

DEMOS

Decentralisation
and Municipal Support



INCENTIVISING PARTICIPATION AND RESPONSIVENESS WITHIN KOSOVO'S LOCAL GOVERNANCE SYSTEM

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SECTION 1:

INTRODUCTION

How can local government responsiveness to citizen needs and demands around public services be incentivised, and thereby improved, in Kosovo? What are the factors that may incentivise both elected and non-elected officials to strengthen processes of transparency, accountability and responsiveness at the local level? This is the question that leads our study into understanding state-citizen dynamics at the local level. The study takes a systemic, political economy approach to focus on the relationships and linkages that shape individual and organisational incentives within local governments. It therefore looks at public officials as the main group (focusing on elected mayors and councillors, nominated directors, and appointed civil servants) but also focuses on the rules and regulations that shape the culture of local government as an organisation. From this perspective, it also considers structures that might motivate citizens to engage with local government, such as increased transparency, or more accessible information.

The literature on these relationships helps establish the fact that the strengthening of local democracy, ensuring strong citizen rights, and the creation of political space at the local level are key to achieving better outcomes at the local level. Citizen participation is important, but participatory mechanisms on their own, in the absence of resources, cannot achieve much. And, while a lack of resources can constrain the ability of local governments to be responsive to citizen needs, an increase in resources to low performance areas (both central transfers and salaries) may not achieve the desired outcomes either. Increased resources need to be combined with measures to strength the capacity of local institutions and politics. In other words, efforts to improve responsiveness must focus on building local capacity and strengthening local democracy through more effective state-citizen engagement. What stands out in the literature is (a) the need to match local capacity with levels of adequate finance; (b) the role of local political configurations and political competition; and (c) the importance of local collective action and strong linkages between local public officials and the citizenry.

For this study, we do not propose to deal with the quite obvious issue of ensuring more resources at the local level, and to ensure that this matches local capacity for spending these resources effectively. We acknowledge that there are issues around resource and staff shortages and that these impact the effectiveness of local governance, especially in smaller municipalities. Our respondents regularly pointed out the need for more and better trained staff, even in the capital city — “the entire directorate has only one electrical engineer, and now imagine how much work must be done only in public lighting. Or the emergency sector has no one with relevant qualification... It doesn’t mean that they don’t do the job but when you have the right person things are done even better”.¹ Or that while officials were trying to be more re-

1 Interview in the directorate of public services in the capital city. January 2021.

sponsive, “the problem is that the budget is not high enough to meet the needs and demands of citizens”.² In small municipalities, up to 86 percent of the budget may be earmarked for salaries and recurring costs, leaving little for new expenditures that arise from citizen demands.

However, these issues of resources and staffing do not form the core of our puzzle. We focus instead on incentives that are conditioned by politics and by the engagement between local officials and citizens at the local level. This is an important question in the case of Kosovo in particular, where it seems the local governance system is procedurally sound and functional. The process of democratic consolidation and decentralization in post-war Kosovo has improved municipalities’ governance capacity, especially in terms of greater transparency and accountability, and led to better public services delivery and the provision of essential infrastructure. Forums for citizen participation are well provided; there are stipulated regulations around the frequency of public forums, and around connections between citizen participation and budgetary priorities (as one mayor put it, “requests are submitted or raised at public budget hearings, because we do not add projects that have not come out of the budget hearings, besides those that are foreseen within the development plan”);³ and relationships between the legislative and executive branches of local government are also well defined. Budgetary discussions start each year with public hearings in July, and priority points from these proceed for discussion by budget committees within municipal assemblies (the legislature) in the following months, before moving to the executive to be included in the development budgets, which are checked against plans prioritised and approved by the assemblies.⁴ This phased process is well conceptualised.

Yet, there seem to be a set of informal institutions and norms that work within the system to create incentive structures that limit local government’s ability to work well with citizens. In this paper, we look at the impact of such incentives in three areas: (a) factors that limit citizen participation; (b) factors that impact the nature and extent of communication between citizens and local authorities; and (c) factors that determine the responsiveness of local officials to citizens. The paper draws on interviews with local government officials to explore these three areas. We start by explaining our methods and how the interviews were conducted. We then look at each of the three sets of factors listed above. At the end, we draw on the literature and our interviews to consider how the responsiveness of local governments may be incentivised and provide the broad contours of a proposed experiment to test this.

2 Interview with the director of cadastre in a large municipality. January 2021.

3 Interview with a mayor in a large municipality. January 2021.

4 Information from interview with a mayor in a large municipality. January 2021.

SECTION 2:

METHODS

The study started with a literature review that helped highlight the concepts and relationships of interest that we wanted to explore and analyse. We used these concepts to develop question guides for semi-structured interviews with local government officials, as a preliminary step in an effort to design an experimental study on how to strengthen state-citizen linkages at the local level and incentivise stronger local government performance. Our main aim in doing these interviews was to understand the process of state-citizen engagement at the local level, focused on processes of citizen participation and the ways in which state responsiveness to such participation may be strengthened.

We conducted 48 interviews in January and February 2021 in 12 municipalities with elected, nominated, and non-elected senior local government officials. The municipalities were randomly selected from the 38 municipalities of Kosovo. They represent a mix of sizes and party alignments. In terms of size, they include small, medium and large administrative units: the large municipalities include Pristina, Prizren, Peja; the medium-sized ones include Dragash, Drenas, Lipjan, Vushtrri and Skenderaj; and the smaller ones included were Hani i Elezit, Strpce, Partesh and Viti.

In terms of political alignment, 4 are governed by the ruling LDK party (Peja, Lipjan, Vushtrri and Viti), 2 municipalities are governed by the opposition party PDK (Dragash and Drenas) and 1 by the opposition party LVV (Prizren), 2 are led by the Serb minority party LS which is in central government due to a power-sharing principle (Partesh and Strpce), 1 municipality is governed by the non-parliamentary party PSD, a breakaway faction of the LVV (the capital city of Pristina), and 2 municipalities are led by independent mayors (Hani i Elezit and Skenderaj).

Interview process

Interview participants were informed in advance by email about the interview purpose, procedure, and agenda. The senior officials we interviewed included 10 mayors and 2 deputy mayors; 10 speakers of municipal assemblies; 20 directors of local departments, and 6 other local officials. The purpose of the interview was explained to each respondent at the start, and they were asked for their consent both for the interview and for it to be recorded. The interviews were guided by the questionnaire we had developed but followed a conversational style in which additional questions and clarifications were raised during the interviews. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and then translated into English. The transcripts were then coded, analysed and interpreted in line with research objectives of the study.

It may be pertinent to mention that this was an election year, with parliamentary elections held on 14 February 2021 and local elections coming up in October 2021. It is possible that this may have affected the interview answers.

SECTION 3:

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION PROCESSES

Fox (2015: 346) argues that a multifaceted “strategic” approach to enhancing accountability and responsiveness that creates “enabling environments for collective action combined with bolstered state capacity to respond to citizen voice are more promising”⁵. In line with this, we approach the responsiveness of local government officials as deeply connected to the strengthening of citizen participation and forums for collective action. Some of the literature suggests that public officials at the local level are motivated to improve their performance based on monetary and non-monetary cues they get from the centre, but a body of literature asserts that such motivations may also draw on their need to respond to a local, actively engaged citizenry that is vocal in making demands. Migchelbrink and Van de Walle (2020) used a survey-based vignette experiment to examine this in the context of local government in Belgium and found that when turnout and participants’ representativeness [of the larger population] increases, it has “a positive and significant effect on public officials’ attitudes toward public participation” and their willingness to use citizens’ inputs in making policy (p. 271)⁶.

This may be a particularly strong incentive for elected officials, given their dependence on local votes for re-election. However, Cleary (2007)⁷ contrasts incentives for local politicians to respond to citizens in Mexico that arise from political motivations (such as re-election) with those that arise from local participatory linkages that allow local citizen to voice their demands and preferences through various types of local political action. They found that it is participatory linkages that actually improve municipal performance, rather than political motivations. This suggests that in a comparison between different types of participation, non-electoral linkages that create greater engagement between citizens and local politicians incentivise behaviour more than the threat of electoral sanctions.

There are other studies that record the impact of civil society on the behaviour of local public officials. In a recent study of the relationship between local state capacity and human development across municipal governments in Brazil, Coelho et al. (2020)⁸ find that there is indeed a strong link between these, and that this is based on cooperation and coordination between local state and non-state actors. In other words, municipalities with a higher number

5 Fox, J. (2015) Social Accountability: What Does the Evidence Really Say? *World Development*, 72: 346-61.

6 Migchelbrink, K. & Van de Walle, S. (2020b) When Will Public Officials Listen? A Vignette Experiment on the Effects of Input Legitimacy on Public Officials’ Willingness to Use Public Participation. *Public Administration Review*. [Online] 80 (2), 271–280.

7 Cleary, M. R. (2007) Electoral Competition, Participation, and Government Responsiveness in Mexico. *American Journal of Political Science*. 51 (2), 283–299.

8 Coelho, R. et al (2020) Capacidades Estatais Municipais e Desenvolvimento Humano Local Brasileiro. *Revista do Serviço Público*. 71(4).

of participatory councils, and more collaboration with local networks of civil society organisations have higher human development index scores, compared to those that rely solely on bureaucratic hierarchies and management structures. Andersson and van Laerhoven's (2007) study of participatory structures also suggests that "demands from CBOs (Community Based Organisations) have a positive and statistically significant effect on all three measures (co-provision, coproduction, and field presence) of participatory governance" (pp. 1100)⁹. Their conclusions on this front are compelling — they suggest that the differences they see across Peru, Brazil, Chile, and Mexico in levels of participatory municipal governance are not connected to the design of institutions and the "national decentralization policy" in any country. Instead, "regardless of the local governments' official role and mandates, participatory municipal governance is more likely to occur when CBOs frequently demand action from their elected municipal officials" (p. 1107).

Citizen participation processes are, therefore, a central focus of our study, and are based on the concern that the types of participatory linkages described above — an actively engaged citizenry and robust linkages with local organisations — may be weak or altogether lacking in Kosovo's municipalities. Such a lack of engagement was confirmed by our interviews with local government officials who pointed out that though citizens had demands — most often connected to local infrastructure; parents bringing up school issues; farmers asking for subsidies; and sports or culture communities looking for sponsorship or financial aid — there was a sense of broad disinterest amongst citizens of their municipalities.

Levels of citizen participation

A large number of municipal mayors that we spoke with pointed out that citizen participation in public forums was low and has been decreasing. They offered different reasons for it. A minority believe that citizen participation seems like it is decreasing because the municipality has managed to deliver on all the issues that they have brought up in the past — when there were more issues, there was more participation, and now that these demands have been met and there are fewer issues, there is also less participation. For example, the deputy mayor of a small municipality explained falling interest by saying, "we have managed to alleviate or even solve the main problems in the municipality". His director of public services added, "citizen participation has declined despite the fact that we publish notices on the municipal website and through other mediums. But we have completed 90 percent of works related to permanent requests, so the interest is obviously lower now". The mayor of a large municipality felt similarly that, "when we fulfil the requests they had, they do not come to the next public hearing".

However, for most of the rest of the public officials we spoke to, it is this response from the mayor of a small municipality that sums up well a more prevalent viewpoint: "although we put in an effort to inform them [citizens] in time on the website and the announcement boards, the participation is not that high, even though we hold them in different localities. Most prefer to come individually to the municipality if they have any requests". Mayors repeatedly said that they were not satisfied with the number of citizens participating in public hearings that they regularly set up, and some said that they put in special effort such as personally calling people on the phone "to invite them to participate. Out of 200 people contacted, only about 20 came to the public discussion".¹⁰ A number of others pointed out that they convene public

9 Andersson, K. & van Laerhoven, F. (2007) From Local Strongman to Facilitator: Institutional Incentives for Participatory Municipal Governance in Latin America. *Comparative Political Studies*. [Online] 40 (9), 1085–1111.

10 Interview with the mayor of a medium-sized municipality. January 2021.

hearings at the level of neighbourhoods and villages to make it easier for citizens to attend, but “it remains a challenge and we must continue to convince the citizens that the hearings are in their best interest and that participation helps us all”.

Participation is limited in terms of numbers but also in substance — even in the capital, officials pointed out that even when a public hearing has lots of people in attendance, “only two or three of them take the floor”. In a small municipality the mayor thought limited participation is because people recognise that the municipality does not have the resources to deal with requests, so that there was no point in participating. In a medium-sized municipality, the issue seemed to be the opposite — “people think that, whether I participate or not, they will build the road or the sewerage anyway”. A local budget officer of a mid-sized municipality brought it together well when she said, “There are two categories in this regard, those who are not interested because they think that it is the municipality’s job to pave the roads, and the others who think that once the road is paved there is no need to participate anymore”.

Together with a preference for face-to-face contact, most requests received by the municipality are individual rather than collective, and about specific issues rather than about general policy directions. This means that, “the citizens who come are the ones who have something directly concerning them, e.g. who have problems with property or the cadastre”.¹¹ An official in the capital pointed out that people show a lack of interest when asked to attend sessions to provide their input on municipal plans, but that they receive up to 600 individual requests each month in person, on email and on Facebook. This can feel particularly onerous given the extent of effort it can take to organise and run 25-30 public hearings in small municipalities, mandated by law, and even more in larger ones.

Of particular concern to some public officials are the even lower rates of participation of women in public hearings. Though this was not noted by many officials, but it does seem that women’s participation may be lower than men in many parts of the country. It was noted by both elected and non-elected officials in both large and medium-sized municipalities, and the fact that society continues to be organised around patriarchal structures may explain a good part of this phenomenon. As one pointed out, “Last year we had 6 budgetary hearings and 2 on the mid-term expenditure framework. The participation was satisfactory, and the only absence was the participation of women”¹². He went on to add that they tried to deal with this by organising a debate with a women’s organisation. A mayor of a large municipality said they were dealing with women’s low participation rates by working with school principals to bring in more women teachers. Officials appear to want to increase the participation of women because they acknowledge that women’s needs and demands are different from those of men, such as a greater emphasis on public lighting and security.

Collaboration with local civil society organisations (CSOs)

A few municipalities appear to have good working relationships with local organisations, such as the instance above of working with women’s organisations to increase the participation of women. The chairperson of the municipal assembly of a large municipality pointed out that, “The Assembly has established good cooperation with civil society organisations, and through them we have promoted the work of the municipality, and created opportunities for the assembly to include citizens in decision-making, such as budget hearings”.

However, most municipal officials did not mention collaborations with local organisations, or

11 Interview with the director of cadastre in a large municipality. January 2021.

12 Interview with the director of budget and finance in a medium-sized municipality. February 2021.

then referred to an uncooperative relationship in which CSOs put pressure on the local government to do more but did not show much interest in participating in public fora or working with the municipality in other ways. As one non-elected official put it, “We have tried interest groups, and different groups of young people and communities, but still there is little interest”. They offered few reasons for this, but a number of officials referred to the role of informal institutions and norms that might help explain the general lack of participation observed.

The role of informal institutions and social norms

Several respondents pointed out that possibly the most robust and well-established form of citizen engagement happens through village councils and their chairpersons, who are an effective information channel and an operational link between citizens and local governments, particularly in rural areas. As an official put it, “When it comes to people living in villages, their requests are usually brought by village representatives”.¹³ Another added, “Representatives of neighbourhoods and village administrators participate more than citizens”.¹⁴ The mayor of a large municipality said, “We receive a lot of positive pressure from the chairpersons of local communities. We are organized in 33 local communities, and now with the new regulation we will have 40 local communities”. The mayor of another large municipality echoed this, “The most effective form [of communication] in our municipality is with the heads of local communities who are active. In the villages they have authority in the localities and organize hearings and record requests. In the city this is done through the neighbourhoods. We have 30 local communities and they have a role in projects where they set priorities”. Another mayor added, “Village representatives are more insistent because they also have knowledge of budget allocation and capital investments”. Though this is a mediated linkage, village council chairpersons consult regularly with citizens, including on local budgets. Others mentioned that “when we go to the villages, there is a higher rate of participation”.¹⁵

It is not surprising that institutions located close to citizens may garner more engagement, but in the case of Kosovo, this has a particular history and regional character. The use of village councils as the primary forum of engagement with the state is possibly based in large part on the fact that local informal institutions known as *bashkësia lokale* or *mesna zajednica* have been central to local governance across the Western Balkans (Khan Mohmand and Mihajlovic 2014¹⁶ and 2016¹⁷, Ebel and Gábor Péteri 2015¹⁸). These village institutions have varying levels of informality now across the region — they operate as informal local governance institutions in some parts while in others they have been incorporated into local government processes (Khan Mohmand 2016¹⁹, Khan Mohmand and Mihajlovic 2016). In Kosovo, *bashkësia lokale* were replaced in 2018 by formal village and neighbourhood councils,²⁰ and the fact that these

13 Interview with a civil servant in the directorate of administration in a medium-sized municipality, January 2021.

14 Interview with director of public services of a medium-sized municipality, January 2021.

15 Interview with the director of administration in another medium-sized municipality, January 2021.

16 Khan Mohmand, Shandana, and Snezana Mistic Mihajlović. 2014. ‘Connecting Citizens to the State: Informal Local Governance Institutions in the Western Balkans’. *IDS Bulletin* 45(5): 81–91.

17 Khan Mohmand, Shandana, and Snezana Mistic Mihajlović. 2016. ‘Integrating Informal Institutions in Local Governance: Does It Matter?’ IDS Working Paper No. 473.

18 Ebel, Robert D, and Gábor Péteri. 2015. *The Kosovo Decentralization Briefing Book*. Pristina: Kosovo Foundation for Open Society and Local Government and Public Service Reform Initiative, Open Society Institute-Budapest.

19 Khan Mohmand, Shandana. ‘Informal Local Governance Institutions: What They Do and Why They Matter’ IDS Working Paper No. 468.

20 In line with European Charter on Local Self-government adopted during the UN Administration and integrated later into the Kosovo legislation. <https://mapl.rks-gov.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Law-On-Local-Self-Government.pdf>

are actively used is possibly connected to the fact that institutions at this level have been citizens' main connection with the state since the 1960s under the erstwhile Yugoslav state.

