**TRANSPARENCY AND PUBLIC SERVICES IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT. CASE STUDY MUNICIPALITY OF KORCA, ALBANIA.**

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***Abstract***

*Transparency level relates to the development level and the cultural emancipation of democratic societies. It really expresses the responsibility of authorities in drafting and implementing policies in every field. The demand to increase the level of transparency determines the work of the institutions that draft policies and cause the decreasing of corruption, a phenomenon that affects the development of the country and the image of Albania in the eyes of the institutions of international community.*

*Information exchange between local government and community, especially the groups of interest, in a clear, correct and accurate way builds the trust of people in their state. Transparency helps the public to understand how the municipality works, creating the opportunity to assess the performance of the local government. It is necessary that the municipality informs and reports periodically on the work done, the fiscal policy plans, and the implementation of projects. We should understand that transparency is also an important political process and the degree of its implementation toward the community must not be left in the hands of the municipality only.*

*The paper will look at the purported relationship between public perception and service delivery in the local government sphere. What the presentation will attempt to address the assumed relationship between public participation and consultation, on the one hand, and improved service delivery, on the other hand. Focus of this paper, are the public institutions of the Municipality of Korca, Albania as a case study. Evaluation of the citizens on the quality of delivery services is achieved by survey, through citizen reporting forms. Through their collection of information is facilitated by the citizens on access, use and level of satisfaction regarding the provision of public services. These reporting forms serve as a strong tool of communication between citizens and policy makers with the best goal of improving services and the potential to increase accountability on their part.*

***Key words:*** *transparency; local government; citizens’ report cards; public services;**perception.*

1. **Introduction**

Transparency helps the public to understand how the municipality works, creating the opportunity to assess the performance of the local government. It is necessary that the municipality informs and reports periodically on the work done, the fiscal policy plans, and the implementation of projects. Transparency is also an important political process and the degree of its implementation toward the community must not be left in the hands of the municipality only. Albanian transition continues to be one of the challenges that the Albanian society continues to face in its social and economical development. One of the phenomena quickly developed during this transition period was corruption, which goes to the highest levels of public administration. The managing of public administration, economy and culture, require transparency in decision-making and, above all, the involvement of interest groups and citizens in this process.

In order to minimize corruption, it is important to increase administration's accountability toward law implementation. The public opinion has a great interest in transparency. The public needs to get information frequently about the incomes that are generated out of the payments of taxes and tariffs. Such an open communication with the community enables the state to change these incomes into useful investments serving the developmental needs of national economy and culture. Albania has approved the law about the right to information on official documents. This law guarantees the right of every individual to get informed about the official documents that are administered by public authorities. However, this issue does not have a practical implementation, or it is rarely implemented in the relationship of the citizen to the state. In our point of view, there are two reasons for this: citizens are not aware of their right to information. They do not understand that according to this law the public administration is required to give complete information on its documents.  It’s very important that local governments share more data with their citizens, including strategic reports. In this article, we’ve dissected why sharing these reports is important, what they should include, and how to make them readily available.

1. **The importance of transparency in the relationship between local government and community.**

Transparency is not a simple concept to define easily. According to an article in [Journal of Management Policy and Practice](http://m.www.na-businesspress.com/JMPP/SauserWI_Web16_1_.pdf), “Transparency is a fundamental component of democratic government and addresses the rights of citizens to know about activities of their government. Too much secrecy in government often leads to an abuse of power and a lack of accountability.” Many authors use different definitions for transparency, though in the relevant literature we can distinguish one of them as among the most comprehensive (Copits and Craig, 1998). “Openness toward the public at large about government structure and functions, fiscal policy intentions, public sectors accounts, and projections.”

We can distinguish three aspects of transparency*:* accuracy of information, clarity of information, common understanding of the information by both public and municipality.

Accuracy of information implies that the information given to the public by the municipality is the same as the information circulating within the municipality, without intentional changes. This aspect is very important in determining transparency.(Winker, Gerats). Clarity of information is especially important when it is presented to different audiences, citizens, and business communities. This requires a certain level of education by the public, which might derive from their interests or from the activity of municipality aiming to foster education in this field. Communicating directly with citizens from different social categories, we draw as a conclusion that the majority of the community is not informed about its rights it is entitled to in accordance with the laws of the country (including the right to information itself). Transparency level relates to the development level and the cultural emancipation of democratic societies. It really expresses the responsibility of authorities in drafting and implementing policies in every field. The demand to increase the level of transparency determines the work of the institutions that draft policies and cause the decreasing of corruption, a phenomenon that affects the development of the country and the image of Albania in the eyes of the institutions of international community. The management of central and fiscal budget makes the community aware regarding the development of the country, and at the same time increases the accountability of the public administration in carrying out tasks and duties as required by the law. Exchange of information between local government and community, especially the groups of interest, in a clear, correct and accurate way builds the trust of people in public administration.

