



Between Energy of People and Vacuum of Institutions! Grassroots Planning in Albania: The case of Co-PLAN Institute for Habitat Development in the Informal Settlements of Tirana!

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Abstract

This article addresses to professionals involved in community-based urban planning and development processes and particularly those working in the non-governmental sector. Those working in the local governments and who are engaged in dialogue and programs with community actors will find the experiences described in this study useful. The main objective of the study is to map institution-building processes, as well as to disclose the various actors and motivations during the way collaboration was established for policy reforms and institutional changes in a country in transition towards market economy as Albania. Until 1990 Albania experienced one of the most severe and orthodox communist system in the entire Eastern European bloc. Indeed, Albanians suffered for more than 40 years negation of the freedom of speech. Consequently, the citizens were not invited in no case to influence decision making, which was very centralized. It can be said that there was no tradition in the participation of community, also because the system abused with the “collective” approach. In the 1990 Albania too was influenced by the political, social and economic changes that brought down the iron curtain in Eastern Europe. Thus, Albania started on the difficult and new road of transition, but rather in a very chaotic manner and even with severe setbacks such as the 1997 social unrest caused by the collapse of the fraudulent pyramid schemes, or consequences of 1999 of the war in Kosovo and refugee crisis. Interestingly enough, a local NGO initiative called Co-PLAN, Institute for habitat development, started its activity as a professional organization in the difficult year of 1997. Formerly a Dutch social program in one of the most irregularly developed areas in the outskirts of the capital city of Tirana; Co-PLAN would be soon distinguished as one a pioneering organization committed to contribute in the difficult transition process. The first steps that were taken in the muddy and poor areas of the periphery aimed to organize the community in addressing problems like public spaces, social disarray and health education. It was very unusual in the Albanian context to approach the community, even more so in the irregular settlements. All too often, there has been an opposition from small

¹ The article recognizes the contributions of the colleagues of Co-PLAN Institute for habitat development, Tirana Albania, and concretely the contribution of D.Shutina, S.Dhamo, F.Kuci and C.Acioly, Jr, etc.

groups from these communities thus forming a strong and very conservative stream, backed up by the government and the “old-fashioned” professionals. In several cases as well as in the back stage, Co-PLAN was accused as “the protectors of the illegality”.

Albania in Transition of 90-s: Co-PLAN, Institute for Habitat Development

In fact Co-PLAN stayed firm on its views of advocacy for the groups in need, vulnerable groups, the part of the community that would never get access and had no chances to influence decision making, even those decisions directly affecting them. Yet Co-PLAN has never acted as “charitable” organization. This in fact made the work in field more difficult. “Due to the persistent crisis often organizations, usually known as “shadow” organizations with their own “hidden” agendas, started to emerge in these areas with a philosophy of emergency in the background.” In the beginning, it was nearly impossible to negotiate with the newcomers to give up their own land for the broader interest of public use, due to the fact that land often entailed a hard-earned asset for them. Even more difficult it became when residents were used with organizations distributing food without claiming any contribution from them for a public cause. In this transition period, also peoples’ attitude shifted rapidly from “collective” into a highly “individual” oriented. The change in mentality has proven to be difficult and usually takes time. But it is probably due to this fact that it became a challenge that “co-planners” liked to embrace. However, the toughest battle was to be fought in a different environment; at the “sophisticated” level of professionals and authorities. Advocating for the formalization of “informal” was considered a heresy. Co-PLAN’s important objective of bringing together the community (not necessarily those of the illegal settlements) with policy makers called for another level, which is professionalism. Therefore, Co-PLAN undertook several initiatives to establish networks and most importantly forums where different actors and stakeholders could forward, defend and confront different views and interests. On the other hand, in several cases Co-PLAN shifted to the role of intermediary between communities and authorities (local and central), by introducing comprehensive tools to cope with the challenges of the new urban dynamics of the transitional period. This required a comprehensive level of capacities as well as strong willingness to be a driver force in the entire process. Co-PLAN had to face new challenges. This shift to professionalism necessitated the broader view of neighborhood-to-city scale.

Kamza: From Informality to Municipal Autonomy

1. "The Municipality of Kamza was formed only in 1996 out of the need to cope with new unprecedented growing developments in the area. Kamza inherited a strong agricultural background and in the past fifteen years or so, the population has seen at least twenty-fold increase of 7,000 to 140,000 inhabitants, and losing almost all the agricultural potential as result of the conversion of land from agricultural-rural to urban" (Aliaj, B.,1995). It is not hard to imagine the burden and scale of problems this municipality is confronted with in coping with an alarming rate of 90% illegal constructions, while it totally lacks any institutional memory or capacity. This has all happened while support from central government was missing or inexistent, since the area was not in its own agenda of priorities, and is regarded as a "dirty dish". "One should also take in consideration the country's context of decentralization where transference of problems rather than powers to the local administration prevails. What's more, political elections continue to cause waves of unjustified layoffs to the local administration staff. In the election of 2001, or 2004 in the Municipality of Kamza, with political changes 95% of the municipal staff was fired, creating a complete blackout in the local administration and transfer of knowledge" (Aliaj, B., 1996). On the other hand, Co-PLAN tried to emphasize the big potential lying in these areas." In several surveys of the time, Co-PLAN estimated an incredibly large amount of 110,000,000 USD investment in housing made by residents (by contrast, the most successful privatization case in Albania at that time reached the amount of 80,000,000 USD), whereas the municipal budget spent for public investment reached the ridiculous amount of 100,000 USD in the best year." (Co-PLAN, 2003)

Unfortunately, in several cases this potential has resulted in violent conflicts with government representatives. In 1995, the government tried to relocate by force the settlers, which braced themselves for an open confrontation that resulted in ferocious conflict between people and police. In fact this was not the only case. The government lacked for a decade the vision for coping with the situation and that has resulted in a misuse of the area for political purposes, making such unrealistic promises during electoral campaigns as legalization of settlements (an option that was never elaborated professionally by the government up to 2005) and hence never took off at that time. This caused other revolts since government has not been capable of finding the proper way of how to handle the situation, so long as bridges of communication between government and community had still a long way to go.

Building Invisible Bridges and Mutual Trust: Disclosing Actors and their Motivations

Co-PLAN has taken several initiatives with the financial support by foreign donors like CORDAID Holland (formerly known as Bilance, Mensen in Nood) and latter by NOVIB, or other Dutch governmental sources, trying to establish communication between government and communities that would eventually serve to address the issues, but also to identify the potentials of joining forces to overcome the problems. In the very beginning, Co-PLAN worked at a neighborhood scale in two very specific areas: i) Breglumasi, an illegally developed area with more than 250 families; and ii) Bathore, which has seen a very rapid expansion from 13-200 hectares, also illegally developed (part of the Municipality of Kamza) with more than 4,000 households; iii) a third case is in Keneta neighborhood in the main port city of

Albania Durres. “The newcomers in these areas originally come from the remote and mountainous areas of the country, where, especially after the 1990s, chances for a decent life were practically zero. Many people became unemployed after the collapse of the heavy industry that was the main source of employment for these areas.” (Co-PLAN, 2004)

Working in these areas it was very important to look at the stages of the process, which the residents go through in order to gain access in the neighborhood:

2. **Step 1: Decision to migrate** - In the places of origin, life is still organized around the clan, which is usually an extended family. Basically this means that to a certain extent the family economy is common, therefore decisions are taken jointly in a group. Take a family of 4-5 brothers (usually these families have a high average number per households) that after it realizes that life in their village is becoming almost impossible, makes the decision to move to urban areas with greater chances for a better life. *“In the past ten years, the central part of Albania has attracted newcomers from all over the country, especially those from the northern parts of the country, which remain the most backward one”* (Aliaj, B., Lulo, K., Myftiu, G., 2003) There are few implications to this decision. In order to afford such an important and financially costly decision, the clan decides about the “sharing of responsibilities” among brothers. One of them (usually the youngest and possibly the single one) gets the mandate of clan to search for the most appropriate and affordable location for the entire clan, while one or two others are responsible for securing the financial means to afford the move and shelter. In many cases this implies that someone has even to emigrate and work abroad. There is always usually the oldest brother, or the grandfather, who remains and looks after the remainder of the family.

Step 2. Identifying location - This step is taken in a very discreet way. The basic criteria are the vicinity with the urban area, affordability, but also the land and property titles. This is a very delicate process. The newcomers are well informed about the tenure of the location they identify as appropriate. This means that if government is the owner of the parcel, the chances are to meet less difficulty for settling in there. Such an attitude stems from the peoples’ belief that “collective property is nobody’s property”. Nevertheless, there is a “fee” to enter the area. It happened that the first newcomers in the area became also “middlemen” (not necessarily the real owners) subdividing the land and selling it out to other newcomers. Needless to say the transactions are informal. In reality the new residents know that they do not actually buy the land, indeed they gain the “right” to settle in the neighborhood. This is reflected in the verbal agreement according to which “the deal would be invalid if the government or the real owners would step in the process”.

Step 3. Testing the firmness of the government - The “purchase” of the plot is not immediately followed by the building of the house. In the very beginning, the residents build a shack or they just put building materials on the site as a sign for

later construction. This step is taken for two reasons. In so doing, they can test the reaction of authorities toward the area while at the same time it sends a signal to the neighbors to prevent the land from any sudden invasion from other newcomers. Sometimes, it happened that they had to deal with police as the latter tried to relocate them. This is probably also one of the reasons why in the beginning only one of the family members is dealing with the first stage.

Step 4. Starting the investment - Having gained a little security the investment on housing starts. What is interesting about this step is that the phases of investment follow the cycles of a financial flow. This means that the progress of the investment is very much relying on the income generated mainly from either emigration, or selling out old properties, or generating income from working in the urban area. Residents appear to be very creative in decreasing the costs of building. The tools used range from using cheap materials to decreasing labor costs by involving relatives in the house-building process. As the household economy grows one can realize how this effects the investment. Better materials are used and roofs replace terraces.

