

Building a better future in Albania



Raising Her Voice has established Local Action Groups to give women in rural communities a say in the decisions that affect them and to ensure their direct participation in local development.

Background

Despite sustained economic growth since 1995, Albania's development is concentrated in the main cities. Much of the country's mountainous heartland is isolated by poor roads and transport. Rural areas suffer from limited public investment, a lack of local capacity to negotiate for and manage resources, and limited community participation in decision-making.

Rural women have almost no voice, and their political representation is poor in local, regional and national governance. Women's civil society organisations are concentrated in towns and cities, leaving rural women largely unheard and unrepresented. In their own communities, social leadership is traditionally dominated by men and decision-making structures tend to exclude women.



Raising Her Voice in Albania focuses on key aspects of good governance: the participation of citizens; the effectiveness of policies and investments for poor women and men; and accountability. The project aims to improve these by establishing Local Action Groups (LAGs) which provide links between local government and rural communities, and give women a voice.

Objectives

Oxfam has worked with civil society partners and local government to establish LAGs in three regions of Albania, Dibra, Vlora and Shkodra, to:

- Enable local government, rural stakeholders and communities to build local partnerships for action and advocacy on rural development.
- Provide LAGs with the necessary skills and resources to support local development which represents and addresses the needs of women as well as men.
- Empower LAGs to advocate at regional and national level for effective measures and investment to reduce poverty and develop their communities.
- Regularly inform rural women and men and other local and national stakeholders about LAG initiatives, using both traditional and innovative communications.

The role of Local Action Groups

LAGs are active in rural areas of many European Union (EU) countries. LAGs aim to include public and private partners which represent different socio-economic sectors, and to reflect the diversity of people in their district; for example, by including both women and men of different generations and representatives of groups with particular needs. They receive EU funding to award grants to local projects.

Rural women often feel that the political agendas of the main parties have little to do with their concerns. They have shown a strong interest in this new approach, which enables them to participate in 'bottom-up' rural partnerships and to have a real influence in the decisions which affect their everyday lives.

Achievements

Participation of women in Local Action Groups

LAGs have been established in the three regions, based on both the EU model and on Oxfam's extensive experience of working with rural forums. The aim is to ensure that women and young people can participate and are fully represented in decision-making. LAGs are also an important space for rural women to come together to exchange experiences and discover what they have in common. More than 60 per cent of Board Members in all three LAGs are rural women. The groups have undertaken participatory assessments in targeted communities and have developed their own strategies and priorities for local development. The predominance of poor women in LAGs helps to ensure that these plans address their needs. Local authorities in each LAG area have committed to provide financial contributions towards community development projects identified by each group.

Promotion of the model in other areas

Guidelines on establishing LAGs have been published to enable other rural communities to set up their own groups. As well as giving practical advice, the guidelines show how LAGs operate further afield, with case studies from other countries. LAG Information Points have been set up in all three regions; each LAG has developed its own visual identity; and a series of leaflets, brochures and other information has been produced to raise community awareness and increase participation.

Learning from other countries

Women representatives from the three LAGs took part in an exposure visit to Holstebro in Denmark to learn from the experience of women in its well-established LAG. They learned how each development project began with a thorough participatory needs assessment, in which rural women played a very important role. The Danish group emphasised the power of local communities to create change through active engagement and partnership; the value of cross-village cooperation; and the ability even of small projects, such as a children's playground or an environmental awareness campaign, to improve daily life in the community.

LAG model showcased at national conference

Women representatives of each of the three LAGs were invited to share their experiences at a national conference on 'EU Best Practices on Policies and Rural Development Networking'. This provided an important opportunity to influence national policy and to strengthen co-operation between communities, government and other stakeholders in Albania's rural development.

Lessons

- LAGs are a new approach for Albania and for this reason some stakeholders were not fully convinced about the right way to institutionalise public-private partnerships at the local level, especially due to the lack of sustainable funding for these new structures. However, face-to-face meetings, providing information and involving stakeholders in participatory processes helped to change opinions, gain support, and create a high degree of local ownership.
- Another challenge has been to deal with the disengagement of local people from decision-making processes. The wide involvement of rural women in establishing the LAGs, and their membership of them, has had a very positive impact. Capacity-building activities and the exchange visit have been a good way to overcome rural women's cultural and personal barriers to participation.
- LAG members and local people were initially more involved and interested in visible actions and concrete projects where they could see an immediate impact. Local projects identified by and implemented in LAG communities made a step change in the way they relate to local government and resulted in increased confidence and eagerness towards capacity building for advocacy and lobbying to directly represent their own priorities.
- The three target regions were selected based on Oxfam's and partners' experience of working there over several years. Locally-based NGO partners, and an established social network and ways of working with local government in these regions proved to be a big advantage.

Raising Her Voice is a five-year programme which promotes the rights and capacity of poor women to engage effectively in governance at all levels. This is to be achieved through enabling their voices to be heard and increasing their influence, and by making institutions more accountable to women.

Working through local partners in 17 countries, Raising Her Voice has significant funding from DFID and is co-ordinated by Oxfam GB.

