

## **Regional Social Policy Reform in the Dynamic of the Albanian National Social Protection Strategy**

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*The paper has been revised by a non-English mother tongue editor*

## ACRONYMS

|          |  |
|----------|--|
| AAC      | Albanian Association of Communes                                       |
| AAM      | Albanian Association of Municipalities                                 |
| ADA      | Austrian Development Agency  |
| CBC      | Cross Border Cooperation   |
| CoE      | Council of Europe  |
| SCO      | Civil Society Organizations  |
| DSDC     | Department of Strategy and Donor Coordination                          |
| DLDP     | Decentralization and Local Development Programme                       |
| EC/EU    | European Commission/European Union                                     |
| FTI      | Fast Track Initiative  |
| GoA      | Government of Albania  |
| IC / HSI | Intercooperation / HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation                     |
| IPA      | Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance                                |
| IPS      | Integrated Planning System   |
| LGDS     | Local Government and Decentralisation Strategy                         |
| LGU      | Local Government Unit  |
| MADA     | Mountain Area Development Agency                                       |
| MDG(s)   | Millennium Development Goal(s)   |
| METE     | Ministry of Economy, Trade and Enterprise                              |
| MIPD     | Multi-Annual Indicative Planning Document 2011-2013                    |
| MoI      | Ministry of Interior   |
| MoLSAE   | Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare                                   |
| NSDI     | National Strategy for Development and Integration                      |
| OSSh     | One Stop Shop  |
| PASARP   | Programme of Activities in Support of Albanian Regions and Prefectures |
| RDP      | Regional Development Programme   |
| RCDS     | Regional Development Cross Cutting Strategy                            |
| SCO-A    | Swiss Cooperation Office in Albania                                    |
| SDC      | Swiss Development Cooperation  |
| SAA      | Stabilization and Association Agreement                                |
| SEE      | South East Europe  |
| SWG      | Sectorial Working Group  |
| UNDP     | United Nations Development Programme                                   |
| USAID    | United States Agency for International Development                     |

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In keeping with the main objective of this research - ‘to collect and present information on cooperation experiences of different actors, in order to eventually identify opportunities of joint strategies and projects with Italian decentralised cooperation in the next future’ - this paper will draw a picture of the cooperation framework in the Region of Shkodra, in part as a result of the exploratory phase – a continuation of previous work done – and after further consultation with local actors in the Region as well as with Tirana-based stakeholders. The paper also portrays the latter’s concerns and experiences, the role they play and their contribution to the Social Policy Reform of the Region; and their common interest in the area of social planning and policies. The analysis focuses on the main steps towards the objectives of the Social Policy Reform in parallel with decentralization and de-institutionalization processes.

The City of Shkodra and the adjoining area is one of the most attractive regions in Albania. The Shkodra Region is familiar with a number of donor programs and with various external assistance instruments for social policies development with a view to optimizing the match of regional priorities and multi/bilateral donor programs/aid instruments. The European Commission, USAID, UNDP, SDC, and CoE were given the leadership of the coordination process by the donor community in-country, supported by the efforts of a number of bilateral donors and international organisations.

The report analyzes three case studies of relevant experiences in Shkodra: the **Regional Development Programme** which aims to contribute significantly to an equitable social and economic development in Shkodra, while improving ‘equal access of citizens to quality public services and economic opportunities, in particular in disadvantaged areas, by strengthening the Qarks; the **Decentralisation and Local Development Programme**, which aims to support various LGUs in developing and establishing instruments to increase local government transparency and accountability, mostly by introducing innovative communication and information mechanisms; and the **Art Gold Programme** which supports the national government in outlining and implementing decentralized and regional development policies to achieve the MDGs and contribute to the implementation of the National Strategy for Development and Integration’ goals in a coordinated way and in partnership with various stakeholders. The analysis of these cases will be focused on specific actors, their experience in the Shkodra Region, their strategies in the selected issues and future perspectives in the framework of IPA funds.

The analysis brings out the context of Shkodra Regional Cooperation in which the EC and other donors with relevant experience in social policies - in keeping with the national “Sectorial Strategy of Social Protection 2008 – 2013” and the “Strategical Concept of Shkodra Regional Development 2010 – 2016” - support the implementation of the National Strategy for Regional Development. The process of institutional strengthening of the Regions, their functioning and democratization through the European integration process, presents new challenges to the donors community, to national and local actors as well as to the business community and civil society.

While looking to the future, to the road towards the EU integration, regional development will obviously continue to be dependent on external support. In this context, the EU and other donors should already look for ways to build up ‘**absorption capacities**’ at **sub-national level** as one of the prerequisites for an effective use of development funding. Both the analysis and the lessons learned tell us that the donors should make use of existing capacities at regional level (Qarks) in the management of grant schemes. The project development up to date more and more requires that a **scaling up of some of the investments** from very local interventions to supra-local levels, from inter-municipal to regional, and from regional to inter-regional levels be considered. On the one

hand this can counterbalance the fragmented and inefficient territorial administration, while on the other it can create stronger horizontal and vertical links among development actors.

## 1. COOPERATION ACTIVITIES IN SHKODRA IN THE FIELD OF REGIONAL SOCIAL POLICY

### 1.1 The general framework of cooperation activities

The City of Shkodra and the adjoining area is definitely one of the most attractive regions in Albania. The European Commission, USAID, UNDP, SDC, and CoE were given leadership of the coordination process by the donor community inside the country, supported by the efforts of a number of bilateral donors and international organisations. The Shkodra Region is familiar with a number of donor programs and with various external assistance instruments in social policies development with a view to optimizing the match of regional priorities and multi/bilateral donor programs/aid instruments.

