



**OXFAM**

# **Local Partnership for Rural Development in Albania Project Effectiveness Review**



**Oxfam GB  
Policy Influencing/Citizen Voice Outcome Indicator**

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## **Acknowledgements**

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## Abbreviations

<b>CSO</b>	Civil Society Organisation
<b>DFID</b>	Department for International Development
<b>GOA</b>	Government of Albania
<b>IDM</b>	Institute for Democracy and Mediation
<b>IMF</b>	International Monetary Fund
<b>INSTAT</b>	Institute for Statistics, Albania
<b>ISRDSA</b>	Inter-sectorial Rural Development Strategy for Albania 2007–2013
<b>LAG</b>	Local Action Group
<b>LAGA</b>	LAG Adrijon, Vlorë
<b>LAGD</b>	LAG Drini, Dibër
<b>LAGM</b>	LAG Maranaj, Shkodër
<b>LOG</b>	Local Government
<b>LSMS</b>	Living Standards Measurement Survey
<b>MEAL</b>	Monitoring Evaluation and Learning Team, Oxfam GB
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organisation
<b>NSDI</b>	National Strategy for Social Inclusion and Development
<b>Oxfam AL</b>	Oxfam Country Office in Albania (later Quodev)
<b>Oxfam GB</b>	Oxfam Great Britain
<b>OSF</b>	Open Society Foundation
<b>QDA</b>	Qualitative Data Analysis
<b>RHV</b>	Raising Her Voice
<b>TOC</b>	Theory of Change

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## 1 Executive summary

'Local Partnership for Rural Development in Albania' was part of the *Raising Her Voice* (RHV) portfolio established by Oxfam GB in 17 countries. RHV aimed to support and strengthen women's roles in shaping policy and local governance. Local Partnership for Rural Development was financed by the Department for International Development (DFID), with implementation by Oxfam GB in Albania (OXFAM AL) over the period 2008–2011.

The project operated in three rural areas in Albania. OXFAM AL partnered with local organisations in each region: with Auleda (Vlorë), the Permaculture Resource Centre (Shkodër) and Argitra Vision (Dibër). Partners assumed responsibility for implementation after the first year of operation, while OXFAM AL continued to provide monitoring and support. The project closed in 2011, but Local Action Groups (LAG) continue to operate with funding from other donors.

This Effectiveness Review elaborates programme impacts in relation to key selected recent outcomes. It offers an assessment of the extent to which intended changes and outcomes have materialised through the project, as well as tracing the intervention's specific contribution to claimed outcomes.

The Evaluation utilises a pre-defined qualitative methodology of *process tracing*. The aim of this is to facilitate more value-free objective judgements of project efficacy. The Evaluation is founded on the project's Theory of Change (TOC), a model of how the intervention seeks to change the situation and address the problems at hand. The Theory of Change model for the Local Partnership for Rural Development was reconstructed and developed through an iterative process of data collection and analysis of project proposals, outputs and impacts.

Developing the TOC is a participative and collaborative process in which main protagonists at OXFAM AL were involved and consulted. Initially, the enquiry identified and selected key recent outcomes for further investigation through discussion and examination of the available documentation. The enquiry then employed backward chaining to establish the causal links toward the outcomes. Progressing through the project lifecycle important intermediate outcomes, preconditions, actions and assumptions at each stage were elaborated. The process tracing approach accommodates the fact that impacts and outcomes may not necessarily be wholly congruent with the goals as set out at project inception. It also facilitates the discovery of unintended outcomes.

Evidence from field research and documentation provide the basis for evaluation. Data were collected from in-depth interviews with stakeholders, partners and beneficiaries at all three project implementation sites, as well as by review of internal documentation. External publications and country data were consulted in order to explore possible competing explanations for project outcomes.

The project was designed to introduce Local Action Groups (LAG) to Albania. This offered an innovative approach for Albania, in that they institutionalise public and private partnership at local level. As found in implementations in other countries, LAG also have the potential to advance people's rights as they provide a negotiation structure with national institutions. While LAG are territory based, they are intended to reflect and represent the diversity of the community and to incorporate different socio-economic sectors and groups with particular needs. The project's initial impetus was on financial and non-financial assistance for the establishment, capacity building, and implementation of locally planned development actions and advocacy.

The aim was to contribute to local development. LAG also offered the opportunity to enshrine gender equity in the organisation and secure the involvement of rural women in activities. As a semi-formal institution, LAG processes and structures could impact local governance and local decision-making. The project aimed to achieve this through formal Memoranda of Cooperation between LAG established by the project and Local Government (LOG) departments.

The project was designed to address key aspects of governance, such as citizen participation accountability and partnership, in order to ensure local development and investment decisions to benefit poor women and men. At the local level these aspects were addressed through:

- 1. The process of wider participation of local communities through equal participation of women and men and stakeholders in the decision-making;*
- 2. Promotion of active partnerships amongst private and public through establishing structures like Local Action Groups, which provide a sustainable model to better link the government with rural communities.*

This effectiveness review identified and focused on two selected outcomes:

**Outcome 1:** *Local Government decisions address Local Action Group priorities and initiatives.*

**Outcome 2:** *Local Action Groups have established a viable model for promotion of women.*

Given the project's rationale, these are considered to be two essential preconditions to the identified final project goal of effective community-led rural development. Central to the intervention's Theory of Change, these outcomes offer a credible basis for analysis of evidence and stakeholder perspectives on the programmes efficacy along the personal, social and political dimensions that RHV seeks to impact. The evaluation should prove useful for learning and forward planning both for the LAG stakeholders and Oxfam GB.

The first outcome was found to be partly contingent on political externalities, such as the lack of a legal basis for LAG, which depended on the evolving Government of Albania (GOA) strategy at the national level. To what extent the lack of progress on LAG' mainstream adoption has affected participation in the project was not meaningfully measurable in the context of this study. It was indicated as a small factor in discussions with beneficiaries, with the understanding that it was more of a concern for the medium-term.

However, at local level, LAG successfully enhanced existing local governance arrangements and gave the community and specifically women's voices a platform. Nearly all stakeholders were supportive and the majority expressed pride and corroborated a sense of community ownership of their LAG. Their concerns naturally centred on financial support for LAG in the short to medium term. The perception of stakeholders and beneficiaries at all levels is largely positive and participation rates are holding up in the three areas. The review finds that LAG offer women a stepping-stone out of their current exclusion from the local political and social arena and a powerful local platform for engagement.

As mentioned, LAG were an unprecedented system in Albania. The risk with innovative interventions is achieving sustainability, which in this instance could only come from buy-in at the national level of politics. LAG' effectiveness and unique compelling advantage over previous rural programmes was found to be their twin role of being implementing agencies as well as advocating at the local level. The former function is contingent on secure funding streams. The hoped-for and anticipated political development – Albania's EU Candidacy – that would have secured this stream didn't materialise, and this has taken the wind out of LAG' sails since the project's close.

Oxfam itself initiated activities near the end of this project in an attempt to mitigate the impact, notably initiating a fresh round of training at LAG that was intended to increase their autonomy, further developing rural forums and trying to institutionalise the relationship of LAG with Local Government through facilitation of the 'Razma' declaration. The three LAG have had to look to other means of ensuring their future. They are considering formalising their structures by establishing themselves as not-for-profit companies. The end of Oxfam's involvement in the project sees it reaching full circle and returning to the project's starting point, crucially however, with the ball firmly in the court of LAG themselves. 'The biggest challenge to LAG now is financial' and LAG going forward are seeking funding from alternative sources outside of public budgets. However, without a wider and more effective campaign of dissemination and media advocacy, potential network effects from LAG advocacy efforts remain weak and under-utilised, for instance in developing credibility and establishing relationships with potential donors.

Equally, this is a tall order as they are currently perceived as operating as local actors. Operationally, they may run as local forums for rural development or as NGOs. The first option leaves them lacking in terms of budget to finance actions, somewhat against the name. Operating as NGOs look infeasible for two main reasons:

1. It risks subversion of the original intent as they will be competing for funding with current partners. This will mean they have to 'specialise' in, for example, gender, development or agriculture. This has been seen in the subsequent implementation of LAG by OSF/GIZ.
2. As an NGO it's difficult to see how they could legally maintain a Memorandum of Cooperation with LOG that oversees and influences budgetary decisions!

Notwithstanding these issues, the LAG established by this intervention have garnered good local support from a wide constituency and integrated successfully into existing governance structures. In some part this was because the model seems to have been very well-adapted to the Albanian context. It was an important achievement, for instance, to bring a gender-positive organisation into a working relationship with local elites to enhance existing governance. Project activities, such as training and capacity building, were instrumental in normalising the LAG-LOG partnerships, as well as bringing clear benefit to many stakeholders individually.

This project has also seen LAG bring real material gains to the community through planning and implementation of LAG designed projects. Instances of this were attested to by beneficiaries in all LAG and evidenced in LOG budgets and reports. This points to the development of a beneficial LAG-LOG partnership in those areas and more widely

demonstrates that LAG may become an effective vehicle for community led decision-making in Albania.

In contrast to other top-down strategies in the political and social spheres, the institutional-grassroots approach adopted here holds great promise for strengthening women's standing and influence in their communities. LAG are the kind of structure that could offer rural women the necessary experience and skills to overcome prejudice and the confidence gap, and act as a springboard to further and wider engagement in public life. If we take the project goal as institutionalising women's role in rural development, then considered as a capacity building project, it is considered to have fulfilled its remit in terms of individual and institutional knowledge and mechanisms. Its influence on the wider policy landscape, no matter how positive it could have been, was severely diminished by the lack of enabling political developments.

While it is still early days for LAG in Albania, this review considers that the project was overall very well conceived and well executed in its core elements. Given greater formal support from GOA, partners and other stakeholders, LAG offer a promising model for rural development going forward.

## 2 Introduction

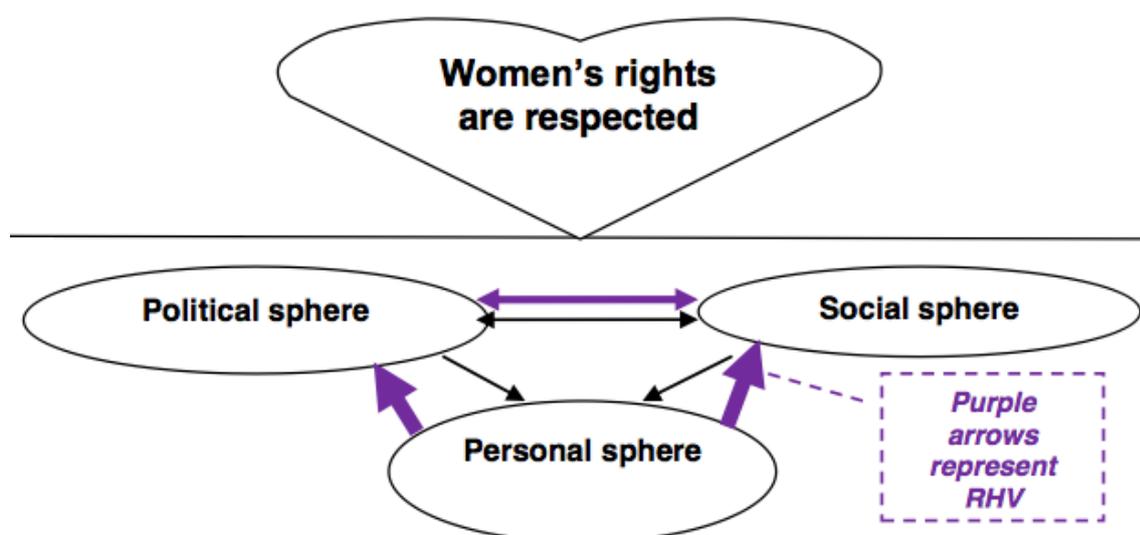
As per Oxfam Great Britain's (Oxfam GB) Global Performance Framework (GPF), samples of mature projects are being randomly selected each year and their effectiveness rigorously assessed. 'Raising Her Voice Albania: Local Partnership for Rural Development' project was selected in this way under the policy influencing/citizen voice thematic area.

