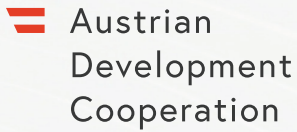


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YOUTH EMPOWERMENT THROUGH RESEARCH

NATIONAL STUDY ON YOUTH PARTICIPATION AND GENDER ISSUES

Funded by the Austrian Development Agency and implemented by Terre des hommes Albania within the project "Youth Voice for Justice and Rights"

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PART ONE

National Study on Youth Participation

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Abbreviations

ADA- Austrian Development Agency

ADC-Austrian Development Cooperation

AKR- National Youth Agency

BE- European Union

CAWI- Computer Assisted Web Interviewing INSTAT Institute of Statistics

KEDNJ- European Convention of Human Rights

KVR- Local Youth Council

OJF- Non-profit organization

OKB- United Nations Organization

TdH- Terres des hommes

UNESCO- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

UNHCRU- nited Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

UNICEF- United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund SKR29-

National Youth Strategy 2022-2029

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Overview

One of the most crucial topics of youth policy in Europe is participation in democratic life. Since the turn of the new millennium, scholars and politicians have been concerned about the apparent “detachment” of young people from democratic participation (e.g., Norris, 2001; Furlong and Cartmel, 2011). However, studies have also found that, despite their apparent lack of interest in official public and political activities, young people often engage in informal and alternative ways and styles of participation in democratic life.

Issues related to the engagement of young people in Albania have not always received the necessary and appropriate attention from policymakers. Young people often become involved in civil society as a stepping stone to politics and decision-making. The involvement of young people in the decision-making process in Albania is often hindered by the old mindset, which considers them as inexperienced to be part of decision-making institutions, such as parliament, government, and municipal councils, and this is a major point of concern. However, in the last decade, the focus of attention on young people was mostly related to the problems they face in a democratic system, such as unemployment, inequality, social exclusion, migration, addiction, etc.

Terre des hommes (Tdh) is the leading Swiss organization for children's aid. Through various programs, every year it provides assistance to over four million children and their families in about 40 countries around the world. One of the countries where Terre des hommes operates is Albania, with headquarters in Tirana. In fulfilment of its mission, one of the organization's projects is “Youth for Justice and Rights”, financed by the Austrian Development Cooperation (ADC) through the Austrian Development Agency (ADA). One of the promised results within the project is drafting of a national study led by young people on their participation in issues related to democracy, human rights, and the community. The involvement of youth as co-researchers and data processors, in addition to their pertinent experience and research, has been a crucial aspect in the development and impact of this study.

It is essential to recognize that addressing youth-related issues requires a multifaceted approach involving government policies, civil society organizations, educational institutions, and active participation by young people themselves. The undertaking of this study at the national level is in line with the vision and mission of the National Youth Strategy 2022-2029:

Specific Objective 1.3

"Youth studies are developed and become part of study programs in higher education institutions and references for further developments in the field of youth" and the relevant measures include:

1.3.2 Youth development policies are built on factual and documentary analyses.

1. A basic reference study is drawn up regarding youth autonomy and equal opportunities according to the needs of young people (2022-23).

2. A basic reference study is drawn up regarding youth inclusiveness and the challenges of including all youth categories in the country's development processes (2022–2023).

This study was carried out at national level with the cooperation of 23 young people under the scientific mentorship of two leaders, covering 12 districts in Albania. The research process extended into three main phases: first, research and scientific work; second, field work and data collection by young people engaged as co-researchers; and third, data analysis and interpretation.

The methodology for data collection was carried out according to the CAWI (Computer Assisted Web Interviewing) technique, otherwise known as data collection through the Internet. Data collection was carried out throughout September 2023, on the Microsoft Forms platform, and the study included a sample of 650 young men and women in the age group of 15–19 and 20–24 years old, including young people from urban and rural areas, from vulnerable communities, and young people not in education, employment or training (NEET). Likewise, 11 validation focus groups were conducted with 100 young people from 12 regions of the country, with representation of young people from urban and rural areas, girls and boys, and vulnerable communities.

Key findings:

- The decision-making structure where young people report that they were most engaged is the school senate.
- Only 29% of young people reported that they are engaged or part of youth organizations/organizations for young people.
- In addition, a small percentage of young people (9%) reported that they are engaged in political groups.
- Meanwhile 82% reported that they are willing to participate in youth organizations or other decision-making structures.
- Most young people (61%) reported that they do not feel represented in decision-making

bodies and in addition, most young people do not believe, or are not sure, if their participation has an impact.

- The school is the most active structure in the community, where most activities for young people are organized. Young people are primarily offered sports, cultural, and recreational activities, which are mainly organized by the school.
- Asked how much involved they feel in these activities, 30% of young people said that they do not think that their role has any impact.
- Only 28% of young people feel/have felt completely represented by school/university structures.
- 56% of young people said that they have never been part of any community initiative.
- 67% of young people report that social media is the main source of information that motivates their participation, second only to television or searching on websites.
- In addition, for 56% of young people, social networks are a reliable source to get information that promotes their participation in society.
- Social media is the main channel of communication for young people, where they get information and engage the most. At the same time, young people report that social media has become a place that has led them to individualism, and where they have faced risks, such as ridicule and bullying.
- A significant part of young people (17%) felt bullied, harassed and endangered while using social networks and 10% preferred not to answer.
- Only 7% of them have reported online abuse.
- 67% of young people report that social media is the main source of information that motivates their participation, second only to television or searching on websites.
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- Only 7% of them have reported online abuse.

I. Purpose and objectives of the study

The purpose of this study was the involvement of young people themselves in researching the barriers and challenges they encounter in their social and public engagement, as well as providing recommendations for improving the mechanisms of involvement in decision-making.

The objectives of the study are as follows:

- To identify potential barriers within legal and policy mechanisms that support the empowerment and participation of children/youth for the advancement of human rights.
- To identify existing practices throughout the country that promote and support the equal participation and cooperation of children/young people with local actors for the advancement of democracy, human rights, and the environment at local level.
- To explore the barriers and gaps affecting appropriate and meaningful youth engagement.

The study, which reflects the findings and conclusions of an analysis conducted based on a rigorous methodology, has come up with concrete recommendations customized for Tdh, which will be used in future interventions of Tdh.

II. Methodology

The study was carried out at the national level with the cooperation of 23 young people under the scientific mentorship of two leaders, covering 12 districts of Albania.

The research process extended into three main phases: first, research and scientific work; second, field work and data collection by young people engaged as co-researchers; and third, data analysis and interpretation.¹ A research framework was drawn up for the study in cooperation with the young people. The process of the study took the following steps:

- **Identification and training/guiding of a group of young co-researchers.** Initially, a 2-day workshop was held with 23 young people in order to make them part of the study as a whole, starting from drafting a gender-focused questionnaire to data collection and establishing focus groups with young people in 12 districts.
- **Definition of the research objectives:** This included specific research objectives and identification, in collaboration with the young people, of the main areas of interest, such as their participation in decision making at the community, school, and technology context, the participation mechanisms, as well as barriers and challenges they face.

- **Revision of the existing literature:** A revision of the existing literature was done to understand the current state of knowledge on youth issues in the international arena, with a focus on youth policies in the EU and Albania. Academic papers, studies, legal documents, national strategies, NGOs' publications, and data from international organizations were analyzed. This helped to build a solid foundation for the study and to identify gaps that need further exploration in the case of Albania.
- **Identification of best practices:** Successful practices of empowerment and participation by young people that have contributed positively to the advancement of the rule of law, democracy, human rights, and gender equality in Albania were identified, and the factors that make these practices effective were also analyzed.
- **Data collection and analysis:** The methodology for data collection was carried out according to the CAWI (Computer Assisted Web Interviewing) technique, otherwise known as data collection through the Internet. The data collection was carried out in September 2023, on the Microsoft Forms platform, and the study included a sample of 650 young men and women in the age group of 15–19 and 20–24 years old. Qualitative data were collected through 11 focus groups conducted with 100 young people from all over the country.
- **Conclusions and recommendations:** Based on the data analysis, engaged young people and experts have drawn conclusions and made recommendations about the situation and possibilities of empowerment, participation, and gender bias among young people in Albania. The recommendations to improve youth structures and practices to assist the advancement of the rule of law, democracy, human rights, and gender equality are based on evidence.

Throughout the research process, ethical standards were maintained and data confidentiality was ensured as needed.

The methodology used to involve young co-researchers

Terre des hommes Albania included as co-researchers in the study 23 young people from 12 regions of the country. They were selected through an application process, initially defining the main criteria to be met by the young co-researchers (Annex A). Two young people were selected from each district. Following the selection process, the young people took part in a 2-day workshop where they were equipped with knowledge about youth-led research, its process and steps. In addition, they were provided with theoretical aspects of youth engagement and legal mechanisms, and were oriented on the methodology and practical tools on how to draft a questionnaire.

After several consultative meetings on the techniques that would be used by them to design and distribute the questionnaire, to conduct meetings with young people in local focus groups, to draw up conclusions and recommendations based on the data, together with Tdh experts and staff, the young people received the relevant instructions to distribute and convey in their communities the collected data of the questionnaire.

The questionnaire designed by young people (Appendix B) was administered online to 650 young people, focusing on 5 study areas:

- Public engagement;
- Community engagement;
- Education engagement;
- Participation through the use of social networks;
- Participation and gender issues.

After completing the questionnaire, the youth and the Tdh support staff conducted 11 focus groups (Shtojca C) with the participation of 100 young people from the 12 regions of Albania.

Sampling

The selection of study samples was based on official data from INSTAT (January 1, 2023) on the population of the age group 15–24 years old. The questionnaire was applied to two age groups: 15–19 and 20–24 years old. Based on INSTAT data, and the calculation of the sample size and the margin of error, the prediction was that, in order to be as representative as possible, the study had to include a minimum of 384 people from both age groups.

Population	Total	Girls	Boys
15-19	172.076	84.315	87.761
20-24	196.240	97.887	98.353
Total	368.316	182.202	186.114

1 INSTAT official data on the population of the age group 15–19 and 20–24 years old

Population Total	Confidence level	Margin of error	Sample size ¹
368.316	95%	5%	384

To ensure that the study was as detailed and representative as possible, even at a district level, INSTAT data from 12 districts were used to provide additional details for every age group and gender. It was observed that the INSTAT database lacks an indicator of the total number of young people in each district. Since this data is lacking, other sources (reports) were explored and the corresponding calculations for each district were based on the total number of the population. This is how the corresponding percentage for each district was extracted (the district population as part of the total population).

	Total	Females	Males	% of the total
Berat	111.431	56.370	55.061	4
Dibër	106.380	51.030	55.350	4
Durrës	289.797	143.757	146.040	10
Elbasan	252.719	128.470	124.249	9
Fier	271.672	136.104	135.568	10
Gjirokastrë	53.314	27.907	25.407	2
Korçë	192.925	98.437	94.488	7
Kukës	71.498	34.783	36.715	3
Lezhë	114.181	58.164	56.017	4
Shkodër	189.164	97.728	91.436	7
Tiranë	925.268	470.061	455.207	34
Vlorë	183.436	92.053	91.383	7
Total	2.761.785	1.394.864	1.366.921	

2 Population data according to INSTAT by district and sampling calculations

Calculations were carried out and this number was provided in order to ensure that the sample was as representative as possible for both urban and rural population, girls and boys, and the age group 15–19 and 20–24. The number of young people involved in each district included 50 percent males and 50 percent females for each age group.

The selection of the samples was also tested in the workshop organized with the young people on possibilities, limitations, and difficulties they think they may encounter in this process. The sampling of 500 young people (it actually reached 650) in all the districts of the country provided an appropriate representation for each district, thus ensuring not only comprehensiveness but also an opportunity to compare the problems and realities of the communities as concerns the participation of young people with mechanisms set up at the political, legal and social level.

¹<https://www.calculator.net/sample-size-calculator.html?type=1&cl=95&ci=5&pp=50&ps=368316&x=110&y=23>

III. Structure of the study

- **Introduction (list of abbreviations, overview, methodology, objectives content, etc).**

This includes background information, research objectives, and methodology, sampling and concrete research tools.

- **General theoretical and legislative framework:**

- Democratic involvement of young people,
 - Legislative analysis and institutional mechanisms for youth participation – rights and justice
 - Youth background in Albania – legislative mechanisms and key strategic documents
- The purpose of the second chapter is to provide a detailed conceptual and analytical framework, as a necessary background to the research project, as well as an instrument to better understand and contextualize the research findings. The aim is not to dwell on theoretical concepts, but to have a clear analytical framework that will enable the researchers to interpret the findings and draw the relevant recommendations.

- **Findings and analysis**

This will be the core part of the study and will be organized according to the research objectives outlined in the overview. This being a quantitative and qualitative study, the analysis and discussions will be presented together. Graphics and tables of results will be used to make reading easier.

- **Conclusions and recommendations**

This section will focus on key points and recommendations. The latter have been drafted based on identified issues, while also targeting specific audiences, such as recommendations for the ministry, groups of interest, and Tdh.

- **Bibliography**

- **Annexes: Questionnaire format, focus group instructions, tools used for the study.**

IV. General theoretical and legislative framework

Youth involvement in democracy: concepts and practices

The empowerment and active engagement of young people in civic life serves as a powerful force for social progress and transformation. The equal participation of young people in democratic processes is not simply a matter of inclusiveness; it is rather a fundamental requirement for the sustainability of democratic governance. Representing the nation's present, and with eyes on the future, young people bring in new perspectives, innovative ideas, and energy to the decision-making table, which potentially lead to positive changes for local communities and society as a whole.

People are empowered when they get to benefit from their rights and it is important to ensure equal opportunities and rights for everyone, such as the right to participate in democratic and civic life. However, young people today are underrepresented in decision-making processes; many of them do not have access to their social rights and face multiple discrimination and prejudices. The European Union Youth Strategy 2019–2027 places special emphasis on inclusion, participation, and engagement

- listed at “point 3: **INCLUSIVE SOCIETIES:** *One third of young people in Europe are at risk of poverty and social exclusion. It is necessary to enable and ensure the inclusion of all young people in society*”, as well as
- “point 9: **SPACE AND PARTICIPATION FOR ALL:** *To strengthen the participation and democratic autonomy of young people, as well as to ensure dedicated youth spaces in all areas of society.*”²

It is essential to work towards the fulfilment of the rights of young people in particular, especially of the most marginalized and excluded, and of all humanity in general. Today, one in six people globally experiences some form of discrimination³. Objective no. 5 – Gender Equality and objective no. 10 – Reduced Inequalities of the Agenda for Sustainable Development 2030 of the United Nations General Assembly, emphasize the importance of empowering and promoting the social, economic, and political inclusion of all, regardless of age, gender, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic status.⁴

Meanwhile, the United Nations Emergency Fund (UNICEF) guideline on adolescent and youth engagement states that it is a moral obligation of governments and societies around the world to support and improve opportunities for youth engagement, as participation of young people and civic engagement is important and a fundamental right for them.⁵

In the last decade, Albania has also given special focus to the engagement of young people in civic and democratic life. The National Youth Action Plan 2015–2020, approved by Decision of

²EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027. Available at: https://www.oph.fi/sites/default/files/documents/eu-youth-strategy_en.pdf

³United Nations (2023). The Sustainable Development Goals Report: Special Edition 2023. Available at:

<https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2023/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2023.pdf>

⁴Sustainable Development Goals. Available at: <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>

the Council of Ministers No. 383, dated May 6, 2015, aimed at developing and coordinating cross-sectoral youth policies in education, employment, health, and culture, and strengthening youth participation in social life and decision-making processes.⁶

The National Youth Strategy 2022–2029 (SRK29), one of the most recent national documents, was drafted in accordance with this plan and based on the final report. It was approved in October 2022 by a decision of the Council of Ministers and published in March 2023, providing opportunities and equal support for young women and men to become active partners in Albania's development. The following are two of this strategy's guiding principles:

- 1) Supporting all young people to develop their full potential, taking into account their rights, voices and diverse needs, leaving no one behind;*
- and*
- 2) Significant participation of young people in local and national decision-making, in youth organizations and community life (SKR 2022 – 2029; page 34) ⁷.*

Although participation is considered an essential element of citizenship in a democratic society and a democratic country, Albanians feel disconnected from government and politics, and two-thirds of them express dissatisfaction with the work of government institutions and opposition structures. Only 20% of young people report that they feel represented in youth policies implemented at the central/local level, and SKR29 aims for this figure to reach 80% by the end of 2029. Therefore, it is expected that 2.4% of the state budget will be dedicated to youth programs. Moreover, young people in Albania report the lowest level of knowledge and the lowest interest in politics.⁸ 80% of them are distanced from political parties, not considering them as a primary means to change society and advance their political skills and beliefs. 68.8% of young people state that their participation in politics is important and only 16% believe that youth issues are the focus of political parties' programs.⁹ According to Bino and Seferaj (2021):

*“Inter-institutional and inter-sectoral cooperation in the field of youth and related issues is essential. Albania needs to increase its efforts to develop a fully functional youth system that responds to the needs of young people, ensures inclusiveness and creates an environment conducive to youth participation and empowerment”.*¹⁰

To enable the inclusion of all young people in society and provide support to develop their full potential, taking into account their rights, voices, and diverse needs, while also giving due importance to empowerment and promotion of the social, economic, and political inclusion of all, several functional mechanisms need to be set up and implemented.

According to UNICEF¹¹, based on the experiences of several countries, encouraging youth participation and civic engagement can be achieved via:

- Promotion of laws, policies, and budget allocations that support youth engagement;
- Supporting and creating structures for the participation and civic engagement of young people;

⁶National Youth Action Plan 2015-2020. Available at: https://www.arsimi.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/plani-kombetar-i-veprimit-per-rinine-2015-2020_Shqip.pdf

⁷National Youth Strategy 2022-2029. Available at: <https://riniafemijet.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Strategjia-Kombetare-e-Rinise-2022-2029.pdf>

⁸DIPI & NDI (2020). Political Engagement in Albania 2020. Available at: https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Albania%20Political%20Engagement%20Survey%202020_Albanian.pdf

⁹National survey: Youth and politics in Albania. Available at: https://www.wfd.org/sites/default/files/2022-06/national-survey_young-people-and-politics-in-albania-final.pdf

¹⁰Bino, B., & Seferaj, K. (2021). Mapping of Youth Policies and Identification of Existing Support and Gaps in Financing of Youth Actions in the Western Balkans – Albania Report. Available at: https://www.rcc.int/youth_db/files/user/docs/1.1_Albania_Report.pdf

- Institutionalizing global civic education while including teaching programs and teacher training;
- Investing in the capacities, networks, and partnerships of young people, including their movements and initiatives;
- Maximizing the value of volunteering and community service.

Even in the case of Albania, the implementation of national and international conventions and instruments, as well as legal and regulatory acts that support the engagement of civil society in general and young people in particular, form a necessary mechanism that supports the integration policies of youth and civil society in local and national decision-making, in youth organizations and in community life. According to Bino, Qirjazi and Dafa (2020)¹² :

“Legal frameworks and policies for enabling cooperation between public institutions and civil society are mostly in place”.

The legal framework that enables the participation of citizens and young people in decision-making has improved with the Law on Public Consultations, the Law on the Right to Information, the Law on Local Self-governance and the Law on Youth. However, referring to the Law on Youth, it is worth noting that at the local level its implementation is proceeding at a slower pace than at the central level.

According to the report “Challenges and Effects of the Implementation of Law 75/2019 – On Youth”¹³, 28% of municipalities have not yet started implementing the law, while 46.5% of them have not started setting up Local Youth Councils. In addition, 74.4% of municipalities do not have a dedicated budget for youth, which makes it impossible to carry out activities stemming from the Law on Youth, and 69.7% of municipalities do not have a strategic document for youth policies at the local level. As a result, in 2022 ¹⁴, only 16% of municipalities had already established Multifunctional Youth Centres (SKR29). In the political sphere, although there is a certain improvement in the involvement of young people in terms of the election of youth leaders, political activities, and a certain presence of young politicians in the main political bodies, the level of participation is still low, hindering their proactive role and inclusion in the country's traditional political structure (Bërdufi & Pacukaj, 2022).¹⁵

In addition to the necessary legal framework to ensure the inclusion of young people in society and decision-making, another equally necessary mechanism to raise their awareness on the importance of being active citizens is the work done by various non-governmental organizations through projects and trainings related to this issue. According to Bino and Seferaj (2021)¹⁵, it is important that:

“Youth organizations focus on strengthening stable and reliable relationships with different groups of young people and channel their interests, needs and demands towards decision-making.”

¹²Bino et al (2020). Civil Society Participation in Decision Making in Albania. WFD and IDM. Available at: <https://idmalbania.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/CSO-Participation-in-Decision-Making-in-Albania.pdf>

¹³Law no. 146/2014 “On public notification and consultation”; Law no. 119/2014 “On the right to information”; Law no. 68/2017 “On local self-governance finances”; Law no. 107/2014 “On territory planning and development”; Law no. 139/2015 “On local self-governance”; Law no. 75/2019 “On Youth”.

¹⁴Report on Challenges and Effects of the Implementation of Law 75/2019 “On Youth” (2021). Konrad Adenauer Foundation and the National Youth Congress. Available at: <https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/#inbox/FMfcgzGtxSmrIFsgmwdVvXKWmcTmskx?projector=1&messagePartId=0.1>

¹⁵Bërdufi, D., & Pacukaj, S. (2022). Youth Political Participation in Conventional Forms in Albania 2011-2021. Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies. ISSN 2281-3993. Vol .11. No.3

Through trainings and projects with a focus on empowering young people and increasing their participation in civic and democratic life, they learn how important it is for their voices to be heard, and that it is the legitimate right of everyone to feel represented at the decision-making table, and that they are key links for the advancement of the rule of law, democracy, and human rights. In addition to the work done by these organizations to raise awareness among young people and empower them in society, the National Albanian Youth Report 2020¹⁶ suggests that

“Youth organizations should exert more pressure and create mechanisms of accountability and monitoring of elected public officials, and local and central government institutions focusing on youth issues and concerns.”

Another key mechanism to ensure the necessary support for young people to develop their full potential, taking into account their rights, voices, and different needs, is the promotion of educational programs, with the aim of preparing and educating them to become active political citizens, and to better understand the public policy and decision-making processes. According to Zaimi (2023):

*“Students in high school must have the right to choose subjects such as: introduction to law, human rights, and the State and the Constitution, in order to have the opportunity to gain general knowledge about democratic processes and the importance of citizens' involvement in public processes”.*¹⁷

Educational institutions are places where the participation of young people should not only be encouraged, but also applied, by providing equal opportunities to elect and be elected in decision-making structures such as student governments, senate, and student councils or in activities that promote the participation of young people in decision-making. The educational progress of young people and further on, their transition from school to the labour market is of key importance. The National Roadmap for the Transition of Young People from School to the Workplace¹⁸ emphasizes the importance of the participation of young people in drafting, developing, monitoring, and evaluating policies and strategies to promote youth employment, training and entrepreneurship. It is the young people who, always based on their rights, representation and freedom of decision-making, should seek quality information, career counselling and access to employment opportunities.

Finally, without question, the use of online platforms should be mentioned, as a space for young people to express their thoughts and passions, connect with organizations and groups with common interests, as well as contribute to the social and political debate. One of the initiatives undertaken in Albania is the establishment of digital youth information corners (info points). In 2022, only 3.27% of municipalities reported to have established these corners and SKR29 aims to have them in place in all municipalities of the country. Compared to traditional sources, Oden and Porter (2023) find a stronger positive relationship between

¹⁶National Report on Youth in Albania 2020. CRCA/ECPAT. Available at: https://www.crca.al/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/RAPORTI-TE-RINJTE-NE-SHQIPERI-2019-2020_0-1.pdf

¹⁷Zaimi A. (2023). Participation of Citizens in the Decision-Making Process: Albanian Case. Thesis for obtaining the title of Doctor in Political Science and International Relations. Epoka University. Available at: <http://dspace.epoka.edu.al/bitstream/handle/1/2274/Al%20Zaimi.pdf?sequence=1>

¹⁸National Roadmap for Youth Transition from School to the Workplace (2022). Available at: <https://krk.al/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/UDHERREFYESI-KOMBETAR-PER-TRANZICIONIN-E-TE-RINJVE-NGA-SHKOLLA-NE-VENDIN-E-PUNES-2-1.pdf>

social media use and political interest and civic engagement among youth.¹⁹ Therefore, as young people today use social networks in large numbers, let them be used as a platform to give a voice to youth issues and the significance of their active participation in the community.

Based on the experience of other countries, and closely working with international conventions to ensure the implementation of legal acts focused on youth engagement in society and decision-making, Albanian society embraces the youth spirit and perspectives which lead to potential positive changes for the local community and society in general.

Legislative analysis and institutional mechanisms for youth participation: rights and justice

Youth participation is a necessity in order to be a decisive part of the legislative and institutional mechanism in our country. While enacting strong laws alone won't guarantee the proper development and implementation of today's policies, it would be a big step in the right direction for increased youth engagement outcomes.

What do we have in mind when we define the “participation of children/youth” in the framework of Albanian legislation?²⁰ :

- Children/youth groups participate in meetings of the municipal council.
- Children/young people are heard before, during the drafting process, as well as during the implementation phase of the budget.
- Groups of children/youth, through questionnaires, seminars and meetings, are asked by local government representatives about their needs and issues of concern.
- Children/young people can draft petitions or public letters addressed to local government bodies.
- Children/young people have a say in the development of policies at the local level related to rights, safety and well-being.
- The participation of children/young people creates an environment where they feel valued.
- Youth participation strengthens democracy and the sense of responsibility in a democratic society.
- Children/young people know their problems better and can help local bodies to determine priority issues.
- Children/young people are encouraged to be active and oriented to turn to the local government for their problems and needs.
- Children/young people must participate during the drafting and discussion of the budget in local bodies.
- Children/young people should be given the opportunity to closely monitor how the funds are used.
- A stronger network is developed between local government, service providers and children/youth.

¹⁹Oden, A., & Porter, L. (2023). *The Kids Are Online: Teen Social Media Use, Civic Engagement, and Affective Polarization*. *Social Media+ Society*, 9(3), 20563051231186364.
²⁰Not intended as an exhaustive list.

In the framework of this study, we see participation and active citizenship as having the right, means, space and opportunity, and when possible, having the support to participate in influencing decision-making, to be involved in initiatives that contribute to building a better society. Youth participation is a modern societal issue. There are still societies and countries, including Albania, where the participation of young people is seen more as alms than as an important issue for the sustainability of democracy and shaping the future leaders from an early age.

Even in the academic and legal aspects, this issue is still new, leaving considerable space to explore and propose further developments. Studies in the field of law, or even beyond, remain limited and social meta-analyses of the positive impact of youth participation and representation in decision-making and politics are still missing. It is precisely for this reason that the opportunities and education for participation begin with the early education of children and young people, to participate in any aspiring democracy, and especially in those countries that are already convinced that they are democratic countries. Although Albania has taken steps forward in the direction of the democratization of its political life after the fall of the communist system, these steps have not been accompanied by legal initiatives to support the participation of young people. However, Albania has built a positive public image in terms of preparing national policies for young people, including their participation in politics and decision-making.

The Constitution of the Republic of Albania, serving as the fundamental act of the country, provides for key rights related to youth participation such as the right to organization, the right to election, the right to association, and the right to free speech and expression. Our Constitution presents in its preamble the democratic dimensions of inclusion and participation in the construction and improvement of democracy.

Although implicit in this declarative constitutional moment, we can say that this act promotes the participation and involvement of citizens in the democratic development of the country. This inspiring moment is more than enough to pave the way for constitutional provisions and other laws. In general, the preambles of the European constitutions do not explicitly include the participation of young people, but contain encouraging sentences, thus creating a link between the citizen and the state.²¹

Children and young people are listed as one of the “preferred” categories of the Constitution, paving the way for the legislator or, in a way, forcing the legislator, to conceive and develop the legislation while essentially respecting this principle. In general, the laws that apply rights or obligations related to children and young people mention this preferential aspect in their first articles, making it part of the legislative objectives and goals, and secondary legislation. In conclusion, we can say that our Constitution explores and sets the main tracks for youth participation by offering them specific protection from the state, as well as providing the main democratic instruments and principles for this aspect. Serving as the main framework to design the main democratic pillars, this act speaks of and explores more than enough about the

²¹For example, the preamble of the Constitution of the Czech Republic contains ‘...citizens – their responsibility to the community....’, presenting participation not only as a right but also as a duty. <https://www.psp.cz/en/docs/laws/1993/1.html>

participation of young people in decision-making, leaving to the Albanian legislation the task of details and regulations according to the relevant fields. In this context, the model of our Constitution follows in the same line as a good part of the European constitutions (Italian, Austrian, Czech, German, etc.).

Law on Youth

While other laws define elements and dimensions of youth participation, the specific law that provides for youth participation is the Law on Youth, which entered into force in November 2019. Although a law that passed “relatively late”, at the instigation of civil society and upon the proposal of the Council of Ministers, the law is the main address that provides rights for young people, as well as other institutions and mechanisms.

Although laws are written with “more favourable circumstances and tones” when it comes to children and young people, the psychosocial development of children and young people has different characteristics. Thus, the Law on Youth only applies to young people between the ages of 15 up to 29. The Law on Children's Rights applies to persons under the age of 18. Therefore, depending on the age, the laws that protect and produce rights and obligations are as follows:

Age	Term	Law
0-18 years old	Children	Law on Children's Rights
15-29 years old	Youth	Law on Youth

Thus, the following elements remain “binding” in terms of the achievement of youth participation:

- Protection of the rights of young people in a comprehensive way;
- Creating the necessary conditions for the activation, participation and support of young people;
- Determining the functions and competencies of institutions at the central and local level;
- Cooperation with organizations that exercise their activity in the field of youth.²²

The Law on Youth provides several mechanisms that are currently in operation as follows:

²²Article 1, Law 'On Youth'.

3 Youth mechanisms provided by the law

No. Structure	Legal provision	Functioning
1. Ministry of State for Youth	Part of the cabinet of the Prime Minister responsible for the development of youth policies and their implementation.	It currently has a minister and a staff of 4-5 people.
2. National Youth Agency (AKR)	Institution subordinate to the Minister of State for Youth, responsible for the further coordination of the implementation and development of youth policies in the country.	Institution with headquarters in Tirana and coordinators (partially) in other the cities. Trainings organized in 8 regions of the country in June 2023, found out that 90 percent of 250 participants said that they had little information about AKR.
3. Youth Organizations	70 percent of their members are young and they play the role of NGOs according to Albanian legislation.	The websites of AKR and the Ministry offer little information on the transparency of the list of organizations that enjoy this status ²³ .
4. Organizations for Young People	NGOs that enjoy this status according to the legislation in force and that during the last 3 years have implemented projects related to young people and their development.	The same situation as with youth organizations.
5. Youth work	Form of voluntary work that creates the possibility to be converted into cognitive credits in education or at work.	A mechanism has not yet been officially established to clarify this dimension and put it into practice for young people.
6. Youth representative organizations	Youth organizations and organizations for young people select their representatives.	Although in 2021 the call opened twice to apply and enable the set up of this organization, there was no interest from Albanian actors. According to discussions and focus groups with actors of youth organizations, concerning the procedure, it is quite difficult to unite the wills of 60 youth organizations and the Law on Youth is not clear in terms of its powers and functions. ²⁴
7. National Youth Congress	A group of 30 youth organizations.	Careful! No Youth Representative Organizations.
8. National Youth Council	Counselling body subordinate to the minister and the Council of Ministers that defines youth policies.	Currently there is an open call for application to establish the Council ²⁵ . So far this body has not been established according to the requirements of the law.
9. National Youth Council	For coordination effects composed of staff from the above districts/ municipalities.	Nonexistent as s structure, pending following the selection of the mechanism above.

²³See <https://rinia.gov.al/keshilli-kombetar-rinor/>

²⁴Report of the National Youth Congress IMPLEMENTATION OF THE LAW ON YOUTH, THE PERCEPTION OF THE YOUTH AND CSOs, DECEMBER 2022, Authors: Dafina PEÇI, Enxhi LIPA, Rigels XHEMOLLARI, https://krk.al/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Raporti_KAS_2022_Final.pdf

²⁵<https://rinia.gov.al/hapen-votimet-per-anetaret-e-keshillit-kombetar-te-rinise/>

International agreements ratified by law (the international context)

Youth participation, like a large number of the requirements of democratic developments for our country, does not work independently from the international, European and regional environment. Albania is part of a series of international acts, which function as a common denominator of states' commitments to the creation of opportunities and spaces for the involvement of young people in decision-making, community and beyond.

Beyond treating participation as a fundamental right of children/youth, the UN has raised youth participation to a significant level through the adoption of the Resolution on Youth Inclusion.²⁶ The Resolution emphasizes the importance of the participation of young people in the development of countries and the world, but at the same time it “forces” the Member States to coordinate their development plans with the same spirit conveyed by the United Nations, thus strengthening initiatives not only at the national level, but also at the regional and global level.

United Nations agencies (UNICEF, UNESCO, UNHCR), depending on their areas of competence, include the participation of children/youth as an essential element, such as their involvement in migration management, protection of cultural objects, etc. Although, in our opinion, the UN's projections on child/youth participation could speak in clearer tones in terms of decision-making, policies and initiatives, the fact that this organization raises child/youth participation as a global cause, urges Member States to move towards common perspectives.

The Council of Europe, another key body that protects the fundamental rights and freedoms of individuals in the European continent, does not speak exclusively for young people, but in its Article 11 reiterates the obligation of Member States to respect the freedom of peaceful assembly and protest.²⁷ The Council of Europe remains today the only international/European body to have addressed through a specific document the participation of young people in local and regional communities.²⁸

The European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) brings under its umbrella only one dimension of participation, that of peaceful assemblies and protests. However, the content of the ECHR is friendly to the involvement of citizens in matters related to them.

The Charter on Youth Participation in the life of local government, produced on May 21, 2003 by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, obliges all local government structures of the Member States to include young people in every area of development and their sectoral policy. This is also an obligation for Albania as one of the member countries of the Council of Europe. Another unique form of youth participation in the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities is the application through the “Youth delegate program”, which gives an opportunity to be trained for a year and implement a youth empowerment and participation project in local government. We emphasize here that, a representation chosen by the local government in Albania participates in the annual and periodic sessions of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, having the obligation to report on taking measures related to relevant youth policy developments, youth participation and public activism.²⁹

²⁶<https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/youth/fact-sheets/youth-participation.pdf> <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N03/502/56/PDF/N0350256.pdf?OpenElement>

²⁷Albania became part of the Convention no. 8137, dated 31/7/1996, see Article 11 of the Convention https://www.echr.coe.int/documents/d/echr/convention_sqi

²⁸European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Communities' <https://rm.coe.int/168071b4d6>, approved by a body of the Council of Europe – Congress of Local and Regional Authorities.

²⁹See for more info <https://www.coe.int/en/web/congress/youth-delegates>

The Council of Europe has set the participation of young people as one of the key priorities of the policies adopted for the period 2022–2025.³⁰ This is in line with the importance that international and European documents, or even regional ones, have in the development and implementation of common perspectives. These documents help to create a harmonization of concepts in Member States, using their respective structures to implement real facilities that pave the way for the participation of young people for their rights and the rights of the community of which they are a part.

Although the European Union acts are not yet mandatory to be implemented by our state actors, in the framework of the integration process in this structure, it is important to bring to the attention of this paper that the participation of young people is one of the key objectives set in the European Youth Strategy.³¹

In addition to the international and European level, youth participation is also addressed in many non-state forums and conferences in the Western Balkans, for example part of the agenda of the Regional Cooperation Council focuses on youth empowerment and participation in decision-making.

The variety of international documents takes on almost endless shades when it comes to young people and their participation. Below we will present some key aspects of the concrete commitments of the Albanian state to contribute to the empowerment of young people in decision-making.

Representation of young people in political life and especially in local government structures

Youth participation, before being an aspect of central government, is a daily issue of local government. In this framework, the country's municipalities have for several years introduced, as part of their work, the definition of youth policies in their annual general plans, as well as a specific budget for young people (this is mandatory according to the definition of the Law on Local Self-governance). Beyond these aspects, with funding from Friedrich Ebert Foundation, the National Youth Congress managed to draft 12 National Youth Action Plans 2020–2023.³² It is recommended to communicate and present these plans to the young people as often as possible, in order for them to be the ones who will manage the provisions of the local plans. The local plans are published on the website of the Foundation and that of the National Youth Congress, and are accessible to everyone in the Albanian language.

The representation of young people in political life and especially in local government structures remains at very low levels. Youth representation in these structures is done not according to laws or decisions in force, but, in most cases, according to personal acquaintances or the “good will” of party leaders. The local government does not issue specific acts in view of the Law on Youth; however municipalities are involved in setting

³⁰ See <https://www.coe.int/en/web/european-youth-foundation/council-of-europe-priorities>

³¹ https://youth.europa.eu/strategy/european-youth-goals_en

³² See https://krk.al/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Plani_lokal_i_veprimet_per_rinine_2020-2023_Diber.pdf

budget items, as well as implementing decisions related to other aspects for children and youth. Young people have the right to participate in the meetings of the municipal councils, but still today this instrument is seen as weak tool to achieve a significant participation.

In general, the role of local government is to issue acts that regulate green spaces, entertainment and activities for young people. Two main aspects that originate from the local government are: allocating the youth budget and placing youth as a priority in their internal acts. The allocation of public funds by the municipality for the youth is a sector where civil society organizations have contributed the most, with the aim of increasing the financial capacities of the youth in the local communities.

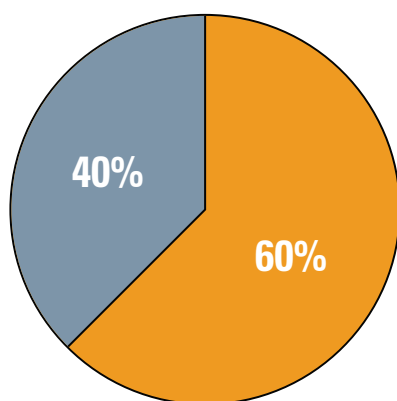
In the framework of the project funded by the European Union “Municipalities for Europe”, today the EU Corners operate in several municipalities, with a focus on activities for young people.³³

V. Findings and analysis

Section I – Demographic data

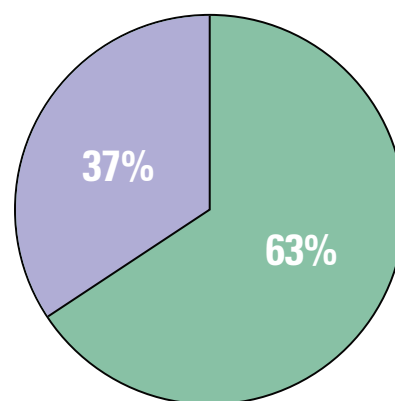
The study included a sample of 650 young men and women aged 15–19 and 20–24. The 15–19 age group has the highest percentage of respondents, a total of 60%, while 40% of the respondents belong to the 20–24 age group (Figure 1). The questionnaire shows that the highest percentage of respondents is female, namely 63% of the total number of respondents, compared to 37% who belong to the male gender (Figure 2). Figure 3 shows the distribution of respondents at the district level. Tirana occupies the first place with 167 answers. Elbasan ranks second with 107 answers, followed by Fier with 90.

1 Age Group Sample (%)



Age 15-19 Age 20-24

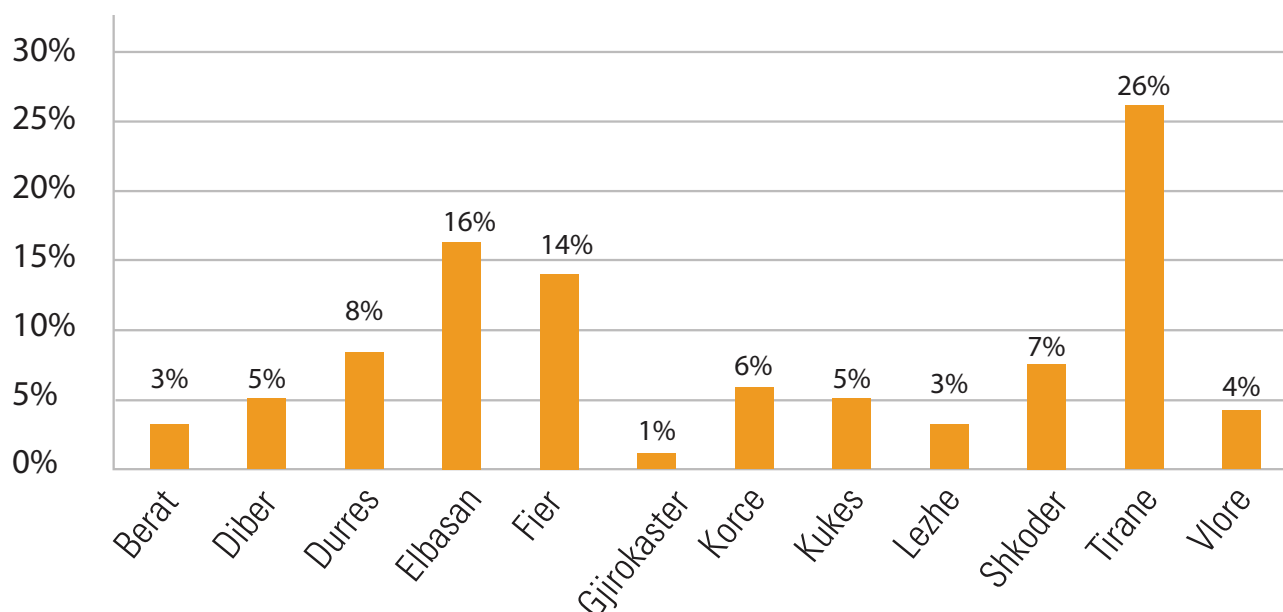
2 Gender Sample (%)



Male Female

³³See https://www.bpe.al/al/kendi-be_rinine_2020-2023_Diber.pdf

3 Sample for region (%)



Regarding the ethnicity of the young people who answered the questionnaire, 92% declare to be Albanian; 4% belong to the Roma community and 4% to the Egyptian community. A majority of these young men and women attend pre-university education (45%), 31% are attending higher studies, 16% are employed and 2% attend vocational education. 6% of respondents declare that they are neither studying nor working.

For the purposes of this study and for further interpretation of the results of the questionnaire, 11 national focus groups were conducted in cities such as Tirana, Korçë, Shkodër, Kukës, Diber, Lezhë, Durrës, Berat, Elbasan, Fier and Vlora, with the participation of 100 young men and women aged 15–24, who shared their very valuable opinions and ideas on the results and recommendations of this study. The distribution of the sample according to the criteria was:

15–19 years old – 77%

20–24 years old – 23%

Girls – 69%

Boys – 31%

Rural area – 26%

Roma/Egyptian community – 7%



Section II – Youth participation - Public activism and democracy

A society where public activism and democracy are strong has more opportunities for sustainable development and fulfilment of the needs and aspirations of its citizens. Public activism and democracy are essential for young people as they prepare them to participate in an open society and feel included. These values are embedded in their civic consciousness and have an impact on how they develop as active and responsible individuals in society.

However, young people in our country are indifferent when it comes to participating in decision-making and about 63% of respondents affirm the above. This is in line with the study “Political Engagement in Albania 2020³⁴”, stating that young people in Albania report the lowest level of knowledge and interest in politics. According to the data from the questionnaire and focus groups with young people, the indifference is related to the fact that only 39% of them feel represented in decision-making bodies, while about 60% are not sure if their participation would influence to more democratic decisions. As a result, 79% state that they are distanced from political parties, while only 9% declare that they are engaged in political groups. The young people from different cities who participated in focus groups said that their indifference stems from either not believing that the issues they raise are addressed or from feeling disappointed after being included once, and then having their thoughts and opinions ignored. Disillusioned with politics and feeling that they are called to meetings to fill the seats, they choose to distance themselves and become indifferent when it comes to participating in decision-making. During the focus group in Shkodër, a 23-year-old boy from the Egyptian community said:

“I have had many invitations to participate in various activities. Initially I did participate, but I noticed that my word was not heard and I was there only to fill the hall, so I no longer participate, as I realized that I do not feel included or heard.”

Although young people are aware of decision-making bodies at the central and local level where they can be a part, the vast majority of them state that they had the opportunity and were more engaged in school structures, such as the student government or council. 34.3% of them declare that they were part of the school senate, 13.4% were engaged in the student government, 10.8% were part of the Local Youth Council and few were engaged in municipal councils or in the National Youth Congress. What is worth noting is that about 31% of young people have not been engaged in any of the decision-making bodies.

Focus groups with young people have revealed that, in eight areas, the primary places for their engagement are schools and non-governmental organizations. Young people also mention Local Youth Councils in Durrës and Diber, and NGOs that are particularly active in Lezha and Shkodra, and a multifunctional centre devoted to youth in Fier Municipality. Discussion in the focus group in Tirana, indicate that young people lack proper spaces, apart from engagement with the educational institutions where they are a part. For a large and dynamic city like Tirana, it is important to distribute information and inform about the spaces dedicated to young people and the work/projects carried out by different organizations.

Regarding the participation of young people in youth organizations, 71% of respondents declare that they are not engaged and only 29% are part of the activities of these organizations. But, as shown in Figure 4, most young people are willing and ready to participate in youth organizations or other decision-making structures for young people. In the focus group conducted in the city of Korça, a 24-year-old man said:

³⁴https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Albania%20Political%20Engagement%20Survey%202020_Albanian.pdf

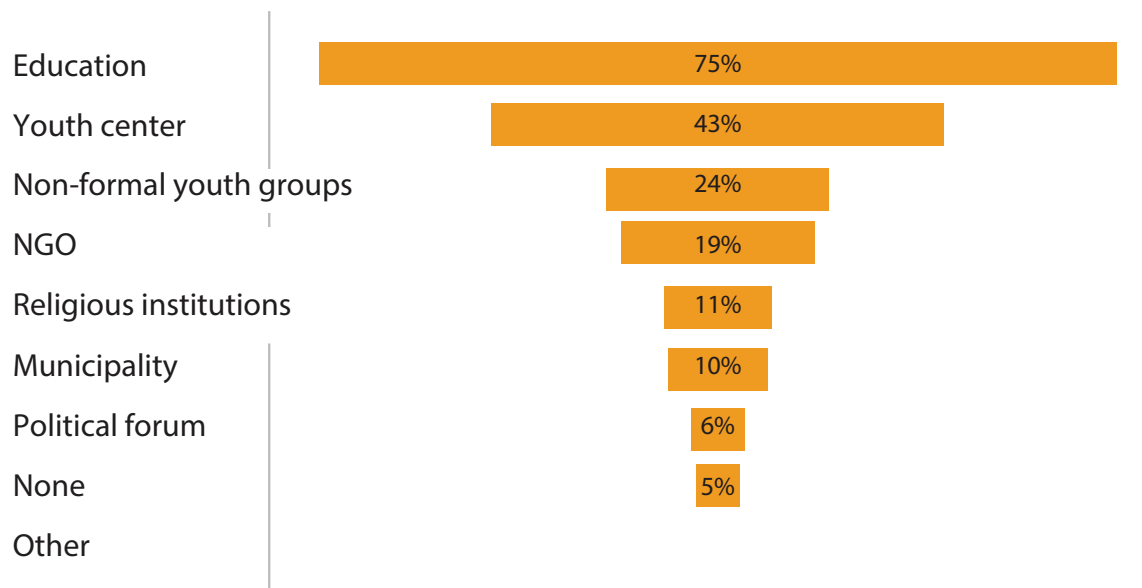
"I would very much like to be a part of youth decision-making structures, but there is no possibility to engage, as there is no fairness in selection".

Section III. Community Participation and Engagement

The active participation of young people in community activities promotes the development of social skills and awareness, and establishes strong bonds between people. It can play a key role in solving local challenges and issues, bringing innovative ideas and positive energy. In this way, young people become an inevitable force for the progress and well-being of the community as a whole. Institutions that cooperate with them, various non-governmental organizations and youth centres, whose focus is empowering young people and increasing their participation in civic and the democratic life, play a major role in raising young people's awareness of the importance of being active citizens.

According to young people, the most active structures in their community are schools, youth centres, informal youth groups and NGOs, followed by the municipality, religious institutions, political forums, etc. (Figure 4).

4 The most active and young structures in the community



When asked which of the institutions they prefer to attend more, the school takes the first place, followed by youth centres and civil society organizations. Therefore, it is very important to engage educational institutions and youth centres for the inclusion of young people in society and community, without differences based on gender, ethnicity, religion, origin or economic status. However, there is a lack of information and mass awareness regarding participation, especially in Berat, Dibër, Kukës, Lezhë, Tirana, Vlorë and Durrës. The young people of the focus groups do not hesitate to say that they have no information about the activities, decision-making structures or the forms of how they can be engaged.

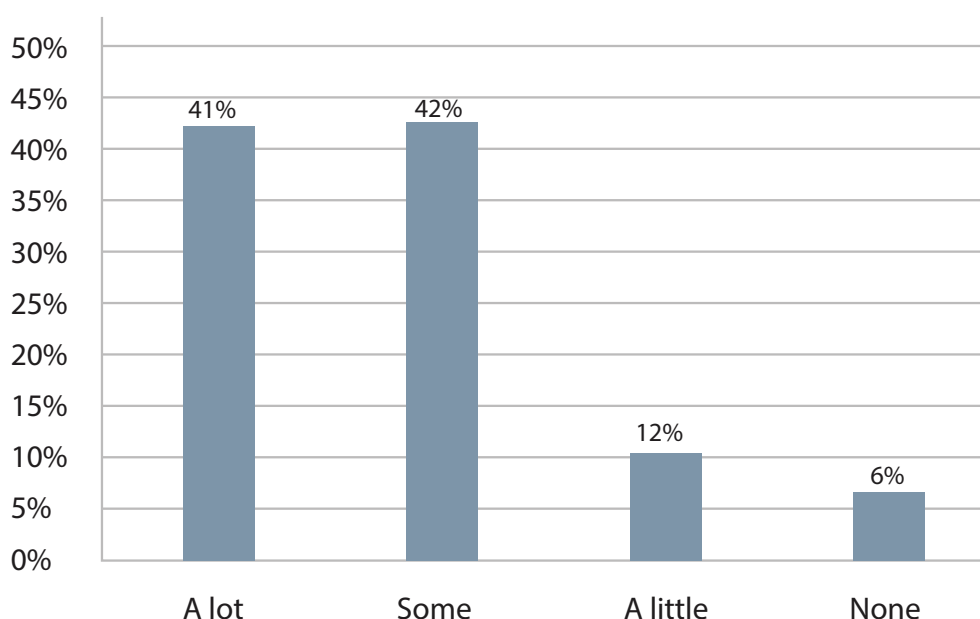
In terms of the most frequent activities organized in the community, sports, cultural and entertainment activities are the ones most often offered to young people, mainly organized by schools. Meanwhile, when asked how involved they feel in these activities, 30% of them say that they do not think that their role has any impact. This is a high percentage that requires greater attention from all actors involved in working with young people in order to increase their motivation and hope that they can bring change through their actions.

Likewise, despite the engagement of young people in the activities offered in the community, in some cities such as Vlora, Korça and Elbasan, the young people in the focus groups said that most of the topics addressed are not actual, the activities offered are not fun and not inclusive, therefore they do not engage or feel indifferent.

Referring to the gender aspect, 53% of young people declare that in the community where they live, both boys and girls are equally engaged, compared to 23% who believe that boys are more engaged, while 24% see girls as more engaged in the community. Although in focus groups, most young people affirmed that girls are more active in social and community activities and recommended the need for greater involvement and motivation of boys to engage and contribute to the community.

Young people in the focus groups clearly expressed their needs and desire to be active and to undertake community initiatives, as well as to be supported morally, technically and financially by local institutions (municipality), school, family, NGOs, and businesses in undertaking these initiatives.

Despite all the barriers and challenges they face in terms of community engagement, a significant part of young people (41%) fully believe that the institutions that work with them can bring about real changes in the community (Figure 5).



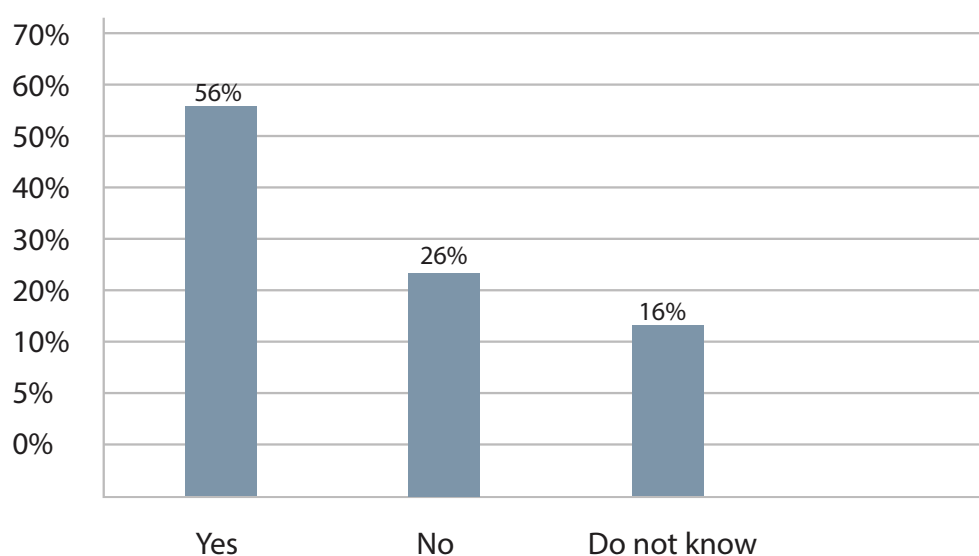
5 The belief that "Institutions that work with young people can bring real changes"

Section IV. Participation and Engagement in Education

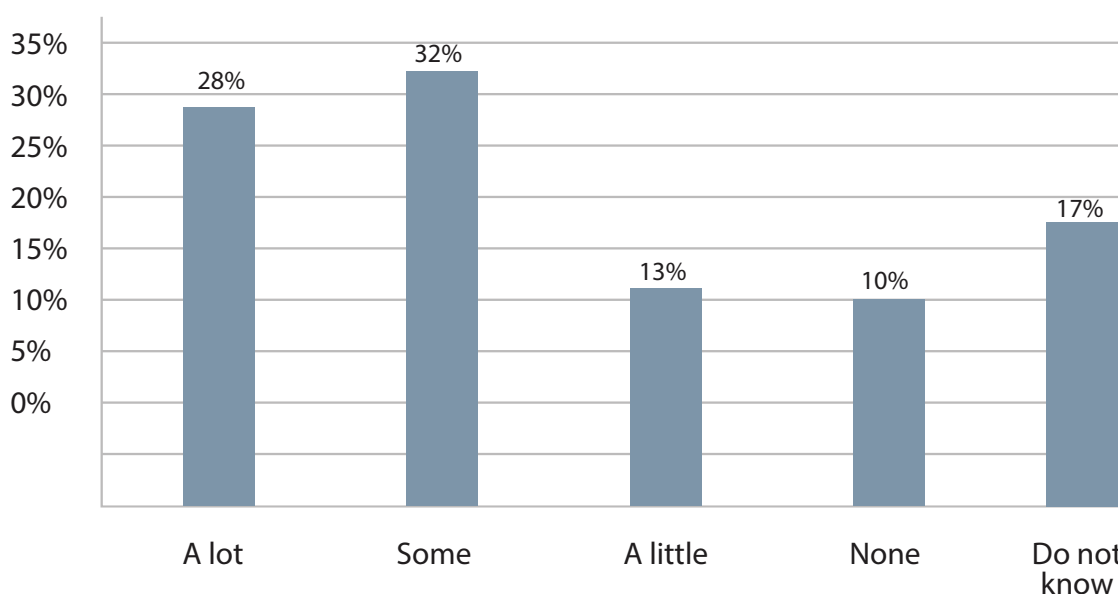
Educational institutions are places where youth participation should not only be encouraged, but also applied, by providing equal opportunities to elect and be elected to decision-making structures such as student government, student senate or council, and activities that promote their participation in decision-making.

Asked if they had equal opportunities to elect and be elected in decision-making structures in the educational institutions they attend, 62% of young people confirmed that they had this opportunity. In addition, 56% of young people declare that in their schools there were activities that exclusively promote the participation of young people in decision-making (Figure 6).

When asked about the level of representation at school/university structures, only 28% of young people feel/have felt completely represented by them (Figure 7).



6 School activities that promote the participation of young people



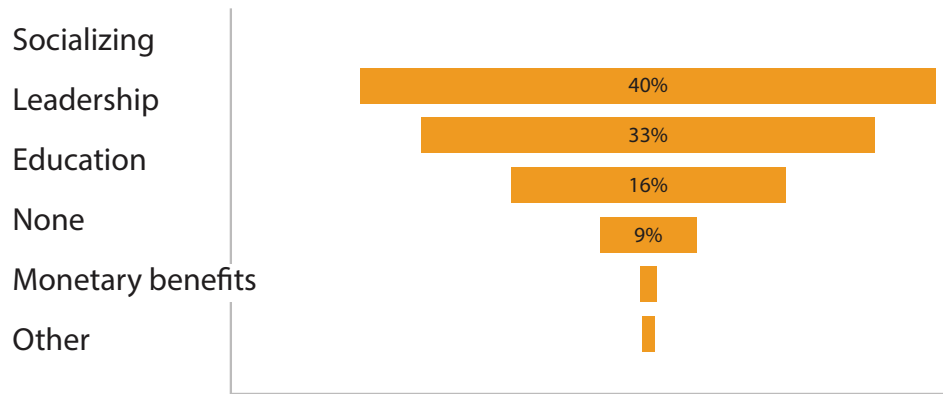
7 How representative young people feel in school structures

Referring to discussions in the focus groups, especially in Berat, Elbasan and Kukës, the majority of young people say that they do not feel represented, this mainly related to the representation at school, in the senate and Local Youth Councils. Young people describe these structures as formal, lacking equality and meritocracy in elections or fair competition. A 17-year-old girl from Kukës said:

"For two years I have been part of the school senate, which is completely non-functional. Based on my personal experience, I don't want to get involved anymore, because there has been no initiative from the senate to be proud of or to motivate other school students to become part of it".

88% of the respondents claim that their families have supported them to participate in activities organized by the school/university. These activities are mainly organized by the school management, teachers, student government and civil society organizations. In addition, it was their personal initiative that pushed or motivated young people to participate in school/university activities, followed by motivation from parents, teachers or their own social circle. According to the focus groups, young people in 8 cities have become part of various initiatives, mainly undertaken by themselves, schools, or NGOs, initiatives which were mostly focused on awareness and support/charity activities and current sensitive topics related to the environment, bullying and violence. What's most impressive is that in big cities, such as Tirana and Durrës, young people says that there are few spaces to get involved and they have not participated in community initiatives. It is worth emphasizing the importance of the active participation of young people in school/university activities, as they foster a rich and diversified experience, preparing them not only for academic challenges, but also for personal and social development in society. Participation in school activities helps develop interpersonal skills such as communication, cooperation or conflict management, as well as offers young people opportunities to build strong social ties.

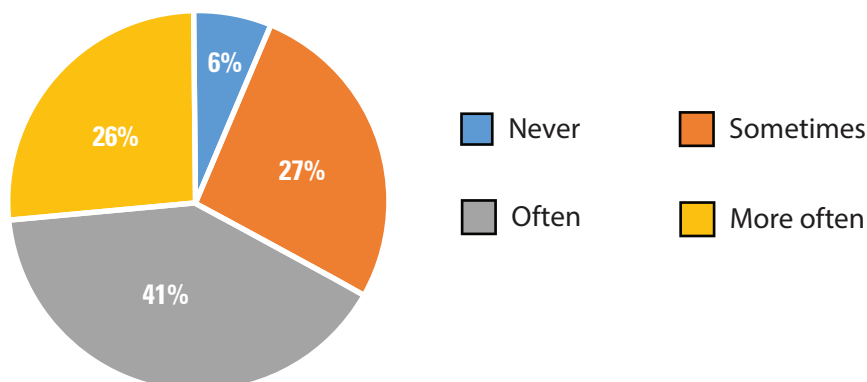
Figure 11 provides information on young people's perspective on what they benefited most from participating in school/university activities or NGOs. 40% of them have chosen socialization as an added value, 33% said that, as a result of their engagement, they have gained communication/management skills and 16% received further information and education. Likewise, in discussions conducted with the focus groups, the young people said that by engaging in various activities they gained better communication and personal skills, such as speaking in public, they felt included and more social, and that the entire experience was useful to them.



8 Benefits from participation in organized activities

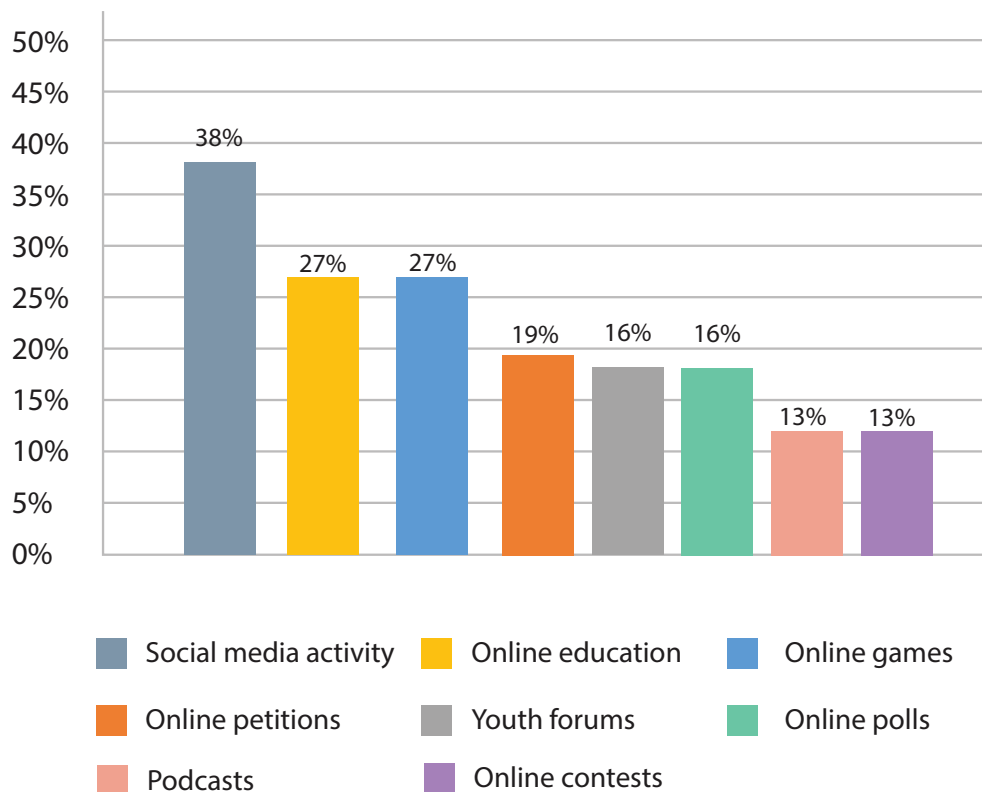
Section V. Participation and Online Technology

In the digital age, it is extremely important to use online platforms as a space for young people to express their thoughts and passions, connect with organizations and groups with common interests, and contribute to the social and political debate. 67% of young people surveyed chose social media (Facebook, Instagram, etc.) as the main source of information motivating their participation, followed by websites (21%), and television (11%). 56% of young people see social networks as a reliable source to get information related to them and their participation in society. Although more than half of young people (54%) use social networks for leisure and entertainment, almost the other half of them report that they also use social networks to get informed about causes related to them and for social activism. Asked how often they are online, 67% reported that they are often or very often engaged online (Figure 9).



9 The frequency of using social networks.

Young people reported various forms of online engagement, such as participation in online training, virtual games, online petitions, youth forums or online discussions, online voting, informative podcasts or webinars, online contests (Figure 10). However, as they said during the focus groups, although social networks are the place where they engage the most and receive information, the use of technology in a massive, non-constructive way has distanced them from each other, has diminished their interest in participating in other activities and consequently, they have become more indifferent and individualistic.



10 Online participation form

In addition, social networks are often a source of danger for young people, who report being exposed to online teasing, bullying and harassment. A significant part of young people (17%), reported that they felt bullied, harassed and endangered while using social networks and 10% preferred not to answer. Meanwhile only 7% have reported cases of online abuse.

VI. Conclusions and Recommendations

It is essential to recognize that addressing youth-related issues requires a multifaceted approach that involves government policies, work and efforts by the civil society organizations and educational institutions, and active participation by young people themselves.

Based on an analysis of data collected from 650 questionnaires with young people in 12 districts and data from 100 young people who participated in the focus groups, the young people and engaged experts have drawn conclusions and made recommendations regarding the situation and possibilities of empowerment, participation, and engagement of young people in Albania. These recommendations are evidence-based and aim at improving youth structures and practices in support of advancing the rule of law, democracy, human rights, and gender equality.

However, before going to the recommendations, we should highlight some of the barriers related to the lack of participation and engagement of young people in decision-making, as identified by the focus groups:

- **Individual barriers** – The majority of young people in the focus groups said that often the reason of their lack of engagement in public life is closely related to their lack of interest. Young people may have other personal priorities, plans related only to education/career or plans to leave the country, which makes them passive and not interested in active participation in society. Another reason is related to other commitments they have at work or with their families, and consequently the lack of time for involvement in other activities. Some young people said that nowadays they feel pessimistic, experience anxiety about their future or a lack of self-confidence, which makes them withdrawn and not active. In addition, individualism appears to be an aspect that affects their lack of awareness about the importance of interaction with others and public participation. Other reasons that were mentioned by young people, and which are important enough to be addressed, are related to the fact that young people did not feel heard or represented in the activities they participated in, they were not exposed to successful or positive models of youth participation, and lack trust and hope that things can change in the future.
- **Family barriers** – The young people in the focus groups said that parents are often uninformed and not aware of the benefits of youth participation and engagement in the public and social life. They do not appreciate the importance of community engagement but are rather focused on education for their children or lucrative jobs. They also stressed that parents are also distrustful about the role and functions of youth organizations and institutions. They lack information on their programs and feel insecure and distrustful to allow or motivate their kids to become part.
- **School and community related barriers** – Findings from the focus groups were almost unanimous in terms of school and community-related challenges and barriers that influence youth non-participation and disengagement. For them, decision-making structures in school (e.g., student government) are dysfunctional. There is no equality, meritocracy or pure competition in the selection of school representatives. According to young people, only good students or those who have good relations with teachers are included in these structures. Likewise, there is no inclusiveness in the activities organized at school, favouring only the best or “preferred” students. As a result, many other young people with desires, potential, talents and the need to engage feel excluded or not represented. As far as the community is concerned, the young people claimed that there is a lack of information and awareness regarding the importance of youth engagement and the benefits that come from it. For many young people, a barrier to participation is their own social circle that bullies or mocks them in case they participate in activities they are prejudiced against, this especially for boys who participate in activities of a social, community or artistic nature.

- **Barriers related to local and youth structures, and NGOs in the country** – According to young people, there are very few opportunities and activities for them to participate where they live. There is a lack of activities as well as a lack of promotion and information about activities, especially from NGOs, which have programs for young people in the area. In addition, the activities that require the engagement and voice of young people often take place in locations that are not accessible to everyone, thus excluding young people who may live in remote rural areas or those who come from marginalized groups. Regarding the local youth structures, they are mostly formal and not active, and many young people have no information about their existence and role. Another reason why young people are reluctant to participate and engage is related to the organization of activities that are not interesting for them, with topics that are non-current, non-inclusive or inappropriate for their level of maturity and mentality. Also, while talking about the online world, young people explained that the massive and non-constructive use of technology is driving them away from each other, while increasing their individualism. But they also emphasized that technology and social media are the communication channels where they get information and spend a lot of time, therefore they should be used more widely to promote activities and raise awareness about youth engagement.

Analysing the abovementioned barriers, it is important to note that a lot of efforts are needed to increase self-confidence among young people and their sense of inclusion. It is necessary for young people to be empowered and become aware of their role in society. Young people should be heard, they should be supported by schools, by local and youth structures, and by NGOs to undertake initiatives, and their opinions should be appreciated and taken into consideration. Equality, meritocracy, encouragement, and equal competition must be ensured in the election processes of young people in schools or youth structures. The undertaken initiatives should be as comprehensive as possible, without differences based on gender, ethnicity, religion, origin or economic status.

Recommendations suggested by young people are grouped more specifically as follows:

Respecting the rights of young people for engagement and participation:

- Establish mechanisms at the local and national level that ensure full engagement and representation of all young people in decision-making and the drafting of youth policies.
- Establish mechanisms that empower and ensure that the local government includes young people and makes decisions based on their suggestions.
- Participation mechanisms must be built in such a way as to ensure the inclusion of all young people (girls, boys, and marginalized groups), taking into account the differences, challenges and barriers they encounter in terms of their engagement.
- Ensure that all professionals working with and for young people are trained on their rights and participation mechanisms to ensure that the voice of young people is heard and taken into account (based on their age and maturity).
- Youth policies should be drawn up based on data and evidence from youth-led studies, and

financial mechanisms should also be provided for their implementation.

- Map and document the best practices and experiences of youth engagement (nationally and internationally).
- Public spending on youth should go beyond education. For young people to thrive, investments are needed in sports infrastructure, community/public spaces, youth centres, art and culture premises, etc.
- Information and awareness on youth engagement:
- Inform young people about local and national participation mechanisms, about their rights and responsibilities in decision-making. Emphasize the role of school and youth structures for clear information on active citizenship, fundamental rights of young people, youth legislation and the role of institutions.
- Inform young people about services and opportunities available to them for learning, volunteering, and involvement in public and political life. Strengthen the promotion of youth-related activities, initiatives, or projects carried out by local structures and NGOs. Use communication channels such as social media, where young people have greater access for information. Strengthen the role of the media in informing young people and guiding them in the direction of values rather than anti-values.
- Inform and raise awareness among parents and community members about the importance of youth participation and engagement. Raise awareness about the value of humanitarian commitment alongside commitments for profitable purposes, the importance of cooperation and interaction in the community in addition to individualism, and encourage young people to play an educational and motivating role in this process.

Youth activities and inclusiveness:

- Ensure that entertainment, sports, cultural activities, and available green spaces exist for young people and are accessible in all municipalities, especially for girls, young people with disabilities, young people from rural areas, those belonging to minority groups, etc.
- Offer activities that ensure the meaningful participation of all young people (not just for the best students).
- Activities should introduce current, relevant, specific, and practical topics, adapted to the age group and mentality of young people (the fun component should be part of it too).
- Young people believe that engaging in activities that support the growth of a positive identity and emotional and psychological well-being (such as self-confidence, communication, stability, tolerance, and diversity) is just as important as education.
- Provide spaces and opportunities (exchanges) that support dialogue between girls and boys, young people in rural or urban areas, or from different cultural backgrounds, in order to foster cooperation, tolerance, and prevention of conflicts, and acceptance of diversity.
- Carry out activities that promote positive models of youth engagement and youth-led projects that promote the country, in order to further encourage the sense of belonging and hope to stay and contribute to the country.
- Local structures (municipality/local units), NGOs, businesses and the community to support youth community initiatives (financially and technically).

- NGOs provide activities/trainings/awareness campaigns with a focus on gender issues at schools/universities for all young people, families, and community in order to reduce gender stereotypes.
- Career counselling offered as a means of dispelling stereotypes about gender roles, emphasizing the potential that young people have regardless of gender.
- Girls and boys should be given equal opportunities to be informed, interact and live together in the current context, where the country's democracy is a priority.
- Document and recognize the participation of young people and their contribution in the community life through stimulation forms such as certificates or letters of reference, which are important for a number of national and international applications.

Work with families:

Work with families to make parents aware of the importance and benefits of community engagement and participation of young people in decision-making.

- Offer positive parenting programs that teach parents about critical thinking from a young age, active listening as a skill in children, and the spirit of cooperation.
- Train parents on gender issues, thus contributing to the elimination of stereotypes about gender roles.

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PART TWO

National Study on Gender Issues

Abbreviations

EU - European Union

CAWI - Computer Assisted Web Interviewing

CEDAW - Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women

INSTAT - Institute of Statistics

IDM - Institute for Democracy and Mediation

NEET - Young people not in education, employment or training

UN - United Nations

UNSCR - United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security

UNDP - United Nations Development Program

NSGE - National Strategy on Gender Equality

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Overview

It is essential to recognize that addressing youth-related gender issues requires a multifaceted approach involving government policies, civil society organizations, educational institutions and active participation by the youth themselves.

Terre des hommes (Tdh) is the leading Swiss organization for children's aid. Through various programs, every year it provides assistance to over four million children and their families in about 40 countries around the world. One of the countries where Terre des hommes operates is Albania, with headquarters in Tirana. In fulfilment of its mission, one of the organization's projects is 'Youth Voice for Justice and Rights', funded by the Austrian Development Cooperation (ADC) through the Austrian Development Agency (ADA). One of the promised results within the project is the drafting of a national study led by young people, on the participation of young Albanians in issues of democracy, human rights, and the community. The involvement of youth as co-researchers and data processors, in addition to their pertinent experience and research, has been a crucial aspect in the development and impact of the study.

The undertaking of this study at the national level is in line with the vision and mission of the project implemented by Terre des hommes Albania 'Youth Voice for Justice and Rights', funded by the Austrian Development Cooperation through the Austrian Development Agency (ADA). The National Youth Strategy 2022–2029's vision and mission, as well as the impact of enhancing youths' conceptual and practical capacities on community engagement, were taken into consideration when designing the study's trajectory.

Specific Objective 1.3 "Youth studies are developed and become part of study programs in higher education institutions and references for further developments in the field of youth" and the relevant measures include:

1.3.2 Youth development policies are built on factual and documentary analyses.

1. A basic reference study is drawn up regarding youth autonomy and equal opportunities according to the needs of young people (2022-23).

2. A basic reference study is drawn up regarding youth inclusiveness and the challenges of including all youth categories in the country's development processes (2022-23).

The study was carried out at the national level with the cooperation of 23 young people, under the scientific mentorship of two leaders, covering 12 districts of Albania. The research process extended into three main phases: first, research and scientific work; second, field work and data collection by young people engaged as co-researchers; and third, data analysis and interpretation. The methodology for data collection was carried out according to the CAWI (Computer Assisted Web Interviewing) technique, otherwise known as data collection through

the Internet. Data collection was carried out throughout September 2023, on the Microsoft Forms platform, and the study included a sample of 650 young men and women in the age group of 15–19 and 20–24 years old, including young people from urban and rural areas, from vulnerable communities, and young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET). Likewise, 11 focus groups were conducted with 100 young people from 12 regions of the country, with representation of young people from urban and rural areas, girls and boys, and vulnerable communities.

Based on the data analysis, engaged youth and experts have drawn conclusions and made recommendations regarding the general situation, empowerment opportunities, participation, and gender biases that young people in Albania must deal with. Based on findings, recommendations are made to improve youth structures and practices to support the advancement of the rule of law, democracy, human rights and gender equality

Below are some of the key findings of the study:

42% of young people think that gender affects their participation or non-participation in Albania and 16% say that they do not know how gender affects it.

24% of young people reported that they personally experienced gender bias while participating in youth activities and 13% of them preferred not to answer.

"My friends ironically call me 'meeting boy' and I feel a little bad, however this has not prevented me from participating in various activities, because I benefit from them"
boy, 18 years old, Dibër.

10% of young people said that they wanted to participate in activities that are considered as suitable for the other gender, but prejudices have stopped them.

63% of young people said that there were times when they did not participate in activities organized by the school/university because of the society's opinion that has an influence on them.

44% of young people think that parents in Albania encourage boys more to participate in activities, compared to 11% of young people who think that girls are encouraged more.

Meanwhile, 46% of young people report that families encourage both girls and boys equally.

"I notice that in our families, no matter how much the situation has changed compared to the past, there is still a mentality that the son must have everything and he is the priority in the family".
girl, 17 years old, Lezha

In addition, it was emphasized in the focus groups that girls are encouraged more to pursue education, community engagement, family work, while boys are encouraged to pursue employment, management roles, family businesses and profitable activities.

Young people from various cities that participated in the focus groups made it clear that discrimination is more visible when comparing rural and urban areas. According to them, girls in the villages are more discriminated against and more uninformed.

I. Purpose and objectives of the study

The purpose of this study is to research gender barriers that prevent the engagement of young people in the community, democracy, and the protection of their rights.

The objectives of the study are as follows:

- To analyze the legal mechanisms and policies that support the empowerment and participation of children/youth in the advancement of human rights from the perspective of gender equality.
- To identify existing practices throughout the country that promote and support equal gender participation and cooperation of children/youth with local actors for the advancement of democracy, human rights, and the environment at the local level.
- To explore the gender-based barriers and gaps that affect appropriate and meaningful youth engagement.

The study, which reflects the findings and conclusions of an analysis conducted on the basis of a rigorous methodology, has come up with concrete recommendations customized for Tdh, which will be used in future interventions of Tdh.

II. Methodology

The study was carried out at the national level with the cooperation of 23 young people under the scientific mentorship of two leaders, covering 12 districts of Albania.

The research process extended into three main phases: first, research and scientific work; second, field work and data collection by young people engaged as co-researchers; and third, data analysis and interpretation.¹ A research framework for the study was drawn up in cooperation with the young people.

¹The study was built on the same research process and methodology, as well as respecting the same content structure and form as the Youth-led National Study on Youth Participation"

The process of the study took the following steps:

- **Identification and training/guiding of a group 23 young people** in order to make them part of the study as a whole, starting from drafting a gender-focused questionnaire to data collection and establishing focus groups with young people in 12 districts.
- **Definition of the research objectives:** This included specific research objectives and identification, in collaboration with the young people, of the main areas of interest, such as youth structures, child/youth empowerment initiatives, participation mechanisms, and gender bias in the Albanian context.
- **Revision of the existing literature:** A revision of the existing literature was done to understand the current state of knowledge on youth gender issues in the international arena, with a focus on youth policies in the EU and Albania. Academic papers, studies, legal documents, national strategies, NGOs' publications and data from international organizations were analyzed. This helped to build a solid foundation for the study and to identify gaps that need further exploration in the case of Albania.
- **Identification of best practices for maintaining gender balance:** Successful practices of empowerment and participation by young people that have contributed positively to the advancement of the rule of law, democracy, human rights, and gender equality in Albania were identified, and the factors that make these practices effective were also analyzed.
- **Analysis of the role of gender in shaping initiatives** for youth empowerment and participation.
- **Data collection and analysis:** The methodology for data collection was carried out according to the CAWI (Computer Assisted Web Interviewing) technique, otherwise known as data collection through the Internet. The data collection was carried out in September 2023, on the Microsoft Forms platform, and the study included a sample of 650 young men and women in the age groups 15–19 and 20–24 years old. Qualitative data were collected through 11 focus groups conducted with 100 young people from all over the country.
- **Conclusions and recommendations:** Based on the data analysis, engaged young people and experts have drawn conclusions and made recommendations about the situation and possibilities of empowerment, participation, and gender bias among young people in Albania. The recommendations to improve youth structures and practices to support the advancement of the rule of law, democracy, human rights, and gender equality are based on.

Throughout the research process, ethical standards were maintained and data confidentiality was ensured as needed.

The methodology used to involve young co-researchers

Terre des hommes Albania included as co-researchers in the study 23 young people from 12 regions of the country. They were selected through an application process, initially defining the

main criteria to be met by the young applicants (Annex A). Two young people were selected in each district. Following the selection process, the young people took part in a 2-day workshop where they were equipped with knowledge about youth-led research, its process and steps. In addition, they were provided with theoretical aspects of youth engagement and legal mechanisms, and were oriented on the methodology and practical tools on how to draft a questionnaire.

Together with the experts and staff, the young people received the necessary instructions to distribute and forward the data collected through the questionnaire in their communities after several consultative meetings on the techniques to be used to design and distribute the questionnaire, to conduct meetings with young people in local focus groups, and draw up conclusions and recommendations based on data.

The questionnaire designed by young people (Annex B) was administered online to 650 young people. Questions about “Participation and gender issues” were one of the 5 areas where the comprehensive study “Albanian youth and their rights in democracy” was focused.

After completing the questionnaire, the youth and the support staff conducted 11 focus groups (Annex C) with the participation of 100 young people from the 12 regions of Albania.

Sampling

The selection of study samples was based on official data from INSTAT (January 1, 2023) for the population of the age group 15–24.

The questionnaire was applied to two age groups: 15–19 and 20–24. Based on INSTAT data, and the calculation of the sample size and the margin of error, the prediction was that, in order to be as representative as possible, the study had to include a minimum of 384 people from both age groups.

Population	Total	Girls	Boys
15-19	172.076	368.316	87.761
20-24	196.240	97.887	98.353
Total	368.316	182.202	186.114

1 INSTAT official data on the population of the age group 15–19 and 20–24 years old

Population Total	Confidence level	Margin of error	Sample size ²
368.316	95%	5%	384

To ensure that the study is as detailed and representative as possible, even at the district level, INSTAT data from 12 districts were used to provide additional details for every age group and gender. It is observed that the INSTAT database lacks an indicator of the total number of young people in each district. Since this data is lacking, other sources (reports) were explored and the corresponding calculations for each district were based on the total number of the population. This is how the corresponding percentage for each district was extracted (the district population as part of the total population).

	Total Youth	Females	Males	% of the total
Berat	111.431	56.370	55.061	4
Dibër	106.380	51.030	55.350	4
Durrës	289.797	143.757	146.040	10
Elbasan	252.719	128.470	124.249	9
Fier	271.672	136.104	135.568	10
Gjirokastrë	53.314	27.907	25.407	2
Korçë	192.925	98.437	94.488	7
Kukës	71.498	34.783	36.715	3
Lezhë	114.181	58.164	56.017	4
Shkodër	189.164	97.728	91.436	7
Tiranë	925.268	470.061	455.207	34
Vlorë	183.436	92.053	91.383	7
Total	2.761.785	1.394.864	1.366.921	

2 Population data according to INSTAT by district and sampling calculations

Calculations were carried out and this number was provided in order to ensure that the sample was as representative as possible for both urban and rural population, girls and boys, and the age groups 15–19 and 20–24. The number of young people involved in each district included 50 percent males and 50 percent females for each age group.

The selection of the samples was also tested in the workshop organized with the young people on possibilities, limitations, and difficulties they think they may encounter in this process. The sampling of 500 young people (it actually reached 650) in all the districts of the country provided an appropriate representation for each district, thus ensuring not only comprehensiveness but also an opportunity to compare the problems and realities of the communities as concerns the participation of young people with mechanisms set up at the political, legal and social level.

III. Structure of the study

- **Introduction (list of abbreviations, overview, methodology, objectives, content).**
This includes background information, research objectives, and methodology, sampling and concrete research tools
- **General theoretical and legislative framework on the role of gender in youth-related issues.**
The purpose of the second chapter is to provide a detailed conceptual and analytical framework, as a necessary background to the research project, as well as an instrument to better understand and contextualize the research findings. The aim is not to dwell on theoretical concepts, but to have a clear analytical framework that will enable the researchers to interpret the findings and draw the relevant recommendations.
- **Findings and analysis**
This will be the core part of the study and will be organized according to the research objectives outlined in the overview. This being a quantitative and qualitative study, the analysis and discussions will be presented together. Graphics and tables of results will be used to make reading easier.
- **Conclusions and recommendations**
This section will focus on key points and recommendations. The latter have been drafted based on identified issues, while also targeting specific audiences, such as recommendations for the ministry, groups of interest and Tdh.
- **Bibliography.**
- **Annexes: Questionnaire format, focus group instructions, tools used for the study**

IV. General theoretical and legislative framework on the role of gender in youth-related issues

Mechanisms of public participation with gender focus of children and youth.

The involvement of young people in democratic life is of particular importance for the sustainable development of a country, where respect for gender equality plays a key role. Every young person, boy or girl, should be able to know and use their rights, as the only way to get closer to developed countries. The empowerment of young people in democratic systems prioritizes inclusion and gender equality. In this context, the systematic inclusion of girls in these systems, avoiding gender inequality, is a necessary condition for the development of

young people in particular and the entire society in general. When an individual, whether female or male, is treated unequally because of their gender, then we are dealing with gender inequality. This phenomenon occurs in both cases, regardless of gender, but it is more obvious that women are affected more frequently.

Encouraging young people to participate in democratic life as well as supporting their social and civic participation is one of the key points, listed second in the European Union (EU) Youth Strategy 2019–2027.

Point 2:

"Equality of all genders: Gender-based discrimination still affects many young people, especially young girls. Equal opportunities and access to rights must be ensured for all young people".³

The EU always pays attention to the improvement of the well-being of young people, and let us recall here the announcement of the Year of Youth in December 2021, when the city of Lithuania handed Tirana the title of the European Capital of Youth for 2022. In terms of political attention, the EU has declared the Year of Youth as a sign of gratitude for the sacrifices that the young generation made during the pandemic, bringing EU activities to Tirana. Within the framework of the Year of Youth, activities, conferences, and initiatives are planned for young people all over the EU countries.⁴

In addition, UNSCR (the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security), has given special importance to the need to understand the concerns, demands and responsibilities of young people. According to the UNSCR, young people must be involved in decision-making, as the only way for them to give their contribution to social life with equal rights.⁵

Because of the patriarchal nature of Albanian society for generations, the male gender's dominance in society has been evident for a long time. Women and young girls have often faced discrimination only because of this phenomenon that has ruled in our society and which requires the work and desire of all of us to co-exist as equals, regardless of gender.

Efforts have been made and continue to be made so that the mechanism of gender equality can function among young people as an essential link of the Albanian democratic system. In the last ten years, Albania has made a radical change in terms of the implementation of human rights and the empowerment of women. The implementation of gender policies and the legal framework has been significantly improved since Albania joined international conventions, introduced regulatory legal instruments and engaged various international organizations, which together work for and ensure the implementation of human rights, democracy, prohibition of violence and human trafficking, and respect for gender equality in the country.

³ United Nations Development Programme, Gender Equality Strategy 2022-2025, available at: https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2022-09/UNDP_Gender_Equality_Strategy_2022-2025_EN.pdf. (Accessed on September 21, 2023).

⁴ The national guideline for the transition of young people from school to the workplace, Tirana, June 2022, available at: <https://krk.al/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/UDHERREFYESI-KOMBETAR-PER-TRANZICIONIN-E-E-RINJVE-NGA-SHKOLLA-NE-VENDIN-E-PUNES-2-1.pdf> (Accessed on September 12, 2023), page 24.

One of the recent national policies that aims to achieve gender equality in Albania is the National Strategy for Gender Equality 2021–2030, drafted in June 2021 by the Ministry of Health and Social Protection, whose vision is:

“A society which values gender equality and justice as fundamental conditions for sustainable, social, economic and political development of the country, empowers all individuals to enjoy equal rights and opportunities in all walks of life, does not allow anyone to be left behind, and which relies on the principle of zero tolerance against harmful practices, gender-based violence and domestic violence, by punishing perpetrators and protecting, rehabilitating and reintegrating abused persons”. (NSGE 2021 – 2030, page 23).

Such initiatives, as the above-mentioned strategies, are added value in the current worldwide fight against gender inequality among young people, where everyone has the right to be acquainted with /informed about living in a democratic system. Young people do not have to leave their country. Based on several public opinion polls, conducted by the Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM) during the period November–December 2019, an overwhelming majority (65%) of respondents in the age group 18–25 reported that they want to leave Albania.⁶ In fact, this phenomenon does not help the development of the country, since the development of the country requires their presence.

Increasing the level of representation of young girls and positioning them with the same rights as boys in the advancement of democracy is a task that belongs to the whole community, including families, schools, and the surrounding environment. All these elements have the obligation to influence the dissipation of negative stereotypes according to which girls cannot be involved in social life in the same way as boys. By eliminating this stereotype and supporting girls to believe in equal rights with boys, we give a strong impetus to increasing interest in the same rights of representation as the other sex. Society faces daily social and economic crises that are created by people themselves. It seems that these crises weigh more on girls only because of gender discrimination.

“The climate crisis, COVID-19, and almost every other humanitarian and development challenge affect women worse, as a result of unequal distribution of power and entrenched and deep gender discrimination” (UNDP, 2022).

In order to prevent gender inequality, the use of several mechanisms is required, which, in order to be functional within the community must position young girls from the beginning in the same rank as boys when it comes to recognizing and implementing freedoms and rights for all human beings.

Such a mechanism to prevent gender inequality in the participation of children/youth in the advancement of the rule of law, democracy, and human rights is the work done by various national and international non-governmental organizations, which carry out projects/training

⁵Young people's participation and civic engagement, available at: <https://www.unicef.org/evaluation/media/1581/file/A%20guide%20to%20action%20what%20works%20on%20adolescent%20and%20young%20people%20engagement.pdf>, (Accessed on September 13, 2023)
⁶Vrutgman, L., & Bino, B., (2020). Trust in Governance Opinion Poll 2019. Tirana: IDM, available at UNDP Albania <https://www.undp.org/albania/press-releases/presentation-%E2%80%99Trust-governance-2019%E2%80%99-opinion-poll-findings> (Accessed on September 9, 2023).

closely related to gender issues. Their mission, while carrying out their social and legal counselling, is for young people to be familiar with their rights and freedoms related to democracy, the development of the country, and their well-being.

Such trainings and projects with a focus on the empowerment of girls in democratic systems are part of a very important mechanism for gender issues. Girls learn that they have the same rights as boys, despite the fact that the context in which they live has not given them the opportunity to reflect on having equal rights with boys in terms of decision-making and empowerment in society.

The local legal and regulatory acts constitute another mechanism, which is responsible for disseminating knowledge among young people on gender equality issues. In addition, these acts monitor the implementation of international conventions and instruments related to this phenomenon, as well as the implementation of the respective legal bases, in order to turn the situation in favour of the girls. The legal basis for legal matters is entwined with the information that young people receive in textbooks on their individual learning years. On the one hand, the government is responsible for drafting new laws, by-laws, and supporting gender mainstreaming policies to increase the participation of girls in the advancement of the rule of law and democracy, and on the other hand, there are a number of mechanisms that focus on promotion, knowledge, communication, awareness and training, so that these acts can be implemented.

Another mechanism to ensure gender equality in all areas of young people's lives is awareness-raising and knowledge that young people receive at home and in schools. According to data from INSTAT, apparently there is a decrease in the number of young people enrolled in the education system.

We know that in the 21st century a lot of efforts are required to empower girls in democratic systems; therefore, their educational progress is important for a country's development strategy. Girls' interest in being well informed about human rights and gender equality is shaped by the way it is communicated to them from the social environment where they live. It is the educational, family and social environment that gives a contribution to increase this interest in girls, starting with their general formation. The whole community must have full faith in the intellectual growth of girls, thereby influencing the belief that girls are raised to increase the demand on themselves and to act in accordance with their rights. Parents and teachers have an obligation to make it clear to young people that there is no gender difference in terms of children/youth representation in a democratic system.

Today, Albanian society needs to increase the number of girls in the areas of rule of law and democracy; therefore real studies on gender equality at national level are necessary and a good mechanism to eliminate barriers. Scientific research and field work on gender equality issues among young people help to eliminate barriers to gender equality.

⁷Social and demographic indicator, INSTAT 2020, available at: <http://www.instat.gov.al/al/temat/treguesit-demografik%C3%ABdhesocial%C3%AB/popullsia/#tab3> (Accessed on September 4, 2023).

Genuine studies on gender awareness help young people to cooperate. Studies at the national level help to understand the causes and consequences of the phenomenon, but also what may be the mechanisms that lead to the achievement of gender equality among young people, despite social and cultural barriers. In addition, these studies help to understand the instruments that young people need in order to face their challenges in the labour market, where despite the improvements youth unemployment in Albania still remains at high levels.⁸

Based on the experience of the most advanced countries, and closely working with international conventions to ensure the implementation of legal acts focused on respect for human rights and gender equality, Albanian society prevents the barriers stemming from the outdated mentality of gender inequality and advances toward development. Young people are more open to cooperation, therefore in many cases they become themselves promoters of gender equality.

International agreements ratified by law

There is no international/European document to specifically or separately address youth participation from a gender perspective. The United Nations or the European Union itself have chosen a connecting focus of both concepts, mentioning the participation of young people as an instrument or tool that will empower the change and develop mindsets and policies for gender equality.⁹ Even the strategic objectives of the European Union place gender equality as a separate cause from youth participation. An analysis of legal documents at the international, European, regional, and national level, indicates that the participation of young people from a gender perspective is not a separate chapter addressed by the legislator, but the legal and wider political interpretations enable a close connection between the participation of young people and the gender equality cause. The participation of young people is not only a matter for boys, but an opportunity that the rule of law must offer and guarantee to both sexes. This aspect is emphasized in the mission and vision of a significant number of international organizations.

The European Convention on Human Rights includes gender discrimination (Article 14) by sanctioning that the enjoyment of the rights and freedoms provided for in the Convention will be ensured without discrimination for reasons of sex, race, colour, language, religion...etc. The Convention raises the cause of gender discrimination as a key element to peacefully dispose of the fundamental rights and freedoms of the individual. The EU Charter of Fundamental Rights also prohibits discrimination on any grounds, including sex (Article 21 of the Charter).

There is also the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women adopted by the United Nations Assembly (CEDAW).¹⁰ These key dimensions and principles established by international and European documents are mandatory to be implemented, even when it comes to the participation of young girls with equal rights to boys.

⁸Economic Reform Programme 2020-2022, Government of Albania, January 2020, available at: <https://new.financa.gov.al/wpcontent/uploads/2020/03/Economic-Reform-Programme-2020-2022.pdf> (Accessed on September 23, 2023), page 115
⁹See the UN document related to this part https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/CSE/65/EGM/Aruri_Advancing%20youth%20participation%20to%20achieve%20gender%20transformative%20change_EP7_EGMCSE65.pdf

Albanian legislation and youth participation in the perspective of gender equality

Albanian legislation deals with gender issues rather in a comprehensive way, not directly showing elements of gender equality or gender discrimination when it comes to the participation of young people. However, even though the Albanian legislation has this technicality, elements of gender equality related to the participation of young people can be found in various legal acts.

Gender discrimination, gender equality, increased participation of girls in the public, political, and social sphere are some of the issues that should be kept in a specific focus when it comes to analyzing the respective legal content. In addition to the long road ahead for the proper implementation of this mechanism, an improvement of the legislation is also needed, emphasizing, at the right place and time, the gender dimension of young people's participation. This is required not only to have a fresh and appropriate moderation of how the law should appropriate this dimension, but above all to foster the right behaviour on gender equality among young people, as both the present and the promising future of society's development as a whole.

Article 18 of the Constitution of the Republic of Albania stipulates that everyone is equal before the law, mentioning that causes such as ethnicity, religious affiliation, social affiliation, etc., should not become a cause for discrimination and differentiated treatment. This general provision, of course, should also be applied to the participation of young people with a gender focus.

Albanian Constitution underwent changes in 2020–2021. In the framework of these changes, we think it would be appropriate to include some terms, which would connect the concept of democracy with participation, as its most existential part. However, our Constitution establishes the principle of equality, which must also be applied to the participation of young people, respecting the principle of gender equality. We also like to remind here that the Constitution gives special protection to children, women and girls, highlighting once again the importance that these groups have for the development of society with democratic parameters.

The key law that regulates the gender equality aspect in Albania is Law no. 9970, dated 24/07/2008, "On gender equality in society". The law focuses on the following key areas:

It regulates the protection against discrimination on grounds of gender and the equal treatment of men and women as concerns:

- labour relations (part IV);
- education and qualification (part V);
- media (Part VI).

¹⁰ Ratified by Albania with Law no. 7767, dated 09/11/1993, and entered in force on May 11, 1994.1994.

The law also offers the possibility of temporary measures to increase the representation of women and girls in public activism:

1. Special temporary measures include quotas to achieve equal gender representation, increasing the participation of the less represented gender in decision-making and public life, the economic empowerment and the empowerment of the position of persons of each gender in the field of work, equally improving the educational level, as well as other measures in any field, where persons of one gender do not enjoy an equal position with persons of the other gender.
2. Cases where state bodies take special temporary measures, including legal provisions, aimed at accelerating the establishment of factual equality between women and men do not constitute discrimination due to gender. These measures should cease to exist once the gender equality objectives for which they were created have been achieved.¹¹

The law on gender equality expresses and specifies the gender quota as a means to increase women's participation in public and political life. We appreciate as positive and promising the fact that this law directly and explicitly links the achievement of gender equality in decision-making processes with participation as a wider dimension.

Meanwhile, the Codes of the Republic of Albania establish specific protection for women and girls in various development processes (employment relationships, marriage, family creation, etc.).

The Electoral Code reiterates the gender quotas (30 percent for general elections and 50 percent for local ones) in the same way as the Law on Gender Equality. Concerning the acts of the executive power, in this range of rights we notice an innovation regarding the development of the gender dimension and the participation dimension. The Council of Ministers has approved the Action Plan for the implementation of Resolution 1325 "Women, peace and security"¹², where the first field is that of participation. The Action Plan expresses with specific indicators the elements of participation with a gender focus. Of course, the plan focuses in a large part on young people as well, offering theoretical aspects for the proper drawing of the policies to be followed by government bodies, as well as statistics available from different sources available so far. Given that the Action Plan has been recently approved (it is still in the final stage of public consultations), we recommend bringing the content of this plan to the attention in order to duly orient organizations and state actors that work in the field of strengthening and improving young people's participation, especially with a gender focus.

In the framework of the adoption of the European Charter for the Equality of Women and Men in Local Life, a regional document was prepared in 2006 by the Council of Municipalities and Regions of Europe in cooperation with members of organizations, as part of a project funded by the Council of Europe. The Charter has been translated into 28 different languages (including Albanian), and has been signed by 1,800 municipalities in 36 European countries, including 13

¹¹See Article 8, https://www.mod.gov.al/images/PDF/barazia_gjinore_shoqeri.pdf
¹²https://konsultimpublik.gov.al/documents/RENUK_631_Draft-PlanVeprimi-zbatimi-i-Rezolutes-1325--2023-2027.pdf-eva.pdf

municipalities in Albania. The European Charter for Equality consists of 30 articles that represent different areas of competence of local and regional authorities¹³. A look at some of the plans (those published on the websites of the municipalities of Gramsh, Bulqizë, Cërrik) indicates that the participation of girls is often mentioned, while also defining the indicators of the action, both conceptually and institutionally.

Political and strategic documents on gender issues

The newly approved Youth Strategy emphasizes in its general and specific objectives that it tends to be oriented towards aspects of gender equality, in order to achieve more specific and significant participation for girls and young women. From the justice and gender equality point of view, the drafted measures take into consideration the specific conditions of girls and young women to better face the challenges of professional development and entry into family life. In all cases, the foreseen measures are related to gender promotion policies and serve to empower girls and young women, taking also into consideration girls who have become mothers or married at an early age, as well as those who are in vulnerable situations. From the gender point of view, the foreseen measures also aim to increase the participation of girls, both in social and professional life. The strategy positions this factor as an element with relevant measuring indicators to ensure not only the right, but also an opportunity for participation.

National Strategy on Gender Equality 2021–2030¹⁴

4 strategic goals:

- Fulfilling of economic and social rights for women, young women, girls, men, young men, and boys.
- Fulfilling the rights of women and men, young women and young men, girls and boys from all groups, for equal participation, representation and leadership in political and public decision-making at the local level.
- Reducing all forms of harmful practices, gender-based violence and domestic violence.
- Applying gender integration as the main tool for achieving gender equality and justice in society.

The Strategy on Gender Equality determines the establishment of a number of institutions as well as their functioning, such as the Minister responsible for gender equality issues, the Gender Equality Officer, the Commissioner for Protection from Discrimination, the Alliance of Women MPs, the National Alliance of Advisors, etc. It would be appropriate for the Strategy to envisage two possibilities:

- a. defining and strengthening activities that link and promote youth participation with a focus on gender
- b. set up a structure or at least a position for an official (especially at the municipality level) with specific functional competence in this aspect.

¹³See Local Plan of the Municipality of Cërrik on Gender Equality https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00X8ZN.pdf
¹⁴https://shendetesia.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/WEB_Strategjia-Kombetare-AL.pdf

The alternatives above would present this concept in the appropriate way and with the adequate approach in order to increase the real participation of girls in politics and society.

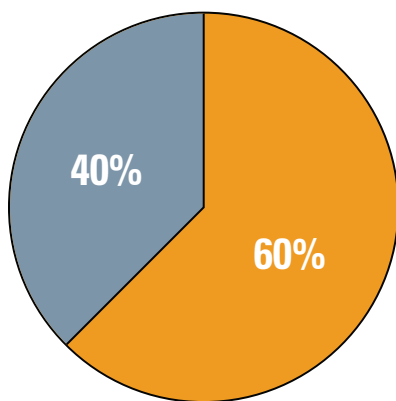
The indicators of the strategy are also in line with the National European Integration Plan, which mentions this aspect in the integration chapters, as needed.

V. Findings and analysis

Demographic data

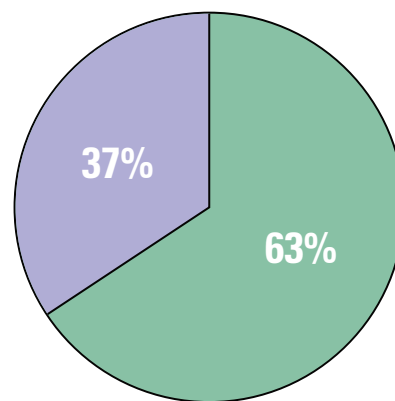
The study included a sample of 650 young men and women aged 15–19 and 20–24. The 15–19 age group has the highest percentage of respondents, a total of 60%, while 40% of the respondents belong to the 20–24 age group (Figure 1). The questionnaire shows that the highest percentage of respondents is female, namely 63% of the total number of respondents, compared to 37% who belong to the male gender (Figure 2). Figure 3 shows the distribution of respondents at the district level. Tirana occupies the first place with 167 answers. Elbasan ranks second with 107 answers, followed by Fier with 90.

1 Age Group Sample (%)



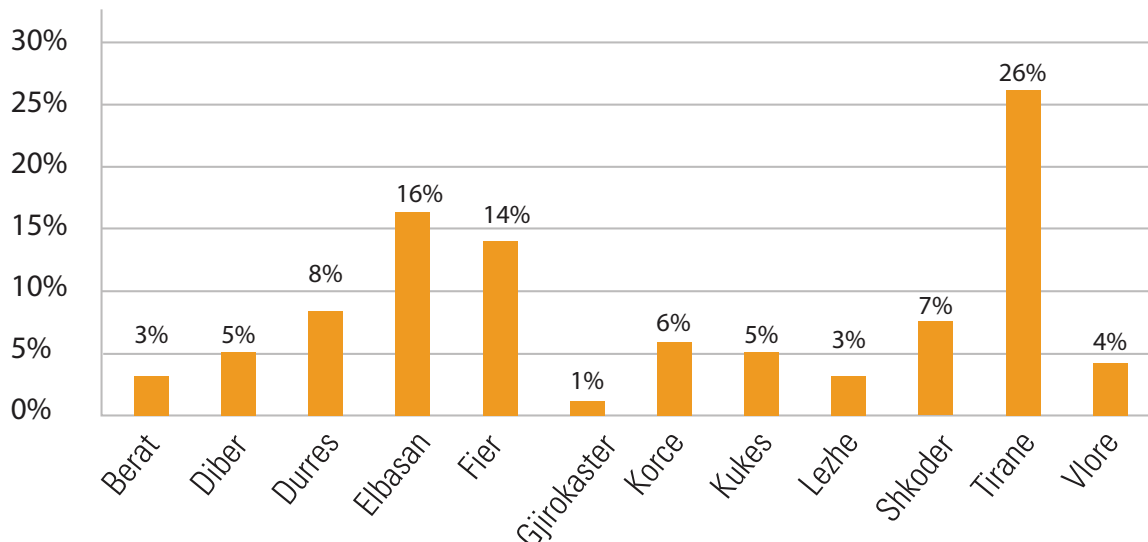
Age 15-19 Age 20-24

2 Gender Sample (%)



Male Female

3 Sample for region (%)



Regarding the ethnicity of the young people who answered the questionnaire, 92% declare to be Albanian; 4% belong to the Roma community and 4% to the Egyptian community. A good part of these young men and women attend pre-university education (45%), 31% are attending higher studies, 16% are employed, and 2% attend vocational education. 6% of respondents declare that they are neither studying nor working.

In order to fulfil the purpose of this study and for further interpretation of the results of the questionnaire, 11 national focus groups were conducted in cities such as Tirana, Korçë, Shkodër, Kukës, Dibër, Lezhë, Durrës, Berat, Elbasan, Fier, and Vlora, with the participation of 100 young men and women aged 15–24, who shared their very valuable opinions and ideas on the results and recommendations of this study. The distribution of the sample according to the criteria was:

15–19 years old – 77%

20–24 years old – 23%

Girls – 69%

Boys – 31%

Rural area – 26%

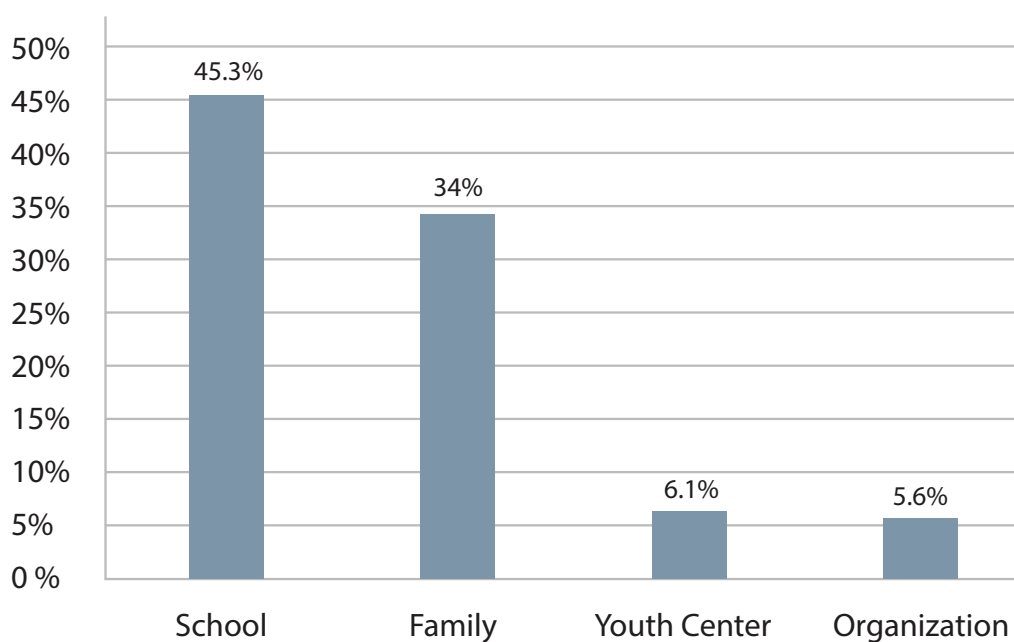
Roma/Egyptian community – 7%



Findings of the study

The first moment when young people are introduced to the concept of “gender equality” is at the community where they live, mainly through their families and school. These two very important institutions of society aim to teach young people that boys and girls have equal rights in terms of inclusion in the same way in social life.

The results of the questionnaire show that the school occupies the first place with 295 (45.3%) of young people answering that for the first time they were introduced to the concept of gender equality at school. 221 of them (34%) were introduced for the first time to this concept in their families, 40 (6.1%) in youth centres and 37 (5.6%) in various civil society organizations (Figure 4).



4 Institutions where youth are introduced to concept of gender equity

These data clearly indicate that the family and the school actually occupy a primary place in introducing the concept of gender equality and related gender stereotypes, allowing young people to get to know this reality that unfortunately still exists, while contributing in the process so that, once they become familiar with this concept, they will be able to see the necessity of eliminating these stereotypes created in society. Based on these figures about the acknowledgement of the concept, there is obviously a difference between those who received the information from their school and families versus those who received the information from the youth centres or civil society organizations. These data show that the contribution from the family and society is high and almost with approximate results, while youth centres and various national and international organizations, despite their efforts so far, projects, training, and social and legal counseling should increase even more to introduce young people to gender issues.

According to the results of the questionnaire, the percentage of young people who participate in projects or trainings offered by these organizations is about divided between those who have attended multiple times (34%) and those who have never attended (37%). The rest of the young people answered that they participated only once (29%). These figures show once again the need to increase the number of trainings and projects offered from various organizations, so that young people can get the most detailed information about their rights and freedoms for equal gender representation in democracy and the development of the country. During the focusgroups, young people from different cities asked for more activities regarding this issue focused only on them.

Young people from Korça say that more activities should be organized at school, but also by the municipality, so that they can have more opportunities to be active. Likewise, young people from Shkodra say that the calendar of activities should be made available to them and should be visible on social networks, so that it can be accessed by all. In addition, young people from Vlora pointed out the importance of cooperation between the school and organizations that provide these activities. The demand and necessity that young people have for accurate information on gender equality is evident in the examples from the cities mentioned above and many other where focus groups were held.

Having been introduced to the concept of gender equality through their families and school from an early age and continuing with the work of the whole community to eradicate stereotypes, young Albanians are already aware that it is not men who make decisions in the Albanian society. 79% of young people answered that it is not only men who make decisions, while 13% of them affirmed the opposite.

The conscious answers of young people that it is not only men who make decisions are in much higher number than the answers of those who think the opposite. This demonstrates how society, as a reflection of the lives of young people, has increased the representation of women in decision-making, something that young people seem to be aware of.

Respect for gender equality is a key element in the sustainable development of a country, as a result, the inclusion of young people in the democratic life without gender differences is a necessary condition that must be recognized and appreciated by the entire Albanian society. The young people themselves say that they occasionally talk about topics related to gender issues in their social circles. Not very often, but sometimes this is part of their discussions, and they have realized how important it is for young people to be empowered in a democracy and how much priority gender equality should have.

The percentage of such frequency is divided into: Very often 17%, often 31%, sometimes 43%, and never 10%. These figures clearly show that the percentage of non-discussion of this issue is very small (only 10%) compared to other parameters. Despite the frequency, since gender equality is essential for the development of young people, the fact that they discuss this issue among themselves makes us understand how aware they are of the importance of this aspect. This is a good indicator of the significance that the young people give to this very sensitive issue for themselves and for the well-being of the entire Albanian society. However, in some cities, the involvement of young people in meetings or youth activities is prejudiced. For example, during the focus group with young people from Dibra, they said that boys are prejudiced when participating in social meetings and girls are discouraged from attending meetings where the number of boys is greater than the number of girls.

The interest of young people to be well informed about human rights and gender equality increases as they discuss, first, in their own social circles, and second, in their families. Society and family are good contributors to shaping young men and women today, having in mind the demand for intellectual growth and their right to be represented without gender distinction. The family is the main nucleus where young people get their first information about social issues, and where they learn how to react to social phenomena. To the question of how parents influence or encourage the participation of boys or girls in activities, 44% of them answered that parents in Albania encourage boys more, compared to 11% who think that girls are encouraged more. Meanwhile, 46% report that both girls and boys are encouraged equally.

We already mentioned the fact that both the school and the family have an important role to play in shaping young people and how influential they are in relation to gender equality issues. Figures showing that parents encourage girls more are very low compared to figures showing that parents encourage boys more. This indicates that the cultural influence from generation to generation continues to be significant. There is no big difference between figures showing that parents encourage boys and girls equally (46%) and figures showing that parents encourage boys more (44%). In an almost equal percentage for both cases, and very negligible, are figures showing that parents encourage girls more to participate in activities. These figures demonstrate the patriarchal mentality that, unfortunately, still prevails in a number of Albanian families, which yet do not fully accept the fact that girls have the right to act the same as boys, based on their rights. According to the focus groups conducted with young people, in cities such as Berat, Dibër, and Durrës, girls are prejudiced when they participate in activities where there are boys and the latter are seen, mostly, as more capable in leadership.

The same cannot be said for the city of Elbasan, where young people think that the empowerment of girls has increased, and they are seen as more motivated than boys. 56.6% of young people say that boys and girls have equal representation rights, 30.7% think the opposite, and only 12.7% say they don't know. Apparently, the number of those who think they have equal representation rights is higher than those who say otherwise, which proves once again that young people have understood that the right to representation belongs to everyone and that both boys and girls have the right and freedom to be represented in a democratic system.

Although the young people themselves understand the concept of equality in representation, in focus groups they do not hesitate to express their concern that the family, although a key mechanism for recognizing gender equality among young people, makes differences in terms of their representation. Young people from the cities of Berat, Dibër and Kukës said that girls feel less encouraged for representation and boys are seen closer to leadership, while girls are seen closer to housework. The young people from the cities of Fier and Korçë say that girls are prejudiced in their right to representation from the old mentality and they are more engaged in housework than in other outdoor activities; however the young people from Korçë think that girls are encouraged more and parents support them economically, morally and psychologically. The young people from Berat say that families leave the boys somewhat freer

are encouraging girls to be involved in youth activities and have a good education, so that they can have more security for their future. Thus, they will not remain ignorant and unable to lead and manage in the future. For young people from the cities of Tirana, Durrës and Elbasan, discrimination is encountered at an older age, as young people approach their professional life, while in other activities discrimination is felt somewhat less. The young people from Elbasan say that girls are seen closer to empowerment and that families have faith in their way of working. The young people from Lezha and Vlora also notice a kind of equality in the representation of young people and say that the opposite happens only in cases where the activities, due to their nature, prioritize the presence of boys. During the focus group in Vlora, a girl said:

"I don't think there is much differentiation. It depends on how the child, who should instil trust in the parents and provide security, behaves".

These focus groups clearly indicate that young people from different cities think that discrimination is more visible when comparing rural areas and urban ones. According to them, girls in the villages are more discriminated against and more uninformed. In this regard, we recall the case of the 17-year-old girl from Guri i Zi, who during the focus group said:

"I feel prejudiced as the teachers themselves tell us that we are not like the city girls".

Likewise, in the focus group conducted in Dibër, young people said that girls in villages still have more difficulties due to the lack of information and home-school distances. There are opinions that some positions (leadership or entrepreneurship) are for men, because women are weaker and do not have the ability to hold them. The young people from Kukës state that in their area boys are more favoured than girls. The latter are less represented even though the effort for independence is palpable. However, they feel that boys are seen by their families as heirs. In Dibër too, the same mentality prevails. In Dibër, families still rejoice more when a boy is born rather than a girl, especially if they already have another daughter.

Regarding gender differences that young people may have experienced during their participation in youth activities, the percentage of those who have not experienced such prejudice is very high.

63% of young people state that they have not experienced gender bias while participating in youth activities, while 24% state the opposite. However, if we take into account the 13% of young people who preferred not to answer, assuming that they were prejudiced and did not feel ready to affirm this fact, as well as the 24% of young people who answered that they experienced gender bias, this results in a significant figure of 37% of young people experiencing gender bias while participating in youth activities. This indicator leads us to thinking that young people have begun to understand and interact in activities they organize among themselves, respecting human rights and freedoms, and gender equality. Young people

are aware of how important their involvement is in social activities and informative trainings on gender equality. During the focus group in the city of Elbasan, a girl said:

"A little late, but I now understand how important is to participate in organizations and trainings, and that's why I came today, to take advantage of these opportunities".

The family and the school are good contributors to shaping the young people, trying to make them as worthy as possible for a developed society, but their social circles are a second good contributor too, helping them understand the importance of gender equality in the social context where they live.

The family and the school, which are seen as the initiators of the young people's acquaintance with the concept of gender equality, must give up the outdated mentality that everything continues only through their sons, to avoiding transmitting uncertainty to the girls about their future. A 17-year-old girl from Kukës stated in the focus group:

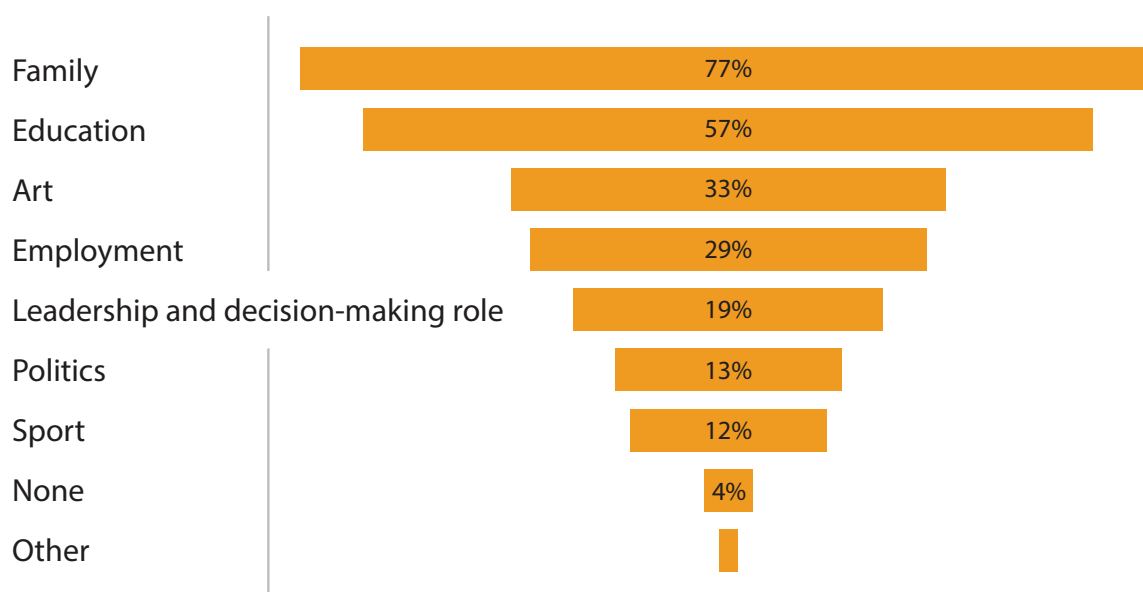
"Boys are encouraged more. While at this age my brother thinks that everything from his parents is his inheritance and I have no right to have my share, then I think that, of course, parents encourage boys more, although with time the mentality is increasingly softening."

This is the mentality of many Albanian boys and this is where the inequality begins, because an 18 year old girl has to start everything from scratch, if she is not going to get married, but wants to be independent, while a boy has more security, knowing that he will get something from his parents. In fact, both sexes should be equally motivated. Both girls and boys are equally worthy representatives of the future. Despite the efforts to make this happen, sons still seem to take priority in Albanian families. A 15-year-old girl from Lezha says:

"I notice that in our families, as much as the situation has changed compared to the past, there is still the mentality that the boy should have everything and he is the priority in the family, leaving the girl aside".

Despite all the national and international actors trying to raise awareness regarding respect for gender equality, the situation of the involvement of girls in the democratic life, compared to boys, is such that the young people themselves think that girls or women are more involved in the family life than in leadership roles, in decision-making, politics, and employment.

5 Sectors where girls and women are more engaged



The majority of young people think that girls are more involved in the family life than in decision-making and leadership roles, and, in fact, this is the interpretation that young people make of what they see and experience in our context daily. While the number of women and girls involved in politics and education has improved recently due to the efforts of many cultural and social actors, their participation in employment is still much lower than their participation in the family life.

VI. Conclusions and recommendations

Young people are promoters of gender equality and therefore the whole community has the priority to form young persons who are worthy of a society where both girls and boys have the same rights and freedom to be brought up, educated, employed, and represented in all the components that form a developed country and a stable democratic system.

It is essential to recognize that addressing youth-related issues requires a multifaceted approach that involves government policies, civil society organizations, educational institutions, and active participation by young people themselves.

Based on an analysis of data collected from 650 questionnaires and 100 young people who participated in the focus groups, the young people and engaged experts have drawn conclusions and made recommendations regarding the situation and empowerment possibilities, participation, and addressing gender biases faced by young people in Albania. Recommendations for improving youth structures and practices in support of advancing the rule of law, democracy, human rights and gender equality are evidence-based.

However, before going to the recommendations, we should highlight some of the barriers related to gender aspects and the challenges affecting youth participation, identified by the focus groups:

- **Individual barriers** - During the focus groups, the young people stated that there are some barriers or individual factors that influence the non-engagement or non-participation of young people in society and they are related to gender aspects, such as, boys work and have no time for other commitments, or girls take care of family members (grandparents, younger children) and cannot participate in other social activities.
In most cases, girls said that boys are not interested in engaging in social activities, they are indifferent, and prioritize personal interests (work, career), while many young people, mostly boys, affirmed that they do not engage because they have plans to leave the country and are focused towards this objective.
Most young people, regardless of their gender, said that there are many other factors that influence the lack of participation from young people, such as lack of self-confidence, lack of interest, pessimism and anxiety about the future, lack of hope that things can change, and the lack of successful and positive role models that take into account their opinions and make them feel heard.
- **Family barriers** - The young people in the focus groups clearly elaborated the patriarchal thoughts of the Albanian families and their lack of awareness about the benefits of the equal engagement of girls and boys in society. According to the participants of the focus groups, girls are often prevented from becoming part of the activities, when there is a high participation of boys or when the location of the event is remote, this related to security issues, especially for girls living in rural areas. For many families, the priority, especially for boys, is their education and employment (material benefits) versus community engagement. Whereas, it often happens that families engage girls in housework and care for family members, thus overlooking the importance of their engagement in society.
- **Barriers at school and community** - The lack of equality, inclusivity, meritocracy, and fair competition for inclusion in school governance structures or youth decision-making structures in the community was highlighted as one of the barriers to youth participation during the focus groups. Likewise, young people do not feel represented and meaningfully involved in decision-making. They also state that the gender factor affects both the participation and non-participation of young people, emphasizing that they are often mocked or bullied by society when they participate in activities and events seen as related to the other “gender”, for example, when girls are involved in sports or boys in social activities. Likewise, there is a barrier in accessing various activities, especially when it comes to girls living in rural or remote areas and people from marginalized groups.

It is important to note that a lot of efforts are needed to increase the self-confidence among young people and their sense of inclusion. It is necessary for young people to be empowered and aware of their role in society. Young people should be heard, they should be supported by schools, by local and youth structures, and by NGOs to undertake initiatives, and their opinions

should be appreciated and taken into consideration. Equality, meritocracy, encouragement, and fair competition must be ensured in the election processes of young people in schools or youth structures. The undertaken initiatives should be as comprehensive as possible, without differences based on gender, ethnicity, religion, origin or economic status.

Recommendations suggested from youth:

- Establish or strengthen mechanisms at the local and national level that ensure full engagement and representation of all young people (girls and boys) in decision-making, and drafting of youth policies.
- Establish or strengthen mechanisms that empower and ensure that the local government includes young people (girls and boys) and makes decisions based on their suggestions.
- Participation mechanisms must be built in such a way as to ensure the inclusion of all young people (girls, boys, and marginalized groups), taking into account the differences, challenges and barriers they encounter in terms of engagement.
- Activities/trainings/awareness campaigns focusing on gender issues should be offered at schools/universities and by NGOs and institutional partners for all young people, families, and community, thus contributing to the dispelling of gender stereotypes.
- Organizations should continue their work for specialized training in the framework of gender equality, being as comprehensive as possible in both urban and rural areas and accessible for children with disabilities.
- Career counselling should be offered as a tool to dispel stereotypes about gender roles and highlight the potential that young people have regardless of gender.
- Ensure that entertainment, sports and cultural activities, and green spaces are available for young people and are accessible in all municipalities, especially for girls, young people with disabilities and young people from rural areas, those belonging to minority groups, etc.
- Offer spaces and opportunities (exchanges) that support dialogue between girls and boys, young people in rural and urban areas, and those from different cultures, to establish cooperation, tolerance, to prevent conflicts, and accept diversity.
- Girls and boys should be given equal opportunities to be informed, to act and live together in the current context, where the country's democracy is a priority.
- Equal engagement of young people in activities and trainings organized by municipalities, organizations and youth centres/structures, which aim to develop the concept of gender equality.
- The family, the school, and the community must always strive for the equal inclusion of young people in social life.
- Raising parents' awareness that empowerment and support for the future should be equally offered to girls and boys.
- The positive role models for young people, including sensitivity to gender issues, should be conveyed even to the youngest; therefore young people and parents should work to increase the self-confidence of girls and boys in terms of their involvement in social life.

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VIII. Annexes

A. Criteria to be a co-researcher

- To carry out the study, we are looking for young people who fit the following profile:
- Be an Albanian citizen aged 17–20.
- Be an active member of the community (member of the senate, student council, youth council, participant in various organizations and others similar to these).
- To have previous engagements in activities organized by Terre des hommes and/or other Albanian or foreign organizations.
- To have good and significant leadership and organizational skills, and active communication with the community (other young people).
- To demonstrate availability to devote himself/herself to the study throughout the process of trainings, drafting, and distributing the questionnaire, and reflecting on the study.
- To have skills to mobilize and involve other young people in the process.
- Note: In including the young co-researchers, the selection process will take in consideration the preservation of the gender balance as well as the rural area–urban area affiliation.

Duties and responsibilities of the young co-researchers group

To participate in workshops according to the agenda set by Terre des hommes Albania (dates 8–9/15–16 September 2023, 10:00-15:30).

- To support the study process by offering reflections and counselling on the issues of young people's participation in their communities.
- To contribute to the drafting of the questionnaire.
- To distribute the questionnaire by engaging other young people and building parallel focus groups with them.
- To lead the focus groups with young people.
- To maintain an ethical and coherent communication with the staff of Terre des hommes during the process (10 days for data collection), as well as on the relevant reflections in the study draft.
- To contribute to the drafting of conclusions and recommendations of the study.

B. Questionnaire

Hello,

We are a group of young people engaged in the national study “Albanian youth and their rights in democracy” that is carried out within the project “Youth, Rights and Justice”, funded by the Austrian Development Agency and implemented by Terre des hommes Albania. The study will include about 500 young people from all the Albanian districts.

The questionnaire you have in front of you is also part of this study. This is a simple questionnaire designed by us. It takes a total of 15–20 minutes to complete.

We would like to assure you that all the information you will provide will be processed and used only for the extraction of statistical data, without being individually identified in any case, and ensuring the preservation of confidentiality.

Thank you for your cooperation!

Do you agree to complete the questionnaire?

SECTION I. GENERAL DATA

1.1 Age group:

- 15 – 19 years old
- 20 – 24 years old

1.2 Gender:

- Female
- Male

1.3 Your residence: _____

1.4 District:

- Berat
- Dibër
- Durrës
- Elbasan
- Fier
- Gjirokastër
- Korçë
- Kukës
- Lezhë
- Shkodër
- Tiranë
- Vlorë

1.5 Your ethnicity: Albanian/ Roma /Egyptian Community/ Other_____

1.6 You are currently at:

- a. School
- b. University
- c. None

SECTION 2. PUBLIC ACTIVISM AND DEMOCRACY

2.1. What is participatory democracy for you?

- A form to be invited to different activities
- Activity undertaken by citizens and not by state actors
- It does not matter who initiates it, as long as my participation affects decision-making or changes
- Other _____

2.2 How much are you willing to participate in youth organizations or other decision-making structures for young people?

- Very much
- Somehow
- A little
- Not at all

2.3 Are you involved in/part of youth organizations/organizations for young people?

- Yes
- No

2.4 If yes, which one? _____

2.5 Are you involved in political groups?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to answer

2.6 If so, do you have the necessary space to give your opinion on issues that concern children and young people?

- Yes
- No

2.7 Do you know if there is a specific law for young people in our country?

- Yes
- No

2.8 As far as your know, which are the decision-making bodies at central and local level where young people can be a part?

- Parliament of the Republic of Albania
- National Youth Agency
- National Youth Council
- Local Youth Council
- Municipality Council
- Student government
- School senate
- Other _____

2.10 In which of these decision-making bodies have you participated?

- National Youth Congress
- Local Youth Council
- Municipality Council
- Student government
- School senate
- Other _____

2.11 As a young person, do you currently feel represented in decision-making bodies?

- Yes
- No

2.12 How are you mostly encouraged engaging and participating?

- On my own initiative
- Encouraged by my parents
- By invitation of the school
- By invitation of the municipality
- By invitation of political structures
- I am a senator/president, so I have information on the activities

2.13 Do you agree with the statement “Young people are indifferent when it comes to participating in decision-making and raising their voices for their rights”?

- Yes
- No

2.14 Do you think that your participation will influence to more democratic decisions?

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

SECTION 3. GENDER ASPECT IN YOUTH PARTICIPATION AND ENGAGEMENT

3.1. Where were you first introduced to aspects of gender equality for young people?

- Family
- School
- Youth centre
- Civil society organizations
- Other _____

3.2. Have you participated in trainings related to aspects of gender equality among young people?

- Yes, once
- Yes, several times
- No, never

3.3. Do you agree with the saying “Only men make decisions in Albanian society”?

- Yes
- No
- This issue is of no interest to me

3.4. Do you think that gender affects the participation or non-participation of young people in our country?

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

3.5 Have you ever taken part in activities that society defines as activities only for the other sex?

- Yes
- No
- I wanted to, but prejudices have held me back

3.6 How often do you talk about gender issues in your social circle?

- Vero often
- Often
- Sometimes
- Never

3.7 How often do you talk about gender issues in your family?

- Very often
- Often

- Sometimes
- Never

3.8. Do you think that parents in Albania?

- Encourage boys more to participate in activities
- Encourage girls more to participate in activities
- Encourage boys and girls equally

3.9. Do you think that girls and boys have equal opportunities for representation?

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

3.10. Have you personally experienced gender bias during your participation in youth activities?

- Yes
- No
- I prefer not to answer

3.11. In which fields do you think girls/women are more involved?

- Family
- Leadership and decision-making roles
- Politics
- Sports
- Art
- Education
- Employment
- Other _____

SECTION 4. COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION AND ENGAGEMENT

4.1 Which of the following structures in the community is most active in working with young people?

- School
- Civil society organizations
- Youth centres
- Political forums
- Religious institutions
- Municipality
- Other _____

4.2. The activities of which of the institutions below do you prefer to attend more?

- School
- Civil society organizations
- Youth centres
- Political forums
- Religious institutions
- Municipality
- Other _____

4.3 Is there a youth centre in the area where you live?

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

4.4 If so, do you think it has the right infrastructure to carry out meaningful activities for young people?

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

4.5 Have you ever attended a Municipality Council meeting?

- Yes
- No
- I don't know if I can

4.6. What activities are mostly offered to young people in the community where you live?

- Sports
- Cultural activities
- Recreational activities
- Political activities
- Religious activities
- I have no information
- Other _____

4.7 How much do you feel involved in the activities you participate in?

- I feel included and heard
- I do not feel included and heard
- I don't think my role has any impact

4.8 In the community where you live, who are the most engaged?

- Boys
- Girls
- Both boys and girls equally

4.9 If you were to propose an initiative, you would first address:

- The school I attend/have finished my studies
- The civil society organization I engage with
- A community business
- Municipality/administrative unit
- Religious institution
- The party I am affiliated to
- Neither

4.10 Have you ever been part of any initiative that has produced concrete results that have changed something in your community?

- Yes
- No

4.11 Do you think that institutions that work with young people can bring about real changes in your community?

- Very much
- Somehow
- A little
- Not at all

SECTION 5. PARTICIPATION AND ENGAGEMENT IN EDUCATION

5.1 Have you had equal opportunities to elect and be elected in decision-making structures at school/university (student government/senate/ council)?

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

5.2 Are there/have there been activities in the school you attend/attended that exclusively promote the participation of young people in decision-making?

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

5.3. If so, do you think that all young people have had the opportunity to participate in decision-making structures?

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

5.4. In which of the following structures have you been engaged at school/university?

- Senate
- Student government
- Student council
- None

5.5. How much represented have you felt/feel by the senate/student government?

- Very much
- Somehow
- A little
- Not at all
- I have no idea

5.6. Does your family support you to participate in activities organized by the school/university?

- Yes
- No

5.7 Have there been times when you did not participate in activities organized by the school/university because of the opinion of your social circle?

- Yes
- No

5.8 Activities at your school/university are/were mainly organized by:

- School management
- Rectorship
- Teachers
- Professors
- Student government
- Student council
- Parents
- Civil society organizations
- Other _____

5.9 What motivates/has motivated you the most to participate in school/university activities?

- My personal initiative
- Motivation from my parents

- Motivation from teachers
- Motivation from the school's psychosocial staff
- Motivation from my friends
- Nothing specific
- I have no motivation

5.10 What do you benefit/have benefited the most from participating in school/university activities (click the most important one):

- Socialization
- Communication/leadership skills
- Education
- Monetary benefits
- Nothing
- Other

SECTION 6. PARTICIPATION AND ONLINE TECHNOLOGY

6.1 Are social networks a reliable source for you to get information related to young people and their participation in society?

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

6.2 What do you mostly use social networks for?

- To spend free time
- To be informed about causes related to young people
- To provide income
- None of the above
- Other _____

6.3 How often do you use social networks to be informed about activities that help increase personal capacities/knowledge?

- Very often
- Often
- Sometimes
- Never

6.4. What is the main source to get information that promotes youth participation?

- TV
- Web pages
- Social media (Facebook, Instagram, etc.)
- Other

6.5. Have you felt harassed/at risk while using social networks?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to answer

6.6. If so, did you report it?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to answer

Thank you for being part of our study!

We will try to represent the voice of young people throughout Albania!

Annex C. Discussion in focus groups: Leader

Welcoming: Participants are thanked and invited to be part of the discussion and the purpose of the focus group is explained:

Hello. My name is _____ and I am part of the group of young people engaged with Terre des hommes to conduct a national study on the engagement and participation of young people. The study is carried out within the project “Youth, rights and justice”, financed by the Austrian Development Agency and implemented by Terre des hommes Albania. In its first phase, an online study was conducted with 650 young people from all over Albania, who gave their opinion regarding participation and engagement in areas such as decision-making, education, community engagement, gender issues, and online technology. The preliminary findings of the study will be discussed with you today, to understand more clearly what are the reasons for the youth engagement or non-engagement, and what recommendations do you have for a more meaningful involvement in the above-mentioned areas.

Duration: The interview will last approximately 45–60 minutes.

Confidentiality: Your participation in the study is voluntary-based and if you do not want to answer a question during the conversation you are free to do so. Notes will be taken during the focus group, which will be used only for the purpose of producing the report and will not be shared with anyone else. All information received will remain confidential.

I. Youth participation

- A. In your daily life, what opportunities are offered to you in the family, school, community, and youth decision-making structures to participate, engage, discuss, and raise your voice on issues that concern young people?
- B. Have you ever been part of any initiative that you think has changed something in the community or in you personally? What was it? What concrete results has it produced? What would you recommend for the initiatives to be more inclusive and with a significant impact?

• Barriers

- A. If you have not been engaged, what were the reasons and barriers that prevented you from being part of such activities?
 - The indifference of the young people themselves
 - Lack of information
 - Lack of activities (school/community/youth organizations)
 - Access to online technology
 - Barriers from society
 - Barriers from the family
 - Stereotypes/gender roles
 - They do not feel represented by decision-making bodies
 - They do not feel included, engaged and heard

- Lack of confidence
Young people are indifferent when it comes to participation in decision-making.
- B. According to you, is this prejudice or reality? Why do you think young people are indifferent?

- **Recommendations:**

- A. What are your suggestions/recommendations for the family, school, community, youth organizations, municipality, and government for the young people to engage more, and feel more represented and heard?

II. Youth participation and gender issues:

- a. Have you ever experienced gender discrimination in activities you participated in? How did it happen and what did you experience?
- b. The majority of young people said that girls and boys do not have equal opportunities for engagement and representation. What is your opinion? What could be the reasons or barriers encountered?
- c. Do you think parents encourage boys more? Why? How do you think parents do this? What do they offer them? Support (emotional, economic, etc.)?

Recommendations:

- A. What are your suggestions/recommendations for both girls and boys to have equal opportunities to be involved?



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