Similarly, the informal institution of the village elder has also been influential through history and provides a natural focal point for citizens to approach when they require something. But perhaps the strongest explanation for the strength of localised networks is provided by the fact that society in Kosovo, in both rural and urban areas, is constructed around strong kinship ties. These are built not simply around the family, but participation within the kinship structure extends to include the village or neighbourhood, creating ties of exchange that bind people together strongly within their communities (Jackson 2018)²¹. This enables strong ties of cooperation but may not integrate well into the more formal institutions of local government. However, some interviews indicated that municipalities do make an effort to incorporate this logic into their work — the mayor of a large municipality pointed out that “people participate neighbourhood by neighbourhood or village by village. The announcement [about public hearings] is made to heads of local communities, and at shops in the villages”. In fact, he suggested that this may have helped deal with distrust and an increase in cooperation. The mayor of a mid-sized municipality suggested more effort was needed to truly broaden out participation, “We have tried going to them if they do not come to us. But even when we tried to go there, there are still the same people who come to me. I think the solution would be to organize better with the village council”.

Brought together, the history of the *bashkësia lokale*, the role of village elders, and the fact of local communities constructed around kinship linkages highlight the importance of informal institutions in how citizens and state institutions engage with one another in Kosovo. It also helps explain why we see citizen participation work better through local bodies rather than directly through formal spaces created by the municipality, where citizen participation remains low.

Another informal institution that might explain low levels of citizen participation is that of public trust in state institutions, also called institutional trust.²² Our respondents spoke often of a sense of disillusionment amongst citizens, based on a perception that participation does not lead to the fulfilment of their demands. This has led to falling levels of institutional trust, and disengagement from formal procedures like public hearings. A local budget officer of a mid-sized municipality pointed out, “Despite our efforts to enhance participation, citizens have lost their trust in the institutions and therefore do not participate”.

Our respondents connected this to a lack of resources and a lack of capacity for dealing with the magnitude of demands that they receive, but it is also grounded to an extent in the nature of state and citizen engagement. Declining trust and low participation appear to work together to create a downward spiral — a civil servant in a large municipality provided a sense of this. He started by saying, “People have lost interest and are not believing anything at all. As far as trust is concerned, I believe things would get better with more people participating and expressing opinions”, but then went on slightly later in the interview to say, “But people say why should I participate, no one is asking us, nothing is being done”. So, people do not participate because they have low institutional trust, but their trust is low because they do not engage with the state.

Some respondents connected the low levels of institutional trust to the legacy of the nature of political engagement under the former Yugoslav state. They pointed out that a certain “men-

21 Jackson, David. 2018. ‘Integrity Building and Social Norms in Kosovo’s Municipalities’. In *Corruption and Norms*, eds. Ina Kubbe and Annika Engelbert. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 211–38.

22 See here for a discussion of political attitudes in Kosovo more broadly: https://www.ks.undp.org/content/kosovo/en/home/library/democratic_governance/public-pulse-xviii.html

tality” had formed through weak connections between states and citizens under the erstwhile regime, and the legacy of thinking of state authority as oppressive in some sense. This led to a disinterest in engaging with the state now and participating in public fora, which meant that this mentality could not be changed quickly through the state’s current nature. An information officer in a small municipality explained, “citizens have not treated the state as a co-participant [in our history], and as a state we have [only] 20 years since we came out of the war. We can achieve better participation by educating the younger generations in the school about the importance of participation, and the obligations that the municipality has to the citizens for transparency and accountability”.

However, citizens are quite active in approaching the state for individual demands. As stated earlier, most respondents pointed out that they receive a high volume of requests and demands on an individual basis and in person. It seems possible that the issue may be less about a distrust of the state and more about the nature of public participation. As the mayor of a large municipality explained, “They have not been involved in the process before and do not know how it goes. They think that they should simply come to the municipality to meet the mayor and give him the requests. Even though they are told that we organize the hearings there [in villages/neighbourhoods], they think that if they come in person they will get their requests fulfilled faster or they do not feel comfortable to make the request while in the hearing”. This may be connected to social norms around the need for personal commitments or guarantees — much like the idea of “giving one’s word” as an assurance things will get done — and that this is possible more in face-to-face interaction than in large public fora.

It seems that one way in which trust may be strengthened may be through the manner and format through which citizens are engaged. As the chairperson of the municipal assembly in a large municipality suggested, “They have little trust in institutions. This has started to change but there is still work to be done. We must strengthen mechanisms to improve communication with the citizen, to raise the awareness of citizens on the impact of their decision-making”. We look at this in more detail in the next section.

SECTION 4:

STATE-CITIZEN COMMUNICATIONS

Central to the study of linkages between local officials and the citizenry is the use of technology for communication. Joshi and McCluskey (2017)²³ comment in their study on ‘bureaucraft’ on how advancements in information and communication technology (ICT) have allowed citizen demands to be reported in real time to bureaucrats at all levels, possibly enabling the matching of preference to policy. Peixoto and Fox (2016)²⁴ build on this by examining evidence on the use of multiple ICT platforms designed to project citizen voice to improve public service delivery across the global South. They analyse two types of accountability – upwards accountability, in which “frontline and middle level service providers are held accountable to senior policymakers and programme managers, who use the user information to take administrative action”, and downwards accountability, in which “service providers are held accountable by citizen voice and action” and “it is driven by the potential political cost to policymakers of not responding to a publicly visible concern” (Peixoto and Fox 2016: 5). They find that platforms that enabled downward accountability were possibly more effective than those of upward accountability – “...civic engagement, in addition to information, is what generates the civic muscle necessary to hold senior policymakers and frontline service providers accountable” (p. 22), and that this works well when feedback is publicly available and transparent.

Much like the literature in the previous section, these studies also argue that getting public officials to listen and respond depends in great part on collective action and pressures that emanate upwards from the citizenry. The literature suggests that ICT-based initiatives have increased the capacity of public officials to respond to citizen demands by making them more aware of citizen preferences, and that central to this flow of communication is the nature of information and levels of transparency.

In our interviews with municipal officials, we found that there are some differences between larger, medium-sized and smaller municipalities in terms of communication between local authorities and citizens. Whereas bigger and wealthier municipalities prefer more digital tools, online platforms and especially social media, the smaller and mainly rural municipalities favour more conventional meetings and consultations located within neighbourhoods. Similarly, there are important differences in the motivation between elected, nominated, and non-elected officials. Whereas elected and nominated officials were focused more on government and

23 Joshi, A. & McCluskey, R. (2017) ‘The art of “bureaucraft”: Why and how bureaucrats respond to citizen voice’, in *Making All Voices Count Research Briefing*. Brighton

24 Peixoto, F. & Fox, J. (2016) When Does ICT-Enabled Citizen Voice Lead to Government Responsiveness? *IDS Bulletin*. 47 (1), 23–40.

procedural challenges, non-elected officials emphasized a need for institutional alteration, capacity-building, and motivation of local staff.

Building on our understanding of why citizens do, or do not, participate in local government processes, we asked respondents in particular about the ways in which they communicate with citizens in their municipalities. It is notable that, overall, most respondents acknowledged the increased use of digital platforms, social media, and other related tools, especially among younger generations. Also, they recognise the greater opportunities that these present for improving participation, communication and local government responsiveness.

Online communication and its effectiveness

Respondents in larger and mid-sized municipalities said that they regularly use and maintain their websites and announcement boards; social media platforms such as Viber, WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter; and email addresses and call services such as ‘alo komuna’, and that they believe that regular communication through these various digital platforms improves local government-citizen engagement. Respondents said that they believe citizens are becoming more comfortable with digital platforms and with this way of conducting their work with the local authorities — “The electronic part is much more effective, because neither newspapers nor advertisements are read by the citizens”²⁵ and “citizens are very active online, while very few attend meetings”²⁶ — but that this differs by area (more in urban than in rural areas) and by group (more in younger than in older groups). There is also evidence that this comfort may be growing. In a small municipality, an information officer told us that when they shifted online during the pandemic, “the first time during the debate, we received 23 questions while in the second debate, 123 questions were added”.

Respondents regularly pointed out how many of their services were now offered online, such as this: “The website of the municipality [allows people] to apply for many things, from a birth certificate up to construction permits. The moment you register, you can make the request electronically and you come in only to pay. In fact, if you verify the payment online, we can send it to you by mail... Starting from the simplest announcements, contracts, decisions, everything is on the website, i.e., we have radical transparency”.²⁷ Others mentioned that citizens are able to monitor the projects of the municipality online. The penetration and usage of mobile phones is also extensive, which means that citizens potentially have instant and mobile access to the internet and its various platforms. Others mentioned that citizens post their requests on the “vrojtesit e lagjës” (neighbourhood observers) page in social networks, or on the donor-funded ‘ndreqe.com’ platform. Some also mentioned “local social networking sites that share information and have quite a few followers that follow our page and work well”.²⁸

Particularly illuminating was the fact that respondents in the larger municipalities thought of online spaces as the primary space for engaging with citizens. For example, in the capital we were told that, “The effect of digital platforms, in my opinion, is 3-4 times higher than the effect of public hearings in the municipality, and this makes communication easier and more effective. We have a digital platform for public participation which is working very well... A citizen logged in with his[/her] name, username and neighbourhood can submit a request or

25 Interview with the director of cadastre in a large municipality. January 2021.

26 Interview with the director of budget and finance in a large municipality. January 2021.

27 Interview with the mayor of a medium-sized municipality. January 2021.

28 Interview with the director of public services in a large Municipality. January 2021.

project for the neighbourhood where he[/she] lives and this will be put to a vote only for the residents of that neighbourhood who are registered on the platform. And the two most voted projects will be included in next year's budget planning". This did not preclude, however, the fact that citizens continue to come to the office in person even here, and that the municipality has to keep space for including requests from this face-to-face interaction as well.

