

Civic involvement and service satisfaction for youth living in the administrative units of the Municipality of Vlora in Albania

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Abstract

Although youth are largely recognised as agents of social change, their engagement in both central and local level remains low. The aim of this article is to identify the needs, and assess the awareness of the services provided to young people by the municipality of Vlora. This can help to identify possible interventions and improve governance practices and services targeting youth in this municipality. I use a qualitative and statistical analysis based on a sub-sample (n=200) of participants aged between 15-29 years old¹, coming from five administrative units, in order to provide direct inputs regarding the local governance and youth's situation in these administrative units. The biggest issues identified in this study are the lack of employment opportunities and internship programs, which would equip them with the employment skills and a lack of social and cultural facilities, especially in the administrative units of this municipality.

Keywords: Local governance; youth engagement; inclusion policy; empowerment.

Introduction

Youth engagement in public life has direct economic, political, social, and cultural implications. Evidence shows a positive correlation between active citizen engagement and economic outcomes, particularly for young people who are not in education, employment, or training (World Bank, 2014). Although young people constitute an important segment of the population, their engagement and interaction at local and central levels is low and not significant in most OECD countries. The aim of this article is to identify the needs, and assess the awareness of the services provided to young people by the municipality of Vlora, especially to youth living in the sub-urban areas of the Municipality of Vlora. This can later help to identify possible policy interventions and improve governance practices and services targeting youth in this municipality.

Youth empowerment and engagement is achieved through their active participation in empowerment programs. These programs are usually implemented by non-profit organisations, government organisations, schools or private organisations which help youths achieve empowerment. These programs use activities focused on youth populations, namely: rights; councils; media; activism; and, other methods (Sazama, J. & Young, K, 2006).

Empowerment theory focuses on processes that enable participation; enhance control through shared decision making; and create opportunities to learn, practice, and in-

¹ The results in this article are based on the data collected from the *Youth Satisfaction Survey* (2019), carried out by the experts of the "Vlora Youth Center", a local NGO located in Vlora city in Albania.

crease skills (Zimmerman, M. 2000). This theory suggests that engaging youth in pro-social, meaningful, and community-enhancing activities that the youth themselves define and control, helps youth gain vital skills, responsibilities, and the confidence necessary to become productive and healthy adults (Reischl, T. M. *et al*, 2011).

In the European Union, EU institutions have set in place various initiatives and projects aiming to support the development of youth exchanges and to encourage the participation of young people in democratic life in Europe. Nevertheless, in most OECD countries also, youth, even when they are involved in political processes, via activism or movements, are not formally represented in institutions such as the parliament, cabinet or in city councils (Henn, M.& Nick Foard 2014).

In Albania, after 30 years of democracy and socio-economic transition, despite many positive achievements, youth engagement in the economic, social and political areas, remains low in all levels (FES, *Albanian Youth*, 2015; *Youth Political Participation In Albania*, 2018 p. 3). The same situation applies all over the country. According to INSTAT (the Albanian Institute of Statistics) in 2019 about 25.5% of young people were neither in employment, education or training (NEET).

Albanian youth in particular, continue to be underrepresented and have no voice in addressing their needs and concerns. This is a common evidence for the region since a vast majority of young people in the South Eastern Europe feel poorly represented in national politics and feel that they should have a stronger say (FES, *Youth Studies South-Eastern Europe 2018/2019 survey*, p. 70). The South-Eastern Europe Survey 2018/2019, on a cross-country comparative analysis, reports that people from underprivileged social backgrounds are considerably less likely to have access to higher levels of education, to participate in political or civic activities, to engage in activities related to self-development, to use ICT for educational and informational purposes, or to find adequate employment.

Referring to periodic INSTAT publications in Albania, there is lack of official statistic youth data on national and local level, particularly on social and political inclusion indicators. As evidenced also in the previous studies, this lack of indicators becomes crucial when drafting or implementing policy interventions. For example, out of 49 municipalities that fulfilled the YPP questionnaires, only 14 municipalities resulted to have a dedicated employee responsible for youth initiatives and policies in their structure (*Youth Political Participation in Albania*, 2018 p. 25).

Given the significant disparities from rural to urban settings regarding infrastructure, access to services, and training opportunities, the focus-groups of this article are the 200 responders of the Youth Satisfaction Survey (2019), coming from the Administrative Units of the Vlora Municipality, separating them from the city responders. This approach closes in this way the lack of official statistic youth data on local level and the existing gap in the local literature.

The potential role of social media in enhancing civic engagement is confirmed also in the replies given to our questionnaires. This role is usually manifested in new forms of political engagement and participation by young citizens (Loader, 2014; Mickoleit, A. 2014).

It is confirmed also in this study that education, either formal such as schools or non-formal education such as youth clubs and civic organisations, plays an important role

in the democratic participation of youth (e.g. in Furlong & Cartmel, 2007; Willems. H, 2012; LSE 2013; Jusić & Numanović, 2017).

The questionnaire used in the survey consists of six parts. The first part contains questions about personal information, including location, age, gender, and education. In the second part the questionnaire asks the interviewers about their information and knowledge about the services provided by the municipality. The third part is focused on the youth related services offered by the municipality. The fourth part is related to the accountability, information and communication of the municipal administration. The fifth part of the survey refers to the municipal activities with youth. The final part of the survey identifies what are the main issues and challenges faced by young people in their communities. Results, conclusions and recommendations on how the municipality can improve its youth work follow.

Background

The Municipality of Vlora consists of five administrative units: Orikum, Shushicë, Novosele, Vlorë city and Qendër. The total population of this area according to IN-STAT on 1st January 2020 was 188,922 with youth constituting nearly a quarter of the total population. Culturally and economically, the city of Vlora is one of the most important cities of southern Albania. After the territorial and administrative reform (TAR) in 2014, its municipal territory has expanded significantly and the gap between citizens and local authorities has increased. This gap is mainly expressed in low levels of civic participation and mobilisation, lack of trust and communication, and a generally poor success in influencing government policies.

Method

Qualitative and statistical analysis have been carried out on a sub-sample (n=200) of participants, coming from five administrative units of the municipality of Vlora in Albania. This sample is extrapolated from the *Youth Satisfaction Survey (2019)*, where a total of 300 youth were interviewed in the municipality of Vlora city and in its administrative units from March to May 2019. The surveyors used the face-to-face method based on self-declarations of respondents. A random probability sampling method was used to ensure that there was equal chance for both genders to be selected for the survey, resulting in 53% of females, compared to 47% of males. Of the total sample, one third (33%) of the respondents reside in Vlora city whilst the remainder (67%) of the total responders come from its administrative units: Orikum; Novosele; Shushica; and, Qender.

Fig. 1. Responders by their place of residence.

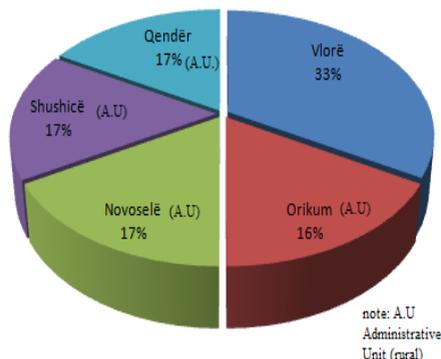
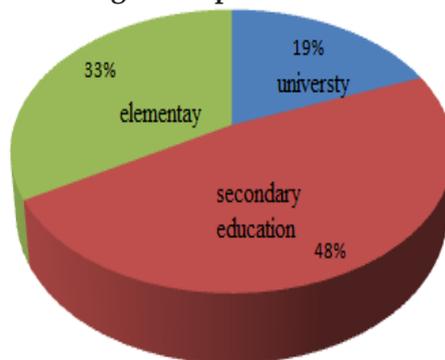


Fig. 2. Responders' education



The age of the respondents used for this article varies between 15-29 years old, where 143 youths have secondary education and 57 youths have elementary education.

Given the significant disparities from rural to urban settings regarding infrastructure, access to services, and training opportunities resulting also in the *Youth Satisfaction Survey (2019)*, the focus-groups of our study are the 200 responders coming from the administrative units.

The questionnaire used in this survey consists of six parts and there are 19 questions in total. The first part contains questions about personal information, including location, age, gender, and education. The third part is focused on the youth related services offered by the municipality. The fourth part is related to the accountability, information and communication of the municipal administration. The fifth part of the survey refers to the municipal activities with youth. The final part of the survey identifies what are the main issues and challenges faced by young people in their communities.

Results of the survey

In this section there are presented the results to the following questions:

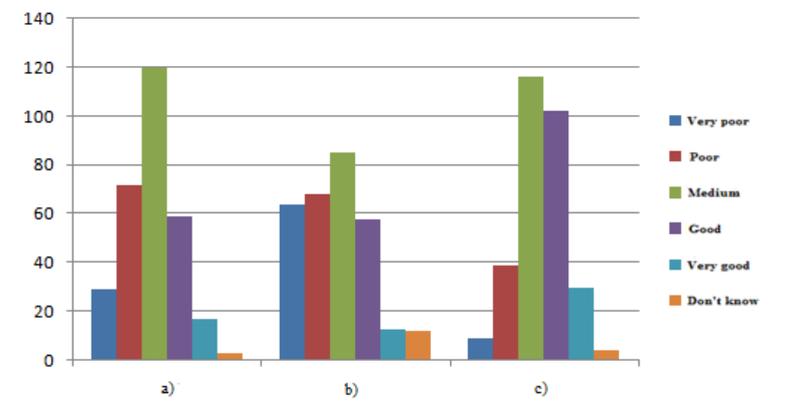
- *Awareness of the services offered by the municipality.*

Whilst municipalities are responsible for delivering high quality services and informing citizens regarding them, the responses of this survey show that there is more work to be done in this regard, especially in the administrative units. 55% of the youth answered they are not aware of the services offered by the municipality. The youth in Vlorë city (61%) are more informed (i.e., are more aware regarding these services), compared to the respondents in its administrative units. Respectively, the figures are: Qendër (28%), Shushicë (36%), Novoselë (42%) and Orikum (44%). The responses to this question indicate that either youth are not aware of the existence of a specific service, or the service does not exist at all (particularly in the administrative units). For this reason, most of the youth recommended that the municipality should improve its efforts regarding the provision of youth services, as well as improving its accountability, information transparency and communication.

- *Satisfaction level of services offered by the municipality.*

In this question, youth are asked to provide input related to three types of services offered by the municipality: a) public services (infrastructure/roads, lighting, greening, water, waste water, and public safety); b) social services (social aid/protection, social centres, etc.) and c) other services (education, cultural, sport). See Figure 3 below.

Figure 3: Level of satisfaction regarding services offered by the municipality.



In general, the analysis shows that youth are not very satisfied with any of the services. They have given the highest score to the *other services* category and the lowest score for *public and social services*. Furthermore, from the survey responses, it's quite obvious that the service provision in the city is notably different and better than in its administrative units. More specifically:

a) *Public services* (infrastructure/roads, lighting, greening, water, waste water, public safety)

Around 37% of the total youth interviewed say that they evaluate this service as *very poor* and *poor*; 40% as *medium* and 25% as *good* and *very good*. In Vlora city, Orikum and Novosele administrative units (AUs) the satisfaction level regarding the public services situation is higher than in the other three administrative units. Around 60% of Qender and Shushice AUs youth evaluated them as *very poor* and *poor*, compared to around 14% as *good* and *very good*. Probably, the municipality has done a better job in Vlora city and Orikum and Novosele, compared to the two remaining locations: this is not well perceived by citizens/youth of these communities. Citizens deserve equal services, which should be delivered in a timely and high quality fashion.

b) *Social services* (social assistance/protection, social centres, etc.)

Concerning this category, youth are also not very satisfied with the social services offered by the municipality. In fact, 44% of the total considers social service provision as *very poor* and *poor*; 28% reply as *average* and only 22% agree with *good* and *very good* social services. The level of satisfaction in relation to the social services is almost the same amongst all the administrative units surveyed, except for Qender and Vlora city, in which 62% have an evaluation as *very poor* and *poor*, compared to approximately 10% that reply as *good* and *very good*. This result might be explained by the lack of social centres in the administrative units and in the city, but also by the new criteria of social assistance that reduced the number of people excluded from the social assistance scheme.

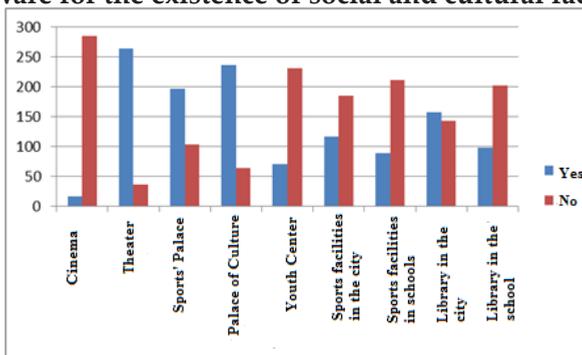
c) *Other services* (education, cultural, sport)

As mentioned above, youth have given the highest scores to the other services

category, where 44% of the youth interviewed are satisfied (*good/very good*) with this service, compared to 39% who have given a *medium* reply and the rest of 16% as *very poor* and *poor*. The situation is better in Vlora city, Orikum and Novosele, compared to Shushice and especially to Qender (54% *very poor* and *poor*). Once again, the investments of the municipality regarding this category may have been more focused in the city and the other two administrative units than in the last ones.

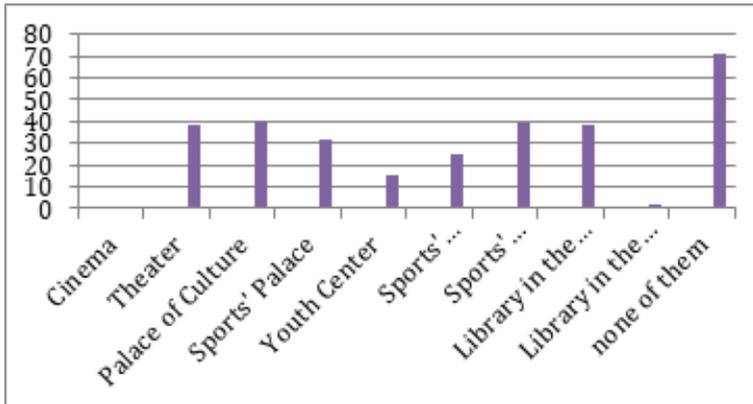
- *Awareness of the existence of social and cultural facilities in your community.*
 The vast majority of the youth of the whole municipality of Vlora (88%) have information about theatres (Vlora's Theatre troupe is one of the most active in the country), however a larger number of youth (95%), have no information regarding the existence of a cinema. Even then, these social, cultural and sports facilities are located in the city of Vlora: only 65% of the youth know about the Palace of Culture and 88% about the Palace of Sports. A small number of youth within the city are aware of the existence of the Youth Centre in Vlora (23%). Around 39% of the youth know that there are sports facilities in the city, but 70% of the total confirm that there are no sports facilities in their schools (especially in the administrative unit of Qender, where 90% of youth have responded negatively). It is almost the same situation that applies also for the existence of the library in the city and in schools. In this case, 52 % of the total youth surveyed know about the library in the city, but more than 67% reply that there are no libraries in schools (again, 90% of the youth in Qender have replied negatively to this question).

Figure 4. Youth aware for the existence of social and cultural facilities.



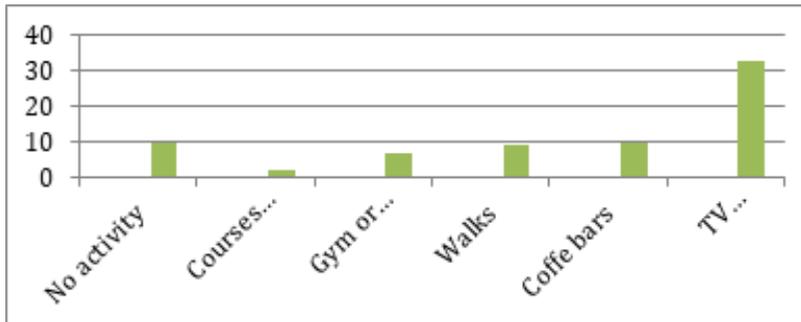
- *If yes, which one do you frequent mostly?*
 The responses gathered from this survey present the sad situation related to the (non-) existence of social and cultural facilities and especially to their operation in these communities. Around 66% of the youth have never visited or used any of the above mentioned facilities, even when they are in place and regularly operated by the municipality or school. None of the youth interviewed has gone to the local cinemas. The percentage of the youth to have attended a theatre show, frequented the Palace of Sports, the sports facilities, or the library in the city is very low (only less than 1%). The Palace of Culture and the Youth Centre are frequented only by 2% of youth. Less than 2% of youth surveyed use the school facilities to for training or entertainment.

Figure 5. Youth frequency of social and cultural facilities.



- *If you do not frequent any of the above mentioned facilities, how do you spend your time?*
 Not surprisingly, around 48% of youth spend their time using social media and TVs. Almost in the same percentage if accumulated, (13%) stay in bars having coffee, go for walks or doing nothing interesting. A smaller percentage of the youth interviewed goes to private gyms (10%) or attend different courses (less than 1%). See Figure 6.

Figure 6: How youth spent their time (sub group).



- *Do you feel safe in your community (city/village/neighbourhood/school)?*
 Over 80% of the youth say that they feel safe in their communities. The situation looks similar in all the administrative units, except for Novosele, where 58% of youth report that they feel unsafe in their community.
- *If not, please specify why?*
 In relation to the reasons which make youth feel unsafe in their communities (20% of them), there were given four options as specified below:
 - Because of insufficient infrastructure* (lack of lighting or decent streets in the neighbourhood, etc.)
 The youth who answer in this group (22%) report that the cause of their insecurity is lack of proper infrastructure, where the majority resides in Qender (58% of the ones that did not feel safe in this Administrative Unit) and in Vlora city (47%).
 - Because law enforcement/ police is not very present or have no trust in them*

The youth who answer in this group (14%) report that the cause of their insecurity is connected with the low presence of the police or a lack of trust in them. The worst case is reported by youth living in Novosele (21%).

c) *Because of the criminal episodes in the community, emphasised by the media*

The same replies (14%) are also reported for the criminal episodes in their community, emphasised by the media. Again, 28% of Novosele's youth group has reported that the lack of safety is related to this phenomenon.

d) *Because of the presence of anti-social behaviours (drugs, bullying, etc.)*

This is the largest portion of the youth (30%) that have reported that they don't feel safe in their communities and youth in Novosele are the most unsafe in this category (42% of the ones who did not feel safe in this Administrative Unit).

• *Inputs regarding the municipality's accountability.*

This part of the survey aims at assessing youth's perception regarding municipal accountability through the two questions below:

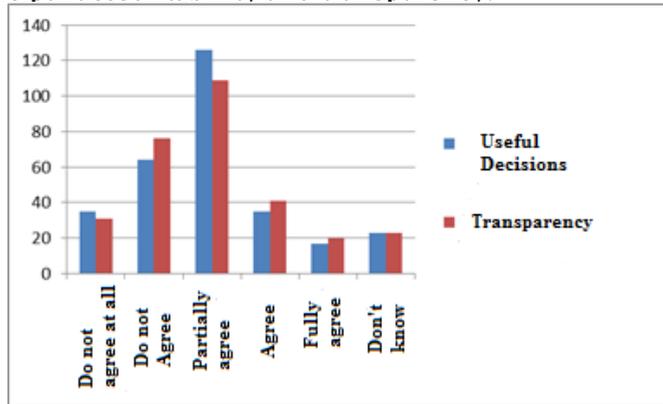
a) *The municipality has taken useful decisions in relation to citizens*

Only 17% of the youth interviewed agreed to this statement, compared to 33% who did not agree at all, 42% that agree partially and less than 1% who answered "don't know". Almost the same perception exists in all the five administrative units where youth are surveyed.

b) *The municipality is transparent/accountable in doing decision-making*

Almost the same evaluation covers the second statement. Less than 20% of youth answer that they "agree" and "fully agree"; 35% of them reply "do not agree" or "do not agree at all"; 36% "partially agree" and less than 1% of answers are "I don't know".

Figure 7: Municipal accountability and transparency.



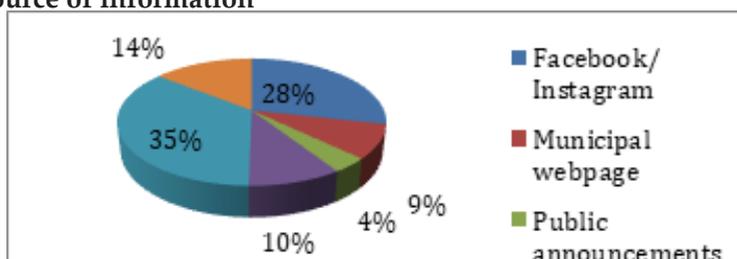
• *Have you or anyone in your family received services from the municipality?*

To this question, 43% of youth interviewed reported that they (or their family) were served by the municipality. However, the situation in the city is completely different from that in the administrative units. Whereas 72% of youth in Vlora city stated they have received services from the local administration, this is compared to only around 25% in the other administrative units.

• *Where do you get the information regarding municipal work/projects from?*

The answers to this question show that internet and social media in particular are very powerful tools for public communication and interaction. In this case, 39% of youth report that they get the information regarding the municipality through *Facebook* and *Instagram* and 10% from the municipal webpage. Local media also seems to be a very useful tool deployed by the municipality for communicating with its citizens, as 41% of the youth interviewed reported they got the information from the local media (56% in Qender). Regarding “individual notifications” only 11% of youth reported this, whilst “public announcements” are almost insignificant, especially in the administrative units (probably public announcement spaces do not exist in these administrative units). From the total, 13% of the youth interviewed have no information (or use no source of information) regarding municipal work/projects.

Figure 8: Source of information



- *Are you aware of any dedicated staff/department working with youth in your municipality?*

Only 22.6% youth interviewed are aware of the existence of a dedicated staff/department working with youth in their municipality and all of these responders are from Vlora city. This indicates the insufficient work of the municipality with this target group.

- *Have you ever participated in any activity organised by this department of the municipality?*

Less than 1% has participated in activities organised by dedicated staff/departments working with youth in their municipality, and all of these responders are from Vlora city.

- *If yes, what was the meeting/activity about?*

Most of the youth that have participated in activities organised by dedicated staff/departments working with youth in the municipality reported that the activity was related to participatory budgeting process.

- *Are you aware of the existence of a youth program and/or action plan in your municipality?*

Only 19% of the interviewed youth reported an awareness of the existence of a youth action plan in the municipality. Where this was so, 38% of this group belongs to youth coming from Vlora city.

- *Are you aware of any vocational training courses, programs or centres in your municipality?*

More than 50% of the interviewed youth responded that they are aware of opportunities regarding vocational training courses, programs or centres in the municipality. This information exists more amongst youth from the city (71%) compared with those in the administrative units. This might be due to lack of this service in the rural areas.

- *Are you aware of any youth employment promotion programs in your municipality?*
 Only 16% of youth responded that they are aware of youth employment promotion programs in the municipality and the majority belong to the city (20%).

- *Which are the issues/challenges you face in your life as youth?*

Regarding this question, the youth responses are as follows:

The biggest issue identified by youth in the city and in the rural areas is *employment* (around 54%). Youth in the city admit that they suffer from lack of employment opportunities, even for part time jobs. There is also a lack of programs and internships, which will equip them with employment skills required in the labour market. Youth from the administrative units have reported a lack of vocational training opportunities and career/job orientation courses.

It is interesting that 37% of youth say that *lack of activities* is one of the biggest challenges in their life. Youth from Vlora city say that the social and cultural facilities in the municipality offer very little and that the activities organised by it are not attractive to them. There is a lack of sports fields or recreational parks in the neighbourhoods. Youth from administrative units suffer from a lack of social and cultural activities, which results in a significant lack of activities.

Poor transportation (29%) and *insufficient infrastructure* (22%) are identified as being amongst the top issues and problems encountered by youth. Youth in the city state that the lack of public inter-city transportation (including public destinations) hinders employment and entertainment opportunities offered to them. Youth from the administrative units have also said that lack of transportation and appropriate infrastructure effects not only youth, but their entire community, economy and development.

Vlora youth (16 %), lack an *effective structure and/or mechanism* to address their issues at the local level.

Youth are also concerned about the existence of *anti-social behaviours* (bullying, drugs, peers to peer violence, etc.). They (14%) have reported that bullying, discrimination of the Roma community, violence, and drug consumption are present. Lack of confidence is also a problem.

Only 8% of the total youth considered the *lack of social, economic and political security/stability* as one of the key issues and challenges.

Table 1. Main issues to youth.

Employment	161
Youth activities	111
Poor transportation	87
Lack of citizenry	33
Anti-social behaviours	42
Insufficient infrastructure	67
lack of social, economic and politic security/stability	8
Lack of effective structure/s and/or mechanism/s working with/for youth	50

Youth provided also their recommendations regarding the work that the municipality should undertake in relation to them. According to these findings, the municipality should make more efforts in delivering youth services and focus on a wider

information and communication campaign.

Table 2. Suggestions of responders.

Delivery of youth services	200
Information and communication	103
Transparency and accountability	53
Other	8

Conclusions

This section contains the main conclusions coming from the survey's results.

In the recent years Vlova city has undergone significant changes in terms of infrastructure and public works. However, this does not apply equally for the administrative units. For this reason, the responses from *Youth Satisfaction Survey (2019)* of the city youth regarding the information and the quality of services delivered by the municipality differ from the responses of youth in the administrative units. This is why this analysis goes deeper by focusing on the responders coming from the administrative units, excluding the residents in the city.

The second part of the survey asked the interviewers about their *information and knowledge about the services provided by the municipality*. More than half of the young people answered that they are not aware of these services, especially those in the administrative units. Feedback from the second question shows that young people are not very satisfied with any of the services. They have given the highest scores for the category of other services (education, culture, sports) and the lowest scores for public and social services. The results of the study show that the provision of services in the city is much better than in its administrative units.

The third part of the survey is focused on the youth related services offered by the municipality. The survey asked youth about the *social, sports and cultural facilities available in the territory of the Municipality, if the youth utilised them and if not, what are other ways they use to spend their time*. Unfortunately, most of the youth in the administrative units responded that they were not aware of the existence of these facilities in their communities (except for the Theatre and Library which are in the city of Vlova). However, youth living in the city reported that there is a lack of sports facilities in the neighbourhoods and the existing facilities do not organise activities that would attract youth. More than 60% of youth did not visit or spent time in these facilities that are operated by the municipality. Almost half of the youth interviewed spend their free time using social media and in the coffee shops and bars.

In the fourth section of the survey, youth were asked regarding the accountability, information and communication of the municipal administration. Youth appear sceptical regarding the questions if *the municipality has taken useful decisions in relation to citizens and that the municipality is transparent with the decision-making process*. Only a quarter of them agreed or fully agreed with these statements.

The fifth part of the survey referred to the municipal activities with youth. The questions are focused on the *structures, plans and programs related to youth participation, em-*

powerment and employment programs. Only $\frac{1}{4}$ of the youth know about the existence of dedicated structures working with youth in the municipality. From this group, only less than 1% have participated in any activity organised by this department. Again, less than $\frac{1}{4}$ of the youth are aware of the existence of a youth program and/or an action plan in the municipality, and even then they come only from Vlora city.

More than half of interviewed youth responded that are aware of opportunities regarding vocational training courses, programs or centres in the municipality. This information is more present among youth coming from the city of Vlora compared to the ones in the administrative units, probably due to lack of this service in the rural areas. Less than 2% of the youth confirm that they are aware of youth employment promotion programs in the municipality and the majority of them belong to the city. The final part of the survey addressed the main issues and challenges faced by young people in their communities and recommendations on how the municipality can improve its youth work. The biggest issue identified by young people in the city and in rural areas is the lack of employment opportunities and internship programs, which would equip them with the employment skills required in the labour market. Another reported problem is the lack of activities and the lack of social and cultural facilities, especially in the administrative units. There are almost no sports or cultural facilities in the administrative units, so there is nothing for young people to do there. Poor transportation and insufficient infrastructure are identified by youth as being amongst the top issues and problems. Youth in the city lack also effective structures and/or mechanisms to address their issues at the local level.

Youth in these areas are concerned about the existence of anti-social behaviours (bullying, drugs, peers to peer violence, etc.). A very small percentage of the youth considers the lack of social, economic and political safety as one of the key issues and challenges.

Limitations

In this study I have gone into a deeper analysis by using a sub-sample of 200 participants aged between 15-29 years old, extrapolated from the Youth Satisfaction Survey (2019), out of a total of 300 youth surveyed. In this subsample there are 100 responders coming from the administrative units who have filled the questionnaires in hard copy form, resulting with some missing values in their questionnaire. However, the amount of the missing data has no implications on our confidence in the results (less than 3 % are NAN values).

Recommendations

Policymakers need to identify the needs and hopes of young people regularly: The recommendations of youth from Administrative Units are related to a better provision of public services, including infrastructure, lighting, water, waste water, transportation and public safety. Their responses indicate that either they are not aware of the existence of a specific service, or the service does not exist at all. In the city, youth appraise the municipality for undertaking infrastructure investments. They do, how-

ever, demand interventions in some of the city streets, particularly in informal areas. In relation to other services (education, cultural, sport), there is a need to: create mobility advantages for disabled children as well as youth in the schools that are being reconstructed; create recreational parks and sports fields in the neighbourhoods; and, reconstruction of the public sports facilities.

In relation to youth employment, the development of programs that promote and enable youth employment in cooperation with other state institutions is required. Beyond this, they should seek to: promote and develop tourism by supporting youth employment as tour operators; invest in economic development and employment; support civic and citizenship education (in and beyond schools) so that young people always have access to a learning environment that is empowering and which fosters participation.

In relation to information, communication, transparency and participation in decision-making of youth, more effort must be made in order to: enhance communication between youth and the municipality; promote participation of citizens/youth in decision-making processes by inviting youth to public meetings and making them part of the consultative and decision-making processes; and, encourage, recognise and support new forms of youth participation, including social movements and on-line spaces for youth participation.

Youth are underrepresented in parliaments, governments and other public administrations. As such, they require fair access in order to achieve appropriate representation.

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