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## Assessment of public participation in local planning & decision-making. A case study from Albania

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### Abstract

The public participation (PP) is widely legitimised as a vital prerequisite to achieve sustainable development and as a basic principle of democracy. Under the conditions of the new territorial administrative-territorial division of local government units in the Republic of Albania, the Malesia e Madhe (MM) Municipality is a new one. The purpose of this study was the assessment of attitudes of the local community of areas under the administration of MM Municipality on PP in local planning and decision-making in order to influence future behaviours of the local community to take active part in local decision-making processes. The questionnaire was used as a research instrument for the local community of this Municipality. The research results showed that the local community of this area was generally aware of the need for their involvement in local decision-making, but they considered the municipality as the main responsibility for their involvement in this process.

**Keywords:** Albania, local planning & decision-making, Malesia e Madhe Municipality, public participation.

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## 1. Introduction

Public participation (PP) is a basic principle of democracy. It is considered as the cornerstone of responsible democratic governance (Cuppen, Broekmans & Enserink, 2012). Nowadays that sustainable development (SD) is a necessity of the time, PP is widely legitimised as a vital prerequisite to achieve sustainable development.

Although there is not a consensus about what it means PP and there is very little clarity on how to achieve it (EPA, 2014; Lucky, 2016; Stephen, Barry & Jules, 1995). Different researchers have often defined it depending on the context in which PP takes place. Brager, Specht and Torczyner (1987) defined PP as a tool to educate the community and increase their ability to influence decisions that affect communities' lives and as a chance to transfer political power. While Armitage (1988) defines citizen participation as a process through which citizens act in response to public concerns, express their opinions on the decisions that affect them and take responsibility for bringing about changes to the good of the citizens. Another scholar, Mdunyelwa (2008) explains PP as the process of seeking and facilitating the involvement in the decision-making of those potentially affected by or interested in a decision. According to Yvonne (2010), the public contribution in this process will influence the decision. Furthermore, EPA (2014) states that PP can be any process that directly involves the public in decision-making and reflects fully public inputs in the making decisions that affect their lives today and in the future. Therefore, PP is considered as the heart that pumps the community's life blood (Lucky, 2016).

From the above, it can be concluded that PP is a continuous communication process between decision-makers and community and not a single event. It consists of a chain of activities and actions that give the public, within the government's jurisdiction, opportunity to influence politics and decision-making of the government. This is a win-win situation for both parties (Enserink & Koppenjan, 2007; Lucky, 2016; Marzuki, 2015; Nurudin, et al., 2015, Stephen et al., 1995; Stokes, 2012; Yvonne, 2010).

The PP in local decision-making can help to:

- Strengthening democracy because by involving in policy-making and decision-making process, the community is encouraged to exercise their democratic rights. As a result, this process becomes more representative, a larger forum is won in which community presents their concerns and cooperates with government, and the works of government assess better by the community.
- Improving process of the policy- and decision-making quality, just because the PP allows government authority to be better informed of different opinions and concerns of the public. It ensures fair development policies and decisions that reflect real needs, enriched with additional experience and expertise, and supplied with new ideas and more innovative and comprehensive solutions.
- Improving the quality of community life by properly implementing those fair development policies and decisions that are making from more representative and comprehensive forums. The level and the nature of PP in local governance issues are often used as indicators of a healthy civic culture.
- Increasing efficiency of resource use by local authorities as it is possible to reach use of resources according to the current needs and priorities of community which are really known from communicating with the community;
- Increasing responsibility for the accountability of the government because the PP can contribute to the assessment of the social, economic and environmental impacts of different projects and how their costs and benefits will affect different segments of the community. Therefore, PP helps to ensure the accountability of the governments for their actions and their responsibility to public interests.

- By linking the community with decision-makers, community confidence in support of the process of policy- and decision-making is strengthened and public authorities are more responsible for their actions.
- Reducing corruption through mutual information between public authorities (information from accountability on the resources available to meet the needs of the community and on the activity they develop) and the community (information for its needs and its expectations from local government). This will bring not only full use of local resources in favour of the community but also transparency and effectiveness in governance.
- Enhancing process legitimacy of implementation of policies and decision since meaningful PP in the process of implementation of policies and decisions will legitimise this process and ensure the consistency of the proposed plan and decision during their implementation. Without PP, the community may feel manipulated and doubtful, which undermines an effective dialogue and can create distrust in public institutions.
- Managing social conflicts, just because the openness of government enables preventing conflict between different groups and between citizens and the government. By bringing different stakeholders and interest groups to the same table of policy- and decision—making, PP facilitates dialogue and achieves consensus and it can minimise the number and the magnitude of social conflicts arising during implementation of the policy.
- Increasing community support to the political system because the community is educated and begins to think creatively in an attempt to find new ways to solve problems that disturb everyone. Knowing that their voices count will make the citizens happier and at the same time, social cohesion or community integration will be enhanced. In this way, failure to properly understand the importance of PP will erode community self-belief in planning and decision-making processes and in responsible democratic governance.

However, the PP process in local policy- and decision-making also has its own challenges and obstacles. On the government side:

- The political context may not be supportive of citizen involvement. Most of the time, politicians, as the legitimate representatives of the people, are therefore free to make decisions on behalf of the people according to politicians' interests, not considering the needs of the people they represent.
- Government bodies and representatives may not sufficiently understand the importance and priorities of PP, on who should be consulted or engaged.
- It can lack transparent and efficient PP mechanisms.
- It can lack general standards and procedures on PP or delay in adopting the appropriate legal framework in line with international standards on PP.
- It can lack the institutional framework and capacity for participatory processes.
- Government can only be consulted in part with so-called 'friendly' organisations. Although PP does not necessarily represent all citizens because an adequate selection process can reduce uneven representation.
- Government does not create opportunities for the community to follow-up and to recognise how public input will be used to inform local planning and decision-making processes.
- Government may be under pressure from time limits to adopt certain legislation.
- PP processes are costly for the government not only for the time they take but also they require investments in organising meetings, drafting comments and providing information on the results of the comments.
- The information provided by the government on agreements and development policy is often too technical in nature and inadequately explained for the community. While on the citizens and other interested parties side:
- They may not sufficiently understand issues for which consultations are taking place.

- They may not understand the need for cooperation with the government.
- They may not have the appropriate communication and lobbying skills to express their opinion.
- They may not have sufficient capacity to react quickly to government announcements and to participate in professional consultations.
- They may not give concrete solutions to problems but only criticise government proposals.
- Public representatives in the municipality council may be unable to represent the thoughts and interests of citizens.
- Lack of coalitions, networks at the local and state level to articulate thoughts more efficiently.

Therefore, when we seek to promote PP in local policy- and decision-making and to establish appropriate mechanisms and strategy for participation in a country, it is important not only to look at opportunities but also challenges in order to implement the appropriate ways and mechanisms for addressing and overcoming these challenges. However, in all the world, processes for including community in local planning and decision-making have been criticised for failure to display distinctive signs of real participation, claiming that opportunities for PP are included in the form, but not in essence.

## **2. The research problem statement**

Governance at the local level plays an important role in the lives of the community, perhaps even more than the central government. Community expects by local government, for example, to provide services, manage public resources and infrastructure, and mediate conflicts. It is more in contact with local government representatives than with representatives of their national government. Also, it is important to state that women, as well as men, serve in the local administration, policy-making and that local government has the capacity to respond to the needs of the local community.

In Albania, a developing country with a new democracy, the Government accepts that PP is an integral part of efforts for SD and good governance. The various attempts have been made by Albanian governance, that PP to be an important component in governmental decision-making and planning processes. For SD, the Local Agenda 21 asks the local government authorities to consult with their communities when formulating the development plans and strategies. But after June 2015, in Albania, the new administrative and territorial division made after the implementation of law 115/2014 'On the administrative-territorial division of local government units in the Republic of Albania', decreased the number of local government units from 384 to 61 municipalities. These municipalities have the responsibility and the challenge of managing the issues at the local level already in larger and more complex administrative areas, including urban and suburban and rural areas. Thus, the territory's administration is turned into a more challenging task. This new administrative-territorial division of local government units was based on the 'Functional Areas' methodology in order to make possible the harmonisation of development policies and the reduction of inequality in the provision of services between urban and rural areas. In this new management situation at the local level, it is necessary to encourage the participation of the community of areas under the administration of these municipalities as a prerequisite for their SD and for transparent, open and democratic governance. Although Albania has good laws regulating PP in local decision-making (LDM), work is how they are implemented. Under the conditions that Albania aspires to integrate into the European Union, gender equality is defined as a prerequisite for European integration and as such it is listed in the Policy Criteria in the European Partnership Action Plan. Women face a number of gender-specific challenges in Albania. If they are empowered and organised, they can form an important electorate in growing democracy.

The scope of the study lies in Malesia e Madhe (MM) Municipality (MMM). It is the second-largest municipality in Shkodra Region and it is located in the northern part of Albania. It is bordered to the north with Montenegro and to the south with the Municipality of Shkodra. This municipality consists of six administrative units. The new municipality has under its administration two cities and 56

villages. MM contains many natural beauties, such as Shkodra Lake and the mountainous areas of Vermosh, Razme and Boges. This Municipality owns large forest areas. Tourism, livestock and agriculture are the main economic sources for the inhabitants of this area. They also deal with the cultivation of medicinal plants and a small part of the inhabitants are engaged in fishing. According to the Census of 2011 (URI, 2015), the population of MM is 30,823 inhabitants. There is a high level of unemployment, while most of the income in this area is secured by emigration. A significant part of the population has migrated over the years to the United States and England. This phenomenon continues at high rates, especially in the young population. As such, the majority of the population under the administration of MMM is rural and marks the lowest number of women's participation in local planning and decision-making processes (DLDP, 2013). The participation of the community, especially of women in local planning and decision-making processes has particular importance in the framework of SD in this region.

This study has the purpose to assess perceptions and attitudes of the local community of areas under the administration of MMM on importance, responsibility, the current level of their engagement in local governance and about the challenges posed to this process. This is because if their attitudes are well-known, then we are in a better position to influence future behaviours of the local community to take active part in local planning and decision-making processes (Elamazi, 2007). In this way, the findings of this study will help to raise awareness of the community and other interested stakeholders of MMM to actively participate in local planning and decision-making processes. Also, they will help this municipality to establish appropriate ways and mechanisms to foster the involvement of the community in local planning and decision-making, while they reduce or eliminate obstacles and maximise the benefits of making this process during the design, implementation and monitoring of policies that affect their lives of the community for SD. This study contributes to the academic literacy of PP in local governance and SD in developing countries.

### 3. Method

The type of research design used was exploratory. The survey was used as a quantitative research method to collect data in order that it could cover the contents of this research since it is the most popular way for measuring attitudes that provides numerous, reliable and organised data, and keeps anonymity to encourage response to sensitive issues. In order to explore and analyse the actual dimension of PP level and practices in local planning and decision-making process in MMM, the questionnaire was used as a research instrument to conduct to the local community of areas under the administration of this Municipality. Since the object of this study was the examination and analysis of the local community perceptions and attitudes on PP in local planning and decision-making process in MMM, initially, exploration of the literature was used to develop the items of the questionnaire. The units of analysis of this research is the community of MM Municipality with a population sample of 30,823 inhabitants ( $N = 30.823$ ) and a sample size of 300 persons ( $n = 300$ ). This study used probability sampling method but keeping the report, 50% female and 50% male in order not to have gender impact on the survey results. The questionnaire was designed as a structured one with closed questions, which facilitates management, tabulation and analysis of data and facilitates the response of the respondents and makes these responses reliable. The questionnaire tested to 20 local random resident of the area before its distribution. It comprised six sections. The first section asked for the demographic profile of respondents. The second section consisted of closed questions concerning the perceptions of the community on the meaning, importance and responsibility of PP in LDM. The third section asked about the possible directions and the most appropriate techniques of PP in local planning and decision-making. The fourth section measured the respondents' perceptions on the most appropriate channels of information communication in the local community for efficient decision-making and the situation on this in MM. The fifth section asked about the importance and the situation of woman involvement in decision-making in MM. The last section measured respondents' perceptions on the challenges faced during the process of involving the public in local decision-making in MM. All attitudinal statements were measured using a Likert scale. This is a very useful

measurement scale when we want to get an overall measurement of attitude about a particular topic. Also, closed questions with two or more alternative choices were used.

A research software tool—Qualtrics—was used as a fast and easy method to deliver the questionnaire, to collect data online, to keep anonymity, to encourage response to sensitive issues and to process the data collected. A total of 300 questionnaires were distributed online using e-mail address' database or social networks lecturer and students from MM of Economic Faculty at Shkodra University. The survey was conducted for 7 days. From the 300 questionnaires distributed to the local community of this area, 198 completed and usable questionnaires were returned, accounting for a response rate of 66%.

Descriptive statistical methods were used to analyse the research results. The differences between categories and items within every category on PP, as percept by the local community, become apparent through the mean. To interpret results of calculated means, the five levels of Likert scales were differed by 0.80 point as follows: Class interval = (Max. score – Min. score)/Class number = (5 – 1)/5 = 0.80 (Pakdeepinit, 2007). So, the applied scales in order to interpret the calculated acceptable mean scores of Likert scales are as following: 1–1.80 = Strongly Agree (SA); 1.81–2.60 = Agree (A); 2.61–3.40 = Neutral (N); 3.41–4.20 = Disagree (D); 4.21–5.00 = Strongly Disagree (SD). The calculated mean scores were ranked from the highest mean to the lowest one in the relevant figures.

#### 4. Results and discussions

Respondents profile: In terms of involvement in the survey by gender, female respondents dominated with 58% in the total respondents participating; while by marital status, married persons dominated the survey (52%). In relation to the respondents' educational level, only 12% of the sample participating had a secondary level of education, while 32% had a Bachelor's degree and 56% of respondents belong to level 'Master'. Of 198 respondents of the study area, 72% were employed (in public institutions 38%, private businesses 29% and civil society organisations 5%), while 15% were unemployed and 13% were retired. From the above data, women, married persons, highly educated people and employed were the most sensitive and aware of the importance of the involvement in the survey and the purpose of the survey.

Respondents' Knowledge on PP in LDM (Figure 1): Respondents are SA that PP is a process through which the community expresses their opinions on the decisions that affect them (mean = 1.6—SA), while at a lower level of agreement they express that PP is a process through which the community takes responsibility to influence to better changes for community (mean = 1.9—A) and to act in response of public concerns (mean = 2.1—A). So, they agree that PP can be any process that directly involves the public in making decisions that affect their lives in order to bring changes for their own good.

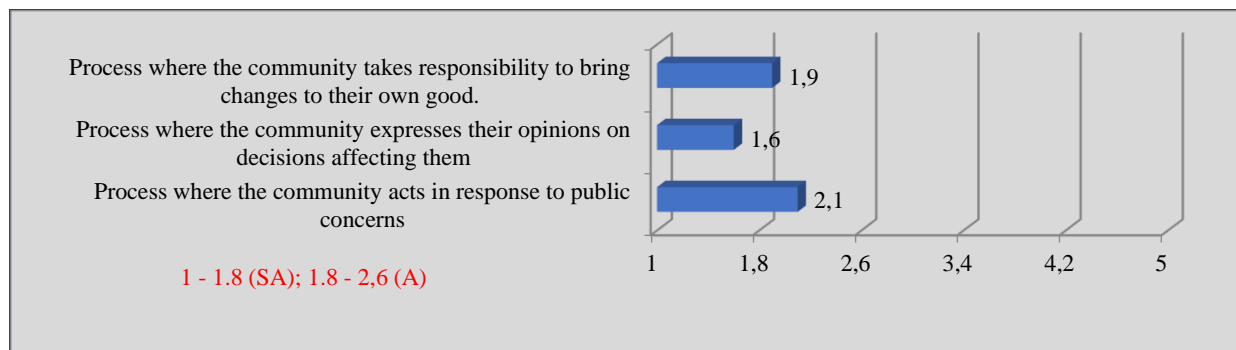
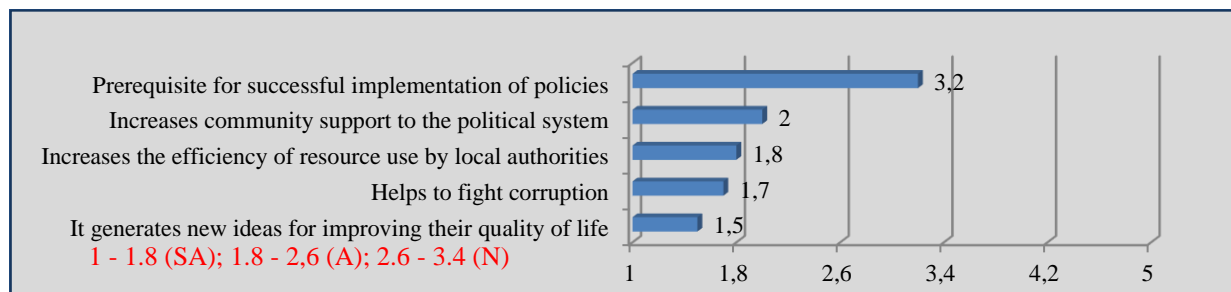


Figure 1. Respondents' knowledge on PP in LDM

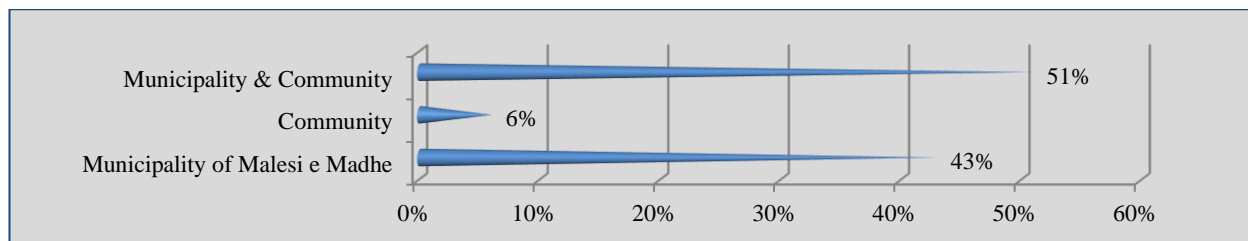


Perceptions of the community on the importance of PP in LDM (Figure 2): Respondents agree that PP generates new ideas for improving their quality of life (mean = 1.5—SA), PP is a tool for transparency in fighting corruption (mean = 1.7—SA) and increases resource efficiency by the local authorities (mean = 1.8—SA). At a lower degree of agreement, they accept that PP increases the community's support to the political system (mean = 2—A). While, respondents maintain a conservative view that PP is a prerequisite for successful policy implementation (mean = 3.2—N). These results show that knowing of their voices will make the community think creatively to find new ways to solve problems that disturb everyone, will make the municipality to reach use of public resources according to the current needs and priorities of community and to be also more transparency in governance, will legitimise implementation of the approved plan and decision. But they think there are other factors influencing the PP to serve as a prerequisite for the successful implementation of approved policies.



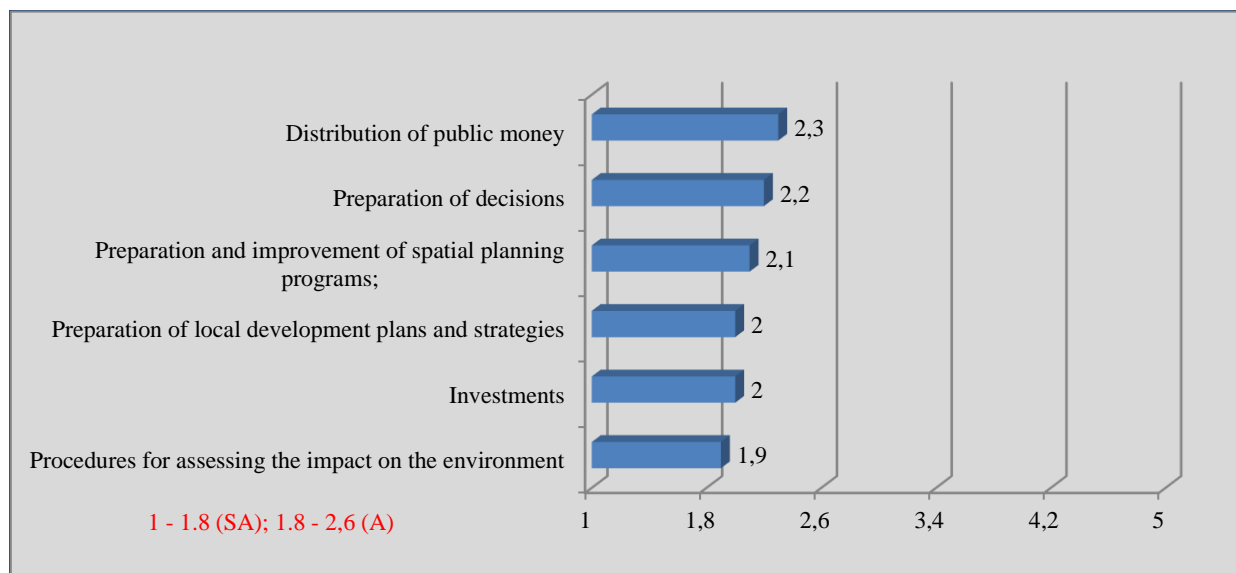
**Figure 2. Perceptions of the community on the importance of PP in LDM**

Respondents' perceptions on the responsibility of involving the public in LDM (Figure 3): More than half of the respondents think that this responsibility is both the Municipality and the local community, while 43% think that the municipality has it and only 6% think that only the community has this responsibility. The results show that a large number of respondents think that the main responsibility for promoting the public involvement in the LVM is the municipality and do not feel that they themselves should be organised that their needs are taken into account and their voices heard.



**Figure 3. Respondents' perceptions on the responsibility of involving the public in the LVM**

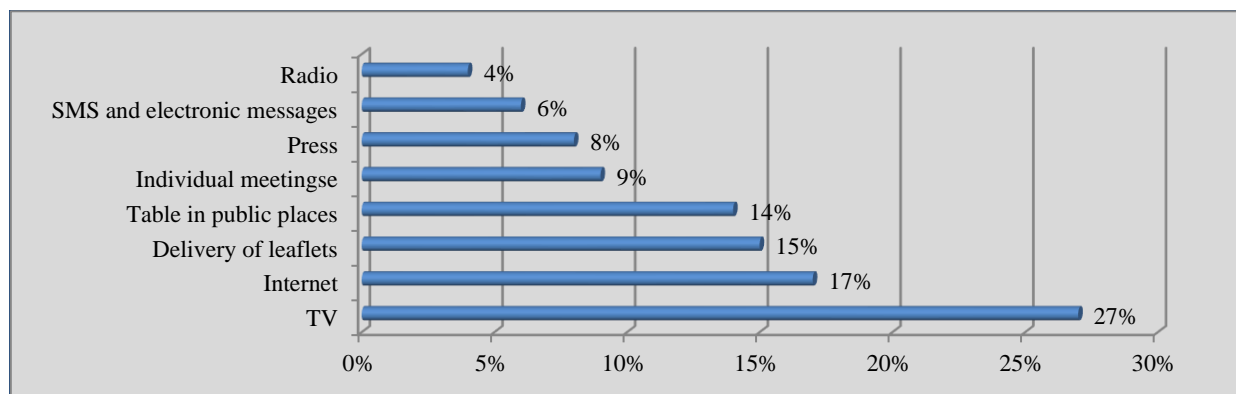
Perceptions of the community on possible cases of PP in the LDM (Figure 4): Regarding possible cases of public involvement in the LDM, respondents express this agreement level: in Environmental Impact Assessment (mean = 1.9—A), in decision-making on investments (mean = 1.97—A), in the preparation of plans, concepts and local strategies (mean = 2—A), in the preparation and improvement of spatial planning programs (mean = 2.1—A) in the preparation of decisions directly affecting their lives (mean = 2.2—A) and in the distribution of public money (mean = 2.3—A). Thus, they give more priority to their participation in the LDM when it is required to discuss the environment, investment, development plans and strategies and spatial planning.



**Figure 4. Perceptions of the community on possible cases of PP in the LDM**

Respondents' perceptions of the most suitable PP techniques in LDM: The respondents think that the most efficient methods that the municipality can use to provide information to the community are the use of open days with the public (75%), field visits (54%), Internet (50%) and then they list the press tools as press statements (27%), bulletin (14%). For gathering information from the community, respondents think that the municipality can use the most efficient techniques: public meetings (68%), questionnaires (61%) and after that they list focus group work (35%) and maps mapping with the community (20%). While, for public consultations, the respondent community thinks as the most efficient techniques: public meetings (53%), social media 50%, and then it lists the comment on the proposal through electronic or letter communication (26%) and consensus meeting (24%). In the end, to reach common decision-making, respondents think of the most efficient technique of using open dialogue (73%), negotiations (29%) and mediation (24%).

Respondents' perceptions on more appropriate communication channel during the PP process in LVM (Figure 5): They see TV set, folding leaflets, tables in public places as the best communication channel during the PP process in LVM.



**Figure 5. Respondents' perceptions on the best communication channel during the PP process in LVM**

Respondents' perceptions of the role and involvement of women in LVM: Almost all respondents (98%) think that the role of women is important in LDM. But most of the respondents (81%) think that currently, the engagement of women in the LVM in the MM is not the right level. Also, 63% of



respondents see a commitment of the MMM to increasing the role of women in LDM. Most of the interviewers (94%) think for the need to increase the role of women in LVM in MM.

Challenges in the PP process in VML at the MM Municipality (Figure 6): As the biggest challenges of PP in LWM at the MM, 71% of respondents admit the political impacts and the subdued mentality of transparency. Then, they list these challenges of PP in LWM at the MM: not organising of the interest groups in the MM (68%), the fragility in the organisation of the new public institutions in the MM (67%) and the uninformed public (67%) resulting from the low level of inclusion in the survey of members of the community of MM, the low mentality of women involvement in LVM (67%). More than half of the respondents do not list the insufficient knowledge on the legislation of employees of public institutions in MM and the lack of financial resources of interest actors for MM (58%). Therefore, when we seek to promote PP in policy- and decision-making and to establish appropriate mechanisms and strategy for participation in a country, it is important not only to look at opportunities but also challenges in order to implement the appropriate ways and mechanisms for addressing and overcoming these challenges.

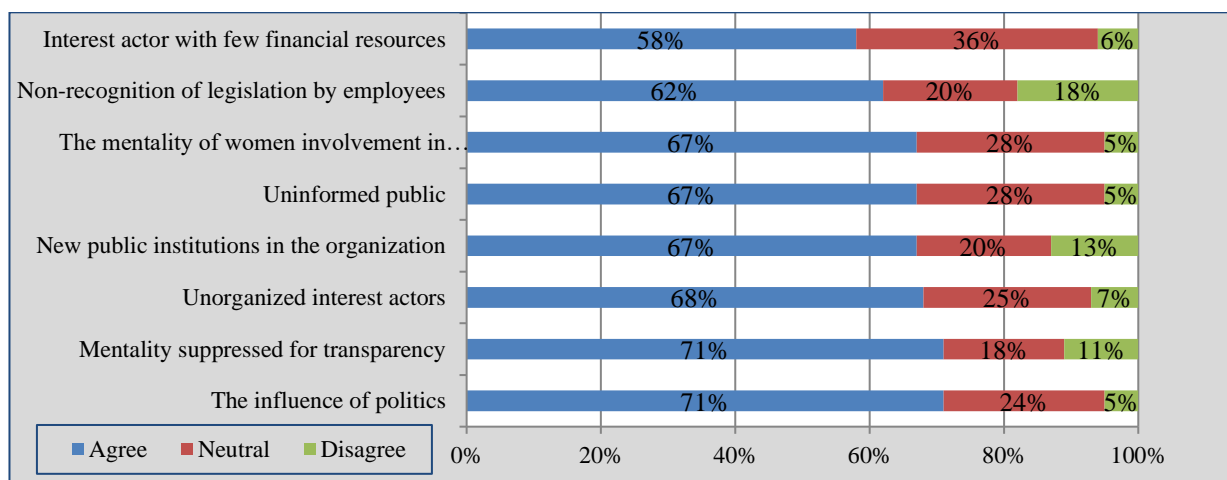


Figure 6. Respondents' perceptions of the role of women in LVM

## 5. Recommendations

In regard to promote PP in policy- and decision-making in Malsine e Madhe, some actions are recommended for different interested actors, arising out of the analysis:

- Local government should rigorously enforce existing laws and establish sustainable legal mechanisms to guarantee PP in LDM and planning.
- It is necessary to recognise and focus on the needs of all participants during the PP process in local planning and decision-making.
- The Municipality and NGOs need to cooperate to develop the capacity of the community to participate in the LVM.
- Local government should create an ability environment for PP in LVM for the entire rural community.
- Municipality should establish institutional policies and mechanisms to encourage PP in the planning, implementation and management of local development and local resource development projects.

- Local administration should build functional units, part of the internal organisational structure to provide useful public information.
- Local government should develop and allocate to the public the necessary information guidance to promote the benefit and opportunity of PP in LVM and define best practices of PP in LVM.
- Local administration should provide technical assistance to the community to understand technical information of proposed plans and strategies.
- Local government should communicate to the community as the inputs of the public influenced the decision.
- Municipality of MM must prepare Village Design Statement for 56 villages under jurisdiction with the participation of local communities for making in the count of local character in of them in local development.
- The community should be organised in associations to make stronger lobbying over decisions that affect them.
- Encouraging women's involvement in local decision-making requires initially giving women economic independence
- PP not measured by the number of public that participated but it must measure by benefits of participation in the community.
- It is necessary to develop the continuous training of employees of public institutions of the municipality of MM
- The local government needs to improve and adapt the physical infrastructure for persons with special needs to have access to information
- Public institutions maintain close ties with the University of Shkodra 'Luigj Gurakuqi' to recruit qualified employee.

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