Online services understandably received a boost during the pandemic — "According to our officials, we have received more requests this time than when we had meetings with citizens in public hearings," said the director of budget and finance in a large municipality, referring to the impact of the pandemic.

In rural areas and smaller municipalities, the use of online platforms is more limited. In some of these there is increasing use of social media platforms such as Facebook, which they believe is proving to be effective. Overall, however, the most effective channel for communication between local officials and citizens in rural areas remains individual meetings and personal engagement, especially with village heads. As the deputy mayor of a small municipality shared, "In small municipalities [mobile app] would be used less, although it would be welcomed. But I believe that the citizens still prefer to come on their own and with a physical meeting or a direct request to receive the service". Even in a mid-sized municipality, the director of administration pointed out that, "We do not have any online platform for verification of requests. The requests are mainly received in hard copy from the representatives of the villages in the municipality". As the mayor of a large municipality put it, "Digital platforms help in urban areas and among young people. However, when it comes to villages, one needs to go and talk to them personally". His information officer added, "When it comes to the budget and budget priorities, we have decided to go to the citizen. We organize meetings in local communities, notify them in advance and hold meetings with citizens. The model that we practice and that needs to be practiced even more is that we have to go to the citizen".

Other officials confirmed the fact that older population groups continue to insist on face-to-face contact, both as habit and because of discomfort with online spaces. The latter was also echoed in the comments of some officials, who showed some nervousness about not being able to govern online behaviour, or know who the requests were coming from — an information officer shared that, "It happens sometimes that fictitious portals require detailed reports that sometimes we do not even have. And there is a bit of a problem, because we do not know who we are answering to and why".

Making online communication more dynamic

Our respondents acknowledged that despite the recent proliferation of digital technology, there is room for improvement. A major area that many identified was the way in which public hearings and debates are organised and announced. Even in a small municipality, the director of administration pointed out that, "Despite the fact that the formal notification is made under the law, we need a bigger commitment on this front. It is not enough just to produce and put out a formal pamphlet. As long as we don't explain it better to them [citizens], we don't explain the importance of approving the budget, citizens will not be aware or understand the importance of this".

Respondents were similarly quick to point out that simply putting information on official processes out there on websites and through announcements could not ensure that this information will be used. The mayor of a mid-sized municipality said, "Although [all our documents] are on the website, we have around 200 requests for access to official documents". His

director of administration added, “We publish all calls in the villages, on websites and social networks and in municipal announcements. But participation is still low”. Even in a large municipality, the mayor said, “With Viber, we have made a kind of platform that if they subscribe, the announcements will show up but there was very little interest even though we advertised it, so we did not continue any longer”. The director of budget and finance of another large, urban municipality added, “Every three months we make the report and publish it on the website. The same practice also applies to property tax where every announcement is published both on the website and on social networks. We have tested a mobile app with the OSCE for property tax but very few have responded. The idea was that if people did not pay tax for a week or something like that, we would take action, but it did not work. However, this was more of an announcement than a specific application of the municipality”.

Gaps remain especially in terms of awareness building and ‘deliberative’ information sharing – information that does not just meet a formal requirement (a box-ticking exercise) but that puts out information that will empower citizens to engage in participatory forums, such as budget planning forums. The chairperson of the municipal assembly of a large municipality pointed out, “We need to find mechanisms to improve communication with the citizen, to raise the awareness of citizens on the impact of their decision-making”. The mayor of a mid-sized municipality said, “Maybe we are not reaching people as much as other municipalities, but local media, local radio, and broadcasting municipal assembly sessions have helped in this regard”. However, even when local media has been involved, it is more about passively putting out information about assembly sessions than about targeted awareness raising.

It is clear that the problem in the municipalities of Kosovo is not about a lack of transparency in terms of not enough information being available to citizens. Multiple respondents pointed out that they make lots of information openly available to citizens on their web sites and through other platforms as announcements. However, it does not seem that this information is produced in usable or accessible formats that can be used effectively by citizens, and that might help incentivise citizen engagement. Instead, it seems citizens continue to approach officials, quite possibly to make this information more accessible to them through explanations offered in face-to-face interactions. The director of urban planning of a mid-sized municipality explained, “I think that direct debates with citizens are more effective. We have a website and publish material. Nevertheless, citizens prefer and need both consultations and to obtain information in order to be better informed and satisfied”.

The challenge here, therefore, is not about putting more information up on sites, but to do so in more accessible formats and to find ways to actively engage with citizens around these. Of course all this requires capacity – we were repeatedly told that “another challenge is related to our capacity since we do not have enough staff”²⁹ – but it is also about whether or not current staff are incentivised to engage with citizens in ways that go beyond ticking boxes to meet stipulated requirements around transparency and the exchange of information. We look at this next.

29 Interview with the director of public services in a large municipality. January 2021.

SECTION 5:

MOTIVATIONS FOR RESPONSIVENESS

Whether or not greater citizen participation and more effective communication will lead to better public service outcomes depends to a great extent on the incentives of municipal officials to engage with citizens effectively and formulate development plans and budgets in line with their expressed preferences. We are interested in the political economy of actions, and what the main influences are that determine such behaviour. The behaviour of public officials is affected by pressures that emanate from the rules and regulations of the system, as well as its organisational culture as a whole. But pressures also come from *above* from party elites and the national level bureaucracy; *horizontally* from other departments and branches of government that might have competing interests or act as role models, as well as from the bureaucratic ethos; and from *below* from social norms, the residents of the municipality, civil society organisations, and the private sector (Joshi and McCluskey 2017).

Lodenstein *et al.* (2016)³⁰ find that in systems where there are formal rules and structures in place for citizen participation, bureaucrats are more likely to listen and respond to citizen demands. Joshi and McCluskey (2017) show that bureaucrats (at higher tiers) think of citizen demands as more legitimate when claims are based on rights and entitlements recognised in law. Legal frameworks that define citizen rights provide ‘reformists’ within state institutions a basis for navigating around other competing pressures that might discourage responsiveness. Mogues and Erman (2020)³¹ argue that ensuring that citizen rights that compel state institutions and officials to act on behalf of citizens exist and are enforced, constitute the first dimension of ensuring responsiveness of public spending to citizen needs. They term this the creation of ‘political space’ for citizens and suggest that this works to reduce the probability of elite capture of resources at the local level. Other considerations such as local government’s technical capacity, and the extent to which the interests of policy makers and citizens may be aligned (both important determinants of responsiveness), are possibly secondary to the basic formal requirement for responsiveness in the law.

The formalisation of citizen participation as part of local government processes is not an issue in Kosovo. Local government reforms provide for public hearings around the annual budget, and a number of other public consultations occur through the year.³² The mayor of a large

30 Lodenstein, E. et al. (2016) Health Provider Responsiveness to Social Accountability Initiatives in Low- and Middle-Income Countries: A Realist Review. *Health Policy and Planning*. 32 (1), 125–40

31 Mogues, T. & Erman, A. (2020) Institutional arrangements to make public spending responsive to the poor: When intent meets political economy realities. *Development Policy Review*. 38 (1), 100–123.

32 Details on these can be found in the Law on Local Self-Government Article 68.1 and 68.3. There are also several Administrative Instructions regarding transparency and participation, such as: Administrative Instruction (MLGA) NO. 04/2018 for Transparency in Municipalities.

municipality explained, “Procedurally, the budget is required to be discussed in three phases, starting with public hearings sometime in July, then the budget committee of the assembly analyses [and prioritises] the requests of the citizens sometime in August, and [then we check] whether they are in the budget planning as well to see whether they are in compliance with the development plan approved in the assembly and check it according to the priorities”. A political space for citizens has, therefore, been created and legal frameworks incentivise officials to convene and use these, as well as to have to incorporate demands from these public fora into the budgeting process.³³ Therefore, in Kosovo’s case, formal and legal frameworks appear to be in place and provide formal incentives around both citizen engagement and responsiveness.

The director of budget and finance in a mid-sized municipality provided details on this: “When the first budget circular is received, we promptly go to field and, through the heads of villages, acquire the citizens’ suggestions in the main villages and neighbourhoods of the city... From budgetary hearings, we receive budgetary requests and then Directors go to field and see what the possibilities are — what are the priorities, where most residents are, and so on... We have a committee within the Urbanism Directorate that assesses and determines requests based on these priorities”. The mayor of another similar municipality provided the details of a slightly different route: “After we take note of the citizens’ requests in public hearings, we discuss them in the board of directors and then send them to the [municipal] assembly where they are approved or determined” and then added, “but the assembly is not organizing enough hearings”.

It seems that in Kosovo the formal system for participatory decision-making is in place, functional, and connected to citizen fora. This is an important first step. Hero and Tolbert (2004)³⁴ study the impact of institutional factors, in this case, the institutionalisation of direct democracy practices on the attitudes of citizens in USA, and find that citizens in states with frequent exposure to direct democracy practices, such as ballot initiatives, are more likely to perceive that government is responsive to their needs, including in more marginalised minority groups. So, if this is already in place in Kosovo, what is it that then limits more effective engagement between local officials and citizens?

To answer a similar question in the UK, Wittels (2020)³⁵ looks at the impact of institutional change in the form of a field experiment with local authorities that tests the extent to which local bureaucrats engage with and respond to citizen participation and input into policy making. Specifically, she looks at whether “non-monetary rewards and value-based communi-

Administrative Instruction (MLGA) NO. 01/2015 for Websites of Public Institutions.

Administrative Instruction (MLGA) No. 06/2018 on minimum standards of public consultation in municipalities (see also <https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDetail.aspx?ActID=18425>)

33 See in particular regulations in Article 6 Documents for Public Consultation (Administrative Instruction (MLGA) No. 06/2018):

1. The Municipality shall be obliged to provide public consultation for all the local policy documents as follows:

1.1. Draft Annual Plan of the Municipal Assembly and the Mayor /the executive;

1.2. Municipal draft budget for the following year, as well as budget revision;

1.3. Mid-Term Budgetary Framework for the next 3 years;

1.4. Developmental strategies and action plans at the local level within sectoral areas;

1.5. All spatial draft plans at the local level, in accordance with the spatial planning legislation;

1.6. All other documents deemed necessary for public consultation by the Municipality.

1.7 Any other document provided for in the applicable legislation that shall be subjected to the public consultation process.

34 Hero, R. E. & Tolbert, C. J. (2004) Minority Voices and Citizen Attitudes about Government Responsiveness in the American States: Do Social and Institutional Context Matter? *British Journal of Political Science*. 34 (1), 109–121.

35 Wittels, A. S. (2020) *Participatory governance and responsiveness: Do motivational interventions increase engagement with citizen input?* [online]. Available from: <https://osf.io/qvfd6>

cation” can increase bureaucrats’ engagement with citizen input (p. 1). The study finds that the way in which input from citizens is communicated within local government (for example, shorter, more direct emails) can impact how local officials engage with the information. It also finds causal evidence that a motivational message sent by citizens can impact bureaucrat behaviour, and in turn, affect citizens’ engagement within policy-making process. However, there are no related changes in budgetary allocations that reflect citizen preferences. The implications of this study are that while non-monetary rewards (in this case a ‘thank you’ note, but could also include staff recognition or award ceremonies) can alter attitudes, there are limits to the extent that participatory mechanisms impact budgetary allocations, the main determinant of which remains the availability and magnitude of central transfers.

Adequate resources and staff capacity are of course central to the extent to which local officials can engage with and deliver on local demands. There were also strong suggestions that more and advanced workshops for local officials that train them in local policies and regulations, public management, and evaluation programmes may work to establish stronger motivations for meeting citizen needs and increasing their participation in decision-making processes. However, what is really interesting here is the fact that it seems both citizens and public officials benefit from information that is communicated in more accessible formats — shorter documents that focus on required information that is understandable, as compared to long documents in which information is obscured by the use of ‘bureaucratese’. This may in itself require capacity building support. In the section below, we look beyond these suggestions at more informal motivations and incentives that emanate from the nature of politics and engagement at the local level.

The role of party politics

Andersson and van Laerhoven (2007) suggest that when the local mayor is from the ruling party at the centre, more development effort is observable at the local level in terms of coproduction between government and communities. This may be because it works as a positive incentive for local officials to improve performance in order to increase the political fortunes of the party. Another way of interpreting this is that improvements at the local level may be the result of the party at the centre being more generous in directing resources and patronage to municipalities led by their party.

Our respondents spoke to this by pointing out the importance of effective cooperation between central and local authorities in improving the administrative, legislative and financial capacities of local governments to meet the needs of the citizens. They indicated that to some extent municipalities run by opposition parties or independent mayors are neglected in several ways, from lacking capital investments for infrastructure projects and limited financial aid and subsidies, to more prolonged legislative and procurement procedures.

The chairperson of the municipal assembly of a large municipality indicated that politics also plays out not just between the party at the centre and the mayor, but also between the mayor and the municipal assembly. “When he/she [the mayor] does not have a majority in the Assembly there is a problem with getting things done. Complying with rules and laws is extensively politicized. Everything is related to the interest of the political party. Parties should be more democratic — the interest of the party should not come before the interest of the state and the municipality”. He went on to offer a very specific example of how party politics works to limit municipal performance: “I have noticed that party members in the assembly, despite a benefit to citizens and even though a project is necessary, oppose it saying that the party’s position is to vote against it”. A budget officer in a mid-sized municipality offered a similar

opinion: “The political situation has encouraged indolence in every institution, there are party-related differences, and therefore people often neglect work”.

According to him, party preferences were pervasive in municipalities, and that assembly members and mayors were often unable to separate their role as party members from their role as elected representatives responsible for the whole municipality. The independent mayor of a large municipality commented that he continues to be struck by the extent to which every action is interpreted in terms of partisan alignments. “The tendency to politicize everything is evident... for example, [people say] ‘he is with this party and he is doing this out of anger, or he is against him and that is why he is behaving like that’”. The director of public services in an independent, mid-sized municipality elaborated, “We are independent, so we deal less with politics, despite having political positions, than many other municipal officials or police officials that should be non-party or apolitical”. The implication here was that as long as public servants served the interests of the party (as opposed to those of citizens) senior officials did not hold them accountable for their actions. In line with national politics, accountability too it seems is a politically polarised concept in many of Kosovo’s municipalities — those with the ruling party may not be answerable for a lack of performance, but those not with the party may find that their actions are under disproportionate scrutiny.

Some respondents were particularly concerned by the instability that political polarisation produces in the work of the municipality, and consequently, in its ability to deliver well to citizens. The director of budget and finance of a major municipality pointed out, referring to the political instability in Kosovo in 2020, that, “There is no motivation [to deliver] because my colleagues tell me to not put in much work because now we will have another government”. Others referred to similar behaviour within their municipalities, for example, the director of public services in a mid-sized municipality spoke about having “changed the mentality of working only during election years”. Relatedly, these respondents talked about the need to find ways to stabilise the work of municipalities and keep them aligned to defined development plans. The director of budget and finance of the major municipality said, “Especially in finance, I would not allow changes to be made every two or three years to deal with matters of politics and elections. Sensitive directorates like finance and the procurement division should be protected from frequent political changes” to provide greater stability for implementation plans.

Organisational culture, rules and regulations

Together with political incentives that explain part of the reason for why local officials may not put in more effort into engaging with and responding to citizens, there are also incentives that emanate from bureaucratic culture. As the chairperson of a municipal assembly in a large municipality explained, “We have the ‘integrity regulation’ and we review and analyse its implementation in the assembly on an annual basis. We notice that there are officials who perform the work mechanically without raising the level of services and communications with the citizen. This mindset needs to change”. He continued, “At the end of the year, when the evaluation is done, it should be done correctly, not covering only the technical part but also the achievements and results”. This may allude in some ways to the influence of politics – based on party membership, local officials may be assessed in different ways and held accountable to varying degrees, and this may be unconnected to how they may or may not have delivered to citizens.

Some respondents, both elected and non-elected, pointed to the important role that the mayor plays in setting organisational culture. Such as, “The mayor has the greatest responsibility to seek to raise the responsibility of the directors of the directorates, and then directors will do the same with their subordinates”, said the chairperson of the municipal assembly from above, or “Accountability depends on the service, in some directorates it is better, but when the mayor insists, I believe that the goal is achieved”, said the information officer in that municipality.

There was also a sense that non-monetary rewards may be able to strengthen a culture of engagement and delivery. Two such motivations were mentioned repeatedly – employee recognition and awards, and performance appraisals. “First and foremost, it is the workplace that influences their motivation the most, despite the fact that the salary is not at a high level” said a director in a large municipality. The mayor of another mid-sized municipality similarly added, “They [staff] are led more by their commitment rather than their salaries, which are not that high... Each Directorate in the end of the year announces the employee with best results. Last year, I rewarded and promoted one of the officials”. The director of budget and finance of a large municipality added, “A more collaborative approach and a realistic performance appraisal motivates staff”. A budget and finance officer in a mid-sized municipality added, “When I saw the performance improvement, I was happy to be part of the staff where there is good performance and work. Obviously, there are also challenges, but I am attracted to challenges, where new dynamics and work is required”. Civil servants, it seems, can be motivated by senior staff setting performance targets and emphasising these in the work. Without these, “civil servants do not take initiatives on their own” said a local budget officer about her colleagues.

Other incentives – horizontal and from below

Respondents spoke to a limited degree about incentives connected to the work of other municipalities and to learning through cooperation from the practices of other local authorities. This may be a particularly important source of support for smaller local governments. The deputy mayor of one such municipality said, “We are a new municipality and any experience or model of other municipalities would be welcomed... We have cooperation with Kacanik but also with the new municipalities created at the same time as us”.

Horizontal pressure may also work through citizens making comparisons with other units. The mayor of a large municipality explained, “I would not say pressure, rather there is a kind of

jealousy between the villages as to why pave roads for that village and not our roads at the same time. The same applies to public lighting where they complain regarding instalment of lighting in certain places before others”.

Considerable amounts of pressure seems to emanate from below from a range of actors in the municipality. An information officer in a large municipality pointed out, “Opposition parties and civil society, monitoring organizations and the media all follow our work and each action”. An officer in the directorate of urban planning of a large municipality added, “External pressure comes from investors who are in a hurry to obtain their permits and insist on speeding up the procedures”. The mayor of a mid-sized municipality connected this to political imperatives: “It is related to political engagement as well as partnerships for the future, as the municipality must maintain its partners. We made electoral promises to be open and have our doors open. We are open with the media, we never avoid them, and I allocate time for civil society and interest groups, including the business community as we have been removing municipal taxes for local businesses for almost 5 years now”.

Officials, both elected and non-elected, made strong points around the fact that incentives to improve public services and responsiveness are determined by financial resources, and support for capacity-building and project management. For example, the director of budget and finance in a large municipality said, “more training is needed for the staff, because the market is constantly changing, together with the behaviour or awareness of the citizens about the customer care”.

At the same time, however, there are strong indications that the more informal aspects of organisational culture, coupled with performance monitoring and evaluation practices that are connected to engaging effectively with citizens, may also work well. It is possible that non-monetary incentives to improve responsiveness may be created through a system of rewards and recognition connected to responsiveness to citizen demands; performance assessments explicitly connected to engaging with and serving citizens more effectively; and the championing of such a culture by the mayor and other senior staff.

SECTION 6:

INCENTIVISING RESPONSIVENESS IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

So, what do we now know about incentivising responsiveness in local authorities? Speer (2012)³⁶ conducted a literature review to reach the conclusion that while participatory governance arrangements have been promoted around the world as effective governance reforms, the evidence on their ability to actually improve accountability is limited. Kosovo seems to be an excellent case in which to explore this puzzle. Here, the legal framework has set up a number of participatory fora as part of local government processes and the formal system for participatory decision-making seems to be in place and functional. But we know from the preceding sections that citizen participation is low and in fact, decreasing; that communication by officials with citizens is a box-ticking exercise; and that political polarisation and strong party identification reduces the accountability of staff and their incentives to be responsive. Our challenge now is to explore how the behaviour of local officials may be shifted to increase their engagement with citizens.

There are some interesting insights offered by the analysis in the preceding sections for addressing this challenge. A central one is that social norms of interaction may tell us something about why public hearings are not better attended. Respondents told us both that people prefer individualised, face-to-face contact, that people do not like to raise their personal issues publicly, and that there are strong social norms around personal guarantees. We were told that, “people think that if they come in person they will get their requests fulfilled faster or they do not feel comfortable to make the request while in the hearing”.³⁷ These facts provide indications for why public hearings might not be more popular — they reduce the personal interactions that build relations of trust in Kosovo and they make requests public, thereby taking away the positive aspects of face-to-face personalised contact, but they do so without necessarily making the interaction more collective, which is usually considered a potentially positive aspect of a public forum. In other words, they take away the strength of an individualised interaction without taking on the strength of a collective interaction.

The preceding sections have helped establish the fact that improving engagement and responsiveness at the local level around public services will require efforts in three different areas: (a) incentivising citizen participation, (b) making more effective use of digital platforms, in collaboration with civil society organisations and local media, to better connect local officials and citizens, and (c) incentivising local officials to respond to citizens, possibly through transparent performance measures that make officials more accountable to citizens.

36 Speer, J. 2012. ‘Participatory Governance Reform: A Good Strategy for Increasing Government Responsiveness and Improving Public Services?’ *World Development*, 40 (12): 2379–98.

37 Interview with the mayor of a large municipality. January 2021.

(a) Incentivising citizen participation

Speer (2012) suggests that it is not enough to focus only on participatory arrangements, but Cleary (2007) tells us that in a comparison between electoral and non-electoral participation, it is the latter that incentivises the behaviour of local officials more than the threat of electoral sanctions, and Andersson and van Laerhoven (2007) argue that local governance is bound to be more participatory when CBOs are actively involved. We draw on these studies and on details provided by our respondents in the preceding sections to suggest how citizen participation may be incentivised and improved.

- Collaboration between officials and local civil society organizations may be a useful way to increase citizen awareness of participation processes and platforms, and the benefits that these are able to offer. CSOs may also help in making information more easily consumable by citizens by helping put these out in more accessible, easy to understand formats. The chairperson of a municipal assembly in a medium-sized municipality said, “we need to explain more to the citizens that their role is key in drafting the budget, because there the influence and setting of priorities is greater. Citizens need to be better informed about transparency and cooperation”.
- Focus in particular on women, where participation seems to be really lagging. Many respondents confirmed that they cannot get women to participate. This may be an area of particular concern, and one that both local governments and any CSOs they work with may want to focus on. This is imperative for gender equality goals — especially in a society that continues to be organised around patriarchal structures — and also important because women’s preferences are often different from those of men, but the policy salience of such differences is often obscured by women’s invisibility in public spaces.
- Most demands/requests are submitted by individuals. This can become difficult for municipalities to respond to. An excellent suggestion in this area is to incentivise collective, group submission from neighbourhoods or groups of citizens. As the mayor of a large municipality pointed out, “requests must be submitted at the neighbourhood level. Requests should not be personal and individual because we cannot respond to each of them separately”. This will also deal with the fact that, as Joshi and McCluskey (2017) argue, representativeness of demands (in terms of the extent to which they reflect the needs of a larger population) is a concern for public officials. And Migchelbrink and Van de Walle (2019) found that the perception that those that participate in public consultation sessions are representative of the public and their preferences influences public officials’ willingness to use citizens’ inputs, more than the actual turnout of people at the consultation. As the mayor of the capital city pointed out, “It is important for the requests of these communities to include all actors, not just a small part”. Group submissions could increase perception of demands being more representative.
 - Incentivise this by saying that proposals need to be supported by a larger number of people for them to be accepted by municipalities — turn submissions from individual to collective ones, supported by collective action in terms of having to bring a village, neighbourhood or other group of interested/affected citizens together to submit it. Local CSOs may be involved in organising group submissions, which might include training on effective claim-making, as well as guidance on government procedures and required formats.

- Public officials can then go and verify this, as they already do with requests. This could work particularly well through village bodies, where it can enlarge the group involved in making demands. This has a precedent in an OSCE intervention.
- This process can include clauses that rank a proposal better if it includes women or prioritises their needs. This could lead to both faster processing and better chances of success.

(b) More effective use of digital media

Municipalities provide lots of information on their websites, but this is done quite passively. Whether or not these are used effectively by citizens, or whether they find this information accessible, is unclear. Our respondents repeatedly established the importance of better information and communication — providing better information to citizens, especially in terms of explaining the processes for budget planning; and communicating information in easier formats — but they seem to not have taken many initiatives beyond pushing announcements out to webpages and other platforms. In a small, mostly rural municipality a non-elected official praised their transparency in that they publish everything important on their website, but pointed out at the same time that the municipality had a mostly elderly population that did not access online sources of information much. Such measures thus become more about form rather than substantive.

In other cases, municipalities do not make effective use of these platforms as effective spaces on which to communicate with citizens, resorting to older or more formal ways of doing business. As the mayor of a large municipality said, “we get requests through the platform of the municipality, which are printed but not incorporated [into plans] unless applicants show up at the public hearing.” Or as the director of public services of a large municipality put it, “our last public discussion was online, and I don’t know whether anyone participated or not”. When they use local media, this is done passively only to livestream and broadcast assembly sessions on local television channels.

In larger municipalities there are concerns about a proliferation of platforms that might confuse citizens and thereby reduce usage. The mayor of one such municipality pointed out that while he thought the future of citizen communication was definitely digital, “it is better not to make many applications, multiple platforms. Maybe it is better to focus on one which can be offered centrally by the government”. A mayor in a medium-sized municipality also pointed out the importance of new apps and platforms having official sanction, that any app “must be licensed so that requests can be made official, because all requests must be registered in the protocol in order to be included in budgeting procedures. For this, they need to be covered as official requests”.

This may be a good space within which donors can coordinate efforts around a platform that is tested in a handful of municipalities and then replicated across the country with support from the central government. This is also a prime candidate where a collaboration with a CSO partner, or a network of these, may be especially effective. CSO partners may be given the role of organising and managing platforms that have official sanction. Their most important role is in processing official data on budgets and capital investments and converting these into formats that are more easily understood by citizens, for example, infographics; comparative stats across municipalities that can provoke greater interest and participation; updates on capital investments that allow effective and engaged monitoring by citizens. CSO

partners may also be given the responsibility to provide this information to media houses to disseminate information, but also organise local panel discussions that build on this evidence, generate citizen debates, and highlight key ways in which citizens can engage with local government initiatives.

(c) Incentivising local officials to respond to citizens

Drawing on these suggestions, we suggest testing out some key interventions as a research experiment to see if local government responsiveness to citizen demands may be improved. We focus our experiment on being able to draw citizens and local officials closer in relationships that are more transparent and accountable. Many of our respondents acknowledge that a lack of accountability and responsiveness are a major part of the repertoire of citizens' complaints, and that they need to work to strengthen these processes within government. We also heard from them that non-monetary rewards focused on recognition and performance appraisals may be able to strengthen a culture of engagement and delivery within municipalities.

We suggest testing out whether digital platforms can do this effectively, simultaneously incentivising citizens to participate (through greater transparency and ease of access, and incentives around collective action) and incentivising officials to respond (through more citizen and media action, and measures that can be publicly tracked). Our respondents provided a strong sense of the fact that citizens are showing an increasing preference for digital platforms to engage with local authorities. Part of the reason for this preference may be connected to social norms that discourage bringing up personal issues in public fora, such as public hearings, and the greater anonymity that online platforms offer. Our interviews also showed that both citizens and public officials stand to benefit from information that is communicated in more accessible formats — shorter documents that focus on required information that is understandable. The role that CSOs and local media can play here is obvious and evident.

SECTION 7:

AN EXPERIMENT TO INCREASE THE TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY OF MUNICIPALITIES THROUGH CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT

Demos II expanded the Municipal Performance Grant (MPG) as an effective tool that aims to instil a culture of performance in municipalities. We are proposing an experiment that will aim to test whether the culture of performance may be further incentivised by active citizen engagement, collaborative partnerships with CSOs and local media, and the monitoring of local government performance in the process. This question now guides our future research in Kosovo and informs the design of our proposed experiment.

Our experiment is premised on some assumptions about incentives and behaviour that may influence performance. The first is that politician behaviour is influenced by sanctions applied by citizens (and therefore by engagement with citizens), and that citizens use both electoral and moral (or social) sanctioning to incentivise politicians to better perform their jobs (Björkman and Svensson 2009,³⁸ Fearon 1999,³⁹ Lindberg 2013,⁴⁰ Tsai 2007⁴¹). Grossman and Michelitch (2018)⁴² suggest that a mix of both types of sanctions may work well to improve politician performance, and that levels of political competition and ethnic heterogeneity can condition this effect. Electoral sanctions, or the threat of not getting elected again, work better when there is competition and the availability of other candidates who can be elected instead. And social sanctioning, or the loss of reputations and moral standing, works better when candidates are socially embedded within their constituency through ethnic or religious ties.

38 Björkman, M., & Svensson, J. (2009). Power to the People: Evidence from a Randomized Field Experiment on Community-Based Monitoring in Uganda. *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 124(2), 735–769.

39 Fearon, James D. (1999). "Electoral Accountability and the Control of Politicians: Selecting Good Types versus Sanctioning Poor Performance." In *Democracy, Accountability and Representation*, eds. Adam Przeworski, Susan C. Stokes and Bernard Manin. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 55–97.

40 Lindberg, Staffan I. (2013). "Mapping Accountability: Core Concept and Subtypes." *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 79 (2): 202–26.

41 Tsai, Lily L. (2007). "Solidary Groups, Informal Accountability, and Local Public Goods Provision in Rural China." *American Political Science Review* 101 (2): 355–72.

42 Grossman, G., & Michelitch, K. (2018). Information Dissemination, Competitive Pressure, and Politician Performance between Elections: A Field Experiment in Uganda. *American Political Science Review*, 112(2), 280–301.

The second is that for such sanctions to work, information about politician performance must be transparent and accessible to citizens. Access is defined both by actual availability of the information, and by the formats in which this is available. When information is inaccessible, unavailable, or incomprehensible to citizens, it creates incentives for politicians to be able to ‘claim’ good performance rather than actually improve performance; focus on activities that boost their reputation for performance rather than their actual performance; or cultivate non-programmatic (clientelistic) linkages with citizens (Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007).⁴³ Grossman and Michelitch (2018) point to another important aspect of information, that it should help set up clear expectations of what citizens may expect from politicians at each level. They argue that “political accountability is weakened when the electorate holds politicians accountable for outcomes that are neither under their mandate nor their direct control”, and that it shifts politician attention towards more visible delivery and away from essential but invisible job duties. Information should also be contextualised in order to be relevant, and that it possibly helps to make it comparative and benchmarked against standards or other actors, in order for citizens to make better use of it. Information dissemination is therefore key to better performance because politicians pay more attention to the criteria on which they think citizens will assess and sanction them, and the role of CSOs and local media in putting out accurate information on politician performance is central.

Third, building on findings from Grossman and Michelitch (2018), it seems that the pressure from these sanctioning mechanisms and information dissemination may work better early in politicians’ electoral terms, rather than later. Information put out to citizens early in an electoral term, and engagement mechanisms activated at an early stage, provide time for politicians to course correct and to respond to expressed preferences and the threat of sanctions. This may work very well with the timeframe of Demos III, which will coincide with a new electoral term at the local level. It will provide enough time to work with local CSOs and local media to: (a) process and disseminate information about performance and expectations, including use of the MPG; (b) engage citizens around this; and (c) observe changes in politician performance (see hypotheses below).

A final assumption we make is on citizen participation in local government processes between two elections, and that while this is the time that citizen engagement with state institutions can most effectively lead to performance improvements, this is also the time when citizen involvement may be lowest (Grossman, Michelitch and Santamaria 2017).⁴⁴ Participating in public fora and engaging with state processes requires a real investment of citizen’s time and effort, the opportunity cost of which can be very high. Participatory modalities to monitor performance can suffer from low rates of participation and therefore have limited success, but a growing body of literature is establishing the fact that digital technologies can help increase participation by lowering the costs involved. Grossman, Humphreys and Sacramone-Lutz (2014)⁴⁵ have established that marginalised populations may be more likely to use ICT-based communication channels, compared to other groups and compared to other existing political communication channels, and that subsidising usage costs can lead to 40% higher uptake. This has an equalising effect on who gets to communicate with the state, providing evidence against the idea that digital technologies may advantage more elite groups. Extending this to the context of Kosovo, we can extrapolate that this may help improve communication and

43 Kitschelt, H., & Wilkinson, S. I. (eds.) (2007). *Patrons, Clients, and Policies* (pp. 1–49). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

44 Grossman, G., Michelitch, K., & Santamaria, M. (2017). Texting Complaints to Politicians: Name Personalization and Politicians’ Encouragement in Citizen Mobilization. *Comparative Political Studies*, 50(10), 1325–1357.

45 Grossman, G., Humphreys, M., & Sacramone-Lutz, G. (2014). “I wld like u WMP to extend electricity 2 our village”: On Information Technology and Interest Articulation. *American Political Science Review*, 108(03), 688–705.

increase participation by women, minority groups, remote and poorer populations.

Expanding on the challenge of participation, Banerjee et al. (2010)⁴⁶ have established that collective action and participation outcomes may be strengthened by combining information dissemination with some type of direct channel of action that helps people see where their participation may actually be efficacious. Information initiatives on their own may not improve rates of participation, but specifying a way for citizens to take action that can improve outcomes without requiring larger structural changes may have a greater impact. This is the case highlighted by Björkman and Svensson (2009) as well – in their CSO-led, health services focused experiment, they combine information dissemination with community discussions about the quality of healthcare and how citizens might help monitor the services and pressure the providers to improve performance. The intervention includes drawing up a “community contract” between citizens and healthcare providers that include community-defined ways in which people could monitor their agreements and time plans with the service providers.

Efficacy is an issue of great concern to citizens (Grossman, Michelitch and Santamaria 2017). They may be more willing to spend time and effort participating where they think this stands a chance of affecting change, but be less willing to do so where it involves simply showing up to hear information being disseminated without any specified pathways to influencing outcomes. Creating or clarifying such channels may be another prime area of involvement for CSO partners. This may be a pertinent initiative in the Kosovo context, where our respondents pointed out institutional trust deficits and citizens viewing the state as disconnected and oppressive. Increasing citizen’s sense of efficacy by creating community contracts around performance and delivery may work to improve participation through the channel of changing citizen’s perception of the state.

The literature also points to specific criteria that must be met in order for CSO involvement to actually be effective in influencing and improving local government performance (Grossman and Michelitch 2018). Most important, the organisations must be credible and trusted by both the government and citizens so that the information they put out is considered trustworthy. Also, they must have capacity to disseminate information widely and work across large parts of the population in order to make the threat of electoral and social sanctioning salient. Finally, the information they disseminate must establish performance and accountability criteria that can be measured, and that is commonly understood by politicians and citizens so that incentives and motivations are aligned in the same direction.

Our experiment is, therefore, premised on the following hypotheses:

1. Disseminating information through credible CSOs and local media using a specially developed app will help align citizen and provider expectations around specific local services and capital expenditures; be inclusive of more marginalised groups; and will therefore improve transparency and engagement (Grossman, Humphreys and Sacramone-Lutz 2014, Grossman and Michelitch 2018).
2. Combining information with clear pathways for action will improve participation rates (Banerjee *et al.* 2010).
3. Local officials’ awareness that their performance is being monitored through commonly understood measures will improve their performance and make them more responsive (Björkman and Svensson 2009, Grossman and Michelitch 2018).