### 2.1 RHV overview

'Raising Her Voice Albania: Local Partnership for Rural Development' was part of the *Raising Her Voice* portfolio established by Oxfam GB in 17 countries. This aimed to support and strengthen women's roles in shaping policy and local governance. The programme was financed by the Department for International Development.

The RHV global theory of change is that transformational change for women is possible when there is positive change in three areas:

- **Personal:** women are empowered and have confidence to act.
- **Political:** the formal and informal structures that determine laws affecting women.
- **Social:** organisational potential for women in uniting to advance their causes.



Within these broad goals, RHV accommodates regional and country-specific adaptations; with the global theory of change as 'a simple framework for understanding and evaluating the contribution of each element of work, and how each fits with wider change processes within and outside of the realms of the project'. Oxfam GB country offices work with local partners, Oxfam<sup>1</sup> in this case, to implement campaign activities. The campaign will be effective because it is multidimensional and more sustainable by enabling existing structures and country-specific approaches. RHV Albania was built on an international model of multi-

<sup>1</sup> Oxfam GB operations in Albania were phased out at the end of 2011 establishing Quodev as their spinoff. In this report the local office will be referred to as Oxfam, as was during the time frame under assessment, to avoid confusion with current Quodev operations supported by other donors. It must be stated that the evaluation took place nearly a year after the end of the project, and LAG were still active with financial support from another donor.

stakeholder local cooperation that was adapted to the country context to strengthen women's roles in participating and influencing local decision-making.

As part of Oxfam's 'Global Performance Framework', the 'Raising Her Voice Albania: Local Partnership for Rural Development' project was randomly selected from a pool of mature and closing projects for an effectiveness review, using the prescribed 'process tracing' research protocol. This evaluation provides a narrative analytical report documenting the research process, discussing the findings, and offering evidence and analysis of both intended and actual outcomes of the project and ways it may have influenced change in the community. This is intended to both inform future programming and to help improve the methodology used to evaluate other global projects.

## **2.2 Albanian context**

Some key themes arising from the socio-economic situation in Albania provide the rationale for the intervention. Long standing rural and gender issues underscore the need for new grassroots initiatives. Consideration of governance and rural policy issues offers guidance to the shape that this type of initiative could take, and the context of Oxfam's previous engagements in Albania provides a starting point for the intervention.

### **2.2.1 Rural development and gender**

Albania's transition from a centralised economy to a market economy came with significant benefits and significant costs, neither of which have been equitably shared. While macro-economic growth has largely been sustained and strong, averaging above 5 per cent since 2000,<sup>2</sup> job and wealth creation have not impacted a considerable section of the population. Given the lack of official data on poverty, policy remains a very blunt instrument and most programming is based on administrative data, assumptions about the country context and small-scale research. The most recent official poverty data comes from the last Living Standards Measurements Survey<sup>3</sup> in 2008. This revealed that poverty at the national level fell from 25 per cent in 2002, to 18.5 per cent in 2005, and to 12.4 per cent in 2008. However, anecdotal evidence, such as a rise in the number of social orphans in residential-care institutions, suggests that poverty levels and severity have worsened since 2008. While the cause of this is considered to be lower economic growth as a result of the global financial crisis, the lack of official data obscures the extent of the problem.

Developmental gains remain unequally distributed among regions and groups of people, with rural, periphery and mountainous areas having generally higher poverty levels. According to LSMS in the three years leading to 2008, the significant fall in poverty rates among regions was accompanied by a faster decline in rural poverty. Overall rural poverty in most regions experienced a significant decline in 2008 compared to both 2005 and 2002, yet, the poor remain concentrated in rural areas in mountainous regions. Poverty in these areas is a result of the prevalence of engagement in low productivity agriculture, characterised by householders operating smallholdings, poor land quality, lack of access to markets, limited availability of public services, such as education, health and employment services, and weak social safety nets.

Rural areas experience a twin deficit, in both public investments and in representation and influence with central government. Local and regional institutions generally lack capacities

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<sup>2</sup> Combined data from INSTAT, reporting from GoA and international monitoring reports such as IMF.

<sup>3</sup> LSMS conducted by INSTAT.

for participatory policymaking, remain unrepresentative and are largely undemocratic. Decision makers remain largely unaccountable to the public, in great part because civil society remains weak, despite long-standing and wide-ranging efforts to strengthen the sector since 1990. Crucially, personnel replacements in the wake of political changes have often had detrimental impacts, notably in terms of continuity and coherence in policy. The issues of poverty and representation are compounded for rural women, who are less represented and engaged at all levels of governance than rural men. This has been a contributing factor to the worsening position of rural women in Albania during the last 20 years compared to men and to urban women. The employment rate of women in Albania was 43.6 per cent in 2009 compared to 64.3 per cent for men.<sup>4</sup> Albania's socio-political environment has normalised patriarchal values and mentalities and this is an important impediment to improving the standing of women.

In its Constitution, Albania has taken important positive steps towards building a democratic society and guaranteeing equality between men and women. Still, freedoms and rights that have been gained have not had an equal impact on women/girls and men/boys in practice. Traditionally women have carried the main responsibility for family welfare, yet they have fewer liberties than men to utilise the necessary resources and means to fulfil these responsibilities. Female withdrawal from the labour market and return to more traditional household-based roles during the years of transition has usually been considered a result of labour market inefficiencies. However, this analysis masks the fact that a greater burden of household duties is already borne by women in addition to other income-generating activities and responsibilities. This withdrawal from the formal economic sphere is especially true for rural women. It has resulted in civic participation and community decision making becoming almost entirely the preserve of men. Given also that Albanian CSOs working on gender issues are typically situated in urban centres, their potential influence here is limited. The necessity of interventions that build on local knowledge and enhance local capacities leaves space open for new representative, grassroots initiatives to work for greater equity for rural women.

### **2.2.2 Governance and policy context**

Existing governance arrangements are typically remote and incomprehensible to rural communities. This leads to a sense of apathy or helplessness among rural communities, and can foster distrust of local government motives and decisions. Governance arrangements are also deeply flawed in terms of accountability and responsiveness, highlighting a clear need to bring decision making nearer to the people affected by the decisions and to increase oversight and participation. Top-down approaches, such as gender quotas for political parties, have done little to empower communities in general, and women in particular, to negotiate and advocate locally or regionally.

Equally, GOA strategies, such as the Inter-sectorial Rural Development Strategy for Albania (ISRDSA) and National Strategy for Social Inclusion and Development (NSDI) have not often translated into effective rural programmes. Major issues lie in:

- Top-down programme design and implementation, hampered by a lack of robust data and limited situational analyses, means that policies are often not responsive to need;
- Low capacities among stakeholders, such as LOG, impedes design and implementation of innovative solutions to local problems;

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<sup>4</sup> Data from Albania Labour Force Survey, 2009.

- Governance issues arising from weaknesses in the decentralisation process. For instance, while administration responsibilities for core services have been devolved, administrative costs remain high and block-grant budgeting from central government offers little space for locally leadership in reform .

### **2.2.3 General scope of Oxfam's work**

Oxfam has operated in Albania since 1992, and has engaged widely at national and local level. An example of engagements in consultations and dialogues during the timeframe assessed in this Evaluation is during the design and implementation of the NSDI 2007–2013 and as a member of the Advisory Group of the Ministry of Agriculture for the process of consultation of the ISRDSA. Most recently, Oxfam's Country Change Strategy in Albania identified the need for local actors to be able to engage with national institutions as a key priority for its engagement in country. Oxfam's support for Rural Forum activities at the local level demonstrated that dialogue could play an important role in enabling more informed decision-making and better negotiation among local actors. However, compared to LAG, local forums don't enhance existing local governance as they cannot engage on an equal footing to negotiate for more effective and appropriate programmes and investments in their areas.

## **3 Evaluation design**

This review utilises the prescribed process tracing (PT) methodology that Oxfam GB has adopted as part of its Global Performance Framework. PT goes beyond a typical theory-based evaluation in that it considers not only whether a causal relationship between the project and outcomes can be established, but also looks to determine the significance of any such contribution that is supported by the evidence, by considering the degree to which other causal explanations are supported by the evidence.

While not intended to be a mechanical sequence of linear steps of how the research exercise should proceed,<sup>5</sup> the following eight steps form the core of the research exercise's protocol.<sup>6</sup>

1. Undertake a process of (re)constructing the intervention's theory of change (TOC), in order to clearly define the intervention being evaluated – what has the project changed (outcomes), how did the project effect these changes (strategies/streams of activities) and to what extent did project activities contribute to these changes.
2. Work with relevant stakeholders to identify up to three intermediate and/or final outcomes considered by stakeholders to be the most significant for the Evaluation to focus on (central to the intervention's theory of change, and useful for learning/forward planning)
3. Systematically assess and document what was done under the intervention to achieve the selected targeted outcomes.
4. Identify and evidence the extent to which the selected outcomes have actually materialised, as well as any relevant unintended outcomes.
5. Undertake 'process induction' to identify salient plausible causal explanations for the evidenced outcomes.

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<sup>5</sup> Significant iteration between many of the processes is expected and, indeed, desired.

<sup>6</sup>Process tracing: Draft protocol.

<http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/blog/2013/02/~media/C396B507E01C47AB880D7EEF9ECCD171.ashx>

6. Gather required data and use 'process verification' to assess the extent to which each of the explanations identified in Step 5 are supported or not supported by the available evidence.
7. Write a narrative analytical report to document the above research processes and findings.
8. Summarise aspects of the above narrative analysis by allocating project/campaign 'contribution scores' for each of the targeted and/ or associated outcomes.

### **3.1 Development of logic model**

Reconstruction of the project's TOC was the first task undertaken by the Evaluator. The logic model was developed in consultation with Oxfam staff during orientation and initial interviews. It was guided by examination of the important project documentation, such as the project proposal, annual reviews and previous evaluations. Outcomes identified at this stage were high level and broad and project activities were not disaggregated much below cluster level. A schematic model of the TOC was developed using TOC website tools.<sup>7</sup>

A series of meetings were held with the Project Manager (4), Oxfam staff (4x1) and representatives from local partner organisations (3x1) that had implemented the LAG project in the three areas. These meetings worked to identify a set of wider outcomes, which were recorded and later analysed before adding to the model. The model was further elaborated through a series of meetings with the project manager, until the schematic model was finalised and agreed. From a range of recent outcomes two were selected as significant and traceable to form the basis for further enquiry. Confirmation of outcome suitability was obtained from Oxfam GB's Global Monitoring Evaluation and Learning (MEAL) team.

### **3.2 Project outcome identification**

The project outcomes identified for this review are:

**Outcome 1:** *That Local Government decisions are made which reflect Local Action Group priorities and initiatives.*

**Outcome 2:** *Local Action Groups establish a viable model for the promotion of women, through greater engagement in community life in its social, political and economic aspects.*

The outcomes under examination in this review were selected following a series of discussions with Oxfam staff and partners in joint development of the TOC model. The outcomes were chosen from a range of identified final and intermediate project outcomes.

They were considered to be essential preconditions to the project goal of effective community led rural development.<sup>8</sup> They also benefit from being specific and measurable. Evidence for Outcome 1 can be traced, for example, in the number of LOG decisions that implement LAG designed projects. Outcome 2 can be evidenced chiefly through the levels of interest, levels of participation and expressions of ownership among stakeholders.

Thus, the outcomes provide a credible basis for analysis of evidence and stakeholder perspectives on project effectiveness, both in terms of the project's goals, and the global

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<sup>7</sup> Available at <http://www.theoryofchange.org/>

<sup>8</sup> See TOC diagram page 18.

programme objectives. They are central to the intervention's theory of change, being final outcomes for the two main causal chains in the project. The outcomes and their causal chains broadly cover two aspects:

1. **Project Equity:** LAG as a model for **promotion of rural women's issues**; the viability of LAG in the Albanian context, notably in terms of **support garnered among the range of stakeholders** and especially **women's participation, voice and standing**.
2. **Project Efficacy:** The ability of LAG structures to enable **community-led decision-making**, shown in changes to and influence on LOG **budgetary decisions, list of priorities** and **local policymaking**.

Even though their establishment was far from trivial, the review does not attempt to trace processes and actions prior to that, so their formation is the starting point for this review. As it transpired, and as the project proposal anticipated, LAG were not implemented or replicated by other organisations during this period under review. Therefore the initial outcome of LAG establishment is fully owned by this project. This review therefore treats LAG establishment as an essential precondition and is not further unpacked.

### **3.3 Data collection strategy**

The Evaluation is based on primarily qualitative data gathered from interviews and group discussions with stakeholders and beneficiaries. Interviews were recorded and meeting notes taken electronically, enabling transcription at a later date. Project data were also collected and collated from internal project documentation provided by Oxfam GB and its implementing partners. This included reports, correspondence, publications, posters, training, relevant materials from LOG, such as LOG yearly budgets and lists of local-area investment priorities. All data were stored in a database to enable coding and querying as part of qualitative data analysis (QDA).

A total of 25 interviews were conducted, 16 of which were with LAG participants from all three regions. This represents between 20 to 30 per cent of active LAG membership, enough to offer a fair representation of the project. Thirteen of the LAG interviewees were women, which reflects LAG composition. Interviewees were selected from among LAG members, LOG representatives, and professionals involved in activities, such as needs assessment and training.

Interviews were conducted during field trips in the case of Vlorë and Shkodër. Due to weather conditions field trips to Dibër proved unfeasible and interviews were held by telephone. Local partners in each LAG region compiled the complete list for field interviews. As well, Oxfam provided a list of five trainers. Four of these were contacted, of which two respondents were interviewed.

Interviews were held with individuals or small groups. They were semi-structured, allowing for exploratory enquiry and for interviewees to express facts, opinions and wider perspectives. Themes and guiding points for questioning addressed the outcomes and activities relevant to the TOC. Qualitative data from discussions were combined with observer impressions to guide the enquiry, utilising corroboration and negative case analysis to determine causes and impacts. Data were triangulated by cross-checking facts with external sources, such as relevant strategies – NSDI 2007–2013; Inter-sectorial Rural Development Strategy 2007–2013; public media announcements on the new strategy in

rural development; and information on recent programmes or interventions in LAG areas by other organisations.

Initial findings from the field research were validated and fact checked prior to further analysis with the local office or through documentation. Where possible, novel findings were included for enquiry in subsequent interviews. Regular communication was maintained with the Oxfam GB MEAL adviser on progress of the evaluation and methodological issues.

Systematic analysis and interpretation of findings was undertaken using content and concept analysis of transcribed interviews, Evaluator's notes and documentation. Frequent analysis of data from field interviews showed the following order of concepts, offering a flavour of women's perceptions of the project from their own words:

- LAG
- women
- local community
- local government
- rural development
- issues
- needs
- men
- participation
- investment
- business
- information
- budget.

Patterns, commonalities and similarities in the findings from each of the regions were drawn out and weighted. Insights and observations, which substantiated themes and expressed value judgements, were noted. Evidence was weighed by demarcating LAG activities that were directly consequent to prior project activities, such as participatory budgeting, from those that were indirect or the result of LAG's own actions, such as word of mouth advocacy. Inductive analysis was used to identify what and how project activities had impacted. Finally, a narrative was iteratively constructed, describing the causal chains of the two outcomes. Final conclusions and ratings on the extent to which outcomes have materialised and the significance of project's contribution were made on consideration of evidence that supports the causal chain narrative and the extent to which competing explanations and other likely causes might have contributed to outcomes.

### **3.4 Limitations of the evaluation design**

No substantive limitations or restrictions were encountered in accessing data, documentation or in sourcing beneficiaries and stakeholders willing to contribute to the evaluation. No one approached declined the chance to express his or her views, which embraced the LAG approach. Internal documentation was readily made available by Oxfam country office.

Interviews and conversations with Dibër were conducted by telephone because weather hazards meant that it was not possible to visit. This is unfortunate, since it would have offered the chance to better explore sensitivity to local socio-economic and cultural conditions in LAG, which could offer important lessons for their later establishment.

Qualitative research that relies on personal perspectives can have issues with regard to weight given to subjective interpretations of the impacts of the project by the beneficiaries. However, this was mitigated by triangulation of data from other credible sources in order to reach scientifically robust and valid conclusions.

Because of the nature of the intervention, exploring the counterfactual, or competing causal factors beyond and outside of LAG proved challenging. The tendency of interviewees to provide glowing perspectives was in this evaluation controlled for by two interchanging strategies that varied from case to case:

1. Becoming more 'critical' in positing of questions and requesting evidence for statements made – although this can lead to confirmation bias.
2. Remaining amicable and keeping the focus on the specifics of the case, while trying not to reinforce value judgements either way.

Crucially, lines of enquiry were constructed that encouraged considered value-free responses.

A further challenge for this review stands was the timing of the Evaluation. LAG are still active and evolving, and the potential benefits to materialise for these communities in the future depends on the continued success of LAG in contributing to local decision-making. Wider benefits for Albania would arguably accrue after LAG' possible legal establishment, although this is contingent on political developments. Lessons from this project could usefully inform GOA strategy and LAG down the line.

Therefore, it needs to be noted, that the evaluation findings present a snapshot at a point in time which might have been different had Albania been given EU candidate status. For instance LAG would have gained support and momentum among the general public and institutions, access to funding and, vitally, in legal basis. In fact, it is likely that had Albania progressed in the candidacy application process, any information campaign on LAG would not have been as important to the sustainability of this project since operational programming on rural development would have certainly raised LAG profiles and awareness at the national level.

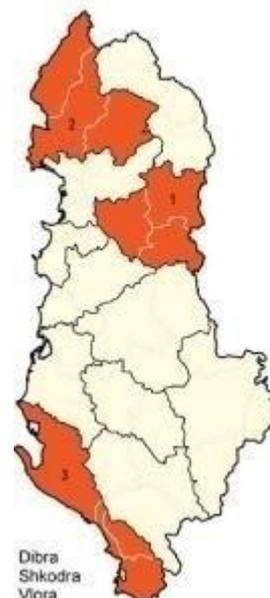
The final limitation is incompleteness: there are inevitably gaps in information in any study, notably in selection bias. Capturing the opinions of all or a larger number of beneficiaries and stakeholders might have elucidated important perspectives, especially overcoming the increased likelihood of favourable judgements since people have volunteered their time to participate. It was, however, unfeasible within the scope of this evaluation. This incompleteness is not considered to unduly impact the reliability or validity of collected data given the limited number of outcomes under examination. Therefore it is considered that the existence of knowledge gaps does not greatly undermine the critical balance and methodological rigour of the review.

## 4 Project description

The project ‘Local partnership for rural development’ was conceived and designed by Oxfam to address the situation of women in rural areas in Albania. It operated between 2008 and 2011 in three regions in Albania: Shkodër (North) , Dibër (North East) and Vlorë (South). The objective of the project was *‘to contribute towards rural development policies and investments that are inclusive, effective and accountable to rural women and men in Albania.’*

The project’s specific aim was to establish **Local Action Groups (LAG)** in line with EU models, and support women in rural communities to engage with development issues. The project’s goals were:

- I. Local government, rural stakeholders and communities have **information, capacities and support** to foster local partnership for actions and advocacy on rural development.
- II. LAG in the three regions **have the capacities to plan and implement actions/investments** to support local development to represent the perspectives of women as well as men.
- III. LAG in three regions are **empowered to advocate** for effective measures and investments to reduce poverty and develop their communities.
- IV. Rural women and men in the target regions and other local and national stakeholders are **regularly informed on LAG initiatives** by the use of traditional and innovative communication tools.



### 4.1 Rationale

Local Action Groups offer an innovative approach for Albania in that they institutionalise public and private partnership at local level. As found in LAG implementations in other countries, they also have the potential to advance people’s rights as they provide a negotiation structure with national institutions. LAG are territory based, but reflect and represent the diversity of the community – including different socio-economic sectors, groups with particular needs. The project’s initial impetus was on financial and non-financial assistance for the establishment, capacity building, and implementation of locally planned development actions and advocacy. The aim was to contribute to local development. LAG also offer the opportunity to enshrine gender equity in the organisation and secure the involvement of rural women in activities. As a semi-formal institution, LAG processes and structures can impact local governance and local decision-making. This offers women a stepping-stone out of their current exclusion from the local political and social arena.

The project was designed to address key aspects of governance, such as citizen participation, accountability and partnership, in order to ensure local development and investment decisions to benefit poor women and men. At the local level these aspects were addressed through:

1. The process of wider participation of local communities through equal participation of women and men and stakeholders in the decision-making;

2. Promotion of active partnerships amongst private and public bodies through establishing structures such as LAG, which provide a sustainable model to better link local government with rural communities.

#### **4.2 Visual logic model**

The final logic model for the RHV Albania shows the main causal chains and project activities that effected change. It can be seen that there is one final, global outcome, in-keeping with the project's title, of Effective Community led Rural Development. The two main outcomes that contribute to this are basis of this review. The branches following from them broadly establish the logic of LAG equity (purple) and LAG efficacy (green). These outcomes are themselves the result of more than one interim outcome, and occurred either as a result of LAG internal processes (not marked) or as a result of project activities (white boxes overlaying arrows).

# Local Partnership for Rural Development in Albania – Project Effectiveness Review



### 4.3 Project activities

Project activities were grouped into four clusters:

- Cluster 1: Providing local government, rural stakeholders and communities with information capacities and support to foster local partnership for actions and advocacy on rural development.
- Cluster 2: Working with public institutions and decision-making forums, including traditional structures.
- Cluster 3: Building capacities of CSOs to work for empowerment of women and securing their rights through campaign and policy work.
- Cluster 4: Disseminating best practice and lessons learned through innovative media and communication channels.

A detailed list of proposed project activities can be found in Appendix 4.

The LAG project activities were implemented in over 60 villages in the three LAG areas. Training engaged more than 100 participants – mainly women from each of the LAG for the introduction.

The project had also intended to arrange a meeting of LAG representatives with women parliamentarians, but the opportunity didn't materialise. Oxfam has, however, lobbied the government for inclusion of LAG in the new NSRD, pressing also for the need for a budgetary allocation for LAG activities.

The project used leaflets and roadside signage to communicate locally. No evidence was available that the project had published in local newspapers, and media/TV awareness was deemed to be too expensive by the project. Information was, however, passed by word of mouth, and in the context of the Albanian rural communities, that is a known method that has proved effective, reliable and economic. The project did not deliver the activities for output 4.2 (Set up and operate a system of information using the mobile communication technology – SMS). The SMS strategy proved to be too costly to attempt. This is probably fortunate, as government legislation changed to place restrictive constraints on privacy and the utilisation of mobile networks.

There were two issues with the output 4.4 (Provide updates for Local/Regional Council websites). Firstly, the website strategy proved unworkable simply because of a lack of internet access in LAG communities. This meant that the intended audience from LAG communities or non-LAG communities would not be able to equally access relevant information. Secondly, if the information was provided to council websites their archiving was no longer accessible to query for this review.

It is worth pointing out that LAG do now have dedicated webpages that are actively maintained and updated, detailing all relevant information about their activities and vision for the future.

#### **4.4 Project governance**

Oxfam took a leading role in the first year. It undertook stakeholder identification and analysis, preparatory to capacity building and training. Responsibility for operation and direction was devolved thereafter to LAG through their membership, with Oxfam providing advice and support. Thus LAG became the main implementing units coordinated by local partner organisations, planning local actions and conducting advocacy.

### **5 Findings**

The focus of this evaluation is on attempting to establish the extent to which the two main outcomes have materialised, and provide an assessment of the most likely cause for the outcome in order to reach a conclusion on the significance of the project's contribution. This section presents and considers the evidence in support of each causal story in order to arrive at conclusions, taking into consideration competing explanations and negative outcomes. The narrative starts after the point of establishment of LAG, where LAG establishment is taken as a given, although it is recognised that it was not a trivial achievement. What is apparent from stakeholders and beneficiaries is that it would be wrong to regard LAG as monolithic entities: even as nascent organisations they have internal complexity and represent a network of interests. Equally, as befits grassroots organisations, it is clear that LAG have characteristics, capacities and outlooks conditioned by their individual socio-economic environments and as a result they exhibit subtle variations, which embody regional identities. Indeed, the names of the LAG represent core features of regional identity of where they operate. For example, LAG Adrijon, where the Adriatic and Ionian seas meet in Vlorë; LAG Drini for the Drini river that crosses the communities in Dibër; LAG Maranaj for the Maranaj mountain in the communities of Shkodër.

#### **5.1 Outcome 1: LOG decisions address LAG priorities and initiatives**

##### **5.1.1 Significance of the outcome**

The determinants of this outcome are political and institutional factors around LAG establishment at the local level. For LAG to achieve this outcome requires them to effect local political change by building trust and exerting influence in key formal and informal relationships with local government. To do this LAG require the capacity to plan and implement initiatives that incorporate the agreed priorities of their constituencies. In order to reduce the opportunity costs of adoption, these priorities need to be articulated with some level of policy coherence with rural strategies and existing programmes. LAG also need to be able to effectively advocate for their vision with local partners.

The Effectiveness Review finds that LAG have so far only succeeded in influencing a small proportion of LOG decisions. It is still early days and this is considered a significant achievement in the timescale and not necessarily a factor against using the LAG model in Albania. Where LOG decisions reflected LAG demands, there was little evidence to suggest that other factors had played a significant role, whether policy, migrant return or other donor programmes.

While LAG have only influenced small initiatives so far, they are attested by all respondents to have had outcomes that are well received and reflective of LOG priorities. While it is still early days, this suggests that the LAG have been adequately equipped for their purpose by

the project. Wide documentary evidence and the testament of interviewees indicated that this is a direct result of the project’s suite of training and capacity-building activities, which was delivered by partners to a high level of satisfaction. In concert with the forethought and groundwork laid in establishing working partnerships from the outset, the project has contributed highly to achieving this outcome.

### **5.1.2 Salient causal stories**

*Resource based explanations:*

1. Return of migrants\* – with investment and new thinking.
2. Remittances\* – increased private investments with local impacts.
3. LAG co-funding local initiatives.

*Incentive based explanations:*

3. Decision making through LAG-LOG relationship.
4. GOA Budgets and Strategy\* – effects of implementation being felt.
5. Regional electoral changes\* bringing a change to LOG priorities.
6. Other donor programs and activities\* impacting LOG decisions.

(\* Competing causal explanation)

### **5.1.3 Findings**

<b>Outcome</b>	<b>Rating</b>	<b>Short Commentary (including reference to other evidenced explanations as appropriate)</b>
<b>LOG decisions address LAG priorities and initiatives</b>		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Through the project, 6 local government units provided co-financing for local investments of LAG. This is important considering the budgetary constraints they face.</li> <li>b. Having established LAG, the project equipped them well to participate in local decision-making and to advocate for women’s and community priorities.</li> <li>c. With little evidence to suggest that other factors had played any significant role in affecting LOG decisions, the project’s contribution to achieving influence on LOG decisions is considered high.</li> <li>d. Programme impacts have not further progressed, however, as LAG-LOG cooperation is predicated on ability of LAG to co-fund, which has not been secured.</li> </ol>

*'It's like when your car is stuck in mud: the commune and the community between them can't push it out. With LAG help, only then the car starts to move out. That's how this partnership works.'* (LOG Respondent)

Key project activities that contributed to this outcome centred on strengthening the LAG-LOG relationship, training and capacity building, planning and implementing local initiatives and advocacy, which are all traced in turn below.

### **LAG-LOG relationship**

LAG had been prioritised as a GoA activity in the NSDI 2007-2013. However, no effort had been made to formalise LAG as funding for implementation would need to be forthcoming from EU IPA<sup>9</sup>, which has a clear mandate of enhancing existing programmes rather than establishing new structures. In conceiving this project, Oxfam had a range of options for which vehicle would be most apt to fulfil RHV aims. *'We could have started our initial work with LOG or simply expanded previous activity on local forums, but we believed in mainstreaming gender issues. We decided on LAG as a way to achieve that, especially since we thought Albania was very close to getting candidate status.'* (Oxfam respondent).

As conceived by Oxfam, LAG were to be an institutionalisation of local forums intended to serve as an active link between women and central and local government through joint investments in rural development. The project mandate established the partners' duty to institutionalise gender mainstreaming in LAG – using their local knowledge to identify locations to establish LAG, fitting LAG organisational structures to local conditions and identifying local stakeholders with gender experience. Much consideration was given to correct establishment of the LAG partnership with LOG.

This was declared by all LOG members to be a vital part of the founding and functioning of LAG. The relationship was consolidated through delivering information on LAG and Leader+<sup>10</sup> and facilitating meetings with partners and LOG at an early stage of the project. Bimonthly and annual meetings cemented the relationship. There was testimonial and documentary evidence of the creation of wider links with other local community members in each of the three regions, including agricultural producers, community groups and the business community. Meetings to promote the project were also held with key stakeholders in rural development, such as other NGOs, donors and government agencies.

The institutional partnership between LAG and LOG was formalised with a Memorandum of Cooperation between LAG and LOG units. The co-financing aspect of LOG commitment is more than symbolic as project risk is reduced if they have 'skin in the game'. Complementarily, LAGs and LOG collaborated effectively on development of the Local Development Strategy for LAG in each area. The main role of LOG in the relationship was to provide facilitation and co-financing. Respondents asserted that LOG leadership was central to the viability of LAG over the project's lifetime: *'The willingness of the leadership is crucial to the success of LAG. Our head offered the offices, the staff, the human resources, time and finances, and expertise at the service of LAG; had the leadership not seen the benefit, it would not have made LAG that appealing, or simply would not have functioned.'*

The LOG partnership and functions are critical to LAG viability, but introduce an element of political risk into the project. This is pertinent to Albania, as frequent local government

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<sup>9</sup> EU IPA (EU Instruments for Pre-Accession) is the funding programme for EU Candidate Countries.

<sup>10</sup> Leader+ is the

changes have often entailed a wholesale change of administration and consequently a loss of capacity. For LAG this means people trained and links built with LOG may be lost which may affect the collaboration. This was tested with some small changes in LOG leadership as a result of local elections in May 2011 in the three areas. However, this had little effect on the project, most likely because most investments had been completed and LAG had scaled down activities.

Perhaps the most important way in which social, political and technical risks were mitigated was embedded in the project's plan to implement through partners and stakeholders who were a known quantity. LAG started on 'already worked land' as a respondent put it. A legacy of previous Oxfam work had built a high level of trust amongst stakeholders, and this appears to have been an important element in safeguarding the LAG-LOG relationship throughout the project's lifetime and beyond. The fact that no conflicts were reported between LAG and LOG is remarkable to contemplate for anyone with even only a little knowledge of local politics in Albania. *'Of course there is disagreement, sometimes vigorous – this is Albania after all. But we haven't seen the kind of politicking over issues, which kills debate or stops progress in its tracks. That holds at all levels – in the LAG, between LAG and LOG and also with the wider community.'* (LOG respondent).

### **Training and raising LAG capacities**

Training and capacity building were a particular strength of the project and appreciated by stakeholders. For many old hands it was a question of strengthening rather than building from scratch in terms of acquisition of skills and knowledge. Even for those, there was added value: *'While I had myself been in trainings with other organisations, the budgeting by participation was a novelty.'* (LAG respondent). The training (and sometimes retraining) appears to have been comprehensive and well matched to both needs and project intents in terms of level and quality of information and support.

Training was delivered to LAG and LOG members. Unanimously, stakeholders in the three regions considered the training delivered met its stated promise of providing 'capacity building and accessible opportunities for women to become actively engaged in local development and in local governance'.

This promise begins specifically with communicating an understanding of LAG' structure and purpose. Here it would seem that the importance placed on governance aspects by the project had either been given or received less emphasis than the RHV overall programme goals suggested. The latter is considered the most likely here, since many forums on the use of the LAG approach as a model for raising women's voices were organised. Equally, it is natural that stakeholders and beneficiaries' expectations of a programme are anchored on interventions that have concrete tangible outputs from projects and works. Tangible results in governance are more of a longer term change.

An example of the utility of the training was demonstrated in LAG Drini, Dibër (LAGD), in this case specifically in participatory planning. Without proper sources of tax revenue in the area, commune resources are very restricted and LOG are heavily dependent on government grants. Naturally, this presents a very real problem in meeting co-financing requirements, but communes managed to address the issue through crafting a joint strategy, which combined efforts and resources and spread benefits.

The comprehensiveness of the training was demonstrable and accounted in documentation:

- **Gender budgeting:** six training sessions took place on gender budgeting in order to equip LAGD with the proper capabilities to work and influence the annual budget allocation.
- **Participatory budgeting:** one of the main training activities; what the budget is, LOG budgetary meeting protocols, LOG responsibilities, GOA and LOG responsibilities, accountability.
- **Local budget monitoring:** a round table on methods of participatory assessment of local government accountability; monitoring of effectiveness of interventions.
- **LAG participation in local decision making processes:** strategy formulation, SWOT analysis, prioritisation, policy coherence, elaboration of policy recommendations and advocacy on issues.

Training, with organisational backing in the form of LAG structure, quickly brought direct benefits. Two key benefits are increased accountability of decision makers and promotion of women's issues. Certainly, engagement in LAG and training has raised interest in and scrutiny of LOG activities, with increased oversight accountability to LAG members. Whereas budgeting used to be discussed only among the council it was now fully participatory in at least two of the areas. The process in LAGM was described by a respondent as beginning with draft budget in May, with meetings with interest groups by sector across the period May to December. Priorities are then finalised and passed to the finance department who turn took these to be discussed with specific costing/budgeting to the municipality council. Ultimate decision-making authority rests with the local council. Naturally LOG can, if need arises, make changes to the budget during the year.

But the crucial impact of LAG has been that LOG meetings are more open and widely disseminated, discussed and challenged: *'There is more transparency now, especially regarding complaints made and how they are responded to.'* (LOG respondent).

Women's understanding of the intricacies of local decision-making and the role LOG plays in community decisions was universally reported to have been greatly strengthened. The trainings' effectiveness was enhanced by the ability of women to put it to use in LAG. Training on governance and budgeting gave women a fuller understanding of the role of LOG and the extent of its remit and powers. A couple of women LAG members, for instance, expressed that they understood better the constraints faced by decision makers, and that the essential component to this was better information and understanding of governance structures on which to base their judgement of LOG performance.

### **Local initiatives**

Local initiatives offer important and palpable evidence of LAG capacities. They are, therefore, to a degree, a result of capacity building and training. As remarked by a majority of respondents, the emphasis on investments as well as capacity building of women was a unique feature of this project. Whereas previous interventions might have focused on training, they were typically weak in facilitating or providing resources to implement. In this case, the training gave critical and very strong support to LAG' own implementation of initiatives.

To what extent, however, can initiatives undertaken by LAG be considered 'wholly owned'? Two criteria suffice here: a) that the investments in local communities *'otherwise would not*

have seen the light of day'; and b) that initiatives have community impact, notably in reflecting women's concerns and needs.

1. LAG were able to plan and implement initiatives that would not have gone ahead otherwise.

Many areas within LAG regions have priority needs that would require significant capital investment. The necessity to meet these priorities is balanced by capacities to implement. LAG budgetary allocations for works were small and not suited to capital-intensive works. Within these constraints, LAG each developed their own 'Local Development Strategy', effectively a working list of priorities for investment. LAG generally targeted smaller projects rather than tackling a single big issue, or contributing their budget into ongoing public works or LOG investments. On the other hand, LAG vision and interventions still need a degree of coherence and relevance with LOG strategies for the areas. LAG investments included:

- LAGA – Three pilot investments completed covering development of environmental tourism, family friendly tourism, and a cultural project for youth, women and the elderly.
- LAGD – Local investment on improving school grounds in *Fushe Cidhen* based on public-private partnership *and* enabled through cost sharing and a local fair activity to promote LAG women producers.
- LAGM – An infrastructure repair project to re-establish an irrigation canal; trade and product fairs. A total of five investments and two activities.

1. Community concerns and needs are identified, elaborated and represented.

Since LAG were too new at this stage and lacked capacities at the start, initial needs identification was conducted by partners in collaboration with research units. Questionnaires used to determine needs were technically sound, gathering useful demographic and socio-economic data on communes. Community needs were identified and communicated in the LAG, with cooperation evident across communes. Interestingly, participation in LAG has also brought a re-prioritisation of needs and a change in roles on the personal level: *'I was initially running my own business collecting and selling herbs. Now that I am involved in the LAG my son is doing that for us. Our commune was very keen on the LAG approach, because it gives us a better picture of the needs in community and we have even benefited by sharing experiences among communes as LOG.'* (LAG respondent).

The types of projects undertaken by LAG vary distinctly. One would not expect a direct correspondence between identified needs and outcomes – unfortunately needs data were not available to make that comparison – but no evidence of dissatisfaction was found. Initiatives reflected shared needs, respecting that needs vary greatly by place, somewhat complicating any broader assessment of the project's response to identified local needs. Respondents understood the wide variation between regions in what was considered locally to be a need: *'The situation is different here, people are a bit better off compared to the other LAG regions. We're not talking about bringing a water tap to the village, because here each house has their own. It becomes more challenging as to how much or even if LAG can help due to their limited resources. In meetings with other LAG we felt selfish for what we were asking for, when we saw the extent to which their unfulfilled needs are considered basic here.'* (LAG respondent).

Women tended to refer back to community needs in discussing LAG initiatives. This was reflected in the kinds of projects that were undertaken, such as a school investment. Such investments were considered long overdue, and it was hoped they would bring back the sense of community. Although not a key objective of the project, the poverty impact of LAG interventions was also apparent at the individual level from testimony of women's entrepreneurial activities in fairs, or through wider community benefits of specific investments, such as an investment in an animal watering facility in LAGD that enabled the tending of larger flocks.

An indicator of equity is shown in the generally positive assessment of the investments carried out in all LAG regions even when respondents were not from the village where the work had taken place. There was no sign of disappointment or loss of faith because needs we're not responded to, nor jealousy over decisions. This can be taken to represent a high degree of equity in the process, if not in the outcome among stakeholders. *'There is no jealousy among communes here.'* *'How could we be when we are building toilets needed for our children in our school? If they have need of a wine canteen elsewhere, then that's their need.'* (LAG respondents).

The impacts of initiatives were less highly regarded in the relatively better off LAGA. However, this community was atypical in this context in thinking that responsiveness implied that 'as needs grow, so should the ability of LAG to respond financially'. But this is an area that is already highly productive agriculturally and benefits greatly from tourism. In this context, the aims of a small scale LAG project are irrefutably modest.

In this regard, returning migration offers little in the way of alternative explanation as a contribution to increased community investments. The circumstances of returnees are highly variable, and actually highlight greater need for initiatives like LAG: *'Out of nearly 300 families in migration about 100 of them have come back and started working on their land.'* (LAGM respondent). However, this sizeable return raises other issues as while some migrants return with financial means, most return with little. This gives added importance to the thoughts of one respondent that *'the issue now is not getting women out of their houses, but to be able to respond to their demands for action with real investments'*. (LAGD respondent).

### **Advocacy**

Advocacy was on going throughout the project, as noted before, through wider link-building and attempts to meet national influencers. Here we consider the ability of LAG to advocate first in their key relationship with LOG, before returning to LAG' impact on the wider picture.

We have seen before that the initial project proposal took candidacy and LAG establishment as a given: *'EU experience has demonstrated LAG are good instruments for funding local partnership initiatives and for making sure that rural areas are able to obtain financial resources to address their local development needs. Thus the immediate output of LAG' establishment creates the local structure to ask for financial assistance and implement local initiatives even when this project ends.'* (Oxfam respondent) In contrast, the project's end and the end of Oxfam's involvement with LAG in Albania has, in a sense, meant that LAG are operating as purely forums and local lobbying. Without budgets to implement their own initiatives, LAG now are reduced to participatory planning and trying to influence LOG decisions, offering an opportunity to examine their effectiveness for advocacy *in vacuo*. LAG can use this budget-constrained time to make advocacy their main activity. However,

advocacy on its own is only part of the original aims. By having to be true to their nature of public and private partnership, LAG will need to co-finance investments as well as advocate in order to influence policy making. There is, however, strong support among respondents to keep LAG going even at limited resources, in the hope that soon the legal framework will enable LAG to expand and strengthen.

Over the lifecycle of the project LAG advocated for women's priorities at many levels, local through visibility, and nationally via publications, conference proceedings and the LAG WebPages. Its key advocacy work, however, was through its relationships with the local community and with LOG. As could be expected, LAG received different audiences and differing receptions in each area when embarking on the LOG relationship. On the one hand, there was initial scepticism both sides had to overcome through commitment and negotiation. This was, by all accounts, a two-way process, with both women and local government having to overcome preconceptions to establish working relationships: women in knowing how better to represent and introduce themselves and their work, and local government in how they perceive women in terms of accountability towards them.

Some LOG members didn't need convincing of the merits of LAG and were supportive from the outset: *'Our roles in LOG had previously taken us with other organisations on a study tour in Hungary for cross-border cooperation, where among other things we also learned about LAG. So when we had the LAG invitation here we were very keen to collaborate. We saw this as a great opportunity for the region... LOG needs new forms of community organisation for rural development.'* (LAGD respondent).

Separate to LAG initiatives, which benefited from LOG co-financing, LOG decisions and budgets are commonly perceived by all respondents as having been influenced by LAG advocacy of community priorities. The evidence, mostly from LAG members, is so far minimal, and slow to surface, but no less important for all that, with changes in budgeting being seen slowly. Claims were made at one LOG that a shift of priorities had happened, pointing to an increased budget for the elderly and tetraplegics. However the claim is contradicted by wider evidence. The budget for this is set by GOA based on LOG administrative data of the number of beneficiaries and needs, and the increase is accounted for by legislative changes<sup>11</sup> including beneficiary declustering that have increased budget allocations for this nationally.

The final phase of the project introduced a new advocacy plan aimed to introduce the LAG approach for women's empowerment and greater participation to potential donors and communities at large. This was given some urgency by the lack of progress on Albania's EU accession, which effectively ended any hopes for formal establishment of LAG in the medium term. In light of this, the project focused on capacity-building of LAG to promote the rights of rural women through campaign and policy work, including work with public institutions and decision-making forums. Training was undertaken in the three regions with women from local authorities, education, health, and agricultural sectors, to prepare LAG for community advocacy and promoting access to decision-making processes. The advocacy was effective in promoting wider interest in LAG in the regions, if not at the level of the state, with requests from local representatives and representatives from other areas who have asked if the scheme will expand into their regions.

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<sup>11</sup> Law on the Status of Blind Persons and Paraplegic and Tetraplegic Persons (amended March 2012)

Of course, the uncertain future of LAG pending on the EU opinion has somewhat diminished the advocacy message: *'In the worst-case scenario, we have now benefited and gained experience from a new approach. It has taught us that by joining forces we can ourselves find ways to respond to needs, which we have not been able to do for ourselves before.'* (LAGD respondent). LAG themselves are looking at other sources of backing, advocating with private business for example, while operating on the faith of their members. While the training has provided good grounding and approach, establishing such links is especially challenging in areas that have seen little or no previous donor engagement, let alone private involvement in public interventions. *'No other organisations have worked in this commune apart from LAG. The LAG coordinator now is not being paid, but is continuing to work so that the LAG doesn't lose the links and faith of the community. We hope that soon LAG will be able to function'* (LAGM respondent). *'We have a good example now, and we will need to lobby more also to business to attract them to collaborate.'* (Local coordinator).

A very important component of Oxfam and partners' mitigation/sustainability strategy as the RHV Albania project funding came to a close, was the 'Razma declaration'. This sets out a shared vision for the future of LAG, intended to inform national policy-making down the line. It calls on the LOG at the regional and commune level to follow transparent and open budgetary processes in order to increase accountability. However, regardless of Razma, LAG long-term sustainability was always predicated on GOA budget streams delivered through IPA programming with the latter considered as an impediment to the full materialisation of this outcome. While the progress of Albania's EU candidacy is naturally beyond the scope of this project to impact, there is no doubt this represents a lost opportunity.

The majority of respondents considered LAG one of the most fertile models for future development efforts: *'Had EU membership progress as planned, LAG would have been the business card for rural development in Albania and immediately operational at international levels of cooperation.'* (Oxfam respondent).

Given the continuing uncertainty over the progression of Albania's candidacy, mainstreaming into rural strategy remains prospective and the legal basis and funding of LAG nationally is not secured. As Oxfam recognises, LAG were foreseen in the rural strategy, but no actions were planned. *'Now we have also raised awareness'*. This is something of a (necessary) retrenchment from original goals. Although Oxfam and partners pushed for LAG to have an active community representative of all fields who would be able to advocate for LAG, raising awareness and ad-hoc issues do not appear enough to keep people attracted on a meaningful scale without promised results.

Oxfam and LAG members have also had meetings at the Ministry of Agriculture as part of their consultations for the rural development strategy 2013–2020, which appear to confirm LAG mainstreaming is still some way in the future – a future that in any event, GOA is not well prepared for: *'They were impressed at how well LAG structures had functioned. However, for many questions they didn't have answers, saying only that LAG are way ahead of the government.'* (Local coordinator). Obviously advocacy efforts have yet to reach the ear of central government. Other LAG-inspired programmes and activities have since been initiated in the country. However, these have an agricultural focus and are not specifically targeted to addressing gender issues.

### **5.1.4 Summary**

The project made a crucial contribution to this outcome. The outcome is considered as partially realised, as LAG managed to formalise their collaboration with LOG while funding was available. Beyond the short term, this relationship proved unsustainable without institutionalisation by central government, and LAG's have reverted to operating as local forums rather than the implementing agencies they were conceived to be. Having established LAG, the project equipped them to participate in local decision-making and to advocate for women's and community priorities. A quality training and capacity-building programme strengthened LAG-LOG relationships and enabled LAG to design and implement small-scale actions and participate in budgeting. Advocacy training was also delivered, however its impact appears marginal in terms of sustainability and there was no measurable evidence of success in promoting this gendered LAG model to key stakeholders and policy makers at the national level.

## **5.2 Outcome 2: LAG have established a viable model for promotion of women**

### **5.2.1 Significance of the outcome**

This is a complex outcome, determined by political, personal and social factors at national and local levels. In order to offer a viable model, LAG need to be sustainable on a political and social basis. It is important to note that although anticipated at project inception, the political sustainability of LAG relates to legal and policy developments, which remain at the national level and outside the scope of the project. At the local level, offering a viable model for participatory rural development is central to the project's ambitions to enhance local governance with community and particularly women's voices. This requires both local political change, explored in the second outcome, and that LAG secure the participation of women. The personal and social factors that enable this participation are examined here. The level and quality of engagement of women can serve as a suitable proxy for LAG' ability to provide a platform that both meets women's needs and facilitates their intent.

The evidence suggests that the impact of the project on this outcome has been slightly attenuated by constraints on fulfilling the planned media and lobbying strategies, and the lack of progress in establishing LAG in law and policy as a result of delays to Albania's EU candidate status. However, LAG have established a viable model for promotion of women where other programmes and initiatives have fallen short. Strong participation levels and the voice of the stakeholders attest to this.

The LAG model has proved to be a viable model to promote women's participation in local development. This has been a result of many contributing factors, such as the willingness of the community to embrace LAG, legacy of Oxfam work with the community in most areas that LAG operated, the quality of the training that has contributed to a sense of ownership, and seeing real material gains that have resolved issues close to community needs, but most importantly seeing that people themselves can influence policy making. How far and how long these can sustain LAG going forward remains an open question.

### 5.2.2 Salient causal stories

*Resource based explanations:*

1. Existing programmes for rural women in the areas\*
2. LAG offer a platform for women
3. Return of migrants with new attitudes towards women's role and standing\*

*Incentive based explanations:*

4. Women's issues are promoted by LAG
5. Increased political participation of women in LOG due to a new statute for gender based quotas in elections

(\* Competing causal explanation)

### 5.2.3 Findings

Outcome	Rating	Short Commentary (including reference to other evidenced explanations as appropriate)
<b>LAG have established a viable model for promotion of women</b>		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. LAG have established a viable model for promotion of women in Albania.</li> <li>b. Programme impact has been aided by: the willingness of the community to embrace LAG, the legacy of Oxfam work with the community, the quality of the training, and seeing real material gains that have addressed community needs. Crucially, women have seen that that they can influence policy making.</li> <li>c. Impacts were attenuated by constraints on fulfilling the planned media and lobbying strategies, and the lack of progress in establishing LAG in law and policy as a result of delays to Albania's EU candidate status.</li> </ol>

*'Oxfam came and asked what issues concern us. Then they asked us what we thought we could do about them. They told us there might be ways that we can deal with them, even by ourselves.'* (LAG respondent)

Key project components in achieving this outcome are LAG' efficacy in raising women's issues; the ability of LAG to provide a platform that promoted women and their concerns, enabling them to advocate to LOG; and the sense of ownership among all members, including men. These are each traced in turn below.

### **Women's concerns and issues**

Providing a public space for women's concerns and needs to be aired and advanced was central to LAG's rationale. From the perspective of stakeholders, this was an essential and appealing difference of the LAG approach. The project focused on women but, as stated by respondents, it was not done in the usual way of trying to tell them what to do. This was done through a set model for institutionalising LAG and the establishment of LAG forums, one for the LAG and one in each commune. Oxfam reasoning was that various sources at the national level, and their own observation in communities where they had worked, showed that there were almost no women in local government. Oxfam also believed that it would have been extremely difficult to change later had LAG not started with the right composition with women forming the majority. LAG were therefore set up with a definite gender promotion criterion in terms of raw numbers, requiring more than 50 per cent of LAG participants and village contacts to be women. The voting is democratic: one member one vote. An example of the pro-women structure is shown in LAGD's organisation: decisions are made by the seven-strong board including a Director, a Deputy and Secretary; and the board itself is constituted of four women and three men, with all positions open to any gender and with positions filled by majority vote. The two other LAG have a steering council of 11 people, seven of which are women.

LAG achievements in activating the community in the development of the area were visible and tangible. There have been other activities trying to engage women in politics, for example, but these have typically failed, perhaps in no small part due to not understanding or taking on board local perspectives. Other organisations have typically entered communities with ready-made prescriptions for why and how women should participate in politics. There were few hurdles for Oxfam and local partners to overcome in relating to the communities, having previously worked with women in the areas. LAG outcomes were closer to the community, with tangible and mutual benefits, unlike previous initiatives to increase women's political participation. *'Of course the great thing is, they don't initially see this as being engaged in politics until later. Politics is considered something partisan and left to professionals.'* (Local partner). Yet, a great change has happened in their mentality thanks to engagements with LAG. *'For example, we had a meeting towards the end of the project and I remember official representatives from three communes were there and they were taken aback by all the questions and demands for accountability from women.'* (LAG and LOG respondents)

Oxfam's decision to work in regions where they had prior experience and contacts helped them to enlist women's support. At the local level, initial information on LAG was delivered by going from door to door. Local volunteers and coordinators engaged with each home in the village to explain the possible benefits. At later stages of the project signage, leaflets and word of mouth were used to inform the whole community about the projects investments and local product fairs were organised to promote LOG. There was, however, a strong element of self-selection among women. This was by design on the part of the project, as the intention was to engage women who would be active participants. Oxfam considered finding women 'champions' early on to be important, with an avowed aim to engage with 'strong women'. Appropriately, LAG membership comprised a substantial number of women of professional standing, such as businesswomen, teachers, nurses, lawyers and economists.

Mention must be made here that the original ambitions to utilise novel media and communication channels as part of an information campaign did not materialise. The aim was to provide information to women and men by using 'all the means to reach them and not

only the traditional information flow by men to men or amongst key families'. Many factors challenged this intention – notably limited internet penetration in the communities. High purchase costs for national broadcast and print media and especially SMS proved prohibitive. However, there was local media coverage, with an article in a monthly publication of the Ministry of Agriculture publication and a chronicle on local TV in Shkodër. Local TV in Vlorë reported on an inauguration ceremony in Novosele, and there was coverage of women's day on March 8. Largely, however, the campaign fell back onto word of mouth and promotion by 'key families' and political leaders, as well as passive means, such as signage at municipalities, to reach women and men in communities.

Getting women to voice their priorities and find ways to collectively address them has proved important not only for women in LAG, but also for the communities at large: *'We can't say enough how much women work in rural areas compared to men. Since 1990 especially, women are worse off in terms of their position in life, too much work and too many responsibilities...as we say here women face a mountain of issues daily, while men just a hill.'* (Local partner). This quote illustrates just how important hearing women's voices is, as their needs, and often the needs of their dependents, would not be known without it. For example, LAG and LOG respondents mentioned cases in which women had raised issues, such as the need to fix a broken bridge so that children could go to school safely, or to build school fencing to create a safe schooling environment for children. While such concerns had been identified before locally, they were not prioritised or funded. However, the benefits of community-needs-identification and partnership action were more widely seen in this case. Although it was women who prioritised and decided to act on the issue, as stated by most LAG respondents, men did the physical work for pay, so the whole family benefited. LAG this way created the platform for women to discuss issues of relevance to communities, and together to prioritise what required most attention and could be afforded by the allocated budget. LAG also enjoyed moderate but encouraging success in sourcing new partners, for example a businessman contributed in the budget needed for building a school fence in LAGD community.

Previous work with mixed groups in the three regions demonstrated a reluctance of women to speak in mixed groups. LAG initially followed this pattern, not wanting to force the change, but soon developed a more open and frank platform as women started realising that it was to their benefit to discuss issues. Women's priorities, however, once expressed, were actually generally shared by men: *'Men joke in LAG that they are here just to listen to women. In fact if you tell men quite often they will think that women's words are their own.'* (LAG and LOG group discussion).

Women in LAG and the wider community started to see the changes happen, and appreciated that if issues were not spoken they wouldn't be tackled. They became aware that local decision-making was not a domain for men only, and that they don't need to go the village cafe to have their say and influence policy in their local area. *'I have organised activities before, but women wouldn't speak out in the presence of men...whereas this (LAG) started initially as small community, they were all relaxed and were talking about their issues, and it came naturally, not forced. We have a woman representative for each village, with eight villages, with 300 families per village, announcements are made and meetings are held in each village. We women can't wait to meet.'* (LAG group discussion).

An additional causal explanation of how the change came about is that there were mostly women attending meetings. This was partly due to the aim of the RHV Albania to raise

women's voice in local decision-making via engagement in LAG structures and activities. As evidenced earlier in this report and intentionally tackled by Oxfam in this project, women's representation in LOG in particular and decision making in general was nearly absent in Albania. With men being a minority in LAG meetings, even when present they played a supportive role. *'I take my wife to the meetings too, not because I am the head of the commune, but also as a member of the community. People were initially teasing me, including women in the meetings, that I am so "modern".'* (LOG respondent). Usually, but not surprisingly, LOG heads in LAG were mainly men. For example, in the case of LAGA in one LOG visited as part of this evaluation, there were two female employees that were members of LAG both as LOG representatives and as residents in the LAG area, and one male who was the head of municipality and also head of LAG board.

The unspoken assumption among many men, and even some women, was that by including women in decision-making 'things will get messed up'. This didn't hold true, however, and men declared they were not afraid to include women in discussing issues that were previously considered their domain. To overcome initial hesitation, the project aimed to get women's voices heard by conducting household questionnaires.

This was considered a more effective strategy for reaching women and gathering women's opinion than just calling people to meetings where mostly men would come. However, the questionnaire data were not easily disaggregated by gender if there was more than one person per household present at the time of conducting the survey.

Community partnership of women and men in LAG was a novel approach, and was perceived to be crucial to their success. One LOG representative in LAGM stated that women's voices had never been heard and responded to like they were in LAG: *'I have seen women debate with heads of LOG, which was not something I thought to ever see. We, men have also been heard too. Needless to say that we have heard men for 20 years, including myself – now it was time for women's voice.'* (LOG respondent in joint LOG and LAG discussion). The difference was also noted in the impacts that LAG brought, especially in terms of how LAG projects helped the community: *'We can reflect a little as to why such things weren't attempted before.'* (LOGD respondent).

Interviewees stressed that LAG's democratic structure was in itself important to ensure the participation of men and women, and especially to guarantee open membership. LAG is very democratic and needs wide membership participation to sustain that. Open participation is perhaps another causal explanation why LAG were more successful than other local initiatives as stated by LAG members in all the three LAG areas assessed. An important feature of LAG mentioned was that they aimed for truly democratic representation, unlike other projects targeting, for example, youth or olive farmers, etc. The need to maintain the democratic structure and to guarantee open membership was considered crucial to the future of LAG. This becomes a challenging issue for Quodev, especially in the absence of a legislative framework for LAG in Albania and consequent inability for LAG to operate and be funded as an open membership structure.

The results of having an arena for women's voices were visible to stakeholders in all regions. LAG evidenced strong collaboration internally and externally with LOG, offering, and crucially being seen as, a safe and important arena for women to develop and communicate. They are also useful to daughters of the women members, *'to open them to new opportunities and they are prepared and equipped better for their life.'* (LAG women

respondents). Indeed respondents of both genders were unanimous in stating that LAG had improved women's standing in the community.

The social and political standing of women in rural areas has been enhanced by the activity and openness of LAG forums. As importantly, since women had few other opportunities to gather together other than family occasions, LAG also became social hubs, a much-needed space where none had been before. One local coordinator's response, corroborated by other colleagues as well as LAG members interviewed, emphasised that women would usually stay on after LAG meetings had ended and continue to chat among themselves: *'Initially, you would hear about things that perhaps they didn't have the opportunity to say when men were around.'* (LAGM).

LAG members and local coordinators in each region noted a positive change in women's position in the social and political life of their communities. While at the beginning of the project the consensus was that no one at the commune offices would listen to women, this soon changed. Local coordinators worked with women to make them aware that they can and should be heard. They also worked with the local government to make them aware that they needed to listen to women and the community in general, and to be accountable: *'We have now a community that has more and richer relations – within the community and outside it. We have a group of women that, beyond their farming skills, understand local decision making and know that they can play an important role in community development.'* (Local partner).

Engagement in LAG has given women the opportunity to learn from other experiences where they would not otherwise have had the chance. Women from LAGM gave an example from their participation in an exchange visit across the border in Kosovo: *'The women we met had acquired skills and developed businesses. They gave us so many ideas, but also confidence in ourselves'*). Women's participation in LAG also equipped them with information on how government works and which services are LOG responsibilities. This knowledge increased community ties and promoted civic participation among women, empowering them to then know who and where to go to voice their concerns. *'Women for the first time heard details about the budget of the commune and its disaggregation by item. It was there that they heard that before the budget is approved, the commune has meetings in each village and discusses issues with people. Usually such meetings are "discussions" in a cafe, where men just decide among themselves.'* (Local partner). In this instance, women demanded for the first time to be party to these discussions that had always been formally 'open' but had only low levels of participation before.

Again, this transformation of previously isolated women into groups of mobilised and informed actors was observed by all respondents, and highlighted here in another group interview, which offers a very different comparison in time: *'We used to go to cooperatives during the socialist system, we used to go out, even working was like going out. We were social, whereas family farming has isolated us. The entire social structure during communism, whether forced or not, disappeared; even schools and medical centres have gone. Villages now don't have schools or nurseries and women are isolated, except for weddings and family events. LAG has opened our eyes beyond only farming. We see now how LAG can help us apply for funds to improve community life.'* (LAGM Respondent)

### **Promoting women**

Change in women's social standing does not always transfer to the home. LAG was primarily an opportunity for women, but involving men too. Ideas about creating spaces for women to work together were put forward, because for women from these areas there is no other possibility to organise and socialise. Some LAG developed initiatives to promote women's economic role, such as gathering women to work jointly on handcrafts in which they had expertise. In regions where traditionally it was often their husbands and in-laws that administered the income at home, neither the immediate financial benefits nor the wider economic promotion of women would be easy gains for the project. However, the positive results of these initiatives were evidenced in promoting women's local productions in product fairs, and also in the financial rewards for women. However, it highlighted a risk that LAG become perceived as women-only initiatives rather than true community partnerships, and also that the social gains women make in and through the LAG arena will not necessarily be replicated in domestic contexts.

Transformation of women's roles is therefore achieved not only through engagement in activities, but also through challenging prejudices and widely held misconceptions. Some women, as well as men, can be habituated or conditioned by their upbringing to consider women's responsibilities as not being work: *'We had to get women themselves to see what their engagements mean. For example, if we asked a man what his wife does he would reply that she doesn't work. In fact he means that she is not paid as an employee, hence is a housewife. However, besides housework and child-care she works on the land or sells products at market or looks after livestock. So women had to make men understand their work should be valued and they should have a voice in the community.'* (Local partner). The dichotomy between private, unpaid domestic work as the domain of women and public, outside paid work as the domain of men is not particular to Albania. Scholars have long evidenced such issues in most countries.

LAG have provided an opportunity for women's personal development in terms of skills but also in challenging and enhancing their perceptions of themselves and their role in the family and the wider community. As stated by women LAG members and coordinators, it was unlikely that women would concern themselves with issues much beyond the household. It was 'inconceivable' to them that they would so soon be engaging with local government, or looking at ways to grow their business. An old Albanian proverb says that 'going out is equal to an education', in this context meaning that by meeting with likeminded women, exchanging with women from other communes, learning from each other and from training, women have seen their vision change and expand.

Many projects in Albania have tried to promote women on the economic and/or political arenas. For instance, a 2010 initiative tried to encourage more women to enter local politics, This had little success in the 2011 local elections which fell far short of its 30 per cent gender quota, with few women participating in training and no women candidates at all coming out of the process. Indeed, there are no women heading local government institutions in any of the LAG areas, and that holds true for the rest of the country, irrespective of the size of unit or the level – regional, municipal or commune. Anecdotal evidence, not cross-checked, was shared in interviews for this evaluation that the 'few women' participants in gender quota trainings were usually just names without real participation. Here we can see the difference between such initiatives and LAG, where the former are aimed simply at one time quota results, the latter are focused on developing a process to achieve the desired results. It is the process that makes the difference. Measured against quota initiatives, LAG have been

successful, not only in getting women participating in training, but also in incentivising women to participate in public life and consider themselves suitable and ready to take on political roles and responsibilities. *'I am on my third mandate and I have seen real change, especially as regards women, collaboration and the whole community needs and outlook. We should by law have three women in the council of the commune. This has never been achieved before, but for the first time I see a change and real interest from women to be elected. This is only due to LAG.'* (LOG respondent). Examples were given of women being involved in the council of the municipality or commune, regularly attending LOG meetings, but no rural woman had yet expressed a wish to be running for office. As the next national elections are due in June 2013, political parties are putting forward more women candidates, and timing could be optimal to meet this with the LAG efforts for promoting women in political decision-making.

An important factor in making LAG successful was the employment of existing links of the local organisations with the community. The credibility of Oxfam, as well as that of local partner organisations, was evidenced as essential to building trust in grassroots approaches. This gave LAG a strong basis on which to build. LAG openness and inclusiveness also ensured it would be more widely embraced than other contemporaneous programs that targeted groups or specific skills and job sectors.

One contributing factor to changing to men's attitudes in the regions is the return of migrant men as a consequence of the global economic crisis, especially those from Germany and the UK. This return from migration is reuniting many families, which is relieving, to some extent, women who had previously been left as sole head of household while the husbands were abroad. Returning men can have a very different mentality about life and opportunities because of their experiences: *'I nearly froze on a visit to Domen when I saw a man airing the washing outside. I stopped, I couldn't believe it...and one of the locals told me with a wry smile to not be surprised as he had just come back from England.'* (Local partner).

LAGM respondents have noticed that returnees are more active, perhaps because they have more money. Noticeably men returnees are much more open to share responsibilities with both husband and wife working equally and running businesses together, although one respondent mentioned a case when a woman complained that upon their return her husband resumed the typical behaviours he had before they migrated, justifying that people adapt to the local customs and norms – 'When in Rome, do as the Romans do'. With the exception of this particular case, evidence from most respondents from communities showed that exposure to a more gender-equality oriented way of life abroad can be a potential contributing factor to men being more aware and accepting of women's voice and roles. This is thought to have aided in the success of LAG so far, however it is not a validated statement for this Evaluation, given that there were only two cases among respondents. Other sources to corroborate such assumptions could not be found among the people interviewed, but generalisations can be made on the overall contemporary societal attitudes changing due to migratory flows inside the country and abroad. Furthermore, it can be a positive counter-argument to what has started to be evidenced sporadically in the media as the returnees' unemployment, whereby upon return from migration due to the effects of the global crisis in host countries, returnees will simply increase the number of the unemployed.

All women respondents from LAG stated that forums and training have enabled women to feel confident in addressing the wider needs of the community. This was corroborated by trainers' responses, stating that they noticed positive changes in the women's confidence: *'I*

*was invited to attend the Razma meeting, and I was pleasantly surprised by the optimism and confidence of women, compared to when I was delivering the training at the start of the project.*’ (Trainer). A LAGM respondent noted that aside from skills they had gained, she felt the LAG experience has made her sit down and think for the community: *‘what we need, and what can be done...it enabled us to address issues that affect us from outside of the house.’* This particular respondent was a young girl from LAGM, who had not participated in any other community activity or grassroots organisation before LAG. Evidence from examples of interventions carried out and interview responses from LAG members show that LAG enable women’s voices to effect change territorially, across villages and communes. *‘Oxfam introduced the LAG approach – but we brought the knowledge of the issues in our areas. For example, we have the issue of waste, which affects each commune separately, but whose solution can not be found at the level of a single commune: it requires a higher level of intervention. We know that we can solve this if three communes affected by this issue gather resources and build a waste collection point.’* (LAG group discussion).

### **Ownership and participation**

An overwhelming sense of ownership and open participation was evidenced among respondents as important to LAG being a viable model for the promotion of women. To foster wide participation LAG membership is open, with the expectation that participation would vary over time and seasonally. LAG have typically been operating with a core of around 15–20 active members, including the board, with the aim that every village has at least one representative. Participation also varies by region in terms of membership levels and composition. Community meetings and joint LAG-LOG forums achieved around 60 per cent women participants in LAGA, an comparatively low percentage, and at odds compared to levels of around 80–90 per cent in the two other LAG. LAGA also found it comparatively difficult to secure wider engagement from its demographic: *‘We initially invited more than 50 women and were disappointed when less than half showed up. This was enough to get going, but we wanted more than enough as we expected dropouts’.* LAGA paid a lot of attention into finding ways to get more women participants – for example, not having meetings at lunchtime or when children coming back from school. They sent invitations by name, and did preliminary canvassing, but still encountered low levels of interest. However, once women were in the meeting they found it easier to talk and raise issues that were concerning themselves and their families. The challenge was to get them to the meetings. Incentivisation also didn’t work as expected, as one LAGA respondent described, *‘We even tried paying a small sum for participation or offering a free lunch, but this didn’t improve numbers. Equally, that was not thought a viable solution in the long run.’*

The relative affluence of the Vlorë region compared to the other two LAG areas is a possible cause here. It has been privileged by a long history of donor activity and enjoys a more diverse and robust economy. This is especially so in Orikum, where tourism is comparatively well developed compared to the other two communes that form this LAG. Women are often busily employed, and *‘unless something much better is offered to respond to their needs, it is difficult to get their interest for community activities’.* That said, there remain areas in the region with comparatively deeper pockets of poverty; however they are very remote and typically sparsely populated, so offer many challenges themselves in establishing and sustaining a grassroots organisation, especially at pilot stage.

LAG reflect their members’ ownership even in the names they have chosen, which represent the identity of their areas and a sense of belonging for the communities. This is demonstrated in comment: *‘As rural people who have contact with land, water,*

*farming...then who is represented and how it is important. It's not like Oxfam came here, did a project and it's forgotten about it once they have left. This is because the LAG is still there working for us. The sense that the LAG is ours is crucial to its success.'* (LAG group discussion). Ownership is also fostered by pride in LAG investments done. Respondents emphasised the importance of seeing investments, with the sense of achievement, proving motivational. What made the LAG project different was that it mobilised the community to do something useful and beneficial, rather merely engaging in local issue promotion or implementing a niche project. Also, seeing wider participation, including co-investment by business, has strengthened community and promoted civic pride as school investments benefits not only children, but parents too. Respondents state that families are happier now that children are safer, in a better environment and with better quality water. *'We all get involved in maintaining the school grounds now, including other local residents. I have noticed even children have become more attentive to it and helping look after it.'* (LAG respondent).

#### **5.2.4 Summary**

The project made an important contribution to establishing LAG as viable model for women's promotion and Outcome 2 is considered realised in full. This was notably through founding LAG with an appropriate gender ratio and ensuring a democratic basis, so that women's concerns and community priorities could be expressed and heard. Despite problems with achieving high participation rates in the relatively affluent LAGA, women's engagement was strong and committed. However, the establishment of LAG predominantly in areas and with stakeholders with previous Oxfam engagements reduced the challenge in this aspect and biased outcomes in a favourable direction. Still, the sense of ownership is evident in the continued activity and evident enthusiasm of LAG members who are busy trying to secure its future and setting out its direction. As befits a grassroots organisation, a great deal of recent momentum has come from community participation. Indeed, their continued activity is wholly down to the sense of ownership among LAG members: *'The group is very active, and wants to continue with this approach. After Oxfam finished women were calling me, saying that they want LAG to continue, and organising meetings to see what and how we can continue. That makes a local coordinator's job so much simpler!'* (LAGM Respondent)

How sustainable LAG are from here is yet to be seen. However, given the evidence here that LAG appear unlikely to be formalised anytime soon in GOA strategy as they depend on country candidacy, the relevance of LAG in their current form, if not their very survival, would appear to be ultimately reliant on the loyalty of remaining LAG members.

## 6 Programme learning considerations

The major considerations arising from this Evaluation largely lie with a need for more complete project risk-assessment at inception. This was apparent in two project aspects:

- Political: More caution is needed for projects that have contingency on developments in political and policy landscape. The project's motivation was founded in the NSDI 2007–2013 which set out LAG as a government objective. Unfortunately, in 2013 LAG still are not formally recognised and this has impacted longer term sustainability of the LAG formed by project.

Media and communication: While this strategy was satisfactorily delivered, it was not as complete as planned. This had at best a minor positive impact on local advocacy, as uptake and interest was evidently high. Problems with implementation were due to financial, technical and legislative risks that perhaps might have been foreseen, notably:

- Lack of budget and capacities to deliver, and inadequate service infrastructure in the country.
- A restrictive legislative environment (privacy and marketing).

LAG show a lot of potential to address poverty reduction, as evidenced in the report, by combining implementing agency with grassroots initiative. Intentionally widening the pool of potential beneficiaries (LAG members) could bring greater benefits in addressing rural poverty and exclusion. This could be achieved by enhancing existing gender quota with a mission to include and reach more at-risk groups, such as the poor, youth (as set out in the proposal), long-term unemployed, people with disabilities, and other adults facing chronic exclusion.

On the other side of the coin, Oxfam should consider further disaggregating their project demographic by subcategories, such as level of education, profession, etc., to better understand composition model dynamics. LAG are a rich source of information that should inform Oxfam evidence-based policies and planning. This would also place Oxfam in a favourable position to influence policy making at the national level and to direct efforts of the donor community.

Tighter communication and monitoring procedures between Oxfam GB and the local office could have prevented the proportional over-allocation of funding into capital projects that occurred sometime around or after the Mid-Term Evaluation. This was noted in correspondence by Oxfam GB, but by then 'projects were under way' and it was too late to reverse. On cursory inspection, this appears to be connected to the mid-project implementation handover to partners. It is difficult to tell whether partner selection, biased towards rural development expertise, or the LAG/LOG relationship may have contributed most here. Stakeholders' and beneficiaries' expectations are typically and understandably anchored by their experience of aid as physical investment and works. This review has evidenced that stakeholders viewed the initiatives as essential to LAG, indeed as a unique and core aspect of LAG, compared with their experience of other training or capacities programmes. Oxfam GB expectations might benefit from being more clearly communicated and key intents more expressly set out in project mandates to ensure everyone is looking from the same end of the telescope and to prevent any such 'miscommunication'.

The emphasis of this intervention was on governance and institutions, and the balance did seem to tip away from this at one point, which suggests that a central plank of the intervention was misunderstood. This had some impact on the viability of LAG as perceived by their constituency, and discouragement of some potential beneficiaries was noted (LAGA). This also reinforces the point about diversifying beneficiaries and addressing persistent poverty pockets. Many here were in areas that had a long history of donor activity and had comparatively high expectations and needs. Greater benefit would have accrued over the longer term from adhering to guidelines and investing in further training, on funding or budgets for instance.

## 7 Conclusion

This review identified and focused on two selected outcomes:

**Outcome 1:** *Local Government decisions address Local Action Group priorities and initiatives.*

**Outcome 2:** *Local Action Groups have established a viable model for promotion of women.*

These were two essential preconditions to the global project goal of effective community-led rural development. The review finds that the projects' TOC was congruent with the global RHV TOC and programme activities were well designed and supportive of declared goals. By designing the project with an institutional approach, it addressed issues on all the personal, social and political dimensions that RHV seeks to impact. The review found that the project largely met its goals in these aspects, with a few caveats.

The first outcome was partly contingent on political externalities, such as legal basis and the evolving GOA strategy at the national level. To what extent the lack of progress on LAG' mainstream adoption has affected participation in the project was not meaningfully measurable in the context of this study. It was indicated as a small factor in discussions with beneficiaries, with the understanding that it was more of a concern for the medium-term.

However, at local level, LAG successfully enhanced existing governance arrangements and gave the community, and specifically women's voices, a platform. Nearly all stakeholders were supportive and the majority expressed pride and corroborated a sense of community ownership of their LAG. Their concerns naturally centred on financial support for LAG in the short to medium term. The perception of stakeholders and beneficiaries at all levels is largely positive and participation rates are holding up in the three areas.

LAG were an unprecedented system in Albania, whose sustainability was dependent on anticipated political developments over which the chief actors had no leverage. Oxfam itself initiated activities near the end of this project in an attempt to help LAGs seek support from other sources, notably providing training so that they would have some level of autonomous capacities, developing LAG-LOG forums and formalising their relationship through facilitation of the Razma declaration. The three LAG have had to look to other means of ensuring their future. They are considering formalising their structures by establishing themselves as not-for-profit companies. The end of Oxfam's involvement in the project sees it reaching full circle and returning to the project's starting point, crucially, however, with the ball firmly in the court of LAG themselves. 'The biggest challenge to LAG now is financial' and LAG going forward are seeking funding from alternative sources outside of public budgets. However, without a wider and more effective campaign of dissemination and media advocacy, potential network effects from LAG advocacy efforts remain weak and under-utilised, for instance in developing credibility and establishing relation with potential donors.

Equally, this is a tall order as they are currently perceived as operating as local actors. Operationally, they may run as local forums for rural development or as NGOs. The first option leaves them lacking in terms of budget to finance actions, somewhat against the name. Operating as NGOs look infeasible for two main reasons:

1. It risks subversion of the original intent as they will be competing for funding with current partners. This will mean they have to 'specialise' in, for example, gender, development, agriculture. This has been seen in the subsequent implementation of LAG by OSF/GIZ.
2. As an NGO it's difficult to see how they could legally maintain an MOC with LOG that oversees and influences budgetary decisions!

Notwithstanding these issues, the LAG established by this intervention have garnered good local support from a wide constituency and integrated successfully into existing governance structures. In some part this was because the model seems to have been well-adapted to the Albanian context, for instance in finding an appropriate balance between gender promotion and existing governance. Project activities, such as training and capacity building, were instrumental in normalising the LAG-LOG partnerships, as well as bringing clear benefit to many stakeholders individually.

This project has also seen LAG bring real material gains to the community through planning and implementation of LAG designed projects. Instances of this were attested to by beneficiaries in all LAG and evidenced in LOG budgets and reports. This points to the development of a beneficial LAG-LOG partnership in those areas and more widely demonstrates that LAG may become an effective vehicle for community led decision-making in Albania. In contrast to other top down strategies in the political and social spheres, the institutional-grassroots approach adopted here holds great promise for strengthening women's standing and influence in their communities. LAG are the kind of structure that could offer rural women the necessary experience and the skills to overcome prejudice and the confidence gap, and act as a springboard to further and wider engagement in public life. If we take the project goal as institutionalising women's role in rural development, then considered as a capacity building project, it is considered to have fulfilled well in terms of individual and institutional knowledge and mechanisms. Its influence on the wider policy landscape, no matter how positive it could have been, was severely diminished by the lack of enabling political developments.

While it is still early days for LAG in Albania this review considers that the project was overall very well conceived and well executed in its core elements. Given greater formal support from GOA, partners and other stakeholders, LAG offer a promising model for rural development going forward.

## Appendix 1: Documentation reviewed

Title	Source
<i>Analysis of data generated from Needs Assessment in Vlorë</i>	Oxfam, Auleda, LAGA
<i>Budgets and list of priorities for the Orikum Municipality (2011, 2011-1, 2012)</i>	LOG
<i>Broshura Udherrefyjes</i>	LAGA, LAGD, LAGM
<i>Budgets for Shkreli Commune (2011, 2012, 2013)</i>	LOG
<i>Building a better future in Albania</i>	
<i>Exposure tour visit to LAG Holstebro – Denmark (September 23-27 2009)</i>	Oxfam
<i>Gender Budgeting Training Package</i>	Etleva Vertopi, Trainer
<i>Gender part in Razma Declaration note</i>	Oxfam
<i>GTF LAG narrative report</i>	GTF
<i>GTF Annual Report Albania (1,2,3)</i>	GTF
<i>Informative Manual on the Establishment of Local Action Group</i>	IDM
<i>LAG Adrijon Evaluation Report</i>	Oxfam, Auleda LAGA
<i>LAG Drini Evaluation Report</i>	Oxfam, Argitravizion LAGD
<i>LAG Maranaj Report</i>	Oxfam, PRC LAGM
<i>LAG Trainings</i>	IDM
<i>LAG RDP Project Financing</i>	Oxfam
<i>Lessons Learned from midterm evaluation of RHV</i>	Oxfam
<i>Midterm Evaluation Report RHV Albania</i>	Oxfam
<i>National Strategy for Development and Integration</i>	GOA
<i>Needs Assessment Questionnaire Model</i>	LAGA
<i>Proceedings Razma LAG event</i>	Oxfam
<i>Project Activities per cluster May–November 2011</i>	Oxfam
<i>Project proposal: Governance and Transparency Fund ‘Local Partnership for Rural Development in Albania’</i>	Oxfam
<i>Project Report – LAG workshop and trainings</i>	IDM, URI, NACCS, GADC
<i>Report on the study tour to Denmark</i>	Oxfam
<i>RHV 3 monthly report</i>	Oxfam
<i>RHV 6 monthly report: (2011 4<sup>th</sup>)</i>	Oxfam
<i>RHV Final Evaluation April 2012</i>	Oxfam
<i>Rural Development Strategy for Albania</i>	GOA
<i>The Needs Assessment Questionnaire</i>	Oxfam
<i>UK Ambassador Letter to Oxfam GB</i>	Oxfam

## Appendix 2: List of key informants

<b>Name</b>	<b>Organisation</b>	<b>Project Role</b>	<b>Region</b>
Geron Kamberi -.	Oxfam GB Albania	Project Manager	Tiranë
Anila Vendresha	Oxfam GB Albania	Country Director	Tiranë
Manuela Mece	Oxfam GB Albania	Programme Coordinator	Tiranë
Ollga Cipa	Oxfam GB Albania	Admin and Finance Manager	Tiranë
<i>Interviews with LAG Partners</i>			
Margarita Cuni		Coordinator LAG Maranaj	Shkodër
Majlinda Hoxha		Coordinator LAG Drini	Dibër
Arjana Bubeqi		Coordinator LAG Adrijon	Vlorë
<i>Interviews with Beneficiaries</i>			
Tatjana Mehilla		LAG member	Vlorë
Ideale Allushaj	LOG	LAG member	Vlorë
Ermelinda Kordha		Methodology expert. Undertook needs assessment	Vlorë
Alketa Karafilaj	LOG	Deputy head of LAG	Vlorë
Emrie Lata		LAG member	Dibër
Shpresa Tomcini		LAG member	Dibër
Servete Kera		Support staff during project implementation	Dibër
Bukurie Begu		LAG board member	Dibër
Pajtim Pernezha	LOG	Head of LAG	Dibër
Aranit Skepi		Head of commune in LAG	Dibër
Fellenxa Shehu		LAG coordinator	Dibër
Angjelina Bujaj	School Director, Director of women's association	LAG member	Shkodër
Gjovalin Dedaj	LOG	Head of LAG	Shkodër
Shpresa Spahia		LAG member	Shkodër
Miranda Kodra		LAG member	Shkodër
Ermira Cenaj	LOG	LAG member	Shkodër
<i>Interviews with Trainers</i>			
Mirela Muca	National Centre for Social Studies	Trainer for social needs	Tiranë
Etleva Vertopi	GIZ	Gender budgeting expert	Tiranë

### Appendix 3: Data collection and analysis

	Feedback on the experience of using the Process Tracing methodology
+	Provides a firm reference point for different lines of enquiry, which is good for exposing what is tangential and helping to limit branching.
+	PT eases data collection, especially capturing multiple perspectives and opinions. Good therefore for focusing collaborative and exploratory enquiry, especially in picking out <i>ignotum per ignotius</i> arguments.
±	That said, counterfactuals and competing explanations proved difficult for interviewees (i.e. doesn't overcome problems of priming).
±	Triangulation seemed crucial to objectivity and exploring other causes and determinants. However, documentation is not <i>a priori</i> better than testimony.
-	Here, prior knowledge of political, institutional and legislative landscape and changes, and other donor projects during the project lifetime proved useful. Important considerations and competing explanations might have been missed without this (IPA, Government initiatives and policies, contemporaneous women and rural projects, subsequent LAG implementations).
-	Outcome pruning is a skill to acquire even if you're not harvesting or it can soon get out of hand (a wide range of intermediate outcomes led to a very complex graph before it resulted in the ToC diagram following numerous discussions and meetings).  Outcome harvesting is perhaps useful for a team, not so easy to manage individually (which, if it's applied like a filter anyway, defeats the purpose!).
+	Coding (tagging mostly) was useful for mapping data to causes and keeping on top of data.
+	Capture everything electronically so you can return to the raw data rather than your own notes. You need to revisit the same data quite a few times.
-	It didn't feel especially natural 'straight-jacketing' causal stories into the narrative. But then, its not meant to be an ethnographic study.
+	PT perhaps has potential as a scoring rubric for evaluation quality...also for self-evaluation for the evaluator.

## **Appendix 4: Proposed project outputs**

<b>Cluster</b>	<b>Activity</b>
<b>1</b>	1.1: Undertake a stakeholder analysis in three regions (Shkodër, Vlorë, Dibër) focusing on key actors for local rural development
	1.2: Provide information to local and regional governments of Shkodër, Dibër and Vlorë on participatory processes, public and private partnership for local development (model of local initiatives through Local Action Groups/forums, pressure groups, EU experience)
	1.3: Training for local government on participatory processes, local partnership/ organisation of exposure visit to a EU LAG
	1.4: Facilitate the local level information exchange with stakeholders in the target regions on LAG
	1.5: Organisation of the initial forums to establish LAG in the target regions
	1.6: Identification of the training needs for LAG in advocacy, participatory planning, project life cycle and funding
	1.7: Design and agree on the capacity building plan
<b>2</b>	2.1: Implementation of capacity building plan with local government and stakeholder
	2.2: Organisation of bimonthly meetings
	2.3: Facilitation of participatory planning for LAG to identify priority interventions
	2.4: Investments planning
	2.5: Implementation of local actions agreed by LAG
	2.6: Monitoring local actions with participatory methods
	2.7: Publication the outcomes of the joint actions between LAG and local governments
<b>3</b>	3.1: Organisation of local consultations on strategies, programmes and investments in local communities
	3.2: Prepare policy recommendations by LAG
	3.3 Develop and implement annual advocacy plan to follow up the recommendations
	3.4: Organisation of the Annual Conference of LAG in the target regions
<b>4</b>	4.1: Publication of a series of leaflets and articles in newspapers on LAG activities
	4.2 Set up and operate a system of information using the mobile communication technology (SMS)
	4.3: Organise annual media briefings and press conference for national and local media
	4.4: Provide updates for Local/Regional Council websites