



ANNUAL REPORT

July 1st, 2015 – June 30th, 2016

Submitted in September 2016



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Acronyms

AB	Advisory Board
GMS	Grant Management System
GMP	Gender Mainstreaming Policy
GFB	Grant and Fellowship Board
LA	LevizAlbania
OSFA	Open Society Foundation in Albania
ProDoc	Project Document
LogFrame	Logical Framework
SEI	Strategic Enabling Instrument
YPO	Yearly Plan of Operations
CSO	Civil Society Organisations

I. Basic information/Project snapshot

Country: Albania	Name of the project: LevizAlbania
Goal	Albanian population benefits from an improved democracy at local level
Outcomes (<i>Project Objective, Purpose</i>)	Outcome 1: Civic actors influence local priority setting, decision making, and oversight of local authorities Outcome 2: Civil society actors initiate and support selected structural changes to improve democracy at local level
Project phase duration: July 1 st , 2015 - June 30 th , 2019	Reporting period: July 1 st , 2015 - June 30 th , 2016
Budget in phase:	1,004,835 CHF
Information on contributions of partners and/or other donors (calculated in CHF): N/A	
Implementing organizations:	OSFA, Co-PLAN, PARTNERS ALBANIA
Main national partner: Open Society Foundation Albania (OSFA)	Main international partners: N/A
Team Leader: Valbona Kuko	Project staff number: 9
Report submitted to the Swiss Embassy in Tirana on: September 15 th , 2016	

II. Strategic review and outlook

This Annual Report covers the 1st Year of LevizAlbania (hereinafter “LA”) operations¹. The Annual Report builds on the interim report submitted to Swiss Embassy after the first six months of implementation.

Thus far, implementation of the YPO 1 is proceeding as planned. Indeed, some of the intermediate results - including the civic turnout for Information Sessions and the number of project proposals submitted by civic actors - have exceeded expectations. There has also been a healthy amount of learning for the implementation team, which has been infused into the project operations.

During the project’s first six months, the partners have established the necessary foundations for effective long-term operations. Key milestones from this period have included:

- Establishing the necessary governing bodies (Advisory Board, Grants & Fellowships Board);
- Completing the staff hiring process and setting up the Grant Management System (GMS);
- Training the staff on the project’s Gender Mainstreaming Protocol and usage of the GMS;
- Conducting four regional Information Sessions with high participation (338 participants overall);
- Launching the 1st Call for Applications supported by a strong promotional campaign across various media outlets (the 1st Call for Applications resulted in 22 grants’ contracts out of 230 applications);
- Promoting LA by disseminating information to the public via the website and social media.

To sum up the first six months, LA has succeeded in establishing the project’s infrastructure while launching its 1st Call for Applications, generating significant interest from key stakeholders across communities. This interest was manifested in the high participation and application numbers as well as in the attention LA has been getting through the media and its online channels.

The following period of implementation has been focused in contracting the grantees of the 1st Call for Applications and preparations for the 2nd Call for Applications, based on the lessons learnt of the 1st Call for Applications. Following up the implementation of the grant-giving mechanism, the team has gathered feedback from the 1st Call for Applications simplified the application process in several areas in terms of the steps and the required documentation. Based on these improvements, LA has launched the 2nd Call for Applications with a more targeted approach to attract proposals in programmatic areas that were less covered in the 1st Call for Applications. The interest of Civil Society (CS) actors remained high even in the 2nd Call for Applications, resulting in 206 applications.

During the reporting year, LA has contracted 22 grants (15 grantees and 7 fellowships) and one project under Rapid Response instrument. Over 500 participants have participated in Information Sessions across seven Albanian municipalities. LA’s staff has also implemented its supporting activities, towards the grantees. Concretely, LA has organized an Orientation Session for the grantees of the 1st Call for Applications and has started its Field Monitoring with 8 field visits during the 1st Year. The goal behind these support activities has been to enhance the grantees’ capacities to establish and implement impactful local democracy-building activities. Specific support areas have included practical project implementation, know-how and coaching provided during the orientation session and the field monitoring visits.

In this reporting period is too early to assess the role of grantees and their projects impact on Albanian local democracy. A more in-depth analysis on the impact of these trends will be provided during the following years of LA’s activities.

Complementing its grant-making activities, LA also emphasized experiences sharing on different challenges on local democracy development among local CSOs. To reach the above goal, LA organized a large-scale event on April 11th, 2016 with all grantees of the 1st Call for Applications and central government

¹ The 1st implementation year covers the period July 1st, 2015-June 30th, 2016.

representatives to share their experiences on local democracy issues, supported by significant media coverage. In addition, LA conducted a capacity building needs assessment to identify core skills relevant for the grantees in project implementation. Based on this assessment, in June 2016 has been organized a thematic training for the grantees on “*The usage of ICT tools in local democracy building*”, with a very positive feedback received from the participants.

All above mentioned activities were focusing on the local level by enabling civic actors to influence local priority setting, decision making, and oversight of local authorities (Outcome 1). The project is also aiming at achieving structural changes on the national level (Outcome 2), however, those activities were about to commence at the end of the 1st Year. The 2nd Year will shed the light on the impact generated by the supported local initiatives as well as on the progress LA will make, towards Outcome 2. Whilst in the 2nd Year of implementation, LA will build on the leanings and experiences from the 1st Year’s activities and continue its efforts around the following programmatic pillars:

- Launching two nation-wide *calls for applications*, attracting up to 100 applications for grants and fellowships per call;
- Funding of up to 15 innovative projects and 5 fellowships per call working towards the improvement of local democracy countrywide;
- Enhancing an enabling environment for grantee and fellowship recipients to address the structural issues inhibiting local democracy;
- Strengthening the capacities of local media players for a more pronounced role in shaping local democracies;
- Implementing the interventions within LA’s Strategic Enabling Instrument (SEI);
- Ensuring gender is mainstreamed in LA’s work and the projects that it will support.

Chapter 1: Introduction

LevizAlbania works to enhance local democracy by cultivating a locally rooted, demand-driven and influential civil society at sub-national level across the country. At the same time, it undertakes strategic projects and national-level advocacy to enable an environment for improved and sustained local democracy. The intervention works from the premise, or “theory of change”, that in order to bring about and sustain a culture of inclusive, transparent and accountable governance, it must steadily build earnest demand for better governance. To achieve this, the project deploys the following instruments:

- *Demand-driven Grants, Fellowships and Rapid Response assistance* for civil society actors (NGOs, constituency-based organizations, media, academic institutions, youth and women’s groups, and individual ‘democracy champions’), partially awarded through high-profile, public Idea Competitions held at local level across Albania.
- *A Strategic Enabling Instrument (SEI)*, which has been designed to tap into LA’s internal strengths as a: (1) driver and enabler of reform, (2) builder of local civic capacities, and; (3) a strategic advocate for broader change. The SEI will mount interventions that foster and enable a wide-range of local democracy activities across Albania and increase their prospects of being sustained.

During the program’s design, LA paid special attention to the National Strategy for Development and Integration II (NSDI II), which is Albania’s blueprint for development. More specifically, LA’s outcomes indicators are closely related with the Pillar: *Good governance, democracy and rule of law* of the NSDI II (2015-2020)². LA’s outcomes feed 3 out of the 13 sectors/components of NSDI II. Additionally, the 6 out of 7 outcomes indicators of LA are in line with 5 Strategic Objectives and 6 respective targets/instruments of NSDI.

During this reporting period there have been some substantial changes with regard to the enabling environment for local democracy in Albania. These changes included the recently constituted 61 municipalities³, the government’s approval of its National Inter-Sectorial Strategy for Decentralization and Local Government 2015-2020 and the new Law on Local Self-Governance. LA has participated and contributed in discussions for the new law by emphasizing the importance that the interest groups are consulted in the preparation of the Rule Book for Local Councils, to enhance the rights of citizens to influence local decision-making processes (Article 18, point 1 of the Law).

LA has also observed additional macro-level trends on the Albanian civil society sphere, with regard to the overall *legal environment, organizational capacities of CSOs, advocacy-related developments and financial sustainability of CSO sector*. The latest reports of *USAID’s 2015 CSO Sustainability Index*⁴ and the *Monitoring Matrix for the Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development 2015*⁵ provide an analysis of the sector above mention areas. More specifically the reports highlight the following issues:

- *Organizational capacities of CSOs* have not improved in the course of 2015. According to the reports, CSOs have made progress towards becoming more visible on various social media outlets (mainly on Facebook and Twitter). The CSO had a more open and inclusive approach in their collaboration with the media and the use of social media in the implementation of their activities and initiatives. They have also used these outlets more effectively in advocating their causes with government and the donor community. On the downside, these efforts remained quite isolated and sporadic, hardly reaching key target groups, such as Roma community, women in rural areas or older populations;

² The NSDI II is organized in Pillars, Strategic objectives and targets/instruments per strategic objectives.

³ Following the new Administrative and Territorial Reform 2014.

⁴ Performed by IDM, launched July 14th, 2016: <https://www.usaid.gov/europe-eurasia-civil-society>.

⁵ Performed by Partners Albania, launched March 2016: <http://partnersalbania.org/publication/monitoring-matrix-on-enabling-environment-for-civil-society-development-country-report-for-albania-2/>.

- In terms of *advocacy trends*, despite CSOs' involvement in many advocacy initiatives during the year, the CSOs' advocacy and lobbying capacities did not change noticeably in 2015. Though CSO engagement in consultations with government and the parliament are more institutionalized, as a result of new laws and institutional structures, including the National Council of Civil Society, it is too early to assess the impact of these new mechanisms. Furthermore, most advocacy campaigns still take place in the capital, while local CSOs seldom organize advocacy campaigns in rural areas and remote communities⁶;
- The past year has brought only limited improvements in the *financial sustainability* of local CSOs situation, although the improvement of the legal financial environment. The financial sustainability is one of the key challenges for CSOs sector, as the sector is donor depending, and the foreign donor support constitutes the main source of financial income;
- Regarding *legal environment* surrounding the civil society, both reports noted that the legal environment for CSOs improved during 2015 with the enactment of several legal acts.

Key legislative changes from 2015 have included:

- Government of Albania Decision No. 459 approving the Road Map for Albanian Government Policy towards a More Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development;
- Law No. 119/2015 on the Establishment and Functioning of the National Council for Civil Society (NCCS) was approved by the parliament on November 6th, 2015. This Law aims to institutionalize cooperation and a permanent dialogue between the government and CSOs. The Law regulates the objective, composition, and operational rules of the NCCS, and is supposed to guarantee the NCCS's autonomy⁷;
- Law No. 112/2015 on Public Financial Inspection was approved on October 15th, 2015. The Law aims to protect against financial mismanagement of public funds (including EU and other donor funding to the government), fraud, and corruption;
- Draft Law on Volunteerism was sent to the parliament in October 2015. This draft Law aims to regulate voluntary work to increase the participation of individuals in civic sphere, improve the quality of life in communities, and support the value of human solidarity;
- Minister of Finance Order No. 62 on the National Standard on Accountability Rules of CSOs was approved on November 17th, 2015.

⁶ USAID's 2015 CSO Sustainability Index.

⁷ This was a legal initiative of civil society, lead by Partners Albania.

Chapter 2: Outcomes achieved for 2015-2016 (Year 1)

LevizAlbania takes aim at two main Outcomes:

Outcome 1: (*focusing at local level*): Civic actors influence local priority setting, decision making, and oversight of local authorities.

Outcome 2: (*focusing at national level*): Civil society actors initiate and support targeted structural changes to improve democracy at local level.

During this reporting period, almost all emphasis went into taking steps towards reaching Outcome 1. While it is still too early to see outcome indicators materialize, LA has made considerable progress in its *output indicators* based in the respective timeframe, listed below for Outcome 1.

Outcomes (Project objectives)	Outcome Indicators	Sources and Means of Verification
<p>Outcome 1:</p> <p>Civic actors influence the local priority setting, decision making, and oversight of local authorities.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Civic actors (citizens, civic groups, media and public authorities) are increasingly engaging to determine and shape local priorities and public services, confirmed in > 50% of Albanian municipalities; 2. Civic actors are increasingly undertaking advocacy and monitoring the adoption of their requests and the implementation of local government plans, budgets, public services, etc., confirmed in > 50% of Albanian municipalities; 3. Media have gained a more significant role in enhancing local democracy, confirmed in > 25% of Albanian municipalities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attendance at Idea Competitions; • Attendance at training events and orientation sessions; • Citizens surveys; • LA monitoring and aggregate data from and LevizBarometers.

While the majority of the tangible steps have been taken towards Outcome 1, LA has also progressed with setting the foundation for Outcome 2 deliverables. Detailed projects under Outcome 2, such as the *Strengthening CSOs for effective inclusiveness and participation in policy-making and decision-making*, and *Municipal Financial Data Platform* have been submitted to Swiss Embassy with only the latter receiving approval in so far. The *Open Data Financial Platform* is being designed to make reliable and systematic data available on the financial performance and the fiscal situation of local governments in Albania. It is intended to spur a fact-based advocacy between different actors involved and interested in local government issues.

During the 1st Year, Co-PLAN has taken significant steps towards formalizing the partnerships around this platform by drafting the Terms of Reference between the partners (Co-PLAN and the Ministry of Finance) and operationalizing the platform, populating with the information for the period 2008-2013. The platform www.financatvendore.al has been functional since December 2015 and has been introduced during LA information sessions to all potential applicants as a source of information.

The second SEI project *Strengthening CSOs for effective inclusiveness and participation in policy-making and decision-making*, will enhance the CSO sector not only in project implementation circle but even in local democracy, through extensive training and coaching, by using different tools and instruments.

The team will build on these preparatory steps in the 2nd Year and start the implementation process. Key activities will include upgrading the platform, preparing an annual analysis of the financial state of play of municipalities and providing training to different target groups.

Chapter 3: Outputs and performance according to Yearly Plan of Operation 2015-2016

As mentioned above, the activities in the 1st Year centered on setting up the necessary infrastructure to make the project successful. Additionally, LA has made progress in executing the planned outputs to achieve the goals set forth under Outcome 1. Highlights in the various areas from these include the following:

- Outcome 1:** (*focusing at local level*): Civic actors influence the local priority setting, decision making, and oversight of local authorities.
- Output 1:** Demand-driven grants and fellowships awarded through the Idea Competitions mechanism are well managed.

I. Calls for Applications

During the reporting period, LA has launched two calls for applications, resulting in over 400 applications. 22 grantees were contracted from the 1st Call for Applications as of April 2016, while it is proceeding with the second stage⁸ of the 2nd Call for Applications.

1st Call for Applications: Before holding the first round of calls for applications, LA has had to lay the groundwork to ensure maximum exposure to - and understanding of - the project across all of Albania. Therefore, the Call was heavily publicized across multiple channels. The announcement was shared on the website, in four major newspapers (Panorama, Shqiptarja.com, Shqip and Mapo), on Ballkanweb and News 24 TV, resulting in a high interest.

The 1st Call for Applications was officially launched via a robust communications campaign on November 10th, 2015. Participants were given 30 days to submit a brief proposal in one of the pre-defined directions:

- Direction 1: The institutionalization of meaningful citizen participation in decision-making, prioritization, planning, budget formulation, service provision (citizens participation);
- Direction 2: Increased and sustained citizen access to public information and improving the public services (information and transparency);
- Direction 3: The empowerment of media to enhance local democracy (media as an advocacy tool);
- Direction 4: Increased accountability of elected and appointed local officials (accountability).

These four directions allowed for considerable freedom in terms of project areas, aiming to bring in ideas from a broad range of democracy-related issues.

Examples from the field #1 – ATA youth group, Kamza

“ATA” or “THEM” is a youth group founded by youngsters who live in Kamza city. The aim of the project is to strengthen the youth capacities, through the involvement of civil society and by finding a common voice in identifying and addressing local government issues. The ultimate goal of the project is to turn these young people into active Leaders of Tomorrow.

These young people are engaging other youth in the region to put pressure on the Kamza Municipality to open the Palace of Culture for Kamza citizens, especially for the youth; to establish a Youth Council, the Network of Activists and a group for monitoring local government as the best way of involving young people in local decision-making.

⁸ During the reporting period, LA has concluded the short list of the Concept Ideas and in July 2016 has organized the three Idea Competitions.

During this reporting period, LA has organized information sessions across 7 Albanian municipalities (for both calls), attracting a total of 436 participants (nearly 60% of them women). The public interest for the information sessions of the 1st Call for Applications was exceptionally strong with 338 potential applicants participated from 17 municipalities⁹, or 28% of the total number of municipalities. This represented 4.3 times more participants than originally forecasted in the YPO.

The participation breakdown of the 1st Call Information Sessions, attended principally by representatives of NGOs and media representatives, as well as individuals and students, is as follows:

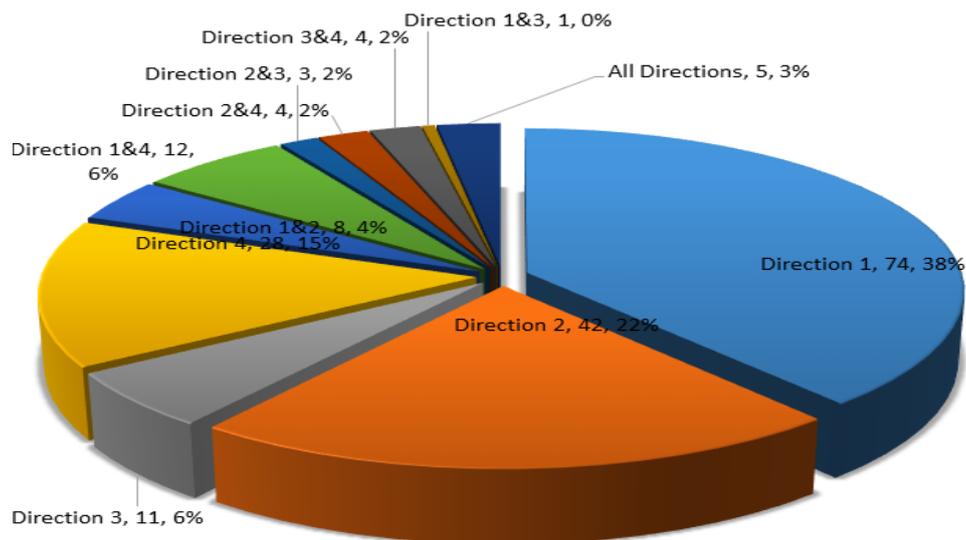
- Shkodra (November 17th, 2015) - 69 participants (41 of them women);
- Tirana (November 20th, 2015) - 139 participants (90 of them women);
- Korca (November 24th, 2015) - 68 participants (32 of them women);
- Vlora (November 26th, 2015) - 62 participants (28 of them women).

A special blog was also opened on the LA website to respond to the Frequently Asked Questions addressed to LA through emails and during information sessions. A total of 40 questions were addressed to LA during the Call duration, which were answered within 24 hours of being received. In response to the Call, the Information Sessions, and the media and communications outreach conducted by the team, a larger number of applicants than anticipated came forward with project ideas. In total, LA received 230 proposals. The breakdown is as follows:

- 169 grant applications from non-governmental organizations, including media organizations;
- 61 fellowship applications from individuals. 58 out of 61 individuals’ applications represent citizens groups.

Only 16.9% (39 applications) of the applications did not meet the Call’s criteria, and as such excluded from full evaluation. The applications derived from 59 of 61 Albanian municipalities. The municipalities with the largest number of applications were Tirana and Shkodra. The breakdown of the proposals by focus areas is below:

Graphic 1: Project Proposals by directions



⁹Shkoder, Lezha, Puka, Tirana, Elbasan, Librazhd, Vlore, Sarande, Gjirokaster, Berat, Lushnje, Kukës, Diber, Devoll, Pogradec, Fier and Durres.

LA organized three regional Idea Competitions for the 1st Call for Applications. The Idea Competitions were open-door events resulting in diverse groups of participants, including applicants and representatives of donor/international organizations among others. Nearly 200 participants attended during the six days of Idea Competitions¹⁰. Each shortlisted applicant presented their idea before the GFB. At the end of each regional Idea Competition, the GFB announced the conditionally approved applicants publicly. LA provided a live stream of the entire Idea Competitions process on its website (www.levizalbania.al/live-stream) and there were up to 1,000 viewers during the events. After the conclusion of the Idea Competitions, 45 applicants were recommended to prepare full proposals, resulting in 22 contracted projects from the 1st Call for Applications by April 2016.

Whilst, nearly 30% of the contracted grants are fellowships (7 out of 22 contracted grants¹¹). In terms of geographical coverage, the projects will create impact across 19 Albanian municipalities with 2 projects covering national level. Three media organizations and three journalists are contracted in the 1st Call for Applications. Overall, while the selected grantees matched the expectation of LA, it was a challenging selection process as many applicants were geared less towards action-oriented proposals as opposed to the more traditional approaches like desk research or roundtable discussions.

Examples from the field #2 – Forum of Free Thought

The goal of this project is to hold the Mayors responsible for the implementation of their election promises, covering 4 municipalities in Albania: Tirana, Lezha, Elbasan and Vlora. The project will work towards this goal by producing reports on the actual municipal work done vs the election promises, by involving citizens in direct dialogues with their local leaders through face to face public meetings and by increasing the role of traditional media and social media in this monitoring process.

Key outputs will include a webpage (www.unëmonitoroj.al), 8 local public meetings with mayors, 2 in-depth TV reports on the mayors' progress with the fulfillment of their promises among others.

On April 12th, 2016, LA has organized an Orientation Session with the 1st Call grantees. Nearly 39 participants (approx. two participants per grantee) were informed in depth on contractual obligations, financial and narrative reporting, LevizBarometer, Communication with Media and Gender Perspective of LA.

2nd Call for Applications: The 2nd Call for Applications was launched on April 26th, 2016 and was more focused on certain areas that were missing from the first round. The team has also analyzed its internal processes and utilized applicant feedback from the 1st Call for Applications to simplify the required documentation and content (see details on LA's lessons learned in chapter). Participants were given 20 days to submit a brief proposal in one of the pre-defined directions:

- Direction 1: Advocacy and lobbying to improve local policy;
- Direction 2: Increased accountability of elected and appointed local officials (accountability).

The Call was heavily promoted in 5 national newspapers, (Panorama, Mapo, Shqiptare, Shqip, Shqiptarja.com), via two online portals (www.lapsi.al and www.balkanweb.com), as well as on the websites of LA and its Consortium members OSFA, Partners Albania and Co-PLAN. The LA social media reached 61,819 people, with 669 posts click redirected to www.levizalbania.al. Additionally, LA has prepared a promotional video to guide applicants and explain the Call itself. This video was very successful, reaching nearly 35,000 views.

¹⁰ The Idea Competitions were organized in: Shkoder, February 10th -11th, 2016, Durres, February 18th -19th, 2016 and Elbasan, February 23rd -24th, 2016.

¹¹ Please find the list of the awarded grants in http://www.levizalbania.al/slideshow_item/levizalbania-shpall-fituesit-e-thirrjes-se-para-per-aplikime/.

LA has organized three Information Sessions in its 2nd Call for Applications, namely in:

- Lezha (May 5th, 2016) - 39 participants (27 of them women);
- Fieri (May 9th, 2016) - 38 participants (24 of them women);
- Gjirokastra (May 10th, 2016) - 22 participants (13 of them women).

This Call attracted 206 applications, including 67 applications for individual fellowships. LA's team saw a slight increase in the percentage of the fellowship applications between the two calls. Additionally, 16% of the total applications came from applicants applying again after an unsuccessful first attempt in the previous Call. The applications received aim to cover 61 municipalities.

In the 2nd Call for Applications, LA has shortlisted 50 applicants for the Idea Competition phase (17 individual applicants and 33 grant applications). LA will be able to provide detailed information on the 2nd Call for Applications in the next reporting period. While these two calls have created robust interest from the public, we could also see that applicants have a long way to go in terms of submitting more quality concept-notes with more innovative content. This is a long-term development process that LA will also contribute to, through its capacity building activities in the coming years.

II. Rapid Response Assistance

LA has also made progress in its Rapid Response assistance that was put in place and promoted through user-friendly on-line guidelines. During the 1st Year, LA has contracted one project focused on environmental protection of North Albania's rivers. The project takes place in the Valbona Valley National Park, where the planned construction of 12 hydro-power plants threatens the local biodiversity and ecosystem. The aim of the project is to enhance the cooperation within the local community, to inform on hydropower projects and mobilize them to take actions to prevent the construction of the planned hydro-power plants. This will be realized through:

- Identification of legal and technical gaps in the concession documentation of the hydropower plants projects;
- Informing and mobilizing the community (local meetings, workshops etc.);
- Advocating to relevant institutions (Ministry of Energy, Ministry of Environment) on taking immediate measures.

The Rapid Response supporting instrument has been largely promoted via social media and in the LA events such as Information Session. Nevertheless, the quality of the ideas received is far from LA expectation.

Output 2: Local government becomes more responsive to civic inputs and demands.

On April 11th, 2016, LA has organized a **large-scale event** with all grantees and central government representatives to share their experiences on local democracy and respective challenges in their localities. This event was combined with the public presentation from the grantees.

Output 3: Capacities of CSOs and fellows to influence local democracy are improved.

A key component of LA is to facilitate the capacity building of the project's financial recipients. The training need assessment of the grantees has passed through a thorough and inclusive process.

As a first step, a list of thematic trainings/topics was produced by LA after an internal analyses and discussion, based on conditionally approved projects from the Idea Competition. The list has identified 7 (seven) major clusters for thematic training, covering a robust list of issues related to local democracy such as detailed and practical information on the new organization and functioning of local government, usage of

ICT for development in local democracy, Media as Advocacy vs Media as PR, Gender mainstreaming in the context of local government, and others. A user-friendly questionnaire has been prepared and distributed to 45 conditionally approved grantees of the 1st Call for Applications. Based on the received feedback, LA identified two major themes that were considered as gaps and relevant for the CS actors to work on local democracy, concretely: in depth information on local government and the use of ICT tools. The first training was provided on “The usage of ICT tools in democracy building” in June 2016, where 22 grantees participated.

A part of the activities planned based on the Outcomes/Output, during the reporting period LA has delivered a set of activities related to project management, communication and monitoring.

1. Project organization and management

Following the contract signing in July 1st, 2015, the team set out to establish the key governance infrastructure for the project. Prior to initiating core activities, LA convened a cross-section round table of over 40 representatives from government, civil society, media, donor organizations (including the Swiss Embassy) to solicit feedback on the YPO 1¹². Their input helped to finalize the YPO 1, while simultaneously building awareness and buy-in from a broad segment of society.

LA, with Swiss Embassy’s active involvement, has established the Project Steering mechanism such as the Advisory Board and Grants and Fellowship Board (GFB) comprising of outstanding individuals with deep experience in the field of civil society, good governance and journalism. The GFB has been very active during this reporting period, on selection of grantees and fellows (more details are provided under Output 1). Parallel to this development, the staff members for the remaining open positions were also carefully selected and hired from a wide pool of experienced practitioners. The staff was then trained on the use of its Grants Management System (GMS) and on LA’s Gender Mainstreaming Protocol.

2. Approach to communication

As part of LA’s YPO 1, the team prepared a detailed communication strategy in order to use all the channels needed to raise the audiences of LA activities and to engage as much as possible the community and different interested groups in LA milestones. One of its first communication activities was the kick-off event for the project organized on January 8th, 2016 in Shkodra, attended by influential public figures (Deputy Prime Minister Mr. Niko Peleshi, Swiss Ambassador Mr. Christoph Graf and Ms. Voltana Ademi, Mayor of Shkodra), which was live-streamed by media outlets, such as Report A1 and TV News 24.

