

---

## THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY FORUMS IN THE PARTICIPATION OF CITIZENS IN LOCAL LEVEL DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES

---

### Macedonia: Community Forum

---



Community Forum Session

Ibrahim Mehmeti (Key Informant)

Mengistu Arefaine (Case Study)

Bern, August 20, 2012

---

## Table of contents

---

1. Background.....	3
2. Context and Power Analysis.....	3
3. Participation / Accountability Mechanism(s).....	5
4. Analysis and Main Lessons Learnt.....	5
5. Concluding Remarks.....	7
6. Mirroring Case Study Kosovo LOGOS.....	7
7. References.....	9

---

## List of Abbreviations

---

CSOs	Civil Society Organisations
FCU	Forum Coordination Unit
IOs	Implementing Organisations
MA	Municipal Assembly
OG	Operative Groups
PR	Public Relations
RM	Republic of Macedonia
SDC	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
ZELS	The Association of the Unites of the Local Self-government

---

## 1. Background

---

To promote local democracy, give a voice to different ethnic groups and ensure the participation of all citizens, the Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia guarantees the direct and indirect (through representatives) participation of citizens in the decision-making process at the local level on issues that are immediately relevant to their lives. The law on local self-government of the Republic of Macedonia describes the details of local governance and requires the municipalities to adopt mechanism designed to strengthen the inclusion of citizens in the decision-making process at the local level. Accordingly, many municipalities have included in their statutes the role of Community Forums as a form of including citizens' concerns in the decision-making processes at the local level. In addition to other forms of citizen participation, the Community Forum model fulfils a legal provision which requires the municipalities to include citizens in decision making processes. Community Forums were launched in Macedonia in 2006 – first only in a few municipalities and then slowly expanded to more than 50 municipalities (out of 85 municipalities, including the city of Skopje as a special unit of the local self-government).

The role of the Community Forum is to promote local democracy and accountability through enabling active participation of citizens in discussions that are vital to their lives. The forums are opportunities for citizens, civil society organisations (CSOs), representatives of the business sector, local institutions and other relevant bodies to meet, jointly analyse problems and propose solutions. The overall goal of the Community Forum is to enhance participatory community development and good local governance in applying a structured instrument for citizen participation – the Forum Approach. The Forum Approach is a development platform both for the citizens (at the local level) to participate in the decision making process in their municipality and also for the local administration to develop a participatory, accountable, and trusted local governance practices. Local authorities use community forums to discuss important issues with their respective citizens.

According to the 2009-2012 cooperation strategy of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), the Community Forum is part of the sub-domain Decentralisation of the SDC Macedonia. The Community Forum programme is currently in its third phase. The Association of the Units of the Local Self-government of the Republic of Macedonia (ZELS) is the strategic partner. Also, there are five implementing organisations (IOs) and a Forum Coordination Unit (FCU) that is responsible for the coordination of all activities related to the implementation of this programme.

---

## 2. Context and Power Analysis

---

Some important **characteristics of the overall environment** were favourable to the creation of participatory and accountable local governance processes through Community forums, i.e. the legal framework, interested citizens, interest of local authorities, active local CSOs and the support of international donors. The legitimacy of local governments is generally accepted, even though participation of citizens in the decision making-process at the local level is not a very mature practice. Often complaints are made about the non inclusive nature of service provision, especially in the ethnically mixed municipalities and / or different religious communities. Also, there are some cases of complaints due to biases due to party affiliations. It is usually the mayor who takes up grievances, but the authority of the mayor is also limited due to the politicisation of issues in the society.

**All municipalities** are eligible to apply to participate in the Community Forums. However, they have to take an active role in the organisation of the forum process and co-fund the implementation of the selected projects. During the selection process of the municipalities who can participate in the programme, their geographic, ethnic and social aspects are taken into account.

