

# YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL LIFE BRINGS SOCIAL CHANGES AND DEMOCRATIZATION IN ALBANIA

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## Abstract

Albania's civil society sector remains weak and struggles to find space for meaningful activity in a highly politicized environment. Even civic activists appear to view running for office as the only real way to influence policymaking; a large number of them competed in local elections in 2011, especially in elections to municipal councils.

The implication of politics with civil society and *vice versa*, based on individual relationships rather than concrete ideas, is one of the characteristics of the Albanian transition. There are constant efforts from political parties and their leadership to imply civil society proclaimed as a new entry or new energy that will democratize these parties or coalitions. These moves cannot represent civil society interests, since politically engaged or influenced people are leading these NGOs. Thus, this paper brings to attention the fact that civil society is more than NGOs registered by law. Other informal groups, such as youth groups and small groups from local communities which could be directly engaged in promoting democracy should be considered as strong actors towards the development of democracy and its consolidation.

This paper aims to take into account two important issues, youth participation and small local communities both as part of civil society that could initiate and influence social changes in local level, transferring the process of the consolidation of democracy in a wider context. Since the discourse of fragile democracy has lasted for years and is still on going, I should now ask: how can the youth participation in small groups have an impact on democratization process? And what if we start from bottom-up, with youth participation in small groups at local level?

Focusing on getting funds from international donors, rather than following their mission and representing the voice of their representative groups, has affected and implicated the role of civil society in Albania and their international partners, losing connections with reality. Thus, I argue that these international and national organizations have lost links with local communities, or in

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the other case, they might have imported good examples of democracy from abroad, which don't fit with the local context in Albania. Local government itself seems that has not performed well towards the youth engagement in participating and consulting to better identify the components needed for democratic changes.

Although, international, national and local NGOs are involved from 1991 in consolidation of democracy, they haven't reached their aim so far; thus, rightly I should raise the question on the role of CSOs during transition. Are they really interested in democratization or should we think about other means and element of local community groups to get involved in order to bring social changes?

**Key Words:** Youth, Participation, Democratization, Civil Society, Albania, Local Communities

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Albania didn't experience any significant form of local democratic government during transition. (CoE, 2006). Despite its shortcomings, Albania qualifies as a democracy, even if that democracy remains to be consolidated.

Albania's civil society sector remains weak and struggles to find space for meaningful activity in a highly politicized environment. Even civic activists appear to view running for office as the only real way to influence policymaking; a large number of them competed in local elections in 2011, especially in elections to municipal councils. Labour's unions in Albania remain weak due to the presence of a large informal economy and the fact that very few large companies operate in the country. Public trust in nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) is low and state as well as non-state actors often use them as scapegoats for various problems. (Ibid)

If I take a look at the political developments during the transition period in Albania, specific democratic developments may be highlighted. Civic and political movements, peaceful and violent demonstration, power shift, contested elections, strikes and referendums as tools used in a democratic society. On the other hand, using these tools does not guarantee the consolidation of democracy still remains fragile because of political conflicts, corruption, low level economic development and citizens' apathy. The latest is very much related to the concept of civil society. Hence, the fact that democracy in Albania is still considered a hybrid regime (Freedom House, 2013) is one of the factors of the failure of the Albanian civil society in regard of democratisation.

Twenty years ago, in 1991, young people were the only and the most solid group of society in Albania who brought democratic changes. Besides political parties established during the early 90's, trade unions, various associations, associations of politically prosecuted people and political youth forums were established in the country. Even though, these civic groups didn't

have any experience, they were willing to bring democratic changes in Albania. Nowadays, these civic groups; associations, trade unions, youth forums and others are very experienced in the fields they operate. Anyway the impact of these civic groups in democratic development compared with similar groups in the Balkans' seems less important.

The implication of politics with civil society and *vice versa*, based on individual relationships rather than concrete ideas, is one of the characteristics of the Albanian transition. During the transition period in Albania, it has become trendy that, ministers, members of the parliament or their councilors would establish their NGOs, foundations or institutes (Krasniqi, 2004). There are constant efforts from political parties and their leadership to imply civil society proclaimed as a new entry or new energy that will democratize these parties or coalitions. Recently, the opposition leader ensured that his coalition will be expanded with other groups from civil society<sup>1</sup> (Rama, 2012), this is not the only case observed as this situation is repeated often and especially before the electoral campaigns. These moves cannot represent civil society interests, since politically engaged or influenced people are leading these NGOs. Thus, this paper brings to attention the fact that civil society is more than NGOs registered by law. Other informal groups, such as youth groups and small groups from local communities which could be directly engaged in promoting democracy should be considered as strong actors towards the development of democracy and its consolidation.

This article intends to take into consideration two important issues, youth participation and small local communities both as part of civil society that could initiate and influence social changes in local level, transferring the process of the consolidation of democracy in a wider context. The transition in Albania has proved to be a bad experience and longer than was expected. Different political and civic initiatives have attempted to bring social changes and stimulate the path toward democracy, but most of them have failed. Since the discourse of fragile democracy has lasted for years and is still ongoing, I should now ask: is there a real civil society that can influence democratization? And what if we start from bottom-up, with youth participation in small groups at local level? Is it possible to accept the fact that democracy starts from small groups and youth participation in local context?

Based on the above, I claim that, other actors different from registered NGOs should be engaged and be taken into consideration. Small groups from local level, no matter if the setting is a classroom, a community group, a family or a group decision making that can proceed according to democratic principles should be considered as well. Unfortunately the application of democracy in small groups is not applied in the Albanian society. Nothing is more important to the health of our democracy, than the active engagement of young people in representative government at local level (Institute for Youth, 2010).

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<sup>1</sup> February 2012, <http://www.balkanweb.com/kryesore/1/rama-ne-news24-vleresoj-qendrimin-e-fundit-te-nanos-81102.html>

Policies on youth tend to be promoted usually by international and national organizations in Albania, while local CSOs are not very much considered to be consulted on preparation of national or local policies. Focusing on getting funds from international donors, rather than representing the voice of their representative groups, has affected and implicated the role of civil society in Albania and their international partners, losing connections with reality. Thus, I argue that these international and national organizations have lost links with local communities, or in the other case, they might have imported good examples of democracy from abroad, which don't fit with the local context in Albania. Local government itself seems that has not performed well towards the youth engagement in participating and consulting to better identify the components needed for democratic changes.

First, in this paper, while analyzing civil society performance on promoting democracy, I hold that the focus should be on local civil society, especially on youth groups and youth participation with the aim to create strong links and better understand the existing situation in local communities, rather than importing success stories from abroad. Civic groups at local level have very good expertise based on the experience, using their links with the community that can better serve to all actors involved in the democratization process. This might have a direct effect on the democratization of the society in general, rather than isolated groups of the society in the big cities, where the attention is focused on the media and politicians. Second, I argue how and to what extent youth participation plays an important role and influence democratization in Albania?, through a combination of interviews with youth workers and civil society activists and findings from different sources in this field, I describe the role of different associations and redefine the role of local community groups as part of civil society.

## **2. SMALL YOUTH GROUPS AT LOCAL LEVEL**

Each of us has the opportunity to be part of small group discussions. Through formal, non-formal and informal education we have learned something about both democratic ideals and the behavior of the so-called democratic governments. A small group consists of more than two people who have a perception of common goals, a network of communication, independence and shared norms (Gastil, 1993). The students make collective decisions about class projects, playtime and outdoor activities. When a decision is made that involves more than one person, the decision can often be made through a democratic procedure. A small group is democratic if it has equally distributed decision making, power, an inclusive membership committed to democracy and a democratic method of deliberation. For many of us, democracy has come to mean election, parliamentary debates, voting lobbying, and the like. For others, democracy may mean open discussions and egalitarian decision making.

Young people participation in decisions that affect them and the life of their community is valuable and has a range of positive outcomes. Youth participation is not an end itself, but a

means of achieving positive changes in young people's lives and of building a better society (CoE, 2008). Young people engaged in local community life through small groups' discussions, participating in different forms that can lead towards a perspective and a democratic citizenship education, will be taken into consideration, supported and motivated by the mass. In this context young people have to feel connected with and supported by humans, communities, ideas, movements (Jans, M and De Backer, K, 2002). This means, that they want to know that they are not alone and that they can identify with and count on a group or institution.

Linz and Stephan (1996) have suggested prerequisite for democratic consolidation the necessity of civil society. A normative theory of civil society has to include the following functions: protection of the people against abuse of power by the state, mediation between state and private sphere, socialization, integration and communication (Schneider, C. and Schmitter, P.C., 2004). As this sector is seen out of political arena, it is supposed that, they could play a great role on democratization. Again, this is a matter of the diversity of CSOs and their direct contributions to democracy.

Community organizations are the cornerstone of the democracy (Toronto, 2004). To be successful, these organizations must reflect the needs and views of their members, users and stakeholders – the strength of their decision-making lies in their ability to be representative and inclusive. There is one democratic group (young people which makes 25% of population in local levels and in most cases they are untapped resources), that is too often ignored or overlooked when it comes to decision making. There may be many reasons why CSOs and local governance have not engaged youth in decision making. Some are based on misunderstanding or uncertainty about how to bridge communication and generation gaps.

Youth participation is consistent with the view of “youth as resources,” and contrasts with the image of “youth as problems” that permeates the popular media, social science and professional practice when referring to young people. For example, the media often portray young people, especially young people from rural areas or disadvantaged neighbourhoods, as perpetrators of crime, drug takers, school dropouts, or other similar problems of the society. With these images in mind, many adults think of young people as problems, and young people accept adult images of their deficiencies rather than viewing themselves as agents of change. Regardless, local youth groups we have aforementioned herein are not registered by law as CSOs they represent civic interests and work for the democratization equally with other CSOs. “Small groups are able to overcome negative stereotypes on youth and create, they have showed enough skills to develop local democracy and be important actors at local level<sup>2</sup>”. Adults frequently sit together discussing young people, without even questioning the fact that youth are not part of the discussion. Entire conferences are focused around youth issues, where not one young person speaks, sits on a panel, or leads a workshop.

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with Frensis Dule, member of Youth Parliament, Tirane, 14 January 2012.

Thus, equality of opportunity is important in democratic groups. As Dahl argues, members of the demos “ought to have an adequate opportunity, for expressing their preferences as to the final outcome,” as well as “for placing question on the agenda and for expressing reasons for endorsing one outcome rather than another” (Dahl, 1991)

In order to answer to the question related with young people and the reason why they should bother to participate in democratization process, I conducted interviews with youth workers and activists asking them about their perception of democracy and democratization. Shortly, democracy and democratization for young people means; equal opportunity, good governance, free movement, quality of education, fun, security, free and fair elections, transparency, accountability, social justice and social inclusion<sup>3</sup>. All these key words make sense for young people and could facilitate their efforts to actively participate in the society as well.

Young people have the right to participate in decisions that affect them, thus, this could be a principal reason, for the fact they should bother to participate. In many cases young people in Albania are faced by decisions that they haven't been part of the discussion. The most recent case is related with TOEFL test<sup>4</sup>, where the Ministry of Education in Albania has set as criteria for those who want to follow Master degrees, while students are against this decision. Due to lack of anticipatory consultations with interest groups, the decision taken by the Ministry has mobilized students in protests on the streets, media and online. Regarding the question why young people should bother to participate, I would like to add the contribution collected from youth workers and activists interviewed during this research;

“...it is the opportunity to enhance my capacities, get to know new people, and learn more about the system how it function” (Denis); “... to test yourself and know more about your skills, create a good network with people, contribute to your community, friends and family” (Blendi); “... it is a pleasure to be part of a youth group, I like to participate because I can benefit indirectly, as well as contributing for my community and people I salute every day will be grateful. It makes me feel helpful” (Uarda); “... participation! It is amazing when you are part of a youth organization, thus I am interested to join my peers” (Sara); “...taking part in local decision making or discussion future policies, can have a transformative effect on how young people think about themselves and their role in the society. It has made me to realize that my contribution as a citizen is very important, especially in my local context (Olsa)<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Apart from interviews with youth workers, I have had the opportunity to organize a focus groups discussion with young people in Kukes region. Fifteen active young people present in this focus groups discussion explained their understanding of democratization, seeing as a normal life process to be engaged without prejudices.

<sup>4</sup> Test of English as a Foreign Language, which is an admission requirement for [non-native English speakers](#) at many English-speaking [colleges](#) and [universities](#).

<sup>5</sup> Taken from the interviews with youth workers and activists of different associations in Albania;

## 2.1.CIVIL SOCIETY AND LOCAL YOUTH GROUPS IN ALBANIA (1991-2011)

Albania hasn't inherited a good tradition in the civil society field. First, social working groups started to get organized before the Second World War, and suspended during and after the war with the establishment of communist regime where every sector was controlled by the state. The totalitarian system was infected in all of its social life cells, by transforming it completely. After democratic changes, the need for civil society came as a necessity to constitute the social structure. The fragile tradition recommenced after 1991 with the first CSOs operating as national ones, but their activity was very limited beyond two or three cities. Due to the lack of tradition and culture inherited, the real role of civil society is missing or at least is overshadowed, because most of the CSOs are established and still establishing to benefit donors funds rather than to contribute to the democratization<sup>6</sup>. Most of the CSOs, which are getting funds from international donors, are registered by law. There are 2,231 associations, 311 foundations and 552 centers registered IN THE COUNTRY. Most of them are established in Tirana and are being assessed as having greater organizational strength and individual human capacities than CSOs in other areas (TACSO, TACSO Albania, 2010). But again, based on the interviews conducted during this study, there are many other civic groups that are in place, mainly in local level as community groups, youth groups and the like, contributing equally as much as CSOs registered by law, even though they get less funds or nothing at all.

In this paper I have not defined separately the role of the civil society from that of local youth groups. Local youth groups and other community groups, which are not formally registered by law, could be defined in the civil society sector as a concept. When it comes to the general perception of people in Albania, civil society is defined only as NGOs registered by law.

Following the logical framework, I would like to focus at local context with different actors of civil society in Albania with whom I have conducted interviews and be able to make links of the concept of civil society with the ones I will address during this research. For these youth workers and CSO leaders, the first impression of what civil society means is stated as follows:

“Organization, conjunction, voluntarism, engagement, participation” (Olsa<sup>7</sup>);

“Although there are many definitions about civil society, in my opinion I would like to define it as Hegel did” The set of intermediate associations which are neither state nor the (extended) family; civil society includes voluntary association and firms and other corporate bodies ...” (Anisa);

“Entirely free individuals, who feels members of a society or the state with full rights; citizens that testify a general culture anytime, anywhere” (Arta)

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<sup>6</sup> Interview with Olsa, member of Confederation of Trade Unions at the national level, 15 January 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Olsa, Anisa, Arta, Doriana and Uarda are some of the interviewed youth workers and youth activists in Albania which I have directly contacted.

“A group of organized people in voluntary bases, who share a common vision, participate actively and independently in the development of their community, to the country they belong” (Doriana);

Even though the word “*society*” is grammatically a singular word, civil society means a large group of people, associated by a common idea and notion towards well-being. Civil society means “*to think big*”, thinking far way of yourself, to fulfill a certain aim. (Uarda)

It seems reasonable to go a step further from the definition of different scholars of civil society in developing the concept together with the definition of local community youth groups. Local youth groups involves; youth parliaments, students unions, youth centers, youth movements, different youth forums, religion groups, teams of sports or fans, which are not necessarily formal or registered by law. These local groups, often are excluded from the label and the equivalent of civil society, therefore their contribution on democratization is underestimated or even not recognized at all.

From 1991, where first associations in national or international level have started to work in different regions of Albania, it has been impossible to implement their projects without links with the local community, individuals or groups. But again, local groups’ contribution have not been recognized or taken into account as much as it should be.

As defined herein by youth workers and activists, civil society is related to the community, voluntarism, engagement, participation, society or large group of people, contribution of whom goes towards their community and democratization. None of their civil society perception is related or has similarities with the political parties. In the other hand, youth workers, different reports of international institutions, researchers and politicians also emphasize that the main and most active part of civil society is implicated in politics and *vice versa*. Even though the nature and composition of civil society can differ from country to country, it remains clear the fact that civil society must be autonomous and independent from politic. Especially, Eastern Europe, where the states have controlled civil society during the communist period, the consequences have been felt during the transitions as well and Albania doesn’t make an exception (AIIS, 2001). As long as there will be common interest between the political parties and civil society organization, hindering democratization will be a challenge.

The coming question to youth workers and other CSOs professionals involved in this research was if there is a real, organized and authentic civil society in Albania. All comments raised the same problem; CSOs are becoming professional to get donors’ money, but they are not independent from politics, they are implied with different political sides and many of their leaders or board members are politically involved people.

Anisa, who is 24 years old and engaged actively in the CSO sector from seven years states “last years, I have noticed that the civil society in Albania (even



though not all of them have civil interests, regardless of their proclaim) has been trying to dissociate oneself from the political superposition...and of course we have seen positive changes on CSOs”.

While Sara, a youth activist engaged in different local and nation CSOs since 2008, explains that “... yes there is a civil society in Albania, but I doubt if it is an authentic one, and of course my concern and doubt comes as a result of strong relations that some active CSOs have with politics and their intentions towards economic advantages”.

These comments made by CSOs activists differ from citizens’ view, which are doubtful for the independence of CSOs. Meanwhile, lack of trust towards politics and the government is evidently advanced; it is supposed that civil society should be stronger and trust should be higher. Unfortunately both sectors suffer from mistrust and the activism of society is missing. Lack of trust has limited the participation of activist and local communities in civil society activities.

During the last ten years, CSOs have increasingly provided non-formal education, have mobilized citizens to participate in decision-making and have increased the number of advocacy activities, as well as the interest in engaging with the government and local authorities in policy dialogue.

There are well established CSOs and think tanks with good analytical capacities necessary for effective advocacy and policy dialogue in Tirana as in the rest of the country these capacities are largely lacking. Due to financial constraints, most CSOs, particularly those outside Tirana, face challenges in engaging permanent professional staff. Majority of CSOs have one to three staff members, either working on short-term or on yearly contracts.

Considering the high number of CSO’s registered, only some of them are able to get funds and develop their objectives. Lacks of experience and professional education, have influenced the management and orientation of CSO’s. Based on the interviews with youth workers and leaders of CSOs in Albania, I have collected some barriers and problems that civil society has faced during the transition, such as follows:

- a) NGOs were initially established by non-professional people, with lack of capacities and specific orientation;
- b) NGO’s initially were not based on social needs, but on donor driven and their adaptability, to benefit funds in order to get employed;
- c) Voluntarism concept was not perceived as a necessity of functional of civil society due to its misapplication during the communism system;
- d) The origin from a totalitarian and collectivist society and lack of information as well was another barrier to start in a good way;

These findings from the field, are in harmony with the scholar A. Krasniqi, while commenting the establishment of civil society after 1991, he admits "...the first ideas in Albania for civic movement, open debate and the establishment of civil society initiatives were not coming from academics ... on the other side, better part of CSOs and other associations were not established by representatives of academic elite, rather than ordinary citizens, also from ex-officials of bureaucratic of communism system (Krasniqi, 2004)". Considering the facts that civil society has had its ups and downs during the transition in Albania, and the fact that local youth groups are not mentioned or taken into consideration as part of civil society so far, I can state that local youth groups have had a great role and their contribution should be recognized and taken into consideration to actively engage and partnership with other stakeholders of the society.

From a first perception I would easily admit that national CSOs have more experience, better organized and consequently it is likely accepted that they should have more influence in the community. However, from experience, the local youth groups or local CSOs have less issues to handle, since they are focused in smaller group, thus they could be much more public-spirited than CSOs working at national or regional level. Furthermore, the local civic groups are closer to the community and part of it, thus they can have a higher influence and greater impact than others from national or international level, despite the fact the latter have more expertise<sup>8</sup>. Although local youth groups have no funds as consolidated NGO which are highly depended on foreign donor funding, they are much more active, but less considered. While local youth groups in most cases are organizing their activities without depending on donor money as CSOs are. Different networks are established recently, and the CSOs understand the benefit of partnership and networking with other organizations, but competition for limited funds makes many CSOs work separately (TACSO, 2010).

### **3. YOUTH PARTICIPATION AND ITS INFLUENCE ON THE DEMOCRATIZATION**

A genuinely inclusive society needs to ensure that its youth participate in all its affairs that young people's views are included in development policies and that young people develop their leadership skills. Based on the focus group discussions and interviews conducted during this research, youth have either remained marginalized or disinterested in participation of politics but not necessarily on issues such as education, environment and health. For the majority this lack of interest was due to the attitude that politics was boring and policy constraints of the state and society.

So far I haven't implied youth groups separately from CSOs yet, but local youth groups should be observed in a more critical way, when it comes to participation and democratization. As I have clarified from the beginning of this paper, *participation in democracy* "means to participate

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with Uarda Begaj, 12 January 2012, leader of Youth Parliament of Fier and active member of New Epoch NGO Fier.

personally and actively, participation which belongs to me, decided and realized by me, thus it is not “being part” neither forced. None has disclaimed that *participation* is the substance of micro democracy and infrastructural ferment of the democratic state’s superstructure” (Sartori, 1998). Furthermore, I’m talking about a specific group of society, youth and small groups at local level. Thus, it is important to stress participation of youth as a separated group, since there might be different approaches of participation, and interests vary from one group to another.

Following the explanation of participation, I will go through different forms that can enable young people to participate.

The first fact to refer is voting but, as in this study I’m taking into account young people, I will consider the fact that only eighteen years old are able to vote. Although, there is no canonical form of direct participation in modern democratic governance; models of contemporary participation are and should be the opportunity to express their opinion by voting, or having their say. Young people should be invited in discussions on at least those topics they will be affected by. Their participation nowadays is becoming divers in terms of means they could use and the percentage of their participation, since internet technology is largely developed and this way of communicating is widespread among young people. Participation of young people is about getting them involved so they can have their say in a way that is comfortable and appropriate for them. It involves adults actively listening to what the young people have to say and incorporating their ideas in decision-making (ACT, 2010).

There are many forms of participation of the young people in local community where some forms seem to be more appealing than others. Non-formal education, voluntary work, youth councils, clubs, NGOs, boycotting of products, signing petitions, campaigning activities, political forums, unions and taking part in elections (both to vote and to be elected) are some forms of participation for young people we have interviewed.

Following the discussion related to participation, I will consider the Ladder of Citizens’ Participation developed by Sherry Arnstein (1969). She argues that participation is valuable to the extent that it “is the redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens... to be deliberately included in the future”. She posited “ladder” of empowerment with six steps: manipulation, therapy, informing, consultation, placation, delegated power, and finally citizen control. This perspective is useful on the basis that a model designed to support youth participation at local level must address matters of facilitation and mentorship, in order to derive an asset based on perspective of youth, the power required to better sustain their participation.

The following question is related with the compliance and benefits of youth participation. Is it enjoyable for young people this process of democratization and what benefits will they receive from their participation?

Young people, more than any other group need to find an enjoyable setting in order to participate. Furthermore, they should benefit directly from participation, being heard and having

their say on the concerns to them related. There might be included benefits for young people, by making also enjoyable, educative or in some cases providing specific payments for consultation groups on specific issues. While young people might have the will to be engaged on local, national and global issues, they are not always so enthusiastic about political and democratic processes. This concern could raise the next question on the motivation of young people in participating on democratic process. What motivates or inspire them to actively participate in the society?

Even though young people demonstrate a broad understanding of our democracy, traditional political structures and government can appear irrelevant to their situation (Collin, 2008). Motivation of young people requires; independence on decision making, safe environment, financial support for their ideas and campaigns, formal and non-formal education both integrated in their daily life and youth exchange activities focused in transition from education to employment.

### **3.1 BARRIERS OF YOUTH PARTICIPATION**

Regardless of the need for increasing of small groups and especially young people's participation and building community capital, I'm aware of the fact that there are barriers which prevent their engagement. For different local elected people and other stakeholders as well, consolidation of democracy at local level by participatory youth can be a utopian notion. High levels of distrust, or sometimes issues to be solved are too difficult. Participatory methods are not the best solutions for adults or elected people at local level. In this context, I prefer to indicate some barriers that youth workers and activists are facing in their daily work, such as: lack of local government commitment, lack of will to give control to youth groups on some projects or programmes, lack of trust between local government on local community groups' capacities and corruption.

Being aware of the fact that Albania remains a non consolidated democracy and the ongoing political conflicts during transition are not serving democratization, there might be a demand of acting and motivating young people to participate through CSOs and small groups and develop their leadership skills. In other words, youth need opportunities to learn and practice democracy in meaningful and authentic ways. The development of local youth groups and their leadership will contribute greatly to the positive development of both; youngsters and their communities. Furthermore, helping young people develop leadership competences makes them better able to solve community problems and enhances their civic participation (O'Brien, J., & Kohlmeier, 2003). The empowerment of young people will help other CSOs to increase their roles and influence local communities. Young people should be trusted to lead issues related with their concerns, as well as being consulted for the new ideas of local development.

Beyond barriers that young people and CSOs face every day and the citizens' apathy, sources to re-activate civil society are in place and need support and motivation. Local youth groups should

be taken into consideration in this case. Since this research is highly based on empirical data, I could not avoid some other comment made by youth workers and activists of CSOs, whom state that;

“Albania should not be perceived only as Tirana, Durrës or Elbasan, (which are the biggest cities) because it is more and beyond them, in each small city, villages and neighborhood where people live. Social inclusion policies for local youth groups should be prepared constantly and with the presence of young people themselves” “... our voice should be heard, youth CSOs should show more self-confidence, enhance the cooperation between local and national groups and of course avoid the completion to get appreciated by politics”...“if the foundations of pyramid are strong enough (which symbolize local youth groups), the whole CSOs structure will be strong up to the top, and there might be the citizens interests that band together CSOs groups, ...while youth groups participation should be motivated, notably those small groups from local level, since young people are the first groups of society whom determine the changes that should be done”...“ more financial means needed for youth groups, ... a real situation analyses and identification of problems is needed, because the better part of concerns we address in the community are overlapped and expected results are missing”<sup>9</sup>

After these comments, which offer a glimpse of both the promise and problems of local youth groups, related to youth participation, I would join the appeal of youth activists that CSOs are not and should not be though only within big cities, as big cities also have their neighbourhoods, like small cities are, and beyond these big cities there is another reality which could not be detached from the other part of the country. Nowadays, when globalization is a fact, there is a revival of the emphasis to develop and educate small community groups toward democratization and how to face challenges in the society.

Financial support is one of the main barriers for the survival of CSOs. While there are local communities, such as local youth groups that have great resources to develop and influence the democratization with less money but with a huge need to communicate, cooperate and hear their voice.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

Identifying patterns of youth participation at local level with small groups, is a step towards developing a better understanding of factors that promotes an independent CSO and its influence on democratization. This paper underlines the importance of power relations in between national and local CSOs and other local community groups, with the aim to achieve anxious social changes and influence democratization in a wider context.

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<sup>9</sup> Interviews with young people activists from Kukës, Fier, Elbasan and Tirana on: 12, 13, 15, January 2012.

This paper doesn't pretend to cure the fragility of democratisation neither the politisation or non credibility of CSOs in front of the public opinion. Although, across the experiences of youth workers, activists, professionals of civil society working at local level has suggested a variety of perspective from which to view the complex and composition of small local groups and their impact to bring social changes and influence the democratization equally with other CSOs operating for years but unable to achieve good results. Along comments and literature review, therefore, this paper contributes to rethinking of involving small groups at local level, as well in opening the debate to apply the bottom-up democracy starting with youth participation in small groups.

Based on the low performance of democracy, political parties are the most active ones and have taken the role of democracy promotion, overshadowing other civil society groups, I could conclude that youth participation and small groups from local community doesn't have a voice to influence the perspective of the development. Civil society, is not yet strong and independent enough to play an active role and should not be identified only with CSOs, as they reach out other informal groups like youth coalitions, networks and small groups at local level.

The emergence of young people in participation is essential for the consolidation of democracy and a better perspective in Albania. Civil society itself should be more opened to small groups from local communities, in order to encourage new initiatives, support youth groups and individuals that could affect and inspire the critical mass. This will help to develop democracy, support participatory approaches and generate debate on a democratic society.

Young people seem to be the best target group and ready to take responsibilities to develop these skills. After twenty years of transition, the efforts toward democratization and the achievement of European standards are the main intention of different actors, with a particular attention of European institutions.

More than ever, a bottom-up local democratic development need to be integrated and applied within small youth groups at local level, marginalized communities and disadvantaged neighbourhoods in big & small cities. Even though the political discourse worldwide seems to be all-embracing, the development of worldwide democracy depends on developing it locally and making democracy more directly relevant and beneficial to local communities and their daily lives.

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