In the context of the Stabilization Association Agreement (SAA) and the EU Pre-Accession Programme, a particular relevance has been assigned to LGU's capacity strengthening. In this framework the Shkodra Regional Development strategy puts a strong emphasis on the aim of strengthening the cooperation process, in terms both of cross border cooperation and international cooperation.

In keeping with the national "Sectorial Strategy of Social Protection 2008 – 2013" and the "Strategical Concept of Shkodra Regional Development 2010 – 2016", the EC and other donors with relevant experience in social policies have ensured their support to the implementation of the National Strategy for Regional Development, facing the challenges of the region's institutional functioning, democratization and European integration. The Government has approved similar actions. The latest slogan of the Albanian Government for donor cooperation is "Bringing Policy and Practice Together" which - as stated in the latest donors round table - highlights the role of the regions in driving development. In this platform, with a special focus in Social Policies, a "*Map of Social Service tools*" is provided by the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare (MoLSAE), with the support of National and Local Social Services, UNICEF, World Vision and the National Center for Social Studies<sup>1</sup>, in order to help actors working in this field.

The North of Albania, in particular the Shkodra region, remains the priority of the Development Plans of Albania. This is reflected in the **municipality of Shkodra** which is one of the most active actors in cooperation activities in the Shkodra district: it is the main urban center of this district, with a long tradition of cooperation with its northern neighbours.

A number of important projects have been implemented in the region that have to be taken into consideration in any intervention planned. These include the EC/UNDP-funded project "Integrated Support for Decentralization" for the period October 2008 – December 2012; the SDC-funded project "Decentralization and Local Development Programme in Shkodra and Lezha Region" (DLDP II) for the period March 2010 - 2013; the USAID "Local Government Programme in Albania", from September 2007 to mid-2012 (a follow-up USAID-funded programme is now beginning).

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.sherbimeshoqerore.gov.al/Default.aspx>

Building on strong historical ties, **Austria** has continued to support Albania's sustainable development and the EU integration efforts in such areas as good governance, regional development, social inclusion and protection, gender equality, environment and renewable energy, vocational education, water and sanitation. As part of Albania's convergence with EU standards, special attention is paid to the protection of human rights. Austria's focus has been on gender equality, women's empowerment and social inclusion.

A number of relevant programs with a special focus on Social policies have been carried out by the Austrian Cooperation together with the Swiss Cooperation. Key issues of these intervention have been social inclusion (through training and professional training), gender equality as well as the development of children security network.

In this context, the Regional Development Programme (RDP) - funded by two donors, the **Austrian Development Agency** (ADA) and the **Swiss Development Cooperation** (SDC) - running from 2011 to 2014, is significantly contributing to an equitable social and economic development in the Shkodra region (overall objective), while improving 'equal access of citizens to quality public services and economic opportunities, in particular in disadvantaged areas, through the **strengthening of The Qark institutions**' (programme purpose). The RDP also wants to support the Government of Albania and the Qark institutions in the process of accession to the EU. To this end and in line with the NSDI, the RDP advocates appropriate improvements of the legal framework as well as contributes to the further development of the capacities of Qarks and other relevant institutions in order to fully meet the EU standards in their regional development activities.

The North of Albania – and the Shkodra region in particular - remains a priority in the Programmes of the **Italian Cooperation**. In cooperation with AdP - Amici dei Popoli, COL'OR - Camminiamo Oltre l'Orizzonte, CARITAS SHKODRA and the local government have implement an Integrated Rural Development Project. This programme was implemented for the period January 2009 – end 2012.

A cooperation agreement was signed between the Swiss Cooperation Development and the Ministry of Interior (4<sup>th</sup> of August 2011)<sup>2</sup> aiming to strengthen and improve Local Governments' functioning in North Albania. According to this agreement the assistance will be aimed at increasing the capacities of municipalities and communes in Shkodra, which in turn will facilitate the decentralization process. A new element in this programme is the focus on sharing experience and good practices at the national level with municipalities and communes in other regions of Albania<sup>3</sup>. The Swiss Cooperation has also supported a Programme on "Decentralisation and Local Development – DLDP", - reacting to the Local Government's needs in the Shkodra region, aimed to improve local governance and institutionalize good management and administration of public services and responsibilities.

As part of the global development context, UNDP has promoted the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals at local level, particularly through its Local Governance Programme (LGP), while the Government of Italy financed a large programme on local economic development, the PASARP (Programme of Activities in Support of Albanian Regions and Prefectures) in the Albanian regions of Vlora, Durres and Shkodra (2000 – 2006).

The ART GOLD Western Balkans Programme in Albania (ART GOLD 2) has been funded by the Italian Government by means of a contribution to the "ART" Trust Fund of UNDP. The aim of the Programme was to consolidate successful practices and strategies already developed in Albania through UNDP's LGP (2000 – 2005) and UNOPS's PASARP (2000 – 2006) programmes.

Based on its results, as well as its objectives, targets and the additional generated expectations and identified niches, the ART GOLD 2 Programme has subsequently received support from UNDP

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<sup>2</sup> (<http://www.osce.org/sq/albania/86416?download=true>).

<sup>3</sup> (<http://www.dldp.al/>).

HUB Geneva and the One UN Coherence Fund for expansion and extension. The Programme ended in 2012, but possibilities and prospects for its further extension are being discussed.

**The Cross-Border Cooperation Programme Albania – Montenegro 2007-2013**, which identifies Shkodra as an eligible region for funding, has, as its main goal, the promotion of cooperation between peoples, communities and institutions from bordering areas, aiming at sustainable development, stability and prosperity in the common interest of citizens of the two countries. In particular its Priority axis I is the “Promotion of regional cohesion and competitiveness through an approach that integrates economic, environmental and social development”. The measure “Enhancing social cohesions through people-to-people actions” indicates the following activities to be implemented<sup>4</sup>:

- Support to non government organizations active in social inclusion activities.
- Education and training initiatives.
- Support of joint health protection related activities.
- Youth exchange activities from both sides of the border.
- Organization of local exhibitions or fairs.
- Bilateral actions for the joint solution of common social problems.