⁴⁶ Banerjee, A. V., Banerji, R., Duflo, E., Glennerster, R., & Khemani, S. (2010). Pitfalls of Participatory Programs: Evidence from a Randomized Evaluation in Education in India. *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*, 2(1), 1–30.

4. This effect will be stronger where there is more political competition and greater ethnic homogeneity (Grossman and Michelitch 2018).

Plan for the experiment

We propose to run the experiment in the same 12 randomly selected municipalities where the interviews were conducted. These will be divided into two matched groups of six municipalities each. The idea is to create two *a priori* homogenous groups so that we can examine the causal effect of external interventions on one relative to the other.

The interventions that form the experiment will be led by CSO partners, and will have the following three proposed levers:

1. Use technology to make governance information both more accessible and easier to comprehend for citizens;
2. Motivate citizens to participate in the governance process and hold officers and staff publicly accountable;
3. Motivate local officials to be more responsive to citizens' queries in order to conform to social norms.

We propose to develop a mobile app that will be made available to citizens in a geographic cluster (treatment group), and compare metrics on citizens' participation and satisfaction with that of a control group (a geographically separated but *similar ex-ante* cluster). The app will have three key features consonant with the levers we intend to use to affect the behavior of various stakeholders in the system.

A. Information Dissemination and Reminders to Nudge Citizens' Engagement. Important governance information on budgeting, capital expenditure, social welfare schemes, etc., will be broken into small (around) 200-word opinion pieces with the help of independent journalists and CSOs and daily updates will be provided via the app. In contrast to other apps that are available in Kosovo that primarily serve as a platform to raise tickets and track their solution, this new app is focused on information dissemination in consumable form. This is based on the finding that information availability and comprehension are key to generating participation and engagement among citizens. Citizens using the app will get daily notifications when a new opinion piece is pushed to the device. The app will also track if the piece has been read and periodically send reminders during the day to nudge the citizen to read the piece. A simple one-question quiz can follow the piece to check basic comprehension. When they pass, a congratulatory message will be shown, which is expected to increase citizens' confidence and sense of efficacy.

B. Citizens' Participation and Feedback. The mere availability of easy to understand information cannot be assumed to automatically trigger citizen participation. Citizens will be encouraged to ask questions on the topics they read, and all questions asked will be posted on a common message board. The message board will not disclose the identity of the person who posted a question, and pseudonyms will be employed for this purpose. Anonymisation will also deal with any biases that government officials or community members might have towards certain groups or individuals. In addition, the system will encourage citizens to read questions posted by others and "endorse" them. Citizens reading the message can upvote a question (there is no downvote option, so citizens can only upvote or do nothing – this is to ensure that there are no disincentives for asking questions). As a citizen gathers more upvotes, he/she will rise in "status" similar to loyalty bands offered by airline and hospitality in-

dustries. Likewise, endorsements will be counted as a metric of engagement and earn points, albeit at a lower amount than asking questions. The number of free endorsement opportunities available (every week) to a citizen will be limited, but additional opportunities to endorse can be earned if a question is posted. This mechanism will also create an organic system to encourage collective action and weed out questions that are deemed less important collectively. The algorithm can internally assign a higher weightage to questions coming from women in order to encourage them to engage further and may also be designed to provide greater weightage to minority groups in a municipality. Finally, each status will be associated with additional reward points, which are redeemable for gifts from popular stores/online platforms, etc. There would be a need to publicize the app to increase awareness initially, but we hope it will become popular among citizens via buzz and word-of-mouth after a few early-adopters get a good experience from using the app. Media houses, who, just like citizens, can have access to the app, can see the pressing questions that have risen to the top. Eventually, we expect online participation to spill over and increase participation in public meetings.

C. Officers' Responsiveness and Feedback. Municipalities can see the questions that have popular support, and the app will also show days since the question reached a particular status. This is to create a visible pressure to respond to the top queries. Responses from officers can range from mere clarification to initiation of actions/policies to address the issue. Once a question gets a response, individual citizens can rate the response (1-star to 5-star). These star ratings would act as a non-financial incentive for the municipalities. Metrics such as the number of 5-star rating answers, the number of open (i.e., unanswered) questions will be available for every municipality in the app. Top-performing municipalities and their performance are expected to create a descriptive social norm that other municipalities might feel necessary to conform to. Top-performing municipalities can also be materially rewarded at periodic intervals (e.g., six-monthly).

Metrics: Some of the key metrics that will be tracked using baseline/end line surveys and via municipal annual reports to the Ministry of Local Government, etc., are:

1. Uptake and use of digital technology.
2. The level of citizen participation in public meetings, especially of women and marginalised groups.
3. The quality of participation, especially of women and marginalised groups.
4. Satisfaction of citizens with local governments.
5. The level of perceived corruption in the country.
6. Magnitude of local government response (e.g. number of resolved questions).
7. Quality of response (speed; type of questions responded to; star rating; type of response (initiation of action))

The metrics and analysis plan will differ depending on the nature of the experiment. For example, suppose the app can be “restricted” to the treatment group. In that case, metrics 1 and 7 will primarily entail studying descriptive statistics as a function of time from launch and as a function of initiatives to increase the app’s visibility in the treatment region. In that case, the remaining metrics can be used to compare the effect of the app on the treatment versus the control.

Suppose for technical or other reasons, we cannot limit the access to the treatment regions. In that case, the nature of the experiment might take the form of studying the effect of en-

couragement provided by CSOs via the app to increase performance. In this case, we can compare metrics 1 and 7 between the treatment and the control.

Finally, metrics 2 and 3 are longer-term effects as compared to the rest.

Challenges: There are a number of challenges or considerations that will need to inform this experiment.

1. We will need to acknowledge that this is all in a context where staff have few incentives and even fewer resources and time with which to deal with citizen input in substantive ways. We will need to ensure that our experiment is able to shift behaviour at the margins within this scenario. This is not very different from the context within which Wittels (2020) ran her experiment in the UK. She notes that, “The results [of an anonymous online survey with local government staff] revealed that staff was highly cynical about previous and impending organisational change, frustrated with an - allegedly - insular style of working, high demands and low reward offered by their jobs. Barriers for engagement with citizen input, which directly related to new organisational changes, were thus notably high” (p. 10).
2. The app and any involved CSOs will need to be seen as credible and trustworthy.
3. Online demands or requests for public service or budgeting will need to be officially/ formally recognized as such by the Ministry, given that current law stipulates that requests cannot be officially considered unless they are received in the office of the local authority in hard copy.
4. There are also legal requirements that projects included in the budgets need to be received through a public hearing.

Case selection: To create the two groups (treatment and control) for the experiment, a number of variables have been used as inputs to the matching algorithm. This includes: Total grant received in 2020, Capital investment budget for 2020, Performance in municipal performance grant in 2019 (a 100-point index), Overall performance in the general Performance Management System (a 100-point index), Population, Number of families that received social assistance in 2016, Number of active Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), Rural population (%), Number of times the current Mayor has been elected to office, Majority ethnic group (Albanian, Serbian, or Turk), and finally an indicator variable showing whether the coalition at the center is aligned with the party that leads the municipality.

A bootstrapping algorithm was employed that used 2000 iterations using R’s *minDiff* package. In each iteration, the algorithm randomly divided the twelve municipalities into two groups and then compared the mean and standard deviations to see if the difference between the two groups on every covariate meets a pre-specified minimum threshold. The process is repeated until this condition is satisfied or the number of iterations is complete.

The algorithm suggested the following two groups:

Group	Municipalities
1	Gllgovc (Drenas), Lipjan, Skenderaj, Viti, Strpce, Pristina
2	Prizren, Peja, Vushtrri, Dragash, Hani i Elezit, Partesh

Empirical examination revealed that the two were balanced on all the metric covariates. The table shows the various parameters used to examine the balance, the units in which they were measured, the averages of the groups (if the covariate is continuous) or the raw counts (if the covariate is categorical), and the *p* value of the difference of the appropriate statistical test statistic (*t* test for continuous measures, and *Chi-square* test for categorical measures)

Covariate	Units	Average/ Count in Group 1	Average/ Count in Group 2	<i>p</i> value of the difference
Total grant received in 2020 (in Euro)	Euro	5,142,420	5,188,366	.976
Capital investment budget for 2020 (in Euro)	Euro	4,711,358	3,673,082	.587
Performance in municipal performance grant in 2019	100-point index	47.52	44.78	.678
Overall performance in the general Performance Management System	100-point index	53.14	53.04	.678
Population	Number	46,574	47,759	.937
Number of families that received social assistance in 2016	Number	718	653	.677
Number of active Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)	Number	47	33	.629
Rural population	%	77%	78%	.913
Number of times the current Mayor has been elected to office	Number	1.52	1.47	.827
Majority ethnic group	Categorical (Albanian, Serbian, or Turk)	A=14, S=5, T=0	A=13, S=5, T=1	.595
Same political party at the Center and at the Municipality?	Binary (1=Yes)	Yes = 16	Yes = 17	1

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