Regarding the **main partners** of the programme, Implementing Organisations (IOs) still are the main resource necessary for the implementation of this phase of the programme. There are five IOs currently working in the programme, i.e. the Foundation Open Society Macedonia (FOSM), Centre

for Institutional Development (CIRa), Macedonian Centre for International Cooperation (MCIC), Association for Democratic Initiatives (ADI) and the Centre for Sustainable Development (ALKA). The IOs are responsible for the management of the forum in coordination with the Forum Coordination Unit. They are also responsible for coaching and training the facilitators, co-facilitators and cooperative groups, monitoring the forum process and reporting to SDC through the Forum Coordination Unit. The facilitator leads the whole forum process, including the coordination of the work of the co-facilitator, the operational group and the working groups. The facilitator organises and facilitates the forum sessions and the work between sessions (supported by the local co-facilitator and in coordination with the operation group). The co-facilitator supports the facilitator and the chair of the operative group and the working groups. Operative groups consist of 6-7 persons and organise forum sessions, the meetings of the working groups and recruit forum participants.

**The Forum Coordination Unit (FCU)** is responsible for coordinating the work of IOs, including the implementation of capacity building components, networking, public relations, and monitoring and reporting (to SDC). **ZELS** is a strategic partner, as it advocates for the inclusion of the Forum model in the statutes of municipalities. Also, in the third phase of the programme, ZELS will be more involved in consultations and in the implementation of certain segments of the programme. ZELS has already started to prepare the process of certification of forum facilitators. This is expected to contribute to the sustainability of this model of citizen participation.

The main expected **outcome** of the community forum programme is the sustainability of the forum model beyond the SDC intervention. The community forum has already been institutionalised by about 46 municipalities as a model of civil participation through its inclusion in their statutes (some municipalities already included forums in their statutes before even being included in the forum process). The institutionalisation process is led by ZELS. A key result of the programme, a number of selected municipalities have gained experience and enhanced their skills and capacities to independently organise community forum processes. Another outcome is that human and institutional capacities for the sustainable provision of forum services have been developed independently from donor support.

**Concerning participation and responsibilities** during the forum sessions, a public invitation is sent to all citizens of the respective municipalities, inviting them to participate in the forums. The agenda is set by the forum facilitator together with the citizens. In project forums, inter-municipal forums and topical forums, final decisions are made by the citizens. In budget forums the decisions need to be adopted by the mayor and the municipal council. The biggest **challenge** in this context is the fact that in most cases local CSOs are directly dependant on the local authorities in terms of space and financing which makes them less efficient. There are ongoing efforts to address this issue by supporting local CSO through another SDC-funded civil society support programme (Civica Mobilitas).

Regarding **power** issues, although municipalities have a certain autonomy, the most powerful decision-makers in general are the political parties who appoint candidates to become mayors. ZELS is an association of mayors and thus it plays a very important role in all decision-making processes. ZELS is a strategic partner of the SDC in the implementation of the programme. Cooperation with the Ministry of Local Self-government also takes place, even though the Ministry is not directly involved in the process. According to statements of mayors themselves, the Community Forum helps them to better understand the needs of the citizens and thus enables them to be better accepted. This acceptance or promotion of trust is a good starting point for **transforming power relations**.

---

### 3. Participation / Accountability Mechanism(s)

---

Community Forums bring together a sizeable number of people, representing different stakeholder groups and participants discuss an issue of common interest. Contrary to other participatory processes, participants in the forum engage in discussions not as individuals, but as members of specific interest groups. Normally, a forum is composed of up to ten working tables, each comprising between five and ten participants. Working tables represent different socio-economic interests and points of view of the community. The forum discussions are structured around these working tables who also define the selection of the projects in the end.

While the **working tables** are constituted by the forum, the following **criteria** is applied:

- women are represented with no less than 40% at the forum tables;
- ethnic communities are situated at the working tables according to their socioeconomic interests, i.e. working tables defined by purely ethnic considerations are avoided;
- in the case of inter-municipal forums "municipal assembly" tables are avoided and participants allocated to different tables according to their interests;
- CSOs are placed based on topics related to their field of activities, i.e. separate CSO tables are avoided.