In the framework of the EU-funded CBC Programme, the project “Development of Local Strategies for Social Services in the Cross-Border Region” (2007-2013) is aiming at supporting Shkodra and Montenegro communities in creating and sustaining Children Friendly milieus, as well as engaging the border’s local authorities in common projects benefiting the citizens. The project aims to contribute to social development and the promotion of social cohesion in the Shkodra Region and the Ulcinj Region in Montenegro, in the mutual interest of citizens of the two countries, through the use of their social and economical assets in pursuing regional development and facilitating cross-border cooperation. The project’s specific objective is the development of a regional social strategy & plan of action with the participation of communities in accordance with national policies on regional social development; to increase public awareness on child participation, and budgeting through structured and professional information dissemination. The project promotes the “Child-Friendly City” as defined by UNICEF: A child friendly city is a local system of good governance committed to fulfilling children’s right.

## 1.2 Local actors of decentralized/territorial cooperation in the region

The Albanian **Ministry of Interior** plays a key role in supporting the implementation of the programmes, providing political and institutional support as well as technical and practical expertise through its consultants. The Ministry also contributes to the programmes’ sustainability, ensuring the dissemination of their results and the future use of their tools. The **Albanian Development Fund (ADF)** is a public agency with the mission of increasing sustainable economic and social development in balance with social cohesion at local and regional level. In this framework the main objectives of ADF are improvement of local public services, local government institutional strengthening, and the increase of good local governance.

The **Qarks of Shkodra** and its **Council** are the second level of local government. Their primary responsibilities are to coordinate and harmonise regional policies, carry out the functions assigned by the central government as well as those transferred to them by local governments.

The Decentralisation and Local Development Programme (2010 – 2013) has required the active involvement of the **Albanian Association of Municipalities (AAM)** and the **Albanian Association of Communes (AAC)** and foresees also a wide range of activities requiring continuous

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<sup>4</sup> ([http://www.albania-montenegro.org/en/index.php?run=spec\\_obj|1|1|1|1|3|3|1](http://www.albania-montenegro.org/en/index.php?run=spec_obj|1|1|1|1|3|3|1)).

communication and the assistance of the two Associations. The latter provide in particular technical and practical expertise to the Programme and facilitate the implementation and organisation of activities at the municipal and commune level and in particular in the pilot LGUs.

The **Prefecture of Shkodra** - which represents the central government at the Qark level - is responsible for the supervision of the legal compliance of local government operations, as well as for coordinating the work of de-concentrated central government agencies.

**Civil Society Organizations** (CSO) based in Shkodra are active in different sectors relevant to RDP which need to be considered.

## 2. SELECTED CASE STUDIES

### 2.1 The Regional Development Programme (RDP)

*Project Purpose:* the RDP aims to contribute significantly to an equitable social and economic development in the Shkodra and Lezha regions (overall objective) while improving ‘equal access of citizens to quality public services and economic opportunities, in particular in disadvantaged areas, by strengthening Qark institutions’ (programme purpose).

*Duration (First Phase):* January 2011-December 2014

*Promoters/funders:* Swiss Cooperation Office Albania; Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC)

The main partners are: Qarks (regions) of Shkodra and Lezha; Municipalities and Communes in Shkodra and Lezha; the Ministry of Interior and DSDC. The Implementing Consortium is ÖAR-Regionalberatung, Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation and Co-Plan.

RDP is a direct response to the ambition of the Albanian Government to achieve a balanced regional development. In doing so it is also connected to the new “National Strategy for Gender Equality and Domestic Violence” (2011 – 2015) which defines the framework policy to promote gender equality. RDP interacts and works closely with a number of institutions which include MoI; METE; DSDC; Qarks of Shkodra; Municipalities and Communes of Shkodra; Local Government Associations; Prefecture of Shkodra; Albanian Development Fund; Mountain Areas Development Agency (MADA) and Civil Society Organizations.

*Beneficiaries:* the Shkodra and Lezha Qarks as decentralised government institutions will be the direct beneficiaries of the project, while indirect beneficiary will be a population of over 560 thousands inhabitants and their organizations consisting of 33 LGUs (5 municipalities, 28 Communes)

RDP is a *regional development project* that identifies the gender issues as a key dimension of development: not only because gender is indicated as a dimension and indirect outcome of RDP, but also because regional development is successfully achieved when all stakeholders` groups are addressed and equity is increased. Good governance and gender-related issues are mainstreamed as transversal topics. Emphasis is also put on promoting disadvantaged areas and vulnerable groups. In this sense, the proposed partnership approach may well be focused on the poverty and gender equality dimensions.

The assessment carried out by the programme shows that while gender equality initiatives do exist in the area, they remain scattered and produce an impact only in few specific areas of the region. One of the main reasons behind this is the gap between gender equality *de jure* and *de facto*.



### Selected intervention case: Gender Equality

The legal and policy framework in Albania related to gender equality has recently improved, but in general there is a poor implementation of it at local level. *Unemployment is quite high among women and they have a low representation in local governments, both at administration (somehow better) and decision-making (extremely low) levels. Women working in the public sectors are mostly involved in education and health services, while those employed in the private sector seem to be engaged in agriculture, handcraft and retail*<sup>5</sup>. In the latter, the rate of businesses owned by women is very low compared to the businesses owned and initiated by men. In the field of education there is no visible difference between males and females. However, very recent trends show an increase in dropouts among girls, especially in the more remote areas of the region, more evident in Northern areas. Attendance at vocational training is not satisfactory although there are vocational education institutions in the region. Access to urban areas (difficult mobility) was one of the main reasons.

As the gender issues remain the key to a successful development, the RDP programme's aim is to make sure that gender-sensitiveness objectives are clearly spelled out within the project framework. For this reason, a gender assessment was undertaken during the RDP inception phase in order to provide recommendations for the improvement of the RDP intervention logic. The RDP has therefore been carefully revised to include activities or aspects that directly or indirectly: 1) Improve women's access to economic opportunities; 2) improve women's access to social services; 3) Strengthen institutional mechanisms in support of gender equality at local and regional levels; 4) Enhance women's participation in decision-making at local and regional levels; and 5) Support the implementation and monitoring of gender equality commitments<sup>6</sup>.

The regional development concepts already existing in the Shkodra qarks seem to have a weak or not well articulated gender perspective. Given that strategies are not yet reflected in the qark councils' budgets, budgetary provisions regarding gender issues at qark level are also missing. This is true at the municipality/commune level as well. The research in both qarks has shown that very little is done to inform women. Of course this is then reflected in their low participation in projects implementation, let alone decision-making.

However, the insufficient gender mainstreaming measures and indicators in the current regional development concepts of the Shkodra qark were considered by RDP as the starting point towards radicating the gender dimension into the development efforts of the region in a comprehensive and holistic way. Based on the research, the project highlights some findings on women participation in community projects, and the type and quality of information tools that LGUs use to reach or address women. The intervention has been built over the lessons learned from previous projects which have also explored instruments to inform women on projects, their rights, opportunities for participation in project implementation, budgets, and other local government activities.

In line with the multi-scalar approach, the structure of the RDP fund has three different windows<sup>7</sup>:

| <b>Flagship Projects</b>   | <b>Small Projects</b>   | <b>Social Initiatives</b>  |
|--|---|--|
| <b>Focus:</b> Regional level covering the project area (Shkodra Qarks)   | <b>Focus:</b> Sub-regional levels/areas   | <b>Focus:</b> disadvantaged groups (youth, unemployed) and areas, non-governmental actors, women |
| <b>Rationale:</b> Implementation of projects in line with strategic priorities of existing planning documents, partnership in project implementation | <b>Rationale:</b> Area-based development concepts, participatory planning process | <b>Rationale:</b> Social innovative approaches, balanced development, empowerment.               |

<sup>5</sup> SDC and ADA' Gender Assessment for Shkoder and Lezhe Qark, Regional Development Programme Northern Albania, Shkoder 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Idem.

<sup>7</sup> Source: Gender Assessment for Shkodër and Lezhë Qark.

**Grant scheme for social initiatives:** Social initiative projects should be selected via targeted calls for proposals, addressing specific groups of people, particularly women, young people, unemployed, people with limited capabilities (disabled) and others. During the programme’s implementation (2010 -2014), round of calls for proposals should address special issues or objectives in coherence with the strategies and needs at regional or sub-regional level.

In this process, the RDP tried to harmonise as much as possible procedures and templates already used by RDF, DLDP and IPA CBC. It also prepared standardized forms for project applications, assessment, contracting, and implementation, monitoring and reporting. Where appropriate, the RDP was took into consideration as much as possible templates and models included in the PRAG.

Finally, gender and equality indicators are included in the RDP monitoring systems with specific gender-disaggregated data, so as to be able to measure progress by empirical information along the programme implementation.

The following table provides information on NGOs and women specific projects in the qark of Shkodra.

***Women’s NGOs and projects implemented in Shkodra***

| <b>Women NGO’s</b>            | <b>Aim of the project</b>  |
|-------------------------------|--|
| Intellectual Women of Shkodra | Awareness-raising on trafficking<br>Training course for rural women on how to create new businesses  |
| The Women of Shkodra          | Training sessions targeting women in need  |
| Woman to Woman                | Counseling for women and girls<br>Training sessions on domestic violence, trafficking, and gender issues<br>Awareness-raising campaign on trafficking and prostitution     |
| Light Steps                   | Engaging community members in environmental initiatives, such as creating green spaces at the neighborhood level<br>Reproductive health<br>Training sessions on leadership |

Source: Gender Assessment for Shkodra and Lezhe Qark, Regional Development Programme Northern Albania, SDC, ADA.

The process of facts finding on gender issues gave the following outcomes: Out of the 32 LGUs addressed by the survey in Shkodra qark, 24 have replied that they involve women in the community groups/meetings (thus involving women in project cycle management), while 3 LGUs have not involved women and 5 LGUs have not answered at all. The frequency of involvement varies from “never to always” and in this range, 56% fall under the category “sometimes”. The participation of women in local council meetings is still very low. 11 LGUs (34%) out of 32 have not responded at all to this issue. Another 34% state that women participate sometimes in local councils meetings, while 28% (9 LGUs) fall under the “never” category. As for the issue of women’s participation in community meetings specifically organised for women, the situation seems to be worse, with 38% (12) of the LGUs not responding at all on this issue and another 38% falling under the “never” category<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> SDC and ADA’ Gender Assessment for Shkoder and Lezhe Qark, Regional Development Programme Northern Albania, Shkoder 2011

It appears that meetings (both in public venues and in the households), media, and publication of information in commune/municipality venues are the most widespread forms of outreach and information provided to women. However, due to the difficult journeys from one LGU to the other, even in these cases the outreach is very low (10-20% of the women – in Shkodra the average is 50% and above, even though the latter is not related to the LGUs role in informing women).

The involvement of women in projects or their information is ensured by LGUs as well as NGOs operating in the region, mainly through projects specifically addressed to women. Most NGOs, however, are based in urban areas (Shkodra), and thus their outreach is not satisfactory.

## **2.2 Decentralisation and Local Development Programme (DLDP)**

*Project Purpose:* DLDP aims to support various LGUs in developing and establishing instruments to increase local government transparency and accountability, mostly by introducing innovative communication and information mechanisms *for per period March 2010 - 2013*

*Promoters/funders:* The Programme on “Decentralisation and Local Development – dldp”, is implemented by HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation in synergy with the “Empowerment of Local and Regional Governance Structures” programme implemented by the Council of Europe, with the support of the Swiss Development Cooperation Agency, under the care and direct interest of the Ministry of Interior.

*Partners:* The main partners of the programme are: Shkodra Region, Ministry of Interior, Association of Municipalities, Association of Communes and LGU Partners.

*Beneficiaries:* The programme builds on the previous investments in support of the decentralization process in Albania, as well as on the efforts aimed at enabling communes and municipalities in Shkodra to improve public services, increase communication with citizens and better plan and manage local resources.

### **Intervention: One Stop Shop Service Establishment**

One of the success story presented as “case study” is the “One Stop Shop” (OSSh), established with the objective to improve efficiency and effectiveness in service delivery and to make information accessible to all citizens including women, poor and marginalized groups. This intervention - the pilot phase of which was implemented in Dajc Commune - consists in a 9-months intervention (2011-2012). It aims to strengthen local democracy through citizen participation in decision making to enable effective local governance and quick and timely response to the needs of the community, with the specific goal of establishing a social services system for vulnerable people using OSSh.

The main activities are: Designing and developing the OSSh structure and functions; Establishing a functional and logistic citizens-oriented infrastructure; Constructing the OSSh premises; Installing hardware and IT software; Putting in place a comprehensive IT system along with its modules; Providing training for municipality key management and staff; Establishing social services with a focus on gender, using the OSSh office to effectively address the concerns of vulnerable groups.

*The Project beneficiaries include:* In total 114.674 inhabitants in the Municipality of Shkodra, 57,347 of which are female; 3,783 families that receive economic assistance; 1,805 inhabitants who receive disability payments; 5,083 private businesses (of which 1,936 big businesses). Businesses will receive a quick and qualitative service and direct information.

The reported achievements of these initiatives are: Staff performance meeting the needs of citizens is improved; Citizens needs are better considered; Investments and budget are discussed and shared with citizens; Quality of services is improved based on citizen’s feedback; Emigrants involvement in local governance is enabled.

This successful case elicits some considerations at this stage: There are good practices throughout the chain of e-government which need to be replicated, and that are originated by a strong and motivated leadership ready for change; a more systemic approach with a better guidance and developed standards would speed up ICT processes; the administration's response to the new ICT development and its use is sometimes "reluctant", while citizens' reception is positive.

The programme's transversal themes are: dissemination of these good practices and centers of competencies; strengthening the AAM/AAC and good practices' influence on policy making; liaising with other donors/programmes<sup>9</sup>.

Dldp participated in the third edition of the leading e-Democracy event in the region, which took place on 23-25 September 2012 in Ohrid, Macedonia. Developing ICT strategy to increase transparency and accountability and to promote innovative citizens communication was the core of its presentation.

## 2.3 Art Gold Programme

*Project Purpose* of the programme is supporting the national government in outlining and implementing decentralized and regional development policies to achieve the MDGs, and contributing to the implementation of the goals of the National Strategy for Development and Integration in a coordinated way and in partnership with various stakeholders as well as other thematic national development policies and strategies, in particular those of the Ministries of Health, Education, Environment and Culture.

The Programme focuses its activities in the two Regions prioritized by the Albanian Government, namely Vlora and Shkodra. Through its technical assistance, the Programme has been instrumental in the organization of regional strategic planning exercises, including the identification and implementation of strategic projects involving public, associative and private social actors, as well as the local offices and representatives of central institutions: an effort that has culminated in the formulation of Regional Strategic Planning documents for both Albanian Regions.

*Period:* the Programme's implementation ended in 2012 (initial year 2010), but further possibilities and prospects for extension are being discussed<sup>10</sup>. A Programme evaluation carried out in the first months of 2013 will enlighten in more detail and examine the adequacy of the assistance provided, in view of drawing lessons and make recommendations for improved future assistance.

*Promoters/funders:* the Western Balkans Programme in Albania (ART GOLD 2) has been funded by the Italian Government by means of a contribution to the UNDP "ART" Trust Fund. The Programme has subsequently received support from UNDP HUB Geneva and the One UN Coherence Fund for expansion and extension.

The aim of the Programme was to consolidate successful practices and strategies already developed in Albania thanks to UNDP's LGP and UNOPS's PASARP programmes.

The Programme is composed of three interrelated components, managed distinctly by UNDP Albania, UNOPS and UNDP HUB Geneva. UNDP Albania is responsible for the implementation of the Programme in Albania, while UNOPS is in charge of the international technical assistance and UNDP HUB Geneva provides overall guidance and coordination, as well as facilitates partnerships and collaboration with various potential development actors and institutions.

*Beneficiaries:* Roma and Egyptian communities (the most excluded/marginalized groups in Albania) for a total population of 9586. Other direct beneficiaries are the employees in Local Government structures, in particular women. The whole community of Shkodra is considered as an indirect beneficiary.

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<sup>9</sup> ([http://www.dldp.al/images/docs/Government\\_Donor\\_Dialogue\\_Issue\\_No\\_48-March\\_2011.pdf](http://www.dldp.al/images/docs/Government_Donor_Dialogue_Issue_No_48-March_2011.pdf)).

<sup>10</sup> Terms of Reference for Independent External Evaluation of Art Gold 2 Programme in Albania. January 2013.

**Intervention: Boosting the achievement of Albanian MDGs and Human Development**

ART GOLD 2 Albania is part of the UNDP’s ART Initiative, which is intended to promote national co-operation framework programmes for governance and local development in developing countries. In line with the Programme objectives, the key achievements to date of ART GOLD 2 are intended for direct and indirect beneficiaries as highlighted above.

Among the main results achieved regarding multi-level governance, the programme continued to actively promote at central level other sectoral national development policies and strategies, in particular those related to Health, Education and Environment. The programme has ensured participation of different local, national and international actors, creating and supporting innovative partnerships within a global system of cooperation. In the MDG framework, among activities to be considered for Promotion and Exchange of Innovations is *The innovative Mother Kangaroo Technique for underweight newborn babies*. Previously implemented by the Department of Paediatrics of the Tirana Hospital, the programme was replicated in the Shkodra regional hospital with the support of the Florence Meyer Hospital, the Region of Tuscany, three health specialists from Sri Lanka's Ministry of Health and the ART Programme in Sri Lanka.

Together with UNOPS’s Universitas Programme, UNDP ART GOLD 2 has established partnerships with the Ministry of Education and Science, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, with the Shkodra University, and with local authorities. The programme established successful “Universitas laboratories of local human development” in Shkodra: innovative approaches to practical professional training and applied research, in which Albanian and international students and professional interns were hosted, with the academic support of local universities. The laboratories served as “think tanks” aimed at generating ideas on regional socio-economic development and cooperation.

The main results achieved regarding public policies will serve not only for the social and economic development of the selected project areas, but also as “best examples” to be replicated in other regions of Albania. Therefore, discussions have continued with national counterparts for the potential replication and institutionalization of these structures/mechanisms. The best practices of this programme can be summarized as following:

| Successful initiatives, processes or activities  | Criteria of best practices   |                                     |                                |
|--|--|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
|  | Integration in the local Government’s programmes, institutionalization | Empowerment of benefited population | Articulation with other actors |
| Creation of Albania’s first Human Laboratories of Learning   | No   | Yes                                 | Yes                            |
| Facilitating dialogue at various level: national, regional, municipal, communal. Assistance in designing a unified Regional Strategic planning | No   | Yes                                 | Yes                            |

Source: UNDP, Annual Report ArtGold2 Programm 2011-2012.

### 3. INDICATIONS FOR FUTURE POSSIBLE PARTNERSHIPS AND CONVERGENCES AMONG COOPERATION ACTORS

#### 3.1 Donor Coordination and the EU Financial Platform for Regional Development

The social policy reform is based on the “Sectorial Strategy of Social Protection 2008 – 2013” (SSSP) within the National Strategy for Development and Integration (NSDI), the country’s fundamental strategic document that gathers together and harmonizes both the perspective of sustainable economic and social development, and integration into the European Union. Regional Development is part of the NSDI: domestic objectives are seen as part of the EU integration process and of the achievement of Millennium Development goals. Meanwhile, this strategy will serve as a basic document in determining Policy Priorities, Medium Term Budget Programme design and orientation of donor funding, especially from the IPA EU programme for the period 2013-2020.

Coordination among projects and donors is endured at the central level through the Sectorial Working Group (SWG) on Decentralization that is co-chaired by the deputy Minister of Interior and the Deputy Country Director of the Swiss Development Cooperation in Albania. Within this working group several donors coordinate sub-thematic issues. There are three SWGs active in the Social/Human Resource Development Sector. The first one addresses “Social Protection and Inclusion”, the second one deals with “employment and VET” and the third one covers “education”. For the first SWG the UN is the lead coordinating donor while Switzerland, Austria and the EU lead the European Donors under the Fast Track Initiative (FTI<sup>11</sup>). The lead donor for the second SWG is Switzerland and the other active European donors are Austria, Germany, Italy and the EU. Finally, the third SWG is led, on the donor side, by the WB. Italy and the EU are closely associated partners under the FTI. Overall, many other donors are active in this field.

The Department of Strategy and Donor Coordination (DSDC) documents and evidences from the Italian Bilateral Cooperation show the continued investments through the years in the field of regional decentralization and in social sectors such as health and education. Albania benefits today from different EU-funded programmes, i.e IPA-CBC Adriatic; IPA CBC Albania Montenegro; SEE- South East Europe; MED-Mediterranean. A number of them have as main objective the intervention in social policies:

IPA Component I - Transition assistance and institution building, which include social inclusion and civil society development.

IPA Component II - Cross-Border Cooperation which includes investment aimed to: Enhance economic and social development in border areas; Address common challenges in public health areas; promote joint activities involving partners and border regions; Support networks between urban and rural areas; Develop cooperation in sectors such as health, culture, tourism and education; Stimulate the integration of cross-border gender equality, social inclusion etc..

Currently, under the Bilateral Cooperation in the framework of the Cross Border Cooperation Programme Albania – Montenegro, IPA 2007 – 2013, Component II – funded by the European Union – the already mentioned project “Local development strategies on social services in Shkodra and Ulcinj region” is being implemented. The project aims at developing bilateral actions for the joint solution of common social problems by promoting education and training initiatives that clearly benefit the cross-border area, in compliance with the national legislation of Albania and Montenegro related to national strategies for sustainable socio-economic development.

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<sup>11</sup> The EU Fast Track Initiative on Division of Labour and Complementarity (FTDoL) aims to support a selected group of partner countries in the process of implementing in-country Division of Labour (DoL). Albania was selected as a pilot Country for FTI/DoL where Italy acts as “facilitator”.

### **3.2 An overview of the SeeNet Programme activities in Shkodra**

The SeeNet Programme is widely recognized and considered as very active and having an important role in the process of strengthening local government in the Shkodra Region. This recognition comes very significantly from the representatives of Shkodra Municipality, who highlight all SeeNet regional activities as well as its scope of work and objectives.

The role of SeeNet as partner is strongly emphasized in the Inter Municipal Cooperation through the programme on reinforcing local and regional government structures. This is in fact one of the objectives of SeeNet, which aims at contributing to increase the effectiveness of social policies, promoting the definition and implementation of an integrated system of social services and interventions (territorial social plan) based on public private partnership and person-centred, able to identify the needs and possible answers coming from the territory. Inter-municipal cooperation is quite a new experience for the Region of Shkodra, indeed for almost the whole of Albania. The role of SeeNet in working closely with LGUs in the de-institutionalization of services is considered as an important intervention and experience in the field of social services.

There is today an active user-friendly electronic platform that makes social service info and details accessible both to groups in need or to the suppliers and other interested actors<sup>12</sup>.

Some of the interventions under SeeNet target minors in situation of parental abandonment and confirm the double value of the projects. The programme supports the regional vocational training centre in Shkodra in order to build up a system of management, planning, and evaluation of training according to the dynamics of the local labour market, taking into account the enhancement of the decentralisation process for vocational training in keeping with the EU integration process. In addition, there are activities aimed at shaping innovative training courses by testing the intersection of work supply and demand and calibrating the effectiveness of training. SeeNet partners in this are the Regional Centre for Vocational Education and the “Light Step” Women Centre.

The SeeNet Programme also includes activities specifically aimed at establishing and strengthening a network of integrated local services working to fight violence against women. In Shkodra this action - led by the Emilia-Romagna Region – involves activities related to job-market analysis and professional training aimed at providing a way into employment for both women and youth, with particular attention to those leaving orphanages. The Programme Action also assisted the local authorities in their social planning and programming tasks at the municipal level. Some of the results of these interventions are:

- The promotion of institutional agreements for the establishment of integrated systems of social services and of various interventions;
- The professional qualification of the main public and private local operators;
- Services of work placement for disadvantaged groups in Shkodra have been qualified;
- Even though Local Governments already regulate and coordinate the participation and the role of different stakeholders based on the local strategic plan, they still do need help for more assistance in this respect.

### **3.3 Opportunities of future partnership in framework of EU perspective**

In the current dynamics, coordinating the different roles and responsibilities at the local and central level remains the key to the success of the reform. Even though it's a hard job, the Shkodra Region is taking steps to be the main actor in the Policy Design regarding Social Protection and Social Service Delivery.

In keeping with the central level priorities, the social service reform requires two main priorities:

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<sup>12</sup> (<http://irps-al.org/db/index.php?group=20&database=Shkoder#>).

- Decentralization of services – to encourage and increase the responsibility of LGUs;
- Deinstitutionalization of social services by switching to “house/family” residential services within the community services, where people are assisted and supported within their usual environment.

Services do not have to be provided only by the local government, but can be offered by a mix of governmental and non-governmental providers and actors. The Shkodra Region has an intensive and dynamic financing from international donors that covers various regional development aspects. The Strategic Concept of Shkodra Regional Development 2010-2016 articulated regional development in five fields of action with their respective vision, objectives, priorities, and indicators which include social services and education training and capacity building among them. What is evident is the significant ability of LGUs to use funds to boost and achieve their social policies objectives.

While the donors’ criteria and procedures show similarities, there is still room to further harmonize and even align them, along the lines of the procedures and criteria applied by the most important (actual and future) funds, such as EU IPA. The priorities of the IPA 2012 National Programme for Albania are in line with those of the Multi-Annual Indicative Planning Document 2011-2013, which are, in the social sector: Reinforce the protection of human rights, notably for women, children and Roma, and effectively implement anti-discrimination policies; support *acquis*-related issues in social sector. The indicative financial allocation for the year 2011-2013 for the Social Development sector is 25.77 million Euro as compared with 13.40 mill Euro for the period 2007-2010.

The main objective of IPA support to this sector is prepare Albania for the implementation and management of the European Social Fund and bring the country closer to EU policies. The European Commission’s recommendations contained in the European Partnership with Albania 2011-2013 list the following priorities:

- improve social protection systems and fight social exclusion;
- adopt measures to increase school enrolment rates at secondary level and among children in rural areas, in particular girls, and in vocational schools;
- improve the education and training system in order to increase the offer of required skills; continue efforts to improve the quality of education and training and establish a modern vocational education and training system; and continue efforts to improve the quality of education and create a modern vocational education and training system; and promote regional cooperation in the field of higher education.

Furthermore, the aim is to prevent social exclusion and develop social inclusion policies/measures for the most vulnerable groups, notably the **Roma population**, *inter alia*, and other minorities such as **Balkan Egyptians**. Finally, **equality between men and women** shall be promoted, and the fight against discrimination shall be strengthened.

The representatives from the Shkodra Municipality and other LGUs appreciate the assistance of donors in their region, highlighting their patience in dealing with some concerns or barriers in the administrative work while dealing with public financial resources, such as: following the LGUs administrative time-line which sometime is not compatible with a project time-line implementation; following administrative regulations and procedures which also sometimes create delays in achieving a particular project’s objective set, etc. It is unquestionable, however, that while municipalities and communes participate in the planning process together with the real project promoters and cooperate in identifying needs, generating project ideas and developing them, applying for funding and then implementing projects, qarks still remain without clear functions and in a vacuum of resources. The donors should make use of the existing capacities at regional level (Qarks) in the management of grant schemes. **The grant funds should be accompanied by the development of the LGUs capacity both in project cycle management and in thematic training on relevant areas of service provision.** Training should be provided to Qark experts to increase



their capacities. The transparency of the decision-making process of every grant scheme is of crucial importance.

As the Minister of MOLSAE stated during the SeeNet Conference on Decentralization of Social Services” (October 2012):

“Now, local government units should show special care and even more attention to manage actual services and raising new ones aimed at providing help to categories such as children, the elderly, persons with disabilities, etc.. This require that local units, along budget infrastructure and other voices, foresee and plan funds for social services”<sup>13</sup>.

There is evidence of the **lack of horizontal partnership**, especially among municipalities and communes. In a situation of extreme LGUs fragmentation, undefined regional scope of functions, and generally limited financial resources for development, inter-municipal cooperation (IMC) should be the first and natural way to overcome these barriers. Actually there is evidence of a successful IMC for some LGUs in Albania (*inter alia* in Shkodra). This good experience should be upgraded and applied in social services using the lessons learned from the actual achievements, the interventions which up to now have been focused on economic aspects.

Further more, **scaling up some of the investments** from a very local dimension to supra-local levels, from inter-municipal to regional, and from regional to inter-regional levels should be considered. This on the one hand can counterbalance the fragmented and inefficient territorial administration, and on the other it can create stronger horizontal and vertical linkages among development actors.

Thanks to the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), MoLSAE has recently initiated a significant initiative in the field of social services, one step of which is the creation of the “Map of Social Service” tool which facilitates all actors operating in this field and at the same time assists society in orienting and informing them about the policy. Nowadays, developing efficient, reflective, sustainable governance mechanisms in public organizations has become a necessity. **The advancement of the Information Society** calls for involvement of diverse stakeholders including international organizations, public institutions, private sector, academia and civil society representatives. This should be addresses from both the policy and technical perspectives, as the ICT can help improve transparency, accountability and effectiveness in public institutions. The objective of this strategy is to review and coordinate the commitments related to the creation of an information-based economy, therefore ensuring a coordinated society-wide fulfillment of responsibilities of the relevant actors. This objective is part of the vision of the progress of Albania towards a knowledge-based society through a sustainable development that would lead to a society where all citizens benefit from the communications and information technologies, with the aim of increasing the level of knowledge, effectiveness and transparency in the public administration.

In pursuing these priorities there is a need for a wider participation, in particular for partnership and coordination with experienced NGOs. There are various NGOs working in the field of social services with different levels of efficacy, and the LGUs representatives recommend to avoid partnerships with any NGOs which have previously showed “weak” performances, so as to avoid disappointing results. In several LGUs – especially rural municipalities/communes – a formal NGO sector is missing. There are also open issues in the **involvement of the business community actors** in the process of regional development on the basis of common interests. More should be done to increase the private sector participation as a development actor and include it more deeply in the initiatives presented in the region. The local government is looking for more innovative ideas in the upcoming future in order to improve the business community participation in the regional development process, in particular for the deinstitutionalization of services, forcing them to listen to the community voice and needs through collaboration and partner’s cooperation.

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<sup>13</sup> (<http://www.mpcs.gov.al/zedhenesi/6-njoftime-per-shtyp/908-ministria-e-punes-dhe-ambasada-italiane-konferenca-per-decentralizimin->).

## CONCLUSIONS

On the issue of decentralisation, the 2011-2013 MIPD says: “Albania is a highly decentralised country but the administrative and technical capacities at the local and regional level need to be further strengthened.” Furthermore, today local governments are in charge of delivering basic services to citizens for which considerable investments have been carried out in recent years through the state budget and EU support. Therefore, it is necessary that local government capacities in managing these services are increased, as well as the central government’s capacity to coordinate and monitor them for increased accountability.

Currently Albania is in a very important stage in the process of achieving the EU Candidate status. In this perspective cooperation initiatives should concentrate on quality institutional strengthening projects.. Regional and local development will depend for a long time on external support, and with the EU integration, the EU and other donor funds should already be looking into the best ways **of installing ‘absorption capacities’ at sub-national levels** as one of the prerequisites for the effective use of development funding.

Using the current experience of the various projects in the region of Shkodra in the framework of regional development, and in particular those dealing with social services, the most relevant recommendation for the donor community at this stage is to expand the geographical coverage and number of beneficiary institutions, promoting successful experiences of previous and current programs and projects. Even though there are LGUs where specific and/or sets of investments are carried out, the need for further implementation and investment is still widespread.

The expansion and replication of successful implementations might sometime prove difficult and suffer financial limitations as a result of the global crisis. Due to this, an efficient use of financial resources is more important than ever. Financial instruments should ensure the achievement of RD policy objectives and be applied consistently and transparently, on a competitive basis among regional/local actors. Even though the EU-IPA funds are expected to offer considerable financial support for regional development, a special focus should be placed on current and past investments in social services and capacity building in that field, so as to optimize further investments. For sustainable investments in the field of social services, domestic development needs to originate from national and sub-national efforts combined with assistance from the international donor community.

Optimizing the resources allocated to social protection services and having a result-oriented vision of public expenses, the Municipality of Shkodra highlights the need that the budget formulation process should be characterized by a more participatory approach, which implies the involvement of more actors in discussing budget allocations according to local needs and priorities. The territorial/decentralized cooperation can also be essential in assisting the horizontal context for the *harmonization of integrated decentralized social services*, therefore reducing the local level project fragmentation. Promoting the involvement of all actors - such as local communities, civil society and the business/private sector - and the improvement of partnership dialogue requires a special focus from cooperation actors on assisting the decentralization process, so as to help those actors to synergize the efforts and increase the sustainability of investments by increasing the sense of ownership.

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