On-line channels play an important role in LA’s overall communications outreach. The LA website is fully operational and regularly updated. The number of unique visitors has been increasing throughout the year, e.g. for the last quarter was 6,544 compared to 3,638 unique visitors in December 2015. The website has been promoted heavily on LA’s social media channels. (Facebook, twitter & Instagram), in order to achieve highest audiences via materials shared through the page in these platforms. LA established accounts on social media like “Facebook and Twitter, and continuously updating them with fresh updates, information about LA, and grantees activities. To date, LA has 4,485 Facebook, 46 Twitter, 195 Instagram followers, 151 viewers on YouTube channel and 1k viewers on UStream, the channel were LA streamed live all the activities, especially the “Idea Competitions”.

Establishing close working relationships with journalists has also been a key objective for LA. The team has started developing these relationships in several ways, by using this cooperation also as an advocacy tool, not only as PR instrument. First, LA has 6 contracted grantees (3 individual fellows and 3 organizations) that represent media actors. Journalists are also invited to all activities LA has organized in the various municipalities. LA has started the preparation of articles aiming to promote issues envisaged by grantees

¹² The activity was organized on October 29th, 2015.

such as the challenges of the right to information and public consultation by municipalities. The articles are expected to be published in September 2016.

LA has increased public awareness of the project by appearing in 12 interviews in popular TV and radio programs as well. The Idea Competitions for the 1st Call for Applications was transmitted in national and local television, newspapers and online news portals. The Idea Competitions for 1st Call for Applications organised in Shkoder, Durres and Elbasan, was broadcasted in both national and local televisions, newspapers and online news portals. Two national televisions, Albanian Public Television and Top Channel and more than 5 local TV's in each city provided an important space in their news edition on this event, and also published the pre-qualified applicants as well. This event was covered by 2 newspapers and 5 online portals.

Adding to the awareness-raising efforts, LA has started to prepare two mini-documentaries. One of these documentaries is focused on the experiences of five grantees that work with marginalized groups in remote areas. It will give a chance to all the grantees of LA in the 1st Call for Applications to motivate and engage as many citizens in initiatives that strengthen local democracy in their areas. While the second documentary will be dedicated to the Rapid Response project connected with the building of small hydropower plants beside of Valbona River in north of the country.

Last but not least, a robust email list with nearly 700 accounts of CSOs operating in Albania has been prepared. This list is organized by regions and has been used to disseminate information about LA.

3. Monitoring and evaluation

The 22 grantees of the 1st Call for Applications have filled in the LevizBarometer and the results have been aggregated. As a key take-away, the grantees have emphasized that the actual state of play of the local government toward the local democracy key elements (participation, transparency and accountability) needs significant improvement. The grantees considered as key challenge in their local areas, mainly, the lack of transparency in municipalities and participation of the citizens in decision-making, considering the implementation of two key laws "*On the right to information*" and "*On notification and public consulting*". The grantees also highlighted that many municipalities do not have an effective website and most of the transparency element with regard to their work and activities are lacking. This situation is more problematic when it comes to the notification of the Municipality's Council meetings (this situation exists in most of the municipalities that the grantees are operating). Additionally, the instruments used by municipalities to involve and consult the citizens in decision-making processes do not ensure inclusiveness or efficacy, especially with regard to annual budget.

LA has also started performing its Field Monitoring activities with the goal of providing hands-on support in implementation-related issues for its grantees along with coaching and personal advice. Based on a detailed field monitoring graphic, LA has performed 8 monitoring visits until June 2016, focusing on providing support and mentoring to individual fellows. Several other visits will follow right after this reporting period.

Chapter 4: Gender mainstreaming

Gender mainstreaming a transversal theme of LA - has been strongly in focus during this reporting period. On one hand, LA worked to ensure that its staff capacities in this area were cultivated and robust. Moreover, it needed to be certain that its gender principles were imparted to all those potential applicants that came into contact with, electronically and at Information Sessions.

At the same time, LA worked to mainstream its gender principles into its operational documentation, namely its YPO; Rules and Procedures for the Advisory Board and Grants & Fellowship Board; the Grantee/Fellowship Applicant Guideline, and; the Calls for Applications. Each of these documents was

cross-checked several times by several staff members against the LA’s Gender Mainstreaming Policy, which was developed with the support of LA’s Gender Specialist. LA has ensured that gender is evident in all the objectives/directions of its Calls for Applications. Moreover, it is one of the grant evaluation criteria.

During the 1st Call for Applications, LA has contracted two organizations working in women rights issues, while more than 50% of the fellows (4 out of 7 contracted) are women. During the field monitoring visit, LA has ensured that the grantees/fellows have respected the Gender Mainstreaming Protocol of LA, which is one of the Annexes of the grant contract.

