

# **Creating a Public Participation Strategy for Kolonja Commune**

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## **Project Background**

The Commune of Kolonja has recently become the target of a road development plan. While the project is a priority of the Kolonja Commune, and supported by the municipal and central government, it has neither been assessed for its potential impact on the local community, nor has the public been thoroughly consulted even though two tourist attractions including the Karavasta Lagoon and Ardenica Monastery are nearby. As an Aarhus Convention Party, Albania has taken steps to facilitate public participation, principally through a National Strategy via the Ministry of Environment. The Institute for Justice and Home Affairs, together with the full support of the Commune of Kolonja and the input of the public, will formulate a public participation regulation to guide public consultations and to practice it pending the new road project and through future development plans.

## **Goals and Overall Objectives**

### **Introducing Commune Staff and Public to Public Participation Mechanisms and Benefits**

While the Kolonja Commune leadership fully accepts the need for public participation, both Commune staff and the public will need to be introduced to public participation procedures through public meetings, and the drafting of a public participation strategy document. Such activities will increase the transparency in the democratic process, and ensure a dialogue between communities and the Commune.

### **Drafting, Testing, and Formalizing the Public Participation Strategy**

Through public consultation and expert consultation, a locally appropriate public participation strategy document will be drafted. It will be tested using the road construction project. Lastly, it will be adopted as a formal regulation for future decision-making needs. The formal strategy will be encouraged in other communities as a valuable regulatory measure.

## **How to Get There – Specific Activities**

- **Conducting The Survey**

After preliminary meetings with stakeholders and the working group, a survey will be conducted with commune staff and council, and community members. The intent will be to assess the overall understanding of environmental issues, and the needs and views of commune staff, community leaders, and organizations in terms of public participation.

- **Holding Public Meetings**

After ensuring that Commune staff and members of various community organizations are trained as public meeting facilitators, meetings will be held in each Commune village. This will build the Commune staff's capacity to undertake public participation activities. The public will benefit from a heightened awareness of the potential environmental impact of development projects, and provide them with a means to share their thoughts and views on how these can be put into practice using public participation tools.

- **Formulating the Commune's Strategy on Public Participation**

After making Commune staff aware of the usage of public participation tools, they will be assisted in preparing a strategy document using public involvement mechanisms. Once created, the draft strategy will be vetted by the public through public hearings of the Commune Council, revised, and presented at an open meeting of the Commune Council. Such activities will walk Commune staff and authorities through the drafting of such a legal tool and exercise in how public involvement can be incorporated into local level decision-making. The final version – once established – will also be written in plain language and distributed to the public.

- **Pilot – Addressing the Road Construction Development**

The road construction project is already in the design phase. This is a perfect time to discuss public participation with stakeholders using the newly formulated strategy – including consulting experts, and holding public meetings with Commune Staff, community members, and the technical staff of the design company.

- **Obtaining the Approval of The Commune Council**

The Commune Council will be encouraged to adopt the public participation strategy as a regulation, and thereafter apply it within the Commune's borders. The document will also be published and distributed to other communes to encourage adoption in other jurisdictions.

## Outcomes

Given the willingness of Commune authorities to engage in public participation, and the need for the public to fully understand the impact of development projects as well as their ability to participate in the formulation of such projects, the Kolonja Commune public participation project should result in a fully functional regulation, an informed public and civil service, and thus an increase in the transparency of the decision-making process.