In this way, intellectuals and other people become actors and generate ideas and projects for the development of the society. If local government, in our case Korca Municipality, organizes open meetings with the business community, intellectuals, and professors of the university during the budget preparation phase, it should be able to recognize different problems, which are not dealt with in its work. The Constitution of the Republic of Albania, the Law for the Right of Information on official documents, and the Administrative Procedures Code determine accurate procedures to be followed, which require the local government to inform the community about the developmental policies it has followed, the projects it has implemented, and especially about the administration of funds and incomes. The aim of the Information Officeisto facilitate the information flow, the public administration is compelled by law to create a special institution named “Public relationship sector and Information”

The objectives are:

-Implementation of transparency principle in the field of administrative activity, the respect for the right to access official documents, and public information.

-Systematic assessment of the public needs and of services' providing, as well as the cooperation to find ways and possibilities to improve the quality in this field.

-Increase of transparency level and fostering communication with the public, by making it easy and simple, and bringing citizens closer to the power.

1. **Methodology of study.**

Citizens' assessment of the quality of service delivery was conducted through surveillance through forms of citizen reporting. Through the questionnaire we collected information on the transparency of local institutions in delivering of public services. The scope of the survey is to provide feedback to the management level on the citizens satisfaction towards the quality and transparency of their services as well as contribute towards improving the service delivery process and making the system more transparent and according to the contemporary standards.as well as the specific objectives:

* To increase the access of local stakeholders in monitoring the delivery of public services, and to effectively participate in the decision-making processes.
* To enhance the municipalities’ capacities to communicate and be more accountable on local government service delivery
* To develop mechanisms that facilitate improvement of the flow of information at the local level related to IPRO services.

The questionnaire design is based on the main principles of the Client Satisfaction Chart that constitute the principles included in the Citizens Report Cards.

The methodology is based on the tabulated sample of the number of respondents in 200 persons respecting the following ratios: 50% to 50% female / male ratio, division into 4 zones or administrative regions by interviewing 50 persons for each division, division by age ( 20 interviews with 25-40 year olds, 20 interviews with 40-60 year olds, 10 interviews with 60-70 year olds.), According to the level of education 30 interviews with persons with higher education and 20 persons with non-higher education, head of household / no head of household in the ratio of 30 to 20 persons and businesses including 10 interviews with small businesses and 40 with other persons

Issues that were evaluated:

* Information and Transparency
* Services quality standards
* Public Complaints / Appeals
* Equality / Diversity / Physical Access
* Consultation and Evaluation
* Service in IPRO

1. **Analysis of observation results**

**4.1 Information and Transparency**

If you feel you have insufficient information what do you think about the reason?

Fig. Nr. 1

The reference to the graph clearly shows the need of citizens to improve the information process regarding public services. Information needs are listed: how to provide information; specific data on the services provided; to know with legal and sub-legal acts.

Lack of information mainly occurs due to non-disclosure of requested information (58%) and then comes the negligence of citizens (9%)

The need for an information center or orientation for information seekers is clearly evident. It is also noted that a significant part of the interviewers felt the improvement of the procedures. Asked about the simplest ways to get information about 59% of respondents prefer the Information Office and less local media or leaflets.

* 1. **Quality service standards**

Fig Nr. 2

Asked about the details of the nature and quality of the expected municipal services only 30% of the respondents are aware of their parameters. Taxes and fees paid are not justified by the quality of services provided (80%).

Respondents will react differently if they find non-performance of services in the parameters. 46% will complain in writing, 29% will make it public, 25% will not react. Application formats should be improved with elements of the Code of Administrative Procedure.

**4.3 Complaints and Appeals**

Complaining against a low quality service is considered important which is expressed in about 80% of respondents but there is a need for assistance in preparing the complaint which results in 79%. Formally complaining helps the whole community. 53% do not know who to turn to for complaint. 84% confirm the need for assistance in compiling the application. The results of the survey highlighted the urgent need to improve the procedures of various requests and complaints of citizens. Likewise, the process of appealing against a decision taken is little known by citizens. 56% declare that they do not have the opportunity to be informed in a timely manner about the decisions taken. Most do not know the procedures, forms and who to turn to for an appeal. 96% of respondents commented on the existence of a structure to provide up-to-date information on decisions taken.

**4.4 Equality / Diversity and Physical Access**

Asked about the unequal treatment of citizens by identifying relatives or acquaintances of employees of the Municipality, it is confirmed by 63% of respondents that unequal treatment is evident. 36% declare that there are no special procedures for citizens with disabilities to help them be treated equally with others. Only 8% of respondents think that reception offices have the opportunity to perform actions for people with disabilities. 20% think that there are persons in the administration who have the duty to treat these persons. Creating facilities for access to public institutions for people with disabilities is a problem almost all over the country. We mention that this problem has not yet been taken seriously by planning in the respective budgets.

**4.5 Consultation and Evaluation**

Asked about the contribution of citizens in relation to the evaluation or giving opinions on the level of services provided by the municipality, about 80% of the interviewers think that they would willingly contribute

The reasons that the majority do not participate in open discussions or consultations on service issues are trust in local elected officials and the administration 46%, non-disclosure 16% and indifference 38%.

Alternatives that increase civil participation are: open periodic meetings defined by topic, date and time since the beginning of the year 52%, use of local media 27%, organization of consultative civil boards with the participation of experts in relevant fields 21%.

**4.6 Analysis of the service in the Real Estate Registration Offices (IPRO)**

Citizens' satisfaction with the services received in this office leaves much to be desired. About 30% of respondents have gone to IPRO more than twice. This indicates that the procedures are not clear by the institution or there are delays in the process for subjective reasons (eg quality, corruption, confusion regarding documents, etc.)

Regarding the contact with the host administration, about 33% said that they were treated correctly, while the rest said that they behaved incorrectly or received unsolicited information. The nature of the difficulties or obstacles that citizens face in obtaining the requested service is classified: Delay in procedures; lack of information; lack of professionalism lack of correctness; procrastination of issues; insufficient service hours and counters; lack of staff; documentation not available. As for the suggestions given by citizens regarding the services that need to be improved are given in the graph below. The timing of the response is the most important aspect.32% of respondents agree with it.

Fig Nr 3

1. **Conclusions**

The results of the survey show the desire of citizens to have more information about the activity of local government, mainly in the provision of public services based on standards. There is still a lack of effective communication between them and public administrators.

The Information Office is seen as a key point of contact of citizens with local employees. There is an appreciation for the work of this office but transparency should be valued more mainly in the delivery of public services and in accordance with local taxes and fees paid.

The local government have not a study on which to build a strategy and set concrete objectives to carry out the tasks related to transparency and legal obligations arising from it towards the citizens. The results show that although the local government has taken initiatives for public consultation on various problems related to decision-making, the involvement of citizens in this process is still low. So no effective means have been found for involvement and to increase public confidence in local elected officials. Citizens' perception of the level of transparency in the use of local revenues is an important tool in improving the living standards of citizens.

1. **Recommendation**

The case study should be seen as a theoretical and practical contribution to the study of transparency, information provision and other related issues. The collected data, conclusions and recommendations should be present in the relevant institutions and affect their daily activity.

The local government should use all opportunities to build and consolidate a complete infrastructure of the Public Relations and Information Sector through which it will fulfill its legal obligations in the field of transparency and information. Consultative meetings with representatives of stakeholders in the draft budget preparation phase or on other issues should be organized more often by choosing the most effective forms of communication. The means of communication between local government and the public should be carefully chosen by the administration. A clear description of projects, objectives and use of municipal funds should be presented to the public on an ongoing basis. This reduces the possibility of mismanaging them.

Putting in full efficiency the reception and information facilities of the public, the preparation of unified forms regarding the applications of the citizens in the evaluated institutions will lead to the increase of the quality of communication. Creating conditions for the implementation of the law on public information on official documents, as well as the publication of mandatory information in implementation of the Code of Administrative Procedure in appropriate forms.

Facilitate the procedures for appealing services and appealing decisions, creating opportunities for physical access of persons with disabilities through special policies and their budget planning. Improving the internal regulation in terms of public relations, as well as improving the regulation on the way of moving documentation within the institution. Communicating with citizens and getting their opinion improves the efficiency of the municipality, increases the level of transparency, increases civil awareness and improves the performance of local government. For this, the best specialists should be selected who will be a source of information on socio-economic development.

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