other committees and processes that are important for the community and the society at large.

METHODOLOGY

Considering the importance of this work, particularly the sociologic perspective of local government and communities, the methodology employed for realizing this work is as follows: first, library research by analyzing the previous works related to this topic. Second, the legal method focuses more on international legal aspects and compares them with the domestic legal issues related to the development and empowerment of communities. Third, the comparative method focuses on the trends in the participation of communities in the processes of public policies and development of communities. The fourth and last qualitative research method works with focus groups in local communities. In this process, there were two focus groups, 8 members in each group, altogether 16 participants (8 women and 8 men). Their ethnicity: 10 Albanians, 2 Turks, 2 from the Ashkali and Egyptian communities, and 2 from the Serbian community. This research was done with the citizens of Prishtina because it is the biggest municipality in Kosovo and because of its specifications as a capital city. The discussion has been done more from the perspective of finding out the role of local government and the

development of the community, public participation of the communities, the role of the communities in the sphere of education enhancement, and its contribution to the reduction of deviant behavior.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In general, while discussing with the focus groups, it could be seen that the development and organization of the communities are still at the early phase of development, which is gradually increasing and helping create active citizenship in public participation in the local governments. Therefore, local government has essential meaning for the life of local communities because, following their capabilities, it impacts the improvement of the quality of life for the communities. However, through cooperation, empowerment of the collaboration, and their development, local communities affect their members' formal and informal education, reduce deviant behavior, avoid prejudice and stereotypes, and influence their social participation as an essential component of democracy.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE COMMUNITIES AND THEIR ROLE IN DEVELOPING EDUCATION AND REDUCTION OF DEVIANT BEHAVIOR

Usually, when talking about local communities, it means religious, women, youth, business, organization of civil societies, marginalized communities, and social categories. Based on Law No. 03/L-047 on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Communities and their Members in Kosovo (2008), communities are defined as:

> National, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, or religious groups traditionally present in the Republic of Kosovo that are not in the majority. These groups are Serb, Turkish, Bosnian, Roma, Ashkali, Egyptian, Gorani and other communities. Members of the majority community in the Republic of Kosovo who are not in the majority in a given municipality shall also be entitled to enjoy the rights listed in this law.

Local communities have an important law in developing their social activities and life within their community. Therefore, the development of the communities requires another necessary process, as described in the following citation and Figure 1 below: "Community development process can be difficult, time-consuming and costly. Community residents are often more concerned with daily tasks than with thinking about and developing a vision of their community's future. For example, residents want access to good schools for their children, decent jobs, and a safe and clean environment" (Vadeveloo 2013).

There are examples of this kind where communities are well organized in some of the municipalities throughout Kosovo, although most of them are at the initial stage. GAP Institute (2017) has identified "at least six villages where their population together with their diaspora and businesses of those villages get together to discuss how and what can be done to improve the environment and the life where they live. These villages are as follows: Korisha, Dobërçani, Koretini, Smira, Stublla e Epërme dhe Lubinja e Epërme" (p. 6). These villages have shown success to be followed because they have their local advisers, they work for the common good,

they have even opened a bank account that collects donations from people voluntarily to keep the environment clean and sponsor other social activities that are also done voluntarily.

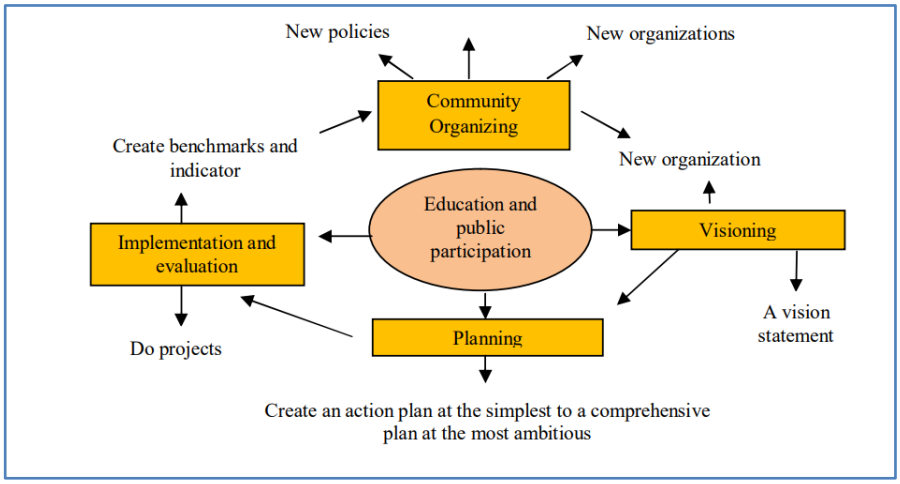


Figure 1: Community Development Process (Vadeveloo 2013, 55)

The development and organization of local communities are closely connected to the administrative instruction as follows: "MGLA - Administrative Instruction No. 02/2019 on the Organization, Functioning, and Cooperation of the Municipalities with Villages, Settlements and Urban Quarters 2019", regulates the organization, functioning and cooperation of the municipality with the villages, settlements and urban quarters, and which has specific responsibilities and powers for the collaboration within the community and the relationship with the local government.

This public policy talks about the way it functions, the form of meetings, and other local councils. Thus, developing the communities is necessary because the communities are fluid, dynamic, and coherent. They cooperate and, above all, they feel identity and social belonging. Communities have contributed to developing community social empowerment in municipalities with pluralism and cultural diversity. They have had their role in decision-making, pushing forward the process of formal and informal education and fighting negative phenomena. While doing the qualitative research, the focus groups discussed the role of the communities in their development and participation in public life, their role in developing education, and the fight against deviant behavior within the community. Their opinion is as follows:

> Local communities have an essential role in developing their life in the settlements where they live. They say that the community has often succeeded in reconciling families with hostilities; they have successfully brought people together and united within the community. They have had an impact on students to pursue schooling also in the reduction of deviant behavior and delinquency; also they motivated and mobilized the community to work for the common good as well as participating in the local councils for safety in the community as an important body of the local security (Focus-group-I 2023).

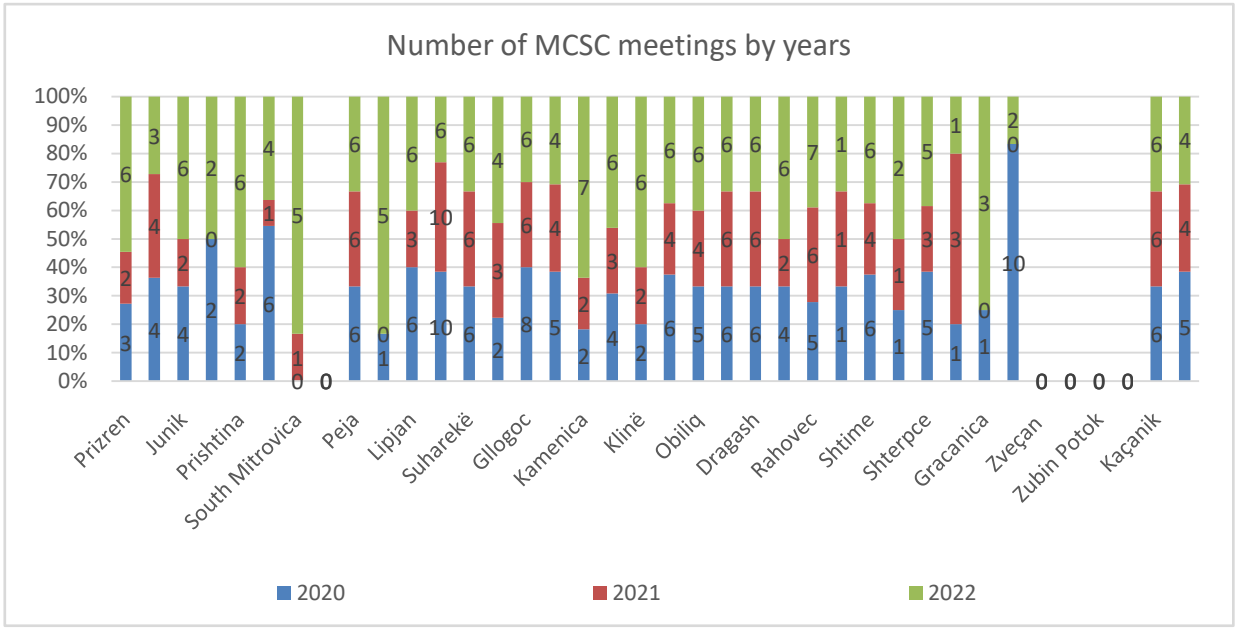
While discussing with the focus groups, their thoughts and opinions were taken on how to organize their community; they have expressed that "as a community, there are no differences between them; they cooperate for a specific purpose, participate in local gatherings with local self-government when the need arises we contribute financially for common good of the community and for fulfilling our requirements and needs" (Focus-group-II 2023). Focus Group "as a research strategy, serve the purpose of intensive discussion and interviewing of small groups of individuals with a specific focus, typically several times within a certain time" (Pajaziti 2010). Putnam calls this development social progress;capital encompasses social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness arising from them. This is because:

> Communities help their members to act through collective action, bridge members of the community through connections, promote collaboration, and allow dialogue, discussion, and debate for the exchange of ideas and opinions. School, family, and community partnerships are a better way of placing school actions within the community; all stakeholders share responsibility for students; learning and development. For instance, educators can transform their schools and classrooms into communities of inquirers. In this process, community involvement becomes important not only for the school but also for the transformation of that very community (Gatt 2013).

Watt (2001) argues that accommodating "the concerns, needs, and interests of communities in education planning and management can help to generate strong demand for education and improve enrolment, attainment, and achievement" (Russell 2009). On the other hand, the community plays an incredible role in reducing deviant behavior, notably through socializing and social integration programs, organizing social activities supported by the municipality logistics, philanthropic activities for supporting education and offering necessary training for the community. Communities in Kosovo are an essential part of the local authority, and a good example would be the Community Safety Council, which has a vital role in public safety. According to MIA/MGLA - Administrative Instruction No. 27/2012 MIA - 03/2012 MLGA for Municipal Community Safety Councils 2012, members of this council are the following vital designations:

> The Mayor of Municipality (Chairperson); Commander of the Municipal Police Station; One representative from each religious community of respective municipality; One representative from each ethnic community within respective municipality; The chairperson of the Committee for Communities from the municipal assembly; Official for gender equality; Director of Education directorate; The chairperson of educational parent's council of the respective municipality; One representative of KSF; One representative of each Local Public Safety Committee; One representative of the Community Safety Actions Teams; One representative of the municipal civilian emergency sector; Representative of municipal office for communities and return; One NGO representative, local media, business community, and community of people with disabilities.

As evident from the above discussion, part of the body is also local communities, including the civil society and members from other communities that are important in initiating the debate and influencing the decision-making for the community's common good within their municipal territory. To achieve this, municipalities must hold at least 6 meetings within one year (three meetings in the first and three in the second half). Based on reports from the Ministry of Local Self-Government Administration, the number of meetings of MCSC over the years was not at the desired level for different reasons. These facts are presented in the Graphic 1 below:



Graphic 1: Number of MCSC Meetings by Years (Authors' depiction)
(Source: MLGA 2020, 2021, 2022)

As can be seen from Graphic 1, municipalities have had fewer public meetings than was projected with administrative instruction for municipalities, even though these bodies play an essential role not only in the field of safety but in other fields as well: education, deviant behavior, problems with homeless dogs, and many other important themes. Therefore, local communities have an important role in developing their community by creating a feeling of social belonging and identity and participating in public policies to improve their well-being.

THE PARTICIPATION OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES IN PUBLIC POLICIES AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

Contemporary society is organized based on the partnership between local government as a unit closer to the citizens and the population or the community. This is so because both parties benefit from this approach. First, the local government benefits from cooperation by strengthening its legitimacy and making the community part of its public policies. Second, the local community's benefit is that through participation, they have a say and advocate for their good, which has an impact on getting better public services and improving their well-being.

Likewise, "local governments are placed in the position which is much better than local government as it works in close coordination with local NGOs and community-based institutions or volunteers in recognizing inconvenience and stating answers" (Haqu 2012, 6).

The involvement of local communities in public policies is a good sign for local democracy and is a crucial precondition for general democratic development. Public policies deal with the support of:

> The decision from creating ideas until appraisal, correction, completion, and implementation. This means that there are a number of options for a decision to be taken; one will be chosen for a variety of reasons (for example, lowest cost, ease of implementation, or there is political will) for which there will be the final decision and then it will be approved with a special implementation plan" (Baliqi 2017, 37).

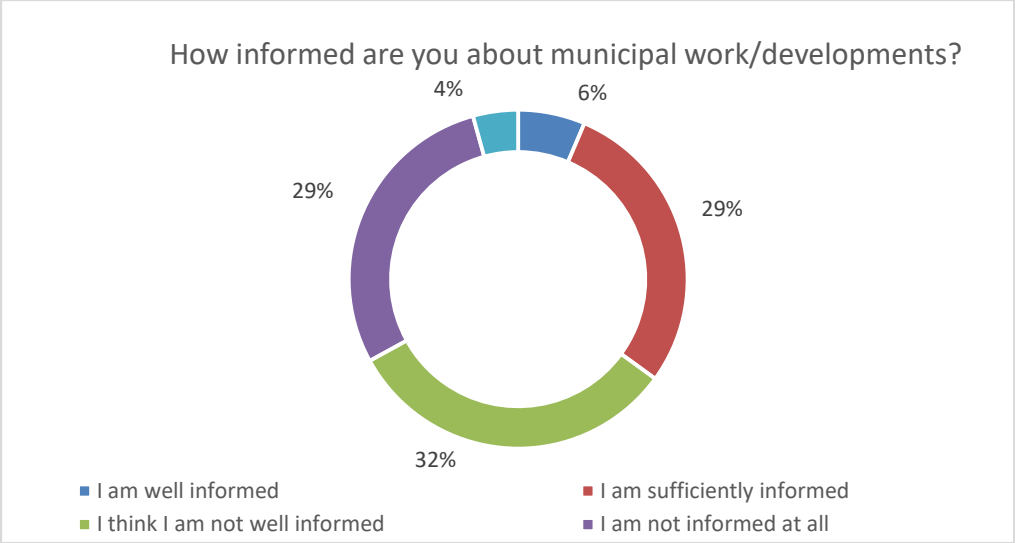
The participation of the community or citizens "means inclusiveness of the citizens, groups of interest and community in general in the processes of decision making to create or improve public policies, procedures, and local practices in favor of creating the well-being of the citizens" (Kamberi 2019). In Kosovo, the community participates in public policies through mechanisms of local democracy, where:

> Actual legislation tends to create solid conditions for all community members; regardless of gender, sexual orientation, age, ability or disability, level of education, or ethnicity, everybody is respected and encouraged to make meaningful contributions to the decision-making. This is achieved by making specific conditions, such as 1) holding public meetings and 2) rights and privileges, like petitions, initiatives, and referendums. Public meetings may be the most common activity compared to other activities of active democracy that, by law, should be held twice a year (AKK/AKM 2019, 43).

The advantages that local communities get from their participation in public policies are: "minimizes the cost and delay of things to be done, improves the quality of the decisions, builds the consensus, increases the facilitation of implementation, keeps the trust and the legitimacy, foresees the opinion of the public and develops the civil society" (AKK/AKM 2019, 42).

In the last few years, even though there has been development within the community compared to the years before, it is still considered far from the target sought. Research tells us that the focus of development should lie on the participation of the community in the cycle of public policies. In the study done by the Democracy for Development Institute (D4D), particularly on whether they think they can influence policy-making, around 64.6% of the respondents declared that they have never tried it because they believe it cannot influence policy-making. Around 19.4% of the respondents have not tried to influence policy-making but think they could affect them if they have tried. 8% of the respondents have been represented in the general decision-making activity, and 3.2% have attempted to influence policy-making and expressed satisfaction with their contribution. 4.7% of the respondents have replied that they have no opinion about this issue" (D4D 2019).

The community, too, has declared that there is very little information from the local government about the issues with common interests for the community.



Graphic 2: How Informed Are You about Municipal Work/Developments? (Source: D4D 2019, 8)

As depicted in Graphic 2, 60.7% of the respondents have stated that they are either not well-informed or not informed at all. Only 6.4% consider they are well informed about these developments, whereas 28.6% have said they have the needed information on this topic (D4D 2019). To get our research with the analyses and research done by others while discussing with the focus groups, our research has touched upon the issue of community participation within the framework of public policies. Related to this issue, they have emphasized that "they participate from time to time in the public meetings, specifically in the meetings related to municipality budget, because they see it important for their future projects, but not for other meetings" (Focus-group-I 2023). On the question about the factors why they do not participate in the cycles of public policies, the majority of them have stated that:

> Some of the factors that made them not participate in these meetings were lack of proper information about the meeting and the agenda, short time provided during meetings to take our thoughts, the influence from the groups of interest, lack of transportation to the meeting, village councils not functional for proper arrangements for meetings, and other factors (Focus-group-II 2023).

Another important issue within the framework of public policies that have recently been noticed to have received attention is the "social audit", which seems to have space for discussion with the local communities. This process involves an approach towards:

> Reaching social accountability through constructive engagement between communities, civil society, government agencies, and the private sector. It values the performance of the municipalities responsible for offering services such as access to water and health services and for the implementation of developmental projects of the community, like road infrastructure and the rehabilitation of public

spaces. Social audits are based on the principles of democratic governance, which means that the process is participative, inclusive, transparent, and oriented towards solutions (DEMOS 2023).

This process is essential for the local community because they can evaluate/monitor locally invested projects. However, the process is still in the initial stage of piloting by some NGOs in some municipalities. The project seeks to have an impact in empowering social cohesion in local communities for the common good and for monitoring the projects by the local government for the public interest in general.

CONCLUSION

Based on the elaborations provided, it can be concluded that the role of local government is critical for the development of local democracy and is indicative of the broader growth of democracy. Local government and the community closely cooperate due to mutual interests aligned with issues for the common good of the public. The study demonstrated that local self-government in Kosovo entails municipalities operating within the legislation framework governing local self-governance. A community comprises citizens united by shared intentions, common interests, mutual trust, and a sense of social belonging and identity. Further analysis of the research findings reveals the significance of the relationship between local government and the community. Local government formulates public policies for the common good and aims to provide more efficient public services. Meanwhile, through development, organization, empowerment of social cohesion, and participation in public policy cycles, the community ensures that these services are closer to the recipients and that projects are executed as planned. Additionally, community involvement influences the enhancement of well-being and contributes to improvements in infrastructure, education, public safety, and other matters of national interest.

The development and organization of local communities in Kosovo seem to be at the early stage of development; however, there are examples where this community was organized well and made their contribution to influence the development of their community through the projects provided by the local authority and other local and international organizations. Accordingly, the communities have often influenced the empowerment of relationship within their community and their participation in local processes. They have also motivated students to pursue their education in both formal and non-formal ways, significantly reducing deviant behavior, prejudice, and societal stigmatization. Furthermore, they have played a key role in creating bridges between ethnic communities in the regions where they reside.

Additionally, the research has concluded that despite mechanisms for local democracy facilitating community participation in decision-making processes, the community's presence in meetings remains insufficient due to various factors. Often, their participation is limited to public meetings specifically addressing budgetary matters. Another noteworthy aspect, which holds significance as a potential mechanism for future community empowerment in public participation, is the social audit mechanism. This mechanism involves the community monitoring municipal projects and enhancing collaboration with local authorities.

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CRediT AUTHOR STATEMENT

Islam Hasani: conceptualization, methodology, software, original draft preparation, and supervision. **Ferdi Kamberi:** conceptualization, data curation, writing, reviewing, and editing, conclusion.

All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the article.

COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

Acknowledgments:
Not applicable.

Funding:
Not applicable.

Statement of Human Rights:
All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were following the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Statement on the Welfare of Animals:
This article does not contain any studies with animals performed by any authors.

Informed Consent:
Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Disclosure statement:
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author/s.

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

The Institute for Research and European Studies remains neutral concerning jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

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