Support to Administrative Territorial Reform
Steering Committee Meeting No. 2
April 22, 2014

Minutes of the Meeting

Participants:

1. Mr. Bledar Çuçi, Minister of State on Local Issues
2. Mr. Enea Hoti, Advisor to the Minister of Local Issues (MoLI) and STAR Project Director
3. Ms. Yesim Oruc, UNDP Country Director
4. Ms. Lisa Fredriksson, Embassy of Sweden Head of Development Cooperation
5. Ms. Linda Gjermari, Embassy of Sweden, Programme Officer
6. Mr. Holger Tausch, Swiss Embassy/Swiss Cooperation Office, Director of Cooperation
7. Ms. Elda Bagaviki, Swiss Embassy/Swiss Cooperation Office, National Programme officer,
8. Mr. Vladimir Malkaj Programme Officer, Regional Development & Environment Cluster
9. Ms. Suzana Cullufi, Democracy and Governance Specialist, USAID
10. Ms. Anila Shehu, STAR Project Coordinator
11. Italian cooperation
12. Council of Europe

Agenda:

1. Progress to date on Administrative Territorial Reform and upcoming activities
2. Progress to date on Support to Territorial and Administrative Reform (STAR) Project
3. Discussion, questions, and suggestions

Meeting Minutes

1. Progress to date on Administrative Territorial Reform and upcoming activities

Enea Hoti, the advisor of the Minister of Local Issues started with the opening remarks welcoming everybody present in the meeting. He highlighted that the main objective of the Steering Committee (SC) was to report on the latest developments regarding the Administrative Territorial Reform and the STAR project, as well as the planned activities for May-July 2014. He thanked all the donors present for their contribution and commitment in support of the reform and the project.

He continued with a brief presentation on the progress made so far regarding the Administrative Territorial Reform. He informed the participants that during the reporting period the work of the
Minister and Technical Secretariat focused on three main dimensions including the political, technical and public consultation dimensions.

As far as the first dimension was concerned, he highlighted the Parliament Decision of 23 January to establish the Ad-Hoc Commission for TAR, the main scope of which would be the approval of the criteria that experts had already developed, approval of the milestones to be followed during the reform implementation process, and preparation of the first draft map. Although the commission was composed of equal membership from position and opposition and both parties enjoyed equal veto to decision making, it was boycotted by the opposition for the three months of its legacy. Under these circumstances, aiming to unblock the situation, the majority has taken the decision to change the quorum from 8/8 to 9/8 in favor of the majority thus creating proper room for the commission to function.

Establishment of Central Working Group and 12 regional working groups led by prefects was another important political decision taken in February 2014. Central working group consisting of representatives from line ministries and national experts have intensively worked for preparing of a detailed report screening the state of affairs of existing LGU’s and are busy with a report writing on functional areas which is expected to be presented to the commission by next week.

Parallel to technical preparation, public consultation received a lot of attention during the reporting period. The minister undertook a tour in almost all the regions of the country aiming to raise awareness about the importance and necessity of doing the reform for more efficient local governance and service provision to citizens, and informing the participants about the criteria going to be used for territorial division.

Talking about next steps the following are the major milestones to highlight:

- Present the two reports to the Parliamentary commission
- Organize consultation process with civil society and business community
- Implement national survey in order to get the opinion of the public in large regarding the reform and proposed functional areas
- Include the feedback in the final proposal to the parliament
- Draft changes of the law on local government impacted directly by TAR and decentralization process happening parallel.

2. Progress to date on Support to Territorial and Administrative Reform (STAR) Project

Vladimir Malkaj, programme officer in UNDP did a presentation of the progress done to date regarding the STAR project. The work of STAR project during the reporting period focused on 4 main directions covering technical and institutional capacity development of MLI to manage and complete the reform process; facilitation of public consultations and consensus building; provision of timely logistical inputs at all stages of the process and provision of additional technical services in support to the reform. To summarize some of the highlights:

- A group of national and international experts is mobilized and providing expertise on best practices of territorial amalgamation and on projecting the new divisions based on functional zones concept,
- 13 regional coordinators are selected to facilitate sharing of information and organization of consultations at regional level,
international experts in close cooperation with. The Minister informed the participants that in close cooperation with experts they have worked for development of the criteria and methodology going to be used during the reform implementation. They have changed the strategy from introduction of the law (criteria and methodology included) to the Parliament to creation of a bi-partisan Parliamentary committee, which is expected to ensure more consensus and participation of the opposition in the process.

In addition the Minister shared the idea of organizing a launching event for STAR project now that more donors are committed and the Chairman of the Parliament has already presented the idea of establishment of the committee in the Parliament.

*Action: Technical secretariat will think of a date for the STAR Project launching event and share it with American, Swedish and Swiss embassies and UN Resident Coordinator to confirm.*

STAR Project Director gave a presentation of the progress done so far, the expenditures and the activities planned for the first quarter of the year (Jan-March 2014). Please note that only the main issues are highlighted here; the PPP is attached to this report.

Below is a summary of the main activities accomplished to date:

- Draft criteria and methodology prepared (incl. concept of functional areas);
- Draft criteria and methodology shared with SC and donor community;
- Several meetings with national and international experts are organized about the reform;
- Recruitment of 4 staff in Technical Secretariat and two drivers completed. The staff is on board;
- Open vacancies for roster of national experts and regional coordinators;
- 16,570 $ is the total amount of expenditures to date.

During the first quarter of 2014 the project will focus on:

- Official launch of STAR project
- Recruitment of regional coordinators and Experts Group; starting functioning of Regional Committees
- Development of a communication strategy and action plan
- Starting of the public information campaign at national and local level
- Training of regional coordinators
- Design and develop handbooks for voluntary merging of local government units

1. **Discussions, Questions, and Suggestions**

The third sessions followed with discussions and questions that the participants had about the reform in general and the STAR progress and plan in particular. They were interested to know the proposed time for the STAR launching event and the role that they could play. According to the Minister the third week of January is a good time for the launching event. UNDP representative highlighted the fact that it is up to the Ministry and the Technical Secretariat to decide upon the level of the event’s organization (technical or high representation). Decision on the level conditions the participants and media participation. Hence, for both cases, no long speeches are recommended.

Swiss Cooperation representative confirmed Swiss participation in the project as this project fits with Swiss Cooperation objectives and development agenda for Albania.

The participants were interested to get more information about was the second level of local government and its future in the perspective of the Administrative Territorial Reform. Mister Çuçi informed the participants that 2 (two) groups of experts will be established, one will work on the first
Participants raised the issue of the Electoral Code and system and the fact that how much they are going to be affected by the Administrative Territorial Reform. The Minister stated that the reform does not have any technical effect on the Electoral Code and system, but theoretically there might be political effect, because of the proportional system actually in use in Albania. As far as electoral administration is concerned, the electoral zones are not organized according to local government units, but according to the size (number of population) of the polling station, which will still be the case with the new territorial division.

Participants suggested that more should be done as far as visibility and transparency of the process is concerned. Opening and using of Facebook or twitter account would help distribution of information in real time.

Action: Upgrade the reform’s official webpage (www.reformatterritoriale.al) and open a Facebook and Twitter account. Concrete ideas about communication strategy will be discussed during the workshop planned for next week.

Regarding the potential expansion the opening of the Steering Committee with other international actors namely OSCE Presence in Tirana and CoE Office in Tirana, participants agreed to consider them as (observing) members as they are not financial contributors to the pooled fund but support operations that need to be closely coordinated with the STAR supported operations; other international actors could be invited when relevant topics/issues will be discussed. The idea is to keep the SC small in order to move fast, focus on technical operations and be flexible when necessary. Other broader issues related to TAR associated reforms will be addressed in the framework of the Sector Working Group.