Normally, forums comprise 8 to 10 working tables. Out of those tables, one is **reserved** for the Municipal Assembly (MA) and another one for the Operative Group. The table of the Operative Group (OG) does not participate in discussions and in project selection as this group is responsible for the logistics and the organisation of the Forum sessions, for the work between sessions and the recruitment of Forum participants. The OG consist of 5 - 7 persons, all key representatives of the working tables. **Temporary working groups** are established to work between the sessions. They prepare information about a topic to be discussed, collect feedback from social or professional groups and develop ideas into projects. However, it is important to note that the process described above may vary, as there are 4 different types of Community Forums (project forums, inter-municipal forums, topical forums, and budget forums), but the essence of the process remains the same.

Throughout the phases of the programme, the **participation of women and ethnic groups** was emphasised. For this reason, criteria have been set at the programme levels requiring minimum 40% women participation at the forum sessions as well as proportional representation of ethnic communities reflecting the diverse structure of the municipality. This strategy of including women and marginalised groups is enhanced with trainings for the forum facilitators and outreach activities of the Operative Groups.

---

### 4. Analysis and Main Lessons Learnt

---

Through transparent and public processes, the community forums conduct discussions for all citizens at the municipal level. Also, an independent, external and neutral facilitator leads the discussion, i.e. the facilitator is from a different municipality and consequently s/he is not affected by the decisions of the citizens of a given municipality. Structured in groups (working tables) according to their interests, the participants discuss pre-defined issues and propose solutions or recommendations to the municipal administration, council of the municipality and other institutions.

The **Community Forums are used** to define priorities within the envisaged documents of the municipality, future priorities of the municipality, and regarding the planning and preparing of the municipal budget. Also, Community Forums can also be useful means to resolve issues that are important and affect different groups.

**The selection of forum topics** is a key success factor of the forum process. The forum topics and types are selected based on the perceived need of the respective municipality. Also, the topics of discussion must fall within the municipality's competence as otherwise there would be a high danger that proposed solutions and recommendations could not be implemented. Consequently, the types of topics of the community forum should:

- be important for the whole community (also considering ethnic and gender composition);
- address problems that can be resolved at the municipal level; and
- be selected through a participatory process and supported by a broad basis

Experience has shown that a good forum topic has already been discussed in the media, cafés and at homes before it is brought to community forum discussions.

The **community forum** process supports **civil society organisations** as it gives them a space to advocate for their topics of interest. Also, Civica Mobilitas (Civil Society Support Facility) is a complementary programme to the Community Forums. It supports CSOs covering topics that are in the competence of the local authorities through institutional (longer term) and project grants (shorter term) and who try to influence policies. For example, thanks to the initiative of one Civica Mobilitas beneficiary, the European Union is supporting a new priority area for Macedonia: "Improvement of the transparency of the public procurement" (precondition for EU accession). The direct outcome of this initiative was that the Government of Macedonia amended the Law on public procurement. Local CSOs are key to ensuring the sustainability of the Community Forums at local level, as they are the most appropriate entity – besides the municipality – to initiate forums beyond the SDC interventions. At the same time, local CSOs have good knowledge of the municipalities in which they work and they are main source for recruitment of forum facilitators and co-facilitators.