Step 5. Moving in - Usually the family moves into the house when the investment is complete. What is interesting in this step is that the family still lives around a common economy. They keep this system until housing for each family is secured. This is a solidarity system that stimulates the assistance among clan members.

Step 6. Improve the surroundings - Noticeably, until this stage infrastructure provision was not a priority. In fact once the plot is bought the buyer is supposed to have the right of access, but this is not always the case, and it becomes sometimes a source of conflict. The reason is that there is no layout whatsoever of the area to guide the land occupation process. But interestingly enough, there still is a natural order in the way the residents build. At this point, the process meets with the difficult task of mobilizing joint efforts and contributions for building and financing of the infrastructure.

Community as an Asset of Planning and Development:

The main focus of the work in these areas was to mobilize community efforts to identify and secure public space indispensable for the urban development of the area. It takes a lot of efforts to convince people who work hard to take out a living to buy the plot of land on which they sit, and who struggled with the police to live where they do, to push back fences and to allow some space for the public purpose and planning sake. However enthusiastic a small group of young professionals could be, it could not be much more done without having first established human relationships with the residents. It is understood that trust building is a lengthy process. It takes time and efforts. It cannot be achieved without trying to understand the real human side that exists behind the entire process. The gravel, for example, offered in return to square meters of public space, was just an instrument of bargaining and building trust with the community. The idea was to start a “snowballing” process, meaning that at a certain point in time someone had to break the ice, and as this process went

on, to have more and more people on the side of the development process. This also means that we wanted the process to take place and more people to accept it through a “social community pressure”. In practice there were the community residents, which had to convince their fellows and neighbors to embrace the rules of the process. A very meaningful indicator is the fact that in three years a network of 6km public space was secured and modestly improved without the involvement of the police or other government authorities. Since the beginning therefore it was very important to identify the so-called “key persons”, which are people that have a good reputation in the area and can be representatives of the community interests. Getting the community organized implied also to have an institutional representation of the area. Since the beginning, special regard was paid to the process of creating a community organization (CBO) named “Rilindja” (Revival). In the beginning, the challenge was to have people grasp such an idea. But soon, as the influence of the organization extended in the area, the challenge shifted to securing the wide representation of the organization. The only way to secure this was through fair, open and democratic elections. One can imagine that Albania did not inherit a strong democratic tradition; hence the task was tough.

Building Partnerships for Development:

After Dutch/foreign aid and development organizations also the World Bank joined the process later thanks to the “Urban Land Management Project” inspired by Co-PLAN work. In fact the World Bank and the Albanian Government financially supported the project jointly, but at that point the Albanian authorities could not yet grasp the importance and the philosophy of the project. With time the project was given the Albanian ownership and supported the upgrading process as first step towards a formalization reform. An important stage of the process was the negotiation between the community and the authorities for the details of the project. Co-PLAN had a key role in intermediating between the community represented by “Rilindja” and the authorities of local and central government. All kinds of issues, ranging from the cost sharing rates to steps of the process and technicalities of the project, were to be discussed and negotiated. After several months of meetings, discussions and negotiations, the process resulted in an official and institutional agreement between the community represented by “Rilindja” and the County officials as representative of the Local Government at the time. However, the Partnership Agreement was covering only a small part in the wide range of the problems the area faces. Co-PLAN remained concerned with the democratic and full-wide representation of the community interests. One of the election periods of the council of the CBO coincided with the local elections of “aldermen” (formerly official representatives of the neighborhoods). It was impressive to see how the “informal” elections of the association of the residents were given even more importance than the local elections and they had a high turnout. Thus, the transparency increased the residents’ trust in the association. Indeed, “Rilindja” was taking on a big and important responsibility, that is, an honest and fair representation of the interests of community on the one hand, and to convey the philosophy of cooperation and collaboration in the urban development process in favor of the public interests most important issue and probably the most difficult one; change the

mentality from “expect the state do...” to “let’s get together take some action and after seek for some support”.

Prioritizing Developments and Consolidating Community via Gender Balance:

Nevertheless, easier said than done, the main difficulty to get the process going were money, though implicitly accepted. That is why Co-PLAN undertook a very interesting consultative process with the community. The approach used was ‘Participatory Analysis for Community Action’. The aim was to get the residents thinking about their own responsibilities and taking the respective actions overcoming the belief that nothing can be done without first having the money. The process resulted in an increasing interaction between residents or group of residents trying to come up with common and acceptable solutions. The questions put forward by the organizers were simple. Say, the question was to identify an appropriate and sizable plot to build a school assuming that the funding of this initiative was in place. In first place, the question was simple to be dealt with. In reality, the process was tough and residents found that it was not easy at all to conclude in a commonly agreed solution. Thus, after difficult negotiations amongst the different groups of residents, an appropriate plot for a health care center was identified and given as community contribution to the initiative of improving the access to health care. As a result, at least 300 families were reached. The entire process was very interesting to the team. Co-PLAN had a fantastic chance to observe from inside the decision making process. In first place, one can get the idea that the pattern of decision-making process is very gender imbalanced. Unfortunately, this is matter-of-factly true. The husband (man) is in charge to generate the income therefore is supposed to have a stronger say on the household expenditures. After a more accurate analysis, Co-PLAN found out that when facing issues like infrastructure the decision would eventually shift towards *water supply* or *sewerage* rather than say *roads*. This probably to banks or projects, focused only on disbursing money, means nothing but Co-PLAN tried to look deeper into that. The implicit assumption was that women were mainly dealing with housing maintenance (*although according to surveys conducted by Co-PLAN a lot of women were also involved in income generation activities by, for instance, assembling shoes at home for an underpaid salary - Vejsiu, Y., and Misja, V., 1996*), while men are more interested in mobility. This argument could be supported by the observed fact in the area that mainly women carry the arduous task of fetching water from often far away distances, by manual labor. Therefore, women mainly influenced the choice of water, while men mainly supported the choice for road network. In fact the women did influence decisions as far as they have probably the bigger stake in family responsibilities. However, the man remains, by an archaic tradition, the one and only articulator of the decisions. A similar effect could be observed in the case of the health care center. At first place, men, who at the time were main counterpart contacts, were not very enthusiastic about the idea. But when the issue was broadly discussed the situation changed. It is understandable; for the women accessing primary health care in the area was incomparably more efficient than say driving more than 10 km (*the distance to the nearest hospital*) to get a simple assistance. The close consultative process with the

community, in fact, later appeared to be crucial especially compared with another initiative of an organization oriented toward “cost-disbursement approach”, which failed to meet the need, and was illegally occupied without serving a single day to its purpose of health care. The accurate observation on the real influence of women in decision-making encouraged Co-PLAN to establish a better contact with the female part of the population. The process gained increasing importance as the involvement of women turned out to be very much relevant to the entire urban development of the area. A women organization was established and probably the most essential social activities were carried out in close collaboration with this group. They succeeded in carrying out the most interesting, traditional and inspiring aspect of the community living in the area, through fairs, social gathering, and other social activities.

Building a Future by Investing of Children and Youth:

In the frequent surveys conducted in the area by Co-PLAN, it was easy to understand that the majority of the population was very young. This has always been regarded as strength for the area, showing the vitality of this population. However, in the threat of sometime cruel reality of the pupils dropping the schools in order to generate income through selling cigarettes on the streets, this obviously becomes an issue of concern. Therefore, Co-PLAN put even more efforts in establishing youth groups that would undertake social as well as education activities (such as *language courses, sports etc.*). Even more specific became the objective of relating a sustainable future with the youth, the future of the population. Several initiatives were taken in having youths planting trees and taking care of them. The limitation of these initiatives was that community does not yet see public green spaces as a priority for the area. Of course the team met all kinds of difficulties. None of the initiatives was easy. In fact some of them were very difficult, while some others even failed. This was for instance the case of a program of waste collection, where a system of collection was introduced and residents were asked to contribute in order to carry on the process. Due to the efforts and energy of the social workers, this system kept running, and even well for some time. However, it could rely neither on the unlimited assistance of Co-PLAN, nor on the self co-ordination of the residents. The project failed to transfer the system to the local administration. Though it was a failure, this case was very interesting to draw some valuable lessons. Of course Co-PLAN neither aimed nor was able to individually focus in all aspects. Having identified several other NGOs operating in the area in different fields, Co-PLAN in collaboration with the Municipality of Kamza initiated the set up of a network of NGOs that would eventually exchange information, co-ordinate and also enter in joint initiatives to sharing the responsibilities. Definitely, the democratization issue of the area through information remained the top priority for Co-PLAN. We could not expect people to influence the governance without sharing information. Amongst the successful attempts in this direction was definitely the publication of the Newsletter of Bathore. This was a good chance for all residents to share their concerns and views on urban development, social, health and education issues.

Replicating Neighborhood Development Agenda at City Scale:

“When discussing about bridges, it would be simplistic to narrow down the issue to the neighborhood level. A constant concern of Co-PLAN was building bridges between community and authorities, between different levels of public administration, between different actors that have a stake in the urban development process including the professionals and more importantly building the main bridge toward the public opinion.”(Co-PLAN & ENHR 2003) Such an important yet difficult process would have little or no effect without a series of Urban Forums or TV programs and debates, where Co-PLAN found itself not just as a participant but on most occasions as organizer and facilitator too. Indeed the Open Public Debate “*Managing Tirana’s rapid growth*” in 1998 was the yearly event that still continues nowadays via so called Open Forum. Until then, the open debate in professional circles about problems to meet the real priorities of people was inexistent in the Albanian society. The echo of this event lasted for a long period of time. The event has come to be a good tradition with Urban Forum organized annually. This is a good chance for professionals, authorities, NGOs, CBOs and communities to join in and exchange views and ideas on urban development and related issues. Co-PLAN succeeded to make the issue a concern also at regional level, which have now carried on Urban Forum in several other cities, and have even established a regional network of professionals (in the Balkans) to address issues of similar content. An important milestone in the process was the ENHR International Conference *Making Cities Work* held in Tirana 2003, and AESOP Heads of School Meeting in Tirana 2011. The Albanian case in these conferences has been very relevant. Publications have also been supportive tools to bring together the professionals and students. “*City Made by People*” initially and Forum A+P nowadays are already a tradition. The aim of this book is to bring the most relevant experiences on urban development contributing in this way to create institutional bridges in the debate amongst professionals.

