RESEARCH PAPER ON
TECHNOLOGY AND INFORMATION FLOW IN ALBANIA, A TOOL TO INCREASE CITIZENS PARTICIPATION AND BENEFITS

Prepared by Zana Vokopola
Urban Research Institute

1. GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF THE CURRENT SITUATION

Albania isolated for 50 years
Second half of the past century was an era of darkness and total isolation for Albania. Exchange of information was totally centrally controlled and used as a tool to deprive people’s rights and freedom of participation rather than a tool that leads to healthier life and greater social freedom. Tools like computers, cell phones, simple office equipment and even stationary phone lines were hardly known by mass Albanians. Some very scarce knowledge about technology was privilege of a very limited and a tight circle of people able to control not just economic resources but also the people’s minding.

Exposure of Albania to the rest of the world and technology
Political changes of early 90’ created an opportunity for the Albanians to increase communication with the rest of the world. For the first time Albanians were exposed to technology and tools that have been used so frequently in the neighbour countries decades in advance. Computers and other equipment became tools so frequently used in government institutions, public administration and private sector. Last years network communication boosted up allowing Albanians for better connections with new experiences and practices of the developed world. It has helped government institutions and public administration to improve governance by creating a more transparent communication environment.

Stage of technology use in government institutions and public administration.
Albania is still fighting against its 50 years build up centralised system in this long transitional period. Networking is limited to those international organisations and a few government institutions. Technology as a tool for better governance and quality management is almost missing at the local level, while the Government of Albania is strongly committed to proceed with the local government decentralisation reform. Database processing and public use of information is at the early stage of development and still is considered as future potential expectation for better governance.

However, several Internet provider agencies are established and there is clear public benefit out of its use showing for a great mid term future rush to be part of world network age. Given the rather low incomes for most of the people, access to technology of mass Albanians is rather difficult. Recent growth and poverty reduction strategy underway in Albania presumes investments in education and health sector, a way that would provide Albanians with better tools and make them more productive and prosperous. Along with introduction of information technology and networking, a great need for training is
identified in order for technology use to become a tool to improve governance and increase citizens’ participation in decision making process.

**New role of the state in the e-era**
Not necessarily Albania needs to be pretty soon on the cutting age of global technology. But in this network age the country needs strengthen the capacity to understand and adapt global technologies for approaching local needs. Decentralisation of power to the governance level closest to the citizens is the new challenge for both Central and Local Government in Albania. In this environment encouraging the creativity of people will ensure for a better democracy and stakeholders involvement.

The Government of Albania should consider a general assessment of needs in technology and networking use, along with training and involvement of public and businesses. Establishment of a broad technology strategy in partnership with other stakeholders should by a priority that would help achieve a rapid integration with European developed community. National policies should be co-ordinated with international initiatives and adoption of fair relationship rules to make possible channelling new technologies towards the most urgent needs of people. Balkan regional technology and information use globalisation, if timely and properly introduced, might become a tool to help reconciliation and a joint approach for regional integration.

**Private – public partnership**
Part of the battle to establish and efficiently use networking and technology is to set up and agree on a fair relationship in between public and private initiatives. In this growing private sector and clear trend of policies towards market economy, merging of private public interest helps for exploring and efficient use of overall resources in the country. Sharing information and investments in between state and private sector is an approach for efficient use of financial resources and intellectual properties. Public private partnership based on use of technology creates more opportunities for job creation and public participation. In Albania there is a clear need for changing current patterns that would allow for a better involvement of private sector to public affairs. The broader challenge for public, private and non-profit decision-makers, especially in developing countries, Albania included, is to agree on ways to segment the global market so that key technology products are introduced at low cost to an extensive use in the country. Public and privates have to jointly identify areas where co-ordination makes a difference because no single private investor will act alone.

**Implementation of democracy in the e-era**
Given the progress made so far and ongoing efforts into establishing a sound and sustainable democracy, it is generally accepted, that in Albania the democratic system already set-up and the way laws and regulations are implemented, shows a fragile democracy. Public administration of both central and local governments are not yet developed enough to assure a fair, transparent and consensus based execution of responsibilities and service provision. Exchange of information, publicly held decision
making activities, involvement of stakeholders, wealth distribution, education, health and social care encouragement of businesses and public private partnership, service’s delivery, and even elections are not developed to such stage that would allow for sound and sustainable democracy. Qualitative delivery of all those pieces without proper use of technology and networking would not help strengthen the system we are willing to build up. It directly effects people’s quality of life. It also reduces isolation, we have been suffering so much, and enabling people to be better informed and to participate in decisions that effect their life. People’s participation strengthens democracy, technology is a tool that helps make it sound and sustainable.

On the other side, in order for a proper use of technology in this network age, this requires human capacities to be developed. Being at the heart of human progress, technology is a tool for people, its creator has the capacities and knowledge to use it to the benefit of the community they serve for. Vocational and on-job training should not be neglected. When new technology is introduced, government needs to train its people and private businesses as well. It increases the capacities of people to better respond future development challenges, it lowers the costs and improves service delivery keeping people involved in a broad democratic participatory approach.

There are many efforts concentrated in this reform, and donors are supporting a lot this program.

2. PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION PROGRAM IN ALBANIA

Albania’s transition experience has been uneven. The country has made some gains in economic growth, but has endured both economic and political crises. Recognizing the economic and social costs of poor governance, the Government of Albania launched a major institutional and good governance reform program in mid-1999. Decentralization to local authorities and municipal governments is one action being taken to improve the governance environment.¹

Short-run improvements in local public service delivery and accountability are essential to success of the Government of Albania’s decentralization strategy. Local political leaders and administrators face a range of significant challenges. Key among these, in terms of transforming local government into effective and accountable entities, is quickly improving information flow.

A robust information loop is essential to effective government. In simple terms, flow of information from citizens to government shapes delivery of public services and flow of information from government to citizens ensures accountability. Neither the habits nor

¹ This is complemented by a pro-active approach at the national level, coordinated by a central Anti-Corruption Unit.
the infrastructure necessary for easy information flow have been part of the governance landscape in Albania.

Because of the communist legacy and the transition upheavals, public administration has many gaps to fill and deficiencies to make up for at the central level (ministry and state agencies), and at the local level (elected and local civil servants).

- Albania does not have the necessary technical and professional capacities to correctly administer democratic governance and deal with the market economy. This has brought about the existence of a number of negative phenomena such as weak public institution prone to political influence and almost incapable to carry out their functions; institutions suffering from low professionalism caused by frequent staff turnover and from politically motivated recruitment in the service. Moreover, isolated public service insulated from public scrutiny and transparency vis-a-vis the media is doomed to fail in performing its duties to the citizens.

- Albanian public institutions are characterized by lack of office facilities, that are only recently being introduced. There is a lot of amateurism while developing administrative procedures, which reduces substantially the effectiveness and efficiency of public institutions. Dissemination of information from the central and local institutions for the citizens more than helps impedes the development of local democracy in general.

Goals

The public Administration program aims towards:

- Consolidation and modernization of public institutions;
- Increasing institutional and managerial capacities;
- Development of human resources;
- Motivation of qualified young people to work in the public administration;
- Increasing professional capacities of the civil servants;
- Identification and spreading of best practices;
- Exchange of information among public servants, citizens and social and economic agents;
- Governance transparency in relation with the citizens and media;
- Decentralization and strengthening of the local autonomy; as well as participation of citizens in local governance;
Public administration programs that many donors implemented in Albania during the last years has helped for the consolidation of public administration institutions, support of decentralization and strengthening of local autonomy. Among other initiatives, has been selected as a priority local government initiatives for the institutional and managerial establishment and strengthening, training of local elected and their staffs, citizen’s participation on local government, identification and dissemination of the best practices. In this framework have been supported different NGOs initiatives for transparencies increase, improvement of communitarian services and anticorruption initiatives.

At a central level have been supported mainly the initiatives for capacity strengthening in institutions which attract and manage foreign help, introduction of new information technology and establishment of necessary capacity which will help in training civil service employee.

Lots of efforts are concentrated on programs which encourage employment of new specialists in the civil local system and creation of an intellectual elite which will help in public administration consolidation and introduction of new management skills.

**Rights of citizens in the new e-era**
The role of citizens in establishing a sound and sustainable system is so crucial when they work together with elected politicians particularly to build up democracy and a market economy. Using technology as a tool for free expression of the word, creating an acceptable environment for their participation as a primary citizen’s right makes government more accountable and concerned on fulfilling the needs of their people.

On the other side, citizen’s participation it is not just their right to do so. It is at the same time their responsibility. A good understanding of rights and responsibilities is a key ration for a successful effort to build up a democratic system. Democracy differentiates itself from other political systems by its dependence on citizen involvement. In an open and transparent democracy, citizen participation does not stop at the voting booth; it involves itself in day-to-day governance activities as well. Involving citizens in tasks related to community projects increases their interest in and understanding of how local government works.

Democracy requires that citizens be educated about community issues in exchange for their support for elected leaders’ policy and decisions. In addition to the right of citizens to participate in the governance process, there is a critical need for elected officials to provide information about municipal services. An informed citizenry makes and supports sound service decisions.

I will give here one example on how the citizen information and computerization of these services at the government level changed the quality of the service and improved the citizens attitudes.

This is the establishment of an Information and Services Centre at Elbasan Municipality.
3. CASE STUDY: INFORMATION AND SERVICES CENTRE AT ELBASAN MUNICIPALITY

The aim of this project was to assist local capacities in Elbasan municipality to increase the level of information about social services for their citizens, so that they can better serve their clients, while including a growing number of served people. The project was implemented in two phases; in the first phase an Information and Services Centre was established, as well as the training of the staff, responsible for the social assistance information dissemination and administration. Second phase was the automation of information, by creating and using a software, for the offices related to the social service.

3.1. Project background

In 1999, Urban Institute, in a joint team of US and Albanian specialists, and I was part of the team, initiated in Albania the project on Performance Measurement of Public Services Delivery. Under this project, four local governments have worked to establish a system of performance indicators with which they could evaluate progress in improving municipal services. A survey of citizens was carried out in each local government, on a representative sample of 500 inhabitants in each city, to ascertain the views of citizens about the quality of services they are receiving. The survey elicited citizen feedback on the quality of public services, in order to obtain data for a number of indicators. These indicators helped identify particular problem areas of the cities in order that program managers would be able to set targets for improvements over years. These efforts have led the city of Elbasan to rethink its entire social sector and develop the social program according the objectives redefined after the survey and the action plan prepared by the working group.

3.2 Existing situation; main problems

Elbasan municipality is overwhelmed by the big number of families living by social assistance cash benefit, due to lack of employment and migration from other regions of the country. There are 5500 families living by social assistance means, or 22 000 persons, out of 130 000 inhabitants in the city. The responsible department in the municipality is in charge of : (I) informing the clients of the application criterias; (ii) receiving the request and preparation of the applicant’s file to be send to Municipality Council for approval; (iii) verification of the living conditions of the applicant; and (iv) distribution of the cash benefit. Main problems are:

- Lack of Information
  Social assistance cash benefit is given monthly by the central government, based on the information the municipality has and, due to lack of information, the figure are not accurate. Establishment of this Centre empowered local government with more information and, therefore, better possibilities to administer by themselves the social
assistance cash benefit. The decision for the families to be enrolled in the system goes with the municipality Council; they should proceed with thousands of cases every month, which is impossible and they approve sometimes quite formally, without prior verification.

Information seemed to be an important problem (though not as great as in the other local governments surveyed), as 32% of those interviewed felt they did not have enough information about available social services. The major source of information was through the media – probably a result of the concerted media outreach carried out by the city. More than half those interviewed had a family member out of work.

From the survey it was found out that the citizens were not well informed for the criteria and ways to get enrolled into the city’s social assistance program, see chart below, the citizens answers for the question:

Do you feel you have enough information about the availability of social services?

- **Yes** 45%
- **No** 32%
- **Don't know** 23%
• **No computerization**

In order to apply and receive the social assistance benefit, each family has to fill a rather big set of documents, from eight (8) different institutions and each municipality administrator has to check 500 to 600 files every month, between first ten days of each month. Under these conditions, there are cases where families forge documents and sell themselves as poor. The Centre would do the registration of the families in computers and provide with this information all relevant institutions, which would help in verifying the documents.

• **Low quality service**

The situation, from the citizen multi service survey held in Elbasan in spring 2000, showed that Elbasan citizens were unhappy with the service, as this graph shows, for the question asked to them: *How would you rate the dissatisfaction factors for your social assistance service, in a scale from 1-5.*

Results from the citizen survey, where 500 citizens were asked for their overall satisfaction with this service, showed that targeting in Elbasan is weak, with only a third of recipients actually in the lowest income households. The service received by benefit recipients was generally below average throughout the city.
This information led the city officials to decide and allocate some of the necessary funds for the establishment of the Information and Services Center in Elbasan. In cooperation with two Albanian NGOs, Urban Research Institute and National Center for Social Studies, donors were approached to join efforts in this new and very useful activity.

3.4 Project objectives

1. Take and receive information, between Local Government, clients, Central Government Institutions and NGO’s that operates in the sector, electronically.
2. Assist the delivery of social services, so that it gets done timely and accordingly
3. Integrate NGO’s that operate in the sector with Government social assistance programs and citizens needs.
4. Develop transparent, automated process to avoid forgery in the system.
5. Establish an accurate Information Centre for donors/investors willing to run an activity in the City of Elbasan.

3.4 Project Implementation

The Project was implemented by the City of Elbasan, in close cooperation with the Urban Research Institute and National Centre for Social Studies. There are four full time employees in the Centre and all need equipment’s such as computers server printers, desks, chairs, shelves and other as needed. The information produced by the Centre is an integrated version of all data provided by Municipality Departments and other Institutions. A software was produced by specialised agencies that records automatically all the data of people enrolled into the social assistance system. Therefore, and information network need to be installed and updated monthly.

Training done by two NGOs in this municipality first developed (i) computer skills for the permanent staff of the Centre; (ii) analysis of the current legislative framework of the social sector in Albania; and (iii) Local Government role in financing and managing the social assistance service.

3.5 Project Results

- After all the families and individuals in need were registered and saved in Municipality computers and the other units (rayon), the list with these people were published in newspapers, in municipality monthly editions and were transmitted by local TVs many times. Due to lack of information, many families that were not eligible for the cash assistance have been taking it for months; with this published information now they call the hotline numbers of the Centre to denounce the abusive cases. In the first two months, 1400 families were taken out of the social assistance scheme and other families in need entered the scheme.
Apart from that, citizens are much happier because they don’t need to go to eight different institutions to receive the requested papers that prove their poverty line, but Centre staff takes this information electronically from different institutions (not yet 8, but 3 of them so far, because other 2 are not equipped with computers, so in these 2 institutions citizens still have to go and receive signed papers by them as requested).

Responsible persons at the Social Services Department have less work to do, computerization of the system saves a lot of their time and energy, and they devote more time to visiting families and realistically judging for the eligible families.

Publications were an important part of the Project, providing Information on:

- Municipality Profile and capital improvement priorities;
- Public services provided by the Local Government;
- Municipal Council Decisions;
- Information on donor, investors and NGO’s activity that operate in the City of Elbasan.

Citizens can use this very important information to look for other job opportunities, for other NGOs that provide social assistance services, for having a full understanding on Municipal activities and its budget expenditure, and this transparency is slowly leading them to a more supportive attitude towards the City officials.

3.6 Project on the long term

Based on this first experience, the Elbasan City decided to do a second project, this time an Information Centre for all the other public services this municipality offers to the clients.

Although there is legislation in place that allows citizens to participate in city council meetings and public hearing sessions, participation in public meetings (e.g. city council) is extremely limited. The observed lack of participation is partially attributable to an absence of adequate premises and information infrastructure. It is important that decision making becomes more open and transparent. This could be done by establishing the physical infrastructure and programs that could enhance great participation of the public in decision making and by opening up the channels of communication and information to and for the public.

A. The main development objective of this project is to encourage the development of more accountability, transparency, and client responsiveness into public service delivery in Elbasan.

As a result of the decentralization policy that is being finalized in Albania, more and more public services will (eventually) be delivered by the local government. Therefore,
the government intends to expand its good governance efforts to the local level, by improving the transparency and quality of public service delivery at the municipal level.

This project is designed to encourage more transparency and accountability in local service delivery by supporting the municipality to improve information flow by addressing both ‘sides’ of the public information loop. Citizen-to-government information will be improved through development of Performance Measurement Strategy, which is not a new concept for this Municipality, given the previous experience with the spring 2000’ multi sector survey. Government-to-citizen flow will be improved through establishment of this Public Information Centre and the development & implementation of a municipal public information strategy.

B Capacity Building Objective(s):

To improve capacity of local stakeholders to monitor and evaluate delivery of public services, and to effectively participate in delivery decision-making processes;

To improve the capacity of the municipality of Elbasan to communicate and be more accountable to their citizenry on local government service delivery;

(i) The development of a Municipal Information Centre to collect and disseminate municipal information.

Most accountability mechanisms for public agencies focus on inputs (e.g., number of personnel, facilities, and expenditures) and occasionally on broad outcome indicators such as literacy and mortality rates. Beyond this arithmetic, little is known about the QUALITY of services delivered by the public sector. For localities to function effectively (and capture the potential efficiency gains) in an environment of increasing decentralization, it is essential that all stakeholders – from public agencies to individual citizens – at the local level have better information.

The performance Management Strategy will be based on previous experiences that this municipality had, by organizing a client survey, evaluating public service delivery, in April 2000’. The strategy intends to have it prepared and administered by independent non-governmental organizations, would establish a baseline rating of municipal public services and record performance via periodic monitoring of public service delivery. Performance Measurement can both highlight the needs of the users of government services, including the poor, and assist governments to deliver on its renewed commitment to building a democratic, responsive, transparent and accountable State.

With regard to the Information Centre, it is understood that the local public sector must have the practical means for both receiving citizen input and disseminating important information, and must have a strategy and the necessary capacity to implement the strategy.
The project would support the municipality of Elbasan in:

- devising a strategy (internal and external) for handling information essential to improved service delivery (planning through implementation);
- implementing municipal information strategies – including adequate equipping of physical information access sites; and
- using technology to allow ‘real time’ information access for increasing citizen information and participation.

B. Expected Outputs

The proposed project activities would contribute to improvements in delivery of public services at the local level – especially for the poor and vulnerable that are less able to make their voice heard. Intermediate outputs towards this objective are expected to be:

- increased civil society capacity to inform itself for engaging in decision-making for and monitoring of public services at the local level (ensure accountability);
- increased capacity of municipal agencies for receiving and using user feedback – and disseminating relevant information (transparency);
- greater opportunities for citizen access to public decision-making (through the information centre, televising of deliberations); and
- data on actual and perceived performance of the quality of public services

Information Centre:

Activities are under way to finalise this second project, divided as follows

1. design computerization strategy for citizens information center;
2. Equipment for citizens information center: and local government staff (6 work stations, 2 printers, scanner, 1 server, 1 copier, furniture, 6 UPS, software, internet access faxes, cabling, phones, supplies and consumables;
3. small rehabilitation works for the centers’ main hall’
4. Training of municipal staff

First activity has found support at SOROS Foundation, and I avail the occasion to thank them on behalf of the Elbasan Municipality, and we hope that with or without any donor assistance, Elbasan will find ways to make reality this continuing effort of them to establish use of technology as a too for better management and increased citizen participation and support.