

CSO CASE STUDY 15

Title: Changing anti-crime policy through community policing in Albania

Country: Albania

Author: Ermal Hasimja

Introduction

This case study presents the results of a two years long process of policy change in the field of security in Albania. The project aimed at creating a solid and legal basis for community policing in 10 Albanian regions.

Half a century of communist rule has created an immense psychological gap between local communities and the police service; the latter being seen as an oppression tool. After the fall of communism the police service, suffering from the perceptions of the past, failed to create cooperation bridges with the communities.

In 2001, the Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM) initiated a long process of policy change which aimed to pave the road to concrete and efficient community policing, re-orienting the anti-crime oppression policy towards a crime prevention approach.

The IDM proposed a concrete project that was closely supported by all stakeholders: the state police service, community based groups or representatives, the governmental educational sector and the local governments in the regions concerned. It was jointly financed by the American foundation *National Endowment for Democracy* and the American Embassy in Tirana and later endorsed by the Ministry of Public Order, and especially the State Police Service.

The role of local communities was considered as crucial because of the relative strength of the communitarian relations at this level. This change depended on the cooperative involvement of all interested parties. Local security was promoted as a common mission of all these stakeholders. The organizers engaged a harsh battle against a past mentality that had to be fought.

The project transformed the current security policy. The changes were brought to a legal level by initiating and adopting normative acts that regulated the work of the cooperation structures. New local structures called Consulting Groups of Police and Community (CGPCs) were institutionalized and included all involved parties.

Type and extent of policy change

In order to create a solid basis for the policy change, IDM acted at two levels:

The legal basis of the policy change: The IDM, in close cooperation with all stakeholders, produced four policy documents that would enable community policing and the broader cooperation between communities and the police (and other governmental sectors).

- A normative act (April 2002) institutionalized the cooperation between the Ministry of Public Order and the Ministry of Local Government and Decentralization.

- A project-law (April 2003) 'On the Creation and Functioning of the Local Committees for Crime Prevention'¹³ foresees a major cooperative role of these structures especially in crime prevention and it involved other local structures such as local governments and schools. These committees were the above mentioned CGPCs.
- A Memorandum of Understanding (December 2004) and Cooperation between the Ministry of Public Order and the Ministry of Education whose goal was to involve schools in the community policing project.

The structuring and functioning of the cooperation in the field: One of the most important policy elements initiated by IDM was the 'National Strategy for Community Policing and Crime Prevention'. This strategy contains a concrete action plan for the full functioning of the CGPCs. IDM also supported the stakeholders in organizing the cooperation and the work in some concrete operations in the field.

Some thoughts on the explanation of the policy change

a) The policy Context

After the economic and political crisis of 1997, the level of criminality touched the highest levels of the post communist transition. The government was still lacking the necessary resources and appropriate strategies to cope with it. Strengthening the state police service was considered as the only viable way to get better results in fighting criminality. However civil society organizations stressed that criminality was a direct consequence of poor living conditions and also a consequence of the relative weakness of the legislative and the juridical structures.

The overall political context was not encouraging. The state police was often accused by the opposition of either supporting the government or cooperating with criminal organizations. Possibly in response to this, the minister of Public Order encouraged the project. However the main role was played by the Director of the State Police who not only participated in the most important meetings, but also encouraged his regional colleagues or required them to do the same

The political influence of the local governments was also very important, especially on local economic development. The local government representatives are directly interested in issues of public order and crime fighting because their reputation depends deeply on their efforts to control them.

The main barrier to overcome was the overall public perception of the police service as a merely suppressive power under the control of the State. Crime was seen as an exclusive governmental issue.

It was also necessary to persuade the stakeholders that this wasn't just 'one more' attempt, really meant to serve the public relations of the government. Instead the project had a concrete goal of community policing that could concretely improve the security level of these communities.

¹³ The project-law is waiting for the approval procedure by the Albanian Parliament.

b) The ways CSOs tried to affect policy change and impact

IDM organized local meetings with all stakeholders and used the conclusions of the research as discussion arguments. The stakeholders agreed to meet and discuss together on the feasibility of the project and the necessary activities and their involvement. The most important obstacle was not to convince the stakeholders about the necessity of the change, but on its feasibility. Due to the reminiscences of the past, the community representatives and even some of the police officers were skeptic. Here, the role of the research conclusions was determinant to break-up lingering perceptions.

One of the main arguments made by the research was that, even though community and police representatives were rather reluctant about the feasibility, both parts were aware of their roles in a possible cooperation. They generally thought that the other wouldn't be able to get involved in the cooperation. IDM showed them that they were equally interested and motivated to cooperate.

They were also told that criminality was lower in regions with strong community organization. Furthermore, the level of criminality was even lower where the police representatives were members of the community itself. During the political turmoil of 1997, the police was able to work better on the communitarian regions of the North rather than in the urbanized southern regions. The evidence was presented to the CGPCs in order to convince them that the project was feasible. The evidence was also presented to the communities through the media.

In fact, the whole process was supported with an important media campaign to raise awareness on the project. This helped to change the community's attitude and mentality on the cooperation with the police and gain support from other local partners.

The grant given by the donors provided the financial resources and ensured the viability of the project. The donors were present at all steps of the project.

c) The nature of research-based evidence and mechanisms used to get the evidence into the policy process

The project implementation was preceded by an in-depth multidimensional research. The IDM used past data on the work and results of the police service and also criminality trends and geographical distribution (INSTAT, the public institute of statistics).

However the core of the research data was collected directly by IDM itself. Detailed individual in-depth interviews were conducted with relevant police officers and local communities' representatives in the 10 regions.

In the meantime, the police service agreed and installed a free phone number for all citizens interested in supporting the police work at the local level.

Following the logics of focus groups, the implementers organized several preparatory research meetings with stakeholders to enquire on their problems and feasibility of the policy change.

d) External influences

The European and NATO integration process is the most important political issue in Albania. Therefore, the legacy of the political power is directly connected to this process. European and American institutions play the most important monitoring role, especially during elections and political crisis.

Criminality is one of the most important issues defining the efficiency of the government and the possibility of integration. European institutions, but also member countries, have supported the government in fighting crime. Italy and Greece are directly interested in this issue because of the geographic position and the possibility of criminal cross-border activities. For instance: In 2001, the Italian government pressured the Albanian government and supported it with equipment and human resources in order to destroy all human trafficking from the southern coast of the country.

Lessons learned

The CGPCs are already active and the first results have encouraged other institutions to replicate the project in the rest of Albania.

Some main lessons:

- Enquiring and understanding reluctances and beliefs of each of the parties involved in the policy change process is a key to the success.
- The role of an intermediary organization was crucial for the project. IDM facilitated the communication between all parties.
- The research based evidence is fundamental to support arguments in creating willingness for change. Evidence is also important to convince the involved parties on the feasibility of the common action.
- The policy change requires the largest coalition possible between stakeholders. The creation of the CGPCs was the first step in building it up. The media campaign was important to ensure public support.

Sources of documentation:

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About the author:

Ermal Hasimja (Ph.D candidate) is a lecturer of Journalism in the University of Tirana. He's also director of IRDD, the Institute of Research on Democracy and Development in Tirana. Mr. Hasimja has previous experience in CSOs, independent media and the academic life. He has studied Political Sciences in France (MA, Paris 8 University).and also Journalism in Albania (BA, Tirana University).