WESTERN BALKANS
HUMAN RIGHTS CITIES

The importance of a Human Rights Based Approach in local government

Mapping of Challenges and Opportunities

Implemented by:

Albania Sustainable Development Organization (A.S.D.O)

Institute for Human Rights (IHR)

European Policy Institute (EPI)

Western Balkans Human Rights Cities Initiative

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1. Introduction

While national governments are traditionally seen as the primary duty-bearers under international human rights law, a growing body of practice, and institutional recognition underscores the role of local governments in protecting, promoting, and fulfilling human rights. Cities are where human rights are either realized or denied in everyday life, where people access housing, education, healthcare, security, and civic participation. The importance of local governments has been increasingly recognized in the international human rights system. The Human Rights Council recognizes the important functions of local government in providing public services that address local needs and priorities related to the realization of human rights at the local level, thus encouraging the states to support the capacity of local governments to promote and protect human rights and highlights their role in fulfilling international obligations, especially within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).[1] Furthermore, the Human Rights Council has similarly affirmed that local authorities are not merely implementers of national strategies but autonomous actors who can develop context-specific human rights approaches. As key steps towards embedding human rights in local governance it recommends the creation of local action plans, human rights offices, and participatory forums, particularly for marginalized groups.[2]

This survey on the human rights situation in Albania and North Macedonia is part of a broader effort to strengthen democratic governance, civic participation, and human rights mainstreaming in the Western Balkans. Both countries, as EU candidate states, are navigating complex processes of decentralisation and multi-level governance while aspiring to align their institutions with European standards under **Chapter 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights)** and **Chapter 24 (Justice, Freedom and Security)** of the EU acquis. The **Human Rights Cities approach**, highlights that human rights only acquire full meaning when they protect people where they live their daily lives. Experiences from cities such as Malmö, Graz, and Utrecht show how municipalities can embed rights in their governance systems, involve civil society in decision-making, and co-create inclusive solutions that strengthen trust and democracy.

Adapting these lessons to the Western Balkans is particularly timely, as local governments here often struggle with limited capacities, fragmented approaches to inclusion, and uneven implementation of anti-discrimination frameworks.

This survey also builds on the vision of four participants of the **SI Summer Academy for Young Professionals (SAYP) 2024** in *"Perspectives on Multi-level Governance, Decentralisation and Human Rights"*, which encouraged emerging leaders in the public sector and civil society to champion transparency, accountability, and citizen participation. The values of human rights-based governance

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[1] *The Right to Development : Resolution / Adopted by the Human Rights Council on 27 September 2018*, A/HRC/RES/39/9 (UN Human Rights Council, 2018), https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1650170?ln=en&v=pdf.

[2] *Role of Local Government in the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights – Final Report of the Human Rights Council Advisory Committee*, A/HRC/30/49 (UN Human Rights Council, 2015), https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g15/174/88/pdf/g1517488.pdf.

namely participation, accountability, non-discrimination, transparency, and empowerment are also the guiding principles of this study.

Our findings map not only the persistent challenges faced by municipalities in Albania and North Macedonia—ranging from structural discrimination and social exclusion of Roma, migrants, and LGBTI persons, to weak integration of rights into local strategies—but also the opportunities for reform. Encouragingly, there is evidence of growing interest from municipalities to learn from European best practices, to involve youth and community actors in policy-making, and to experiment with innovative tools such as inclusive budgeting and rights-based monitoring.

The Albania Sustainable Development Organization (ASDO) and its partners Institute for Human Rights (IHR), the European Policy Institute (EPI) and Municipality of Lushnja as the main local governance partner, through initiatives like the **Balkan Human Rights Cities Initiative** and cross-border cooperation, are contributing to this regional shift. By facilitating dialogue, developing joint standards, and strengthening municipal capacity, these efforts aim to ensure that human rights are not perceived as abstract obligations, but as practical tools for improving people's daily lives in the Western Balkans.

This survey is therefore not only a snapshot of the current state of rights at the local level in Albania and North Macedonia. It is also an invitation: for municipalities, civil society, and European partners to join in co-creating **human rights cities and regions** in the Balkans—spaces where dignity, equality, and participation are not aspirational ideals, but lived realities.

2. Context

2.1 Human Rights Based Approach

The Human Rights Based Approach (HRBA) is a conceptual and practical framework for human development that is grounded on international human rights standards and operationally directed toward promoting and protecting human rights. In 2003, the United Nations (UN) adopted the Common Understanding on a Human-Rights-Based Approach to Development Cooperation,[3] establishing that development programmes and governance must be explicitly aimed at fulfilling human rights, with programming guided by principles such as universality of human rights, inter-dependence and inter-relatedness, non-discrimination, participation and inclusion, accountability, and the rule of law. In local governance, it means:

- Empowering rights holders (citizens) to claim their rights;
- Strengthening the capacity of duty bearers (local authorities) to meet their obligations;
- Ensuring participation, transparency, accountability, and non-discrimination in policy and service delivery.[4]

In this regard, although states and UN agencies differ in structure and organization, the HRBA can be applied to both, tailored and designed to fit the context. When tailored to each context, it can transform how institutions operate, improve how duty bearers meet their obligations, and ultimately enhance the lives of marginalized and excluded people.[5] Under the HRBA, the government, both at the national and local levels, holds a fundamental obligation to respect, protect, and fulfill the human rights of all individuals. This duty applies across all sectors of public life, encompassing social, economic, cultural, and civil-political domains. From the perspective of rights holders (i.e., all individuals), these obligations translate into concrete responsibilities for the state: to create enabling conditions for the full and unimpeded realization of human rights, and to actively ensure that these

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[3] United Nations Sustainable Development Group, "The Human Rights Based Approach to Development Cooperation Towards a Common Understanding Among UN Agencies," United Nations, 2003, https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/6959-The_Human_Rights_Based_Approach_to_Development_Cooperation_Towards_a_Common_Understanding_among_UN.pdf.

[4] United Nations Sustainable Development Group, "The Human Rights Based Approach to Development Cooperation Towards a Common Understanding Among UN Agencies."

[5] Tomislav Ortakovski, *Implementation of the Human Rights Based Approach in Policy and Programming Processes within Public Institutions* (Institute for Human Rights, 2020), https://www.ihr.org.mk/storage/app/media/%D0%9F%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B5%D0%BA%D1%82%D0%B8/2020%20-%20%D0%A7%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B5%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B8%20%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B2%D0%B0%20%D0%B7%D0%B0%20%D1%81%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5/%D0%9C%D0%B5%D1%82%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%BE%D0%B3%D0%B8%D1%98%D0%B0/Methodology%20n.1%20EN.pdf. page 10

rights are not only formally recognized but also meaningfully accessible in practice. Crucially, individuals are not passive recipients of state policies, they are active holders of rights, empowered to claim those rights and to hold duty bearers accountable. This shift from needs-based approaches to rights-based frameworks, places the emphasis on dignity, accountability, and legal entitlement.[6]

The HRBA is an essential element of Human Rights Cities concept. It ensures that policies and programs are designed and implemented with active participation from all residents, especially marginalized groups and ensures that the public services directly impact the protection and fulfillment of the human rights of the citizens.

2.2 The Human Rights Cities concept

The concept of embedding human rights in local governance through the Human Rights Cities (HRC) approach represents a transformative approach to municipal roles in realizing international human rights standards. The People's Movement for Human Rights Learning (PDHRE) helped pilot the first Human Rights city in Rosario, Argentina, in the early 1990s, initiating a model that embedded human rights principles into local policies and education, notably focusing on police conduct toward marginalized groups.[7] This grassroots beginning emphasised the importance of awareness and empowerment at the local level, long before the international community formally acknowledged the local governance dimension of rights protection. Since then, cities such as Graz,[8] Utrecht,[9] Lund,[10] and Gwangju among others, have taken steps to operationalise the concept, adapting it to their contexts with varying degrees of formality, institutionalisation, and civic engagement.

Core Principles

The Gwangju Guiding Principles for a Human Rights City, adopted in 2014,[11] provide a guiding framework that defines a human rights city as one grounded in participatory democracy, non-discrimination, accountability, and social inclusion. Thus, Human Rights Cities commit to integrating international human rights norms into local governance by:

- Using human rights principles to guide municipal decision-making.

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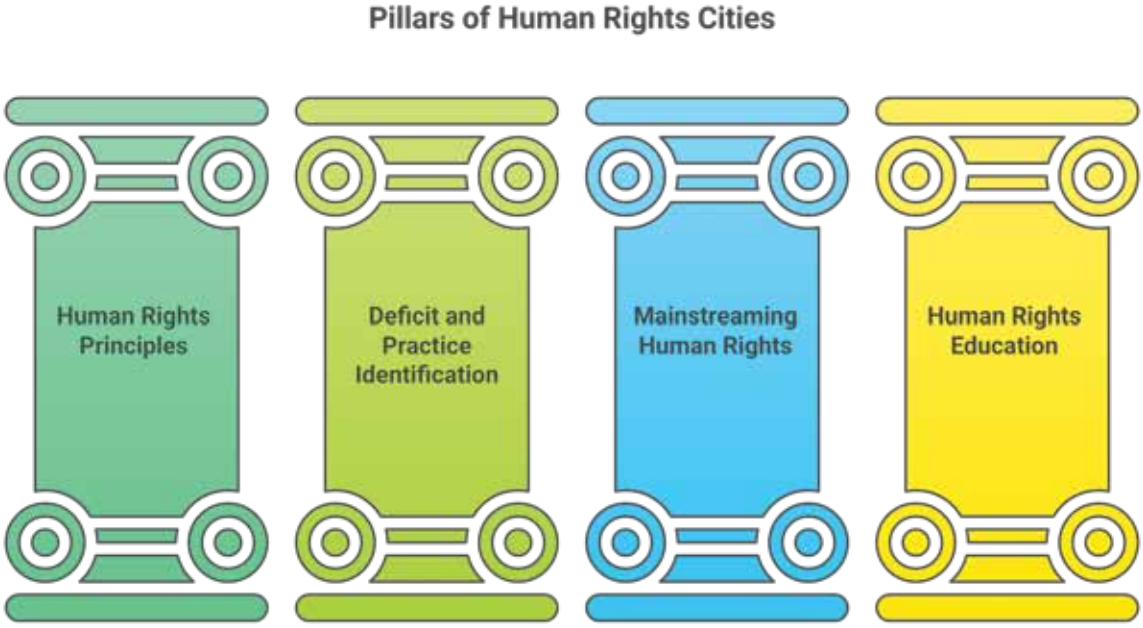
[6] Tomislav Ortakovski, *Implementation of the Human Rights Based Approach in Policy and Programming Processes within Public Institutions*.
[7] Martha F. Davis, "Introduction," in *Human Rights Cities and Regions - Swedish and International Perspectives*, ed. Martha F. Davis et al. (Raoul Wallenberg Institute, 2017).
[8] About Graz Human Rights City see: https://humanrightscities.net/humanrightscity/graz/
[9] About Utrecht Human Rights City see: https://humanrightscities.net/humanrightscity/utrecht/
[10] About Lund Human Rights City see: https://humanrightscities.net/humanrightscity/lund/
[11] "Gwangju Guiding Principles for a Human Rights City (Gwangju Principles)," 2014 World Human Rights Cities Forum, May 17, 2014, https://en.whrcf.org/generaldata/?bmode=view&idx=54278730.

- **Participation**: Citizens, especially marginalized groups, are actively included in decision-making.
- **Accountability**: Institutions have clear responsibilities and mechanisms for redress.
- **Non-Discrimination & Equality**: Equal treatment and proactive inclusion of vulnerable communities.
- **Transparency**: Open access to information and decision-making processes.
- **Empowerment**: Citizens are aware of their rights and able to claim them.

- Identifying deficits and good practices within administration and public services.

- Mainstreaming human rights into all areas of governance and reaching out to civil society and the private sector.

- Promoting human rights education to foster a local culture of dignity and inclusion.



Throughout the years, cities have implemented a wide variety of mechanisms for localizing human rights. Graz declared itself a Human Rights City in 2001 and created a Municipal Human Rights Council in 2007 assigned to conduct human rights monitoring at the local level.[12] Other examples include Nuremberg, Vienna, and the Swedish region Västra Götaland that have established human rights offices or departments in their administration, helping coordinate human rights initiatives or action plans, provide the city and its leadership with advice and guidance on human rights activities,

[12] Klaus Starl, "Human Rights City Graz: Lessons Learnt from the First 15 Years," in *Human Rights Cities and Regions - Swedish and International Perspectives*, ed. Martha F. Davis, et al. (Raoul Wallenberg Institute, 2017), https://rwi.lu.se/app/uploads/2017/03/Human-Rights-Cities-web.pdf. Page 53

raise awareness of human rights and help engage with stakeholders such as civil society.[13] Another example includes the city of Malmö that established an advisory Council of the National Roma Minority, supporting the participation of Roma with the city and help fight discrimination and vulnerability and help to promote the Roma culture and language.[14]

The Human Rights Cities concept represents a powerful tool for reclaiming the democratic and inclusive potential of cities. It is not a one-size-fits-all model, nor a fixed status, but an ongoing political and institutional process of transformation. Becoming a Human Rights City means adopting a vision of governance where rights are not abstract entitlements but lived realities manifested in housing policies, public spaces, policing practices, educational curricula, and participatory forums.

Regional Relevance

In the Western Balkans, municipalities are at the frontline of service delivery but often lack the tools to translate human rights into practical governance. Here, the Human Rights Cities concept aims to provide a framework to align local governance with EU integration chapters on Judiciary and Fundamental Rights (23) and Justice, Freedom and Security (24).

Human Rights Cities are not defined by a single legal framework but by practice and culture: a municipality's commitment to ensure that rights are meaningful in daily life. By adopting this model, cities in Albania and North Macedonia can become drivers of democratic resilience, social inclusion, and European integration, bridging the gap between international commitments and local realities.

2.3 Local framework

2.3.1 Albania

Albania's Constitution, promotes equality, non-discrimination, and citizen participation[15] which serve as basis of a Human Rights-Based Approach. According to the Constitution of the Republic of Albania, human rights and fundamental freedoms are directly applicable and binding upon all state authorities. Article 18 guarantees equality before the law and prohibits discrimination on any ground; Article 15 establishes that fundamental human rights are universal and inviolable. Together, these provisions set up the basis for embedding the principