# Strengthening Electoral Processes in Albania – Summary Final Report

## Background and Context

On 21 June 2015, Albania held local elections following a significant reform of Albania's territorial-administrative structure. Sixty-one municipalities were created following a process of wide stakeholder consultation, public input and analytical and expert research, replacing the country's nearly 400 local government units that existed previously. The 2015 local elections provided citizens an opportunity to elect the first Councils and Mayors of these new municipalities.

Elections are administered in Albania by the Central Election Commission (CEC), an independent institution comprised of commissioners nominated by political parties, and a professional civil service staff, or secretariat.  In order to further the CEC's development and to strengthen the capacities of its staff, and that of other electoral stakeholders, UNDP, drawing on its long-term democratization work in Albania, launched the "Strengthening Electoral Processes in Albania" program. The program was designed to improve competencies of election officials and strengthen processes and systems employed to administer elections. In doing so, UNDP helped improve levels of transparency and trust in the 2015 local elections, which helped bring the recent process of territorial-administrative reform closer to completion and integration into Albania's system of governance.

## I. Voter Education and Information

*Focus Group Findings Report.* At the outset of the project, UNDP held a series of focus group discussions to identify key issues in voter education prior to the 2015 local elections. UNDP drafted a discussion guide together with project partner, Partners Albania – a leading NGO who had also worked with UNDP closely on supporting Albania's territorial-administrative reform. The discussions took place in eight towns and villages in all major regions of Albania. Discussions centered on voters' perception of the elections in the context of Albania's new municipalities and how this affects voters' need for information and motivations for participation. Discussions also focused on gender and elections, family voting and other informal pressures placed on voters, sanctions for fraud and other issues.  The results offered insight into what were key gaps as well as motivating factors in voter education for these elections. The analytical report with findings and recommendations was provided to more than 2000 local NGOs and other organizations and institutions in Albania in the months prior to the elections. The report can be found here:

http://www.al.undp.org/content/albania/en/home/library/democratic_governance/research-on-voter-education-and-motivation-prior-to-the-june-201/

***Party and Candidate interactive website.*** Given the recent territorial-administrative reform and resulting, new electoral units (i.e., the municipalities), it was critical the electorate have basic information about these electoral units and the candidates competing to govern them. UNDP assisted the CEC in developing a web-based platform http://kandidatet.cec.org.al/Results/LocalMayor?cs=sq-AL&r=r&rd=r1 to provide easy-to-understand information on the local elections, including the new election boundaries and candidates. This new map and candidate lists presentation replaced an outdated and non user-friendly practice of posting the lists in separate word or html files. The site was operational a few weeks prior to Election Day (there were delays in candidate registration due to unrelated external factors) and had over 18,000 page views from users in 71 different countries.  It was also shared via Facebook, twitter and other forms of social media.  In total, the page appeared on over 250,000 Facebook accounts, and was shared directly over 1,400 times by users.

***Election Observation Video.*** UNDP and the CEC produced an animated video for international election observer groups to train their short term observers in the week before the 21 June election. The video went over the roles and responsibilities of observers, opening of voting, processing voters, closing, and transfer of materials to the counting centers. The video was provided directly to representatives of observer missions, foreign delegations and international organizations, and was also placed on YouTube



Figure 1 Election observer instructional video

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3zOmsvtoahY  via the CEC website. A longer version of this video, used to train election officials (see below), was also aired by the national TV broadcaster (in Albanian) in the days prior to the election.

## II. Training and Capacity Building of electoral stakeholders

***Training Video for Election Officials.*** Originally designed to be hands-on assistance with e-learning for election officials, UNDP changed course after the local project appraisal committee meeting and a request from the CEC to create a video training aid for Voting Center commissioners. A sixty-minute animated training video was created in cooperation with the CEC Election Commission department, covering all key duties of the preparation for voting and the Voting Center, and the Election Day itself, in a series of chapters, each of which had a Q&A session to test viewer's knowledge. The video also covered different scenarios that may occur on Election Day in the process of voting, and how to deal with them. The video was provided to each of the 280 CEC trainers and placed on the CEC



Figure 2 Voting Center Commissioner instructional video (Lesson 4: Voting Day)

website http://www.cec.org.al/sq-al/Zgjedhjet/Video-Trainimi-KQV and was also picked up by the national broadcaster and aired as civic education during the week prior to the Election.

***Election Dispute Resolution Training.*** UNDP organized a week-long training program for judges appointed as members of the Electoral College and CEC commissioners and staff on interpreting the Electoral Code and resolving electoral disputes. The training was co-organized with UN Women and based on Building Resources in Democracy, Governance and Elections (BRIDGE) methodology, combined with a series of case studies and simulations. The training program covered issues related to Voting Center fraud and irregularities, investigation techniques and evidentiary standards, allocation of mandates, and case management within and between the institutions. The complete report of the workshop can be found at:



http://www.al.undp.org/content/albania/en/home/library/democratic_governance/report-election-dispute-resolution-workshop-bridge-module/

***Gender and Elections Training.*** In partnership with UN Women, UNDP organized a two-day Gender and Elections BRIDGE workshop for staff of the CEC secretariat and civil society organizations. The

Figure 3 Participants from UNDP Albania BRIDGE workshops

workshop sought to explore issues facing women in elections in Albania, from the perspectives of voters, candidates and members of the election administration. Over forty participants from the different groups examined gender-related issues currently present in the organization of the June 2015 election, and strategize how the electoral authorities, civil society and other stakeholders could address such issues. The full workshop report is at: http://www.al.undp.org/content/dam/albania/docs/misc/BRIDGE-Final%20Report.pdf



***Training of Voting Center Secretaries on new pilot project.*** As part of its pilot project to test implementation of the new Voting Center Management software module (see below), UNDP trained 85 Voting Center Secretaries from Tirana, Puke and Sarande municipalities. These trainings covered the idea behind the project, their roles and key duties, how to operate the tablet computer, and how to use the software to report on the status of materials, the opening and closing of the Voting Center and turnout during the Election Day.

**Figure 4 Voting Center Secretaries in Puke municipality receive instruction on using new software**

### III. Instilling new systems and methodologies in election administration

***Management systems for candidate and party registration***. The CEC of Albania registers candidates for elections using a combination of systems, including paper copy submissions, manual data entry, and a few basic software applications at both the central and zonal commission level. Moreover, the systems were not connected to other election management systems and software, such as for tallying of votes and the allocation of mandates. This process was thus time consuming (often requiring reentering of the same data), lacks



**Figure 5 Screen shot from new candidate registration module**

basic validation checks to gauge compliance with eligibility requirements, and easily subject to human error. UNDP worked with the CEC to create a political subject management software application, with built in checks to determine candidate eligibility and gender threshold requirements in accordance with new provisions of the electoral code. The system is also integrated within the overall CEC IT management system, making easier such tasks as ballot design, allocation of mandates and publishing of results. The system also allowed for import of candidate information using preexisting software applications.  Connected to this system is also the interactive map of Albania that presents to voters a visualization of the new municipalities and the candidates standing for Mayor and Municipal Council (see above).
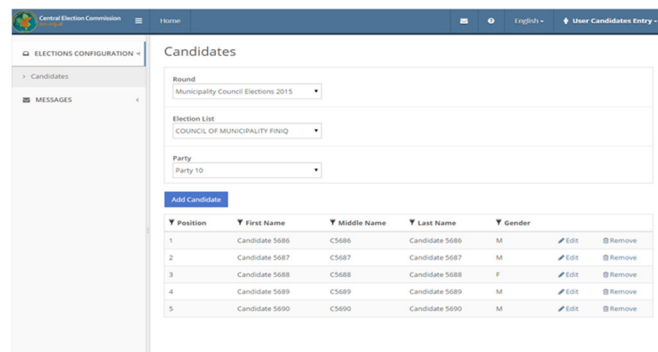
***Automation of campaign donation and expenditure declaration forms.*** According to the Electoral Code, political party treasures and others handling campaign finances must submit records of donors' contributions, and campaign expenditures, to the CEC. The CEC currently provides a template document for recording donations, and guidelines to writing the required report, through its website. UNDP developed a database to manage this process, whereby parties are given their own access to an online database for recording donations and expenditures. The database separates items as per the requirements of the Electoral Code, such as cash contributions, loans, in kind services and goods (for donations) and different types of expenditures. Once parties submit expenses to official auditors and eventually the CEC, the CEC will be able to present different public reports on its website, heightening public information and transparency on this important issue.

***Development of management systems for voting center operations.*** Updates on the opening of voting centers and voter turnout are an important feature of elections – they provide citizens insight on the voting process during Election Day. Such information, when delivered promptly and regularly, builds confidence in the electoral process and its administration. To provide the CEC greater access to information on Election Day, UNDP provided assistance in developing a software program to relay this information directly from the voting center to the CEC.



**Figure 6 Tablets ready for use with the new voting center management software**

The software module allowed for tracking of electoral materials into and out of Voting Centers, communicating the status (open, closed, etc.) of Voting Centers, and reporting hourly voter turnout figures, directly to the CEC by using tablets and 3G/GPRS network communication. The system was piloted in Voting Centers in Puke and Sarande municipalities during the June 21 local elections. Data was available to the CEC almost instantly – turnout data was available in many cases hours before the CEC had the information through traditional collection methods. Turnout was also displayed on an interactive public website and updated approximately every 60 seconds. UNDP and the CEC will use the lessons learned from the successful pilot to evaluate the systems applicability countrywide in the 2017 parliamentary elections.
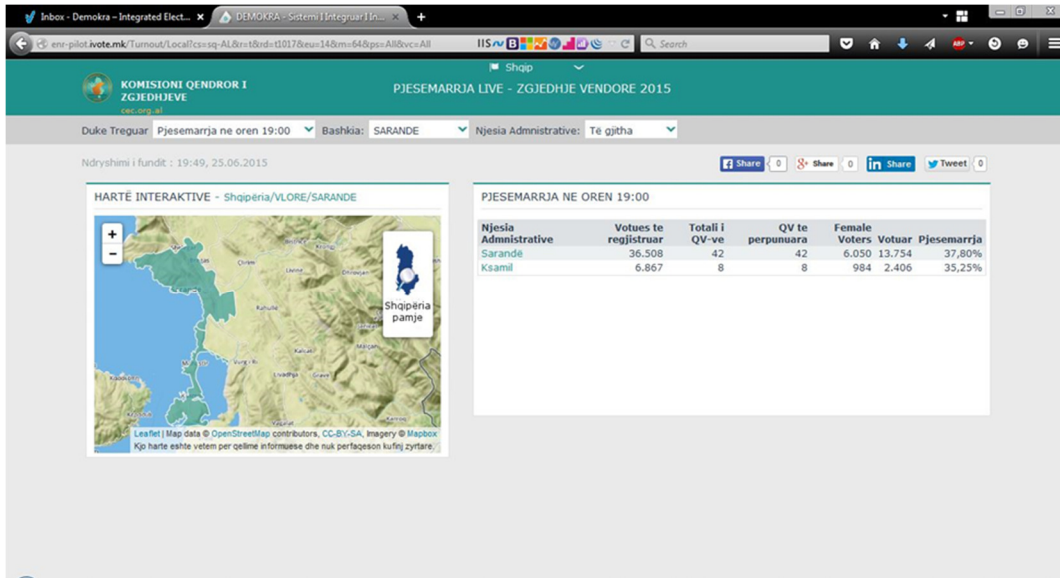
**Figure 7 Screen shot from live turnout display from Sarande municipality**

### Observations and Recommendations:

- A majority of assistance interventions would more logically have been developed up to a year earlier in the election cycle (in some cases longer). In certain cases, the programing would have been more effective this way (BRIDGE training, Candidate Registration module) etc. The videos needed to wait for law changes and some revised procedures in order to be finalized, but could have benefited from a longer development time. Only the voter education research and the candidates display website really "benefited" from being done so late in their electoral cycle. Future programing should commence as early in the electoral preparation period as possible in order to maximize effectiveness.

- BRIDGE was difficult to implement during electoral preparations, and participants could not fully absorb the training, or in some cases even participate fully. If BRIDGE is to be done in future, it needs to occur earlier in the electoral cycle, more frequently and as part of overall staff development plan (as opposed to just one-off topic trainings). The cost of BRIDGE was also an issue – even the two jointly-conducted workshops were maybe one-third of the entire SEPIA program budget.  Given overall assistance budgets for Albania, it may be difficult to implement a more robust BRIDGE program.

- The training videos were highly popular and successful, both as a training tool for commissioners (commissioner trainers) and also as a source of public education. The videos can likely be modified easily for future local elections; the fact that characters are animated makes it easier still. For parliamentary elections, it would be more advisable to create a new video as the procedures are substantially different. In addition, with more time for production higher-quality animation software could be used.

- The piloting of the Voting Center Management module was highly successful – it is technically feasible to roll this module out nationwide at the next election. However, there are some usage,

human capacity, and cost implications that will need to be first addressed. Please see the final report on this project for many more specific recommendations.

- One thing that is lacking in the overall organization of the work of the CEC is a Strategic Plan or even departmental work plans. Much of the work is "reactionary" as issues develop. While this is inevitably the case in an elections period, during the off-peak periods of the election cycle the CEC should develop a multi-year strategic plan. Not only would such a document(s) help in the administering of each election event, but would guide the organization in the development of its different capacities and roles – helping it set future priorities and goals for itself as an institution. As strategic planning is an evolving, participatory process that takes time, work should begin in earnest as soon as possible in order to have such plans well in place prior to the 2017 electoral period.

- The current role of the CEC in campaign finance regulation is minimal, and would need to be strengthened in order for it to provide more effective enforcement of campaign finance provisions in the law. The law itself needs to be strengthened for there to be a more meaningful and transparent account of money and elections in Albania. Should these legal reforms happen, the political finance software modules would have far greater benefit and value to the CEC and electoral subjects. Even absent such reforms, more time is needed and greater attention could be placed on training the electoral subjects on using the newly developed tools of the CEC to create consistency and standards in reporting of donations and expenditures.

- CEC departments are slightly isolated in their work – and too much that the CEC is doing well, including new technology it employs, is only used by the IT department. The departments of logistics, election commissions, spokesperson and legal affairs could all benefit greatly (and do their work more efficiently) by fully be trained on and embracing the existing CEC systems. The off-peak period of the election cycle affords the CEC secretariat the opportunity to do this.