Building Capacities of Local Authorities towards Good Governance:

For several years, Co-PLAN was a chief advocate of formulating in a participatory way a model that would cater for the reality in the irregularly developed areas. Considerable efforts were put in preparing the community to take actions to improve the social and physical conditions. However, the authorities were far from being responsive to the initiatives of the community. Often this slowed down the process of integration of these communities with the rest of the city. On the other hand, Co-PLAN always tried to position itself as an organization that facilitates the communication between community and government rather than taking over the government duties. This differed quite a lot from what most organizations were doing. Building infrastructure, schools or other facilities were none of Co-PLAN’s business, which was rather trying to bring together different actors to find the appropriate means and suitable solutions through multi-lateral contributions.

However, as Co-PLAN and “Rilindja” gained the trust and the mandate of community to spell out their needs, the government was still lagging behind. This was a crucial moment to realize that there was no longer a need to work closer with the local government in order to make them understand the real issues, and also to

increase the trust of the residents on local authorities as well as their capacities to deal with the situation. It was upon this basis that a new initiative named “Empowering the local government and community based initiatives in the Municipality of Kamza” would take off. The initiative was a joint effort between the Municipality of Kamza, Co-PLAN Institute for Habitat Development and IHS Institute for Housing and Urban Development Studies, Rotterdam Holland. In order to cater better for the needs of the local government, a priority needs assessment was undertaken. For this reason, a joint group of municipal representatives and professionals of Co-PLAN organized a workshop which concluded in an operational plan. “The main approach used was the Objective Oriented Participatory Planning. In fact, no one anticipated that the project was about to be strongly shaken by the local elections of that year. The sudden layoffs of 95% of the staff was a big lesson for the young team, which had to get used with the up and downs of the political climate of the Albanian reality. The only thing left when almost everything you built is ruined is to start anew. Hence, the immediate action was to re-establish contacts with the new political representatives of the Municipality of Kamza. At the end of the day, professionals must face reality, and the reality is that for good or bad the new administration represented the people of the municipality.” (Aliaj, B., Dhamo, S., Shutina, D., 2009)

The Process of Making a Strategic Urban Development Plan:

A new process of carrying out the priorities of the local administration started. After a difficult consultative process the priorities were identified. However, it was difficult for some time for the project team to come to a full understanding with the municipal staff on the as often what they meant was different from what they said. For instance, they were wondering if something could be done about the “chaos”. To our understanding (which latter proved to be right) the chaos was standing for the irregular urban development process. It is clear that the question whether something could be done about the urban chaos was a much talked-about issue. The “what” did take time and efforts to identify. In fact, the “what” was followed by the “how” and so on... During the process almost all these issues had to be reviewed according to the dynamics. What was important to be maintained was the close contact with the ground and community, which helped the team in not losing the realistic view on what we were doing. The project finally could identify: (i) urban development; (ii) infrastructure; (iii) economic development which indeed meant to them employment, as the priorities of the local administration of the Municipality of Kamza to cope with the very difficult reality. On the other hand, the project team had its limitations in terms of finance as well as knowledge and experience.

However, the experience accumulated through years of working with the grassroots level appeared later to be crucial for the success of the entire process. In order to respond to these needs we formulated the following objectives: (i) a vision for urban development; (ii) building capacities; and (iii) investment in public service. “Why a plan?” or “another plan” was the first question to come up and which needed an immediate answer. In the transitional period there were other planning initiatives that failed to meet the real needs of peoples. The traditional planning methodology in

Albania was a narrow physical one, without considering the involvement of different actors. To the project team it was clear that the process was going to make the difference. Another factor that would eventually make the difference was the fact that in the view of the project, the plan was never seen as an end, but rather a means in the hands of the local administration to foster the development of the area. Being a pioneer organization, Co-PLAN aimed to introduce comprehensive methods of urban planning and urban management. Hence, the assistance of IHS Rotterdam was estimated to be crucial especially in this process. “Capacity building” was a crucial component. One could not expect any comprehensive strategy to translate into actions by people that lacked first hand experience in dealing with urban management issues. Besides, the level of education of the local administration was low (this is common in such level of municipalities across the country and we had to deal with this sad reality). For this reason, the aim was limited to on-the-job assistance. “Investments” is the last but not least component. Given the project’s financial constraints, the investments were not meant to meet the huge needs for infrastructure of the municipality. In addition, since they were limited this necessitated that choice to be well thought to addressing specific issues and models. In the end, Co-PLAN wanted to use these investments to assist the municipality rather than taking over its duties to meet the needs for public infrastructure and services. During the process, all the three-abovementioned components were combined together to complement each other and above all to serve the purpose of the process of empowering the local government.

Citizen Participation: tools, methods and results!

At the start of the project, the notion of citizen participation all but known and accepted. The notion was even strongly rejected by a considerable number of professionals. To a certain extent, the notion is not so welcome nowadays either. Such opposite views by them can be justified on the grounds of their former education in a society where the basic elements of democracy were lacking. Hence, the very first challenge was to build and support a cogent argument on why the citizen participation was important. Co-PLAN team came from a very interesting experience of work with the grassroots level, which in fact focused on organizing the community for joint actions. The terms of discussion and negotiations were simple and clear. You were dealing with sharing contributions to improve infrastructure, the steps, and stages of betterment of the area. All these topics were perfectly understood by residents. The move to a higher scale along with the shift from an action- oriented experience to policy formulation implied that also the terms of discussion with the residents needed to change. In the beginning this created few difficulties, as far as nobody was expected to address to the community issues like “How do you expect the improvement of urban management in Municipality of Kamza (MoK)?”, or “Could you feedback on the vision formulation of the MoK?” Therefore, the team understood that the document that was going to be prepared should be easily translatable into actions, and phases expressed in operational terms. The same problem the team encountered with the municipal staff too. In different meetings with the municipal administration, we realized that the amount of feedback on the expectations of the plan was very low. This was only showing the scale of difficulty

that awaited us in the long process of formulating the strategy. The implication was that more efforts had to be put in conceiving a plan that would cater for the people's real needs. Moreover, this was a tough task especially when references to similar experiences in Albania were missing. It took several months (December 2000 – July 2001) of discussions and negotiations, brainstorming amongst the team members of the project as well as with the IHS Rotterdam consultants to come up with the an elaborated idea of how the plan was to look like. Building the argument of “why participatory approach” was only a small part of the picture. In order to ensure participation the team had to think about the tools and the infrastructure of participation. The same question Co-PLAN staff was making at time was: How citizens can reach us?

In order to expect any kind of feedback, the community ought to be informed about the process and about the expected product. The project team therefore launched a campaign of information about the project and the preparation process of the urban development plan. The campaign involved several ways of communication. Some of the most important national and local newspapers were involved in the coverage of the plan. In addition, in collaboration with the main national private radio in Albania the project team experimented a creative way of information. In the morning program (which has the biggest audience, due to the singular way of involving music, humor, phone calls and discussions on the real daily problems) the experience of the Municipality of Kamza, which to many in the capital was unknown, was brought in. Thus, the information was conveyed to both sides: the citizens of Tirana heard the new and peculiar situation in Kamza, while the residents of the newly created municipality of Kamza received the views and opinions of the city where they want to integrate to. Other means of information were used, including banners on the main road of the Municipality to announce the plan preparation, and give clues about contacts (the project office in the municipality was the point of contact). In addition, an announcement board served to communicate the progress of the process. However, this was only part of the communication process, to get the message through. The objective of the participatory process was not only to inform the community on the proposal of the draft strategy but also to receive feedback from the residents. Therefore, other means were employed to serve this purpose. A questionnaire was distributed to 10,000 households. The questionnaire contained an explanatory notes on the plan as well several questions to receive their feedback on the strategy. The return of the questionnaires was not optional, but special personnel were devoted to collect the questionnaires door to door, few days after they were distributed. Thus the residents were given enough time to for the answers. Time and efforts were devoted to the elaboration of the entire amount of questionnaires. The results of the questionnaires are included in the urban development strategy. Furthermore, in order to increase the transparency of the process, the result of the survey were attached to the strategic document. In the process of community participation in policy formulation, it is very important to look at the events and results from different angles. For instance, the process of questionnaires was very important. However, Co-PLAN staff was aware of the fact that in the questionnaires were received feedbacks at an individual or family level. But what about the

feedback at a higher community level? A series of meetings with the community were organized. What is interesting about these meetings is that regardless of what “conventional architects” might expect, residents are very sensitive in the proposals put forward. The secret of the process is to translate ‘complicated topics’ in simpler language so that the ordinary people can understand and react. For instance, instead of addressing broad issues on urban management theory, we simply aimed to collect feedback on the proposal of cost-sharing approach to build infrastructure. During these meetings, we also tried to bring other issues like education, health and economic development, to residents’ attention and not to limit their thinking only about infrastructure. In fact, these meetings served to make a step forward in the process of changing the community attitude, from a passive and complaining (claiming state support) to a more proactive (initiative to take actions).

The Role of Media for Participatory Planning:

However the wishes of the community have to be confronted with the possibility of the government as well as with the wishes of the rest of the public opinion. Therefore going upper in the levels of participation was very important. To that end, Co-PLAN prepared other TV programs, with the aim to involve the general opinion in the difficult discussion of facing up such phenomenon like irregular land development. In addition, the Mayor of Kamza was present on TV answering to the online questions of the residents, as well as other representatives from the central government that took part in the online debate. The TV program appeared to be a very efficient mean to target greater audiences. In the way long of the process, the involvement of actors in a continuous debate on the strategic urban development plan became very important. A series of urban forums, specifically devoted to the discussion on the urban development strategy, was prepared. In the early stages of the project, the first forum aimed to set up, with different actors involved, a calendar of activities for the preparation, discussion, and approval of the urban development strategy. What makes the case different was is that the strategic thinking in the Albanian urban management methodology is almost inexistent. Hence, a common understanding on the stages of the process ought to be agreed upon. Once a certain progress was achieved with the design of the plan, such consultations and discussions were came be held on a regular basis. One of the most significant forums was organized when the first integrated draft of the plan was designed. In order to facilitate a sound and productive discussion, the draft was given beforehand to all actors involved, to give them the necessary time for reflection. It is worth mentioning the tough debate that discussions in those forums generated. In addition, the case in Albania is such that not all actors are interested in a sound development of the urban management system. “The central government is not willing to give its powers to local government or other sectors. In addition, several public/state intuitions would prefer to retain their exclusive powers, although this does not go in line with efficiency and development issues. The strategic plan, therefore, along with the entire process, had to cope with such diverse and sometimes odd interests and positions.” (Aliaj, B., 2008) To create conditions that are more conducive for the different actors to receive comments and feedback, also other means were employed. All actors were expected to submit comments in a written form. However, the lack of

culture in writing reports was somehow an obstacle to the process. Instead, bilateral meeting resulted to be even more interesting for the actors to submit comments. Even more so to ensure the involvement of actors who are still reluctant to accept comprehensive approaches of urban planning, for them special activities were organized. They were even invited in workshops that included site visits in order to bring them closer to the reality. As mentioned above, there was a cycle of forums organized at different stages of the process. The strategic urban development plan draft reflected the comments made by different actors in the forums. Forums were open to the participation of whoever had the interest to join in. However, Co-PLAN took the responsibility of guaranteeing the presence of key institutions, government representatives, professionals, and NGOs/CBOs. In order to maintain the open-forum idea and bring the topics to the attention of the public, some of the forums were even broadcasted on television. *“It is interesting to look at a very simple fact; the distribution of the draft plan to different actors. Co-PLAN considered a success the fact that more and more actors were aware about the content of the strategic urban development plan. Grotesquely enough, the attitude of the public institutions differs very much in this respect. Still official regulatory plans are kept in shelves like they were classified.”* (LMTF 1995)

Formulating new Urban Development Strategies:

In the process of formulating the urban development strategy, the involvement the donors' community is considered to be very important. The interaction with such community appeared to be very relevant to the process. Despite how it might look in first place, the relation with the donor was not focusing on possibilities of funding. This was only one of the issues. The donor community was present in Albania to assist the Albanian society in coping with the social, political and economic changes in the transition period. The technical expertise they provided has been very relevant to the Municipality of Kamza. The interaction appeared to result in a productive exchange of views on the urbanization process and ways and means to cope with it. In order to fully understand the process a look into the Albanian institutional set up is needed. In this way comparisons with other different cases might be a little simpler.

Different schemes have been designed in Kamza case to support the explanation:

- (i) The governance scheme; aims to illustrate the governance set up. The governance in Albania is organized in two levels; local and central. Local government in urban areas is organized in *municipalities*, while in rural areas is organized in *communes*. The local government also is structured in two levels. Different municipalities and communes are joined together to establish the *second* level of the local government; the *county*. The system was introduced only recently, and to a certain degree has worked. However, the central government has its own system extended also locally; the *prefecture*. Municipalities and communes are elected in local elections. The county is established through indirect elections, while prefecture is an entity that is appointed. The prefectures are still used as instruments of central government to “control” the local government.

- (ii) The decision making process on urban management aims to pave the way for the process of approving urban plans. The system reflects somehow the poor level of decentralization at that time in Albanian experience. In principle, the final approval/rejection of urban plans is always done by the central government! Oddly enough, the central government does not see itself committed in the urban development process through planning initiatives or policy formulating. This only reflects that; in the policymaking level a *controlling* attitude rather than *leading* still dominates. Moreover the Albanian concoction of Committees for Territorial Adjustment (read Development) only deteriorated the decision making process in that it does not ensure the necessary transparency and representation of the public opinion.

Some Findings and Conclusions:

The practice of Co-PLAN shows the actors involved in the process, aims to explain the extended environment the project team targeted in order to design the strategic document. Albanian society has progressed in the process of getting organized. However, the transition period is very short to result in having all groups of interest organized. Especially in the reality of Kamza, a recently created urban area, it was nearly impossible to have different groups represented. The process met such a difficulty while trying to contact and properly involve the private sector, which appears to be disorganized and scattered. Therefore the project could not but contact on an individual basis the members of this community. A special questionnaire was prepared for the private sector in order to attract its feedback on the urban development strategy. Many efforts were put in communicating with community, public opinion, professionals, and authorities. Since the early stages of the project, the team came to realize that the situation within the municipality needed to be carefully analyzed. At a certain point, Co-PLAN realized that the information flow within the municipality did not ensure the involvement of all necessary departments of the municipality. In the Albanian context, this was the praxis. Usually, what happens is that the levels of the municipality, especially the higher ones, prefer not to share the information. The challenge is how to improve the hierarchic interaction without a *telling* and imposing attitude. Therefore the project team suggested the expansion of the group and the creation of (municipal and Co-PLAN) Task Force. The idea was to allow the Municipality to have a greater say on the process and product, and at the same time to guarantee a better flow of information through removing the “monopoly” situation in information at the authorities’ level. The set up of the task force resulted in a better orientation of the rest of the activities of the project.

For instance, the Task Force found very useful the building of a geographic information system. Indeed, the municipal staff lacked the basic working tools. Because Kamza was a municipality without an institutional memory, the administration lacked basic geographic information. The training and workshops tried also to reflect the needs of the Task Force. Several trainings were done, ranging from Institutional Development and Organizational Strengthening, to information systems for Tax collection. The trainings never were an objective per se. “The

preparation process of the Strategic Urban Development Plan (SUD) served as a good chance for the on-the-job training. The approach resulted to be more efficient due to two factors: (i) municipal staff could not devote much time to conventional training; (ii) the topics were oriented towards the needs of the members of the Task Force. Each chapter of the SUD was discussed and commented in the weekly meetings of the Task Force.” (Driscoll, J., 1995)

Co-PLAN has since then the strong conviction that participation should be included not only to influence the decision-making but also to share and take responsibilities. In fact, participation was a crucial argument behind different initiatives at the neighborhood scale. Participation was also when residents gave land in favor of public space, financial contribution to build public infrastructure as well as taking collective actions to improve the future education of the children. In addition, the investment component of the project served as a good chance to ensure participation of the municipality in different actions. Each initiative had its own specific purpose. The very first one was the initiative to improve the only public space in the center of the municipality. For several years, it was prone to illegal kiosks and gambling activities. Also an informal marketplace was using the green space. The demolition of the illegal kiosks was a clear message of the willingness of the Municipality of Kamza to improve the image of the city. In contrast with what happened in other cities, where the debris from the demolition of illegal buildings took some time to clear, the Municipality of Kamza and the project were looking forward to restore the public space and make it attractive for residents. After the space was renewed, we realized that the quality of the leisure time of the residents of the neighborhood was higher. The second initiative started in a different perspective. There is a considerable distance from the neighborhood of Bathore and the Town Hall, which implies that residents had to walk a long distance for the various stamp duties such as birth certificates, social assistance, etc. The local authorities agreed to join Co-PLAN’ and donors’ initiative to build a new complex building with municipal offices for that particular neighborhood. This proved to be a very suitable solution for the residents as well as for the administration. The project also offered possibilities for a kindergarten, which was missing in the area. From case to case, also the idea of participation and cost sharing developed ever further. Co-PLAN succeeded in implementing initiatives by sharing costs either with the municipality or with the community. In the last experiences also the attempt to bring together local government and community-based initiatives, was successful. In a package of intervention, the local administration entered in joint actions with the community by offering basic materials for the sewerage network, whereas the community offered its free labor force. In three years the management of the investment changed. In the beginning, Co-PLAN was leading the process and ensuring a safe implementation of the investment, while in the second part of the project the municipality took even more responsibilities in implementing the investments under pre-defined monitoring rules.

The performance of the Municipality of Kamza evolved in several aspects. In the process of preparation and defense the SUD in front of authorities, Co-PLAN put

even more efforts and energy, particularly in the first part of the project. The local administration was more reluctant to face a political and professional discussion with the central government on the urban development strategy for the region. However, as they got more involved in the process, they became more confident in the approval process. The Mayor of Kamza also presented and defended the SUD Plan in front of the highest national authority. Although Co-PLAN is a modest pioneering organization, the experience accumulated in different project has been meaningful to all members of the organization, but what is more important to the public opinion, professionals and authorities. Constantly Co-PLAN has been willing to share its experience with professionals, university, and civil servants especially through a series of public lectures. The most important lesson learnt from the experience in different projects and initiatives is that the process makes the difference. Indeed there have been different planning initiatives that from the technical point of view met high standards. However, these initiatives lacked a very important element, communication. Despite the fact that this is only the beginning in the field of urban planning in Albania, however, the experience of these years during two decades is a valuable lesson for the future of Urban Management in Albania. Co-PLAN has always stressed the motto of learning by doing, while government authorities and organizations are not in the same position to afford. Therefore, they can easily learn from others' experiences, so that the same mistakes are not repeated again. As far as participation is concerned, identifying the right actors and stakeholders for the process has been yet another task which required some degree of thinking. As a matter of fact, the Task Force set out to possibly reach all those interested in and relevant to the process. This was however something dependent also on the degree of organization of the actors themselves. Admittedly, the Task Force could reach even a greater number of participants, if better organization were possible.

The experience of Co-PLAN during 90-s and early 2000-s has been crucial for the platform this organization submitted to Albanian Parliament in 2004 for better handling territorial planning, environmental issues, and formalization of informal economy. As result of that since 2005 considerable changes happened in the mentality of urban governance in Albania, including new law of territorial planning and legalization of informal settlements. In addition Co-PLAN established POLIS University as an instrument of developing a critical mass of expertise that would hopefully provoke further reforming of planning in Albania.

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