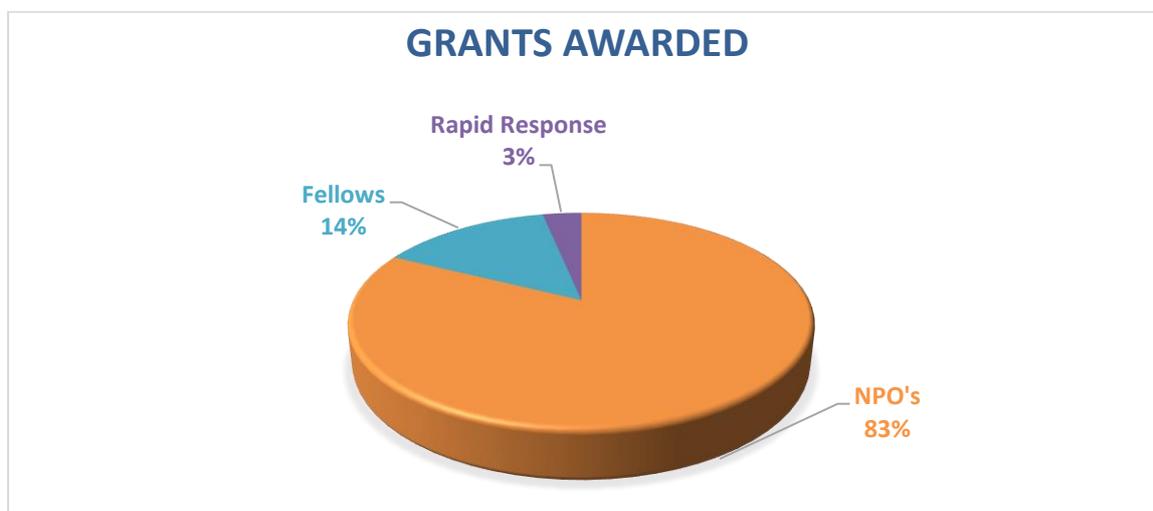
Chapter 5: Finances and management

The approved budget of LA for the 1st Project Year (July 1st, 2015 - June 30th, 2016) was 1,004,835 CHF. During this period LA finalized the grant-giving process of the 1st Call for Applications. Therefore, LA has awarded:

- 22 grant contracts under the 1st Call for Applications and 1 Rapid Response with a total budget of CHF 439,137

The initial budget planned for grants was CHF 439,789, so LA managed to award 99.9% of the total planned budget. From these 22 contracts:

- 15 grants are awarded to NPO’s with a total budget of CHF 361,848;
- 7 grants are awarded to fellows with a total budget of CHF 63,038;
- 1 Rapid Response with a total budget of CHF 14,251.



LA provides continuous support and mentoring to the awarded grantees to increase their capacities and ensure a successful and effective project management and implementation. The below provides a summary of the contracted and disbursed amount for the reporting period, divided by NPOs and Fellows:

	Contracted amount * CHF		Disbursed amount * CHF	
	NPO	Fellows	NPO	Fellows
Amount by category	376,099	63,038	225,840	1,970
Total	439,137		227,810	

Chapter 6: Lessons learnt

LA has been pro-actively collecting feedback from the applicants, Consortium, Grants and Fellowship Board and the donor to further improve the process behind the calls for applications, information sessions and idea competitions. These inputs were coupled with observations around open questions and assumptions made at the design-stage of the project. With a full year under its belt, LA has much better clarity on some of the relevant issues about local democracy development. Key learning's from the 1st Year of implementation and the 1st Call for Applications includes:

- There was a robust interest from individuals, and groups of individuals, to apply for fellowships. The initial hypothesis was that classical granting programs in Albania, which almost exclusively target NPOs, have overlooked the pent-up demand from outspoken and distinguished individuals, who want to take action to advance local democracy. Some 19% of participants at the Information Sessions, and 30% of the total applications, were submitted by individuals. Nevertheless, the evaluation of the applications has revealed that individual capacity to draft convincing proposals has been weak - even though many of the individuals in question have strong professional credentials.
- The grant management process of the fellowship has faced considerable challenge during the 1st Year, due to weak capacities of fellows and the overburden administrative issues. LA recognizes the high needs it will have during the upcoming project phase, to assist in coaching the individuals to formulate workable proposals and implement in an efficient way;
- LA noticed a clear lack of information among the general population - and many of those interested in undertaking LA projects - about the functions and competencies of local government units. This dynamic was on display in particular at Information Sessions, where participants had weak understanding of the functions and responsibilities (e.g. urban planning, public services) of local government and routinely reverted to raising issues of national political relevance;