Experience with implementing Community Forums has led to the identification of some key **lessons learnt**. First, at the beginning, citizens had a less holistic understanding of forums and participated merely to get an opportunity to win a project. Thanks to outreach efforts, the citizens now understand the process better and support it. Second, the support of municipalities is essential to the successful implementation of forums. Particularly, the inclusion of mayors promotes the initiative by securing large number of attendees and the interest of the media. The support of a committed mayor is important to motivate the active participation of the municipal administration, which in turn is very important for the sustainability and good quality of the forum process. Third, in order to effectively institutionalise forum initiatives in the municipal statutes, the forum processes should be made shorter and less costly. Fourth, local CSOs, the local co-facilitator and motivated Operative Group are very important elements for the sustainability of the Community Forums. Fifth, to deal with the citizens' doubts on the process it is crucial to have direct communication and informal meetings with them, especially to clarify the voting procedures. Sometimes citizens abandoned the forum because they were disappointed by the selected topic of the forum or were sceptical about the overall outcome of the process. Therefore, continuous communication and outreach efforts are very important part of the overall forum process. Finally, regarding project implementation, the tendering process is arduous with lots of pressure from different interested parties and should be made even more transparent, e.g. by including external observers. Also, the timeframe for the implementation of the projects should be revised in order to take into account different external factors, such as the weather conditions especially for infrastructural projects.

Considering that Macedonia is a highly sensitive society with considerable risks for inter-ethnic tensions, the Community Forums serves as a place for interaction between the ethnic and religious communities and thus contributes to decreasing tensions. The main **successes** of the project were:

- getting the support by the ZELS governing structures in general and the Ministry of Local Self-government to the forum process;
- institutionalising the forums through the inclusion of the forum model in the statutes of majority of the municipalities;
- achieving the certification of facilitators which contributes to the sustainability of the forums

---

Some **weaknesses** and **potential risks** of the project are:

- the forum process is rather long, i.e. it could be shortened;
- the implementation of the selected projects should be more in the hands of the municipalities with a smaller involvement of the implementing organisations in monitoring the process;
- the lack of independence of the local CSOs may affect the quality and the sustainability of the forum process;
- the quality of the forum process may be jeopardised once the process is solely in the hands of the municipalities and conducted by a forum coordinator, without coordination by the implementing organisations;
- there is a risk that once the process is in the hands of the local authorities, gender inclusion and especially proportional participation of minority communities and vulnerable groups is “sacrificed” for the sake of “cost effectiveness”

---

## 5. Concluding Remarks

---

The community forums have the advantage of raising the interests and awareness of the citizens at the local level on the importance of participating in decision-making on activities that directly affect their lives. The community forums consider the participation of women as an important issue to be addressed and also ensure the involvement of different ethnic groups. This reduces the existing ethnic biases and tensions. As they are effective instruments for enhancing citizens’ participation at the local level, Community Forums promote double advantages: while enabling citizens at the local level to be part of the decision making processes, the forums also give the local authorities a better understanding of the concerns of the citizens and the opportunity to respond accordingly and improve their perceived legitimacy. To maintain these achievements enough local human and financial capacities are necessary to effectively and successfully organise community forums.

The community forums were an opportune and high quality instrument that allowed municipalities to implement constitutional and legal requirements on citizen participation. However, successful implementation with regards to pro-poor participation and decentralisation still relies very much on the existence of CSO that are able to represent or mobilise the poorer sectors of society. Also, sustaining this kind of civil society without donor support might be a challenge. Possible impacts of the community forums on voters’ choice and programmatic proposals of local candidates would be a very interesting topic for further research.

---

## 6. Mirroring Case Study Kosovo LOGOS

---

An SDC funded governance project in Kosovo was asked to mirror the Macedonia case study, i.e. complement it with other lessons learnt.

### **LOGOS: Swiss Kosovo Local Governance and Decentralisation Support**

**- by Pascal Fendrich**

The Swiss-Kosovo Local Governance and Decentralisation Support (LOGOS) is a local governance project financed by SDC and implemented by HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation. In phase II LOGOS supports nine municipalities in South-Eastern Kosovo in various fields, e.g. municipal development planning, financial and fiscal management, administrative services and improved public services provisions. Good governance, the inclusion of the sub-municipal level and gender are considered transversal themes.

In order to improve the quality of the public meetings organised in its partner municipalities and inspired by the successful application of the Community Forums in Macedonia, LOGOS decided to borrow key elements of this methodology. LOGOS replicated a simplified version of the Forums and reproduced the key mechanisms and implementing structures (operative group, moderator, etc.) to improve participation in public meetings and structure discussions. Forums have been held in the

---

fields of budget planning and execution, strategic planning and the development of waste management plans<sup>1</sup>.

A key feature of the forum process applied in Kosovo is that it relies on the mobilisation of citizens. As in Macedonia, LOGOS supports the creation of municipal operative groups (OG) composed of 3 to 5 persons representing either the municipality, civil society or the business community. The co-moderator is a member of the OG and coordinates its work. The role of the OG is to support partner municipalities in preparing the public meetings and in inviting citizens. It ensures that all communities and categories of the population are informed about and included in the meeting. Finally, the operative group ensures that the meeting goes smoothly. It is also responsible for the minutes and for ensuring that the conclusions reached are recorded and will be followed-up on at the next meeting. LOGOS also recruits an external facilitator to structure and facilitate discussions. This professional facilitator is expected to train the co-facilitator who normally comes from the local civil society and is built up to gradually take on the responsibilities of the facilitator and assume leadership in the facilitation of the meetings.

The application of these simple mechanisms has produced very positive results. First, it has led to a significant increase in participation. Meetings supported through this methodology made it possible to gather three to four times as many citizens as in previous meetings. Meetings are also better structured and lead to more active discussions. This in turn has contributed to changing perceptions of both citizens and municipal officials on the usefulness of public meetings. Due to the positive feedback of citizens, there is a greater interest in public consultations as they are increasingly perceived as a real opportunity to voice concerns and influence municipal policies. Similarly, the opinion of municipal officials has also changed. Municipal officials were initially suspicious when they were invited to apply this methodology. Many also believed that public meetings were a formal compulsory procedure. In the course of time they are progressively recognising the value of these types of events and even consider them as useful moments to test their plans and decide on municipal priorities.

Overall, the introduction of the Forum methodology has proved very useful for improving participation in policy-making and supporting transparency and accountability mechanisms. Thanks to its simple mechanisms, the application of the Forum methodology has given greater substance to public meetings and created proper opportunities for exchanges and debates. An additional strength of the methodology is that it can be replicated and adapted to other contexts. Despite these strengths, the sustainability of the procedures introduced by the Forum approach remains a challenge. On the one hand, the project ensures that appropriate competences are developed<sup>2</sup> and responsibilities localised. It further hopes that the repetition of successful meetings will promote the ownership of municipal officials and the demand of citizens for these kinds of consultations. LOGOS could go a step further and (like in Macedonia) support municipalities in institutionalising Community Forums and include the methodology in municipal statutes. Currently, LOGOS covers all the costs of the organisation of these meetings (financial compensation of the OG/Moderator, printing of documents, lunches/coffees, logistics, etc.). LOGOS also plays a central role in ensuring the neutrality of the OG / facilitator. In this respect feedback received from participants also shows that the participation of foreign organisations and donors in the organisation of public meetings gives greater credibility to the meetings and helps mobilise participants. These considerations will need to be integrated in future project activities, e.g. efforts to increase municipal leadership in the organisation of such fora and to reduce the project's visual presence at these events.

---

<sup>1</sup> These public consultations resemble the Topical Forums described in the Macedonian case.

<sup>2</sup> Through practice and the development of manuals for instance.



---

## **7. References**

---

Forum process Publications (forum programme data, initiator's guide, coordinator's guide, and facilitator's guides) Swiss Agency for development and Cooperation-SDC (Bern, 2007).

End of Phase Report – Community Forums Programme Up-scaling, 28. February 2011

Law on Local Self-government of the Republic of Macedonia (Official Gazette of RM, No. 5/29 January 2002.

Manual, Community Forum in 11 Steps, Kristina Hadzi, et al, Association of the Units of Local Self-government of the Republic of Macedonia-ZELS, (Skopje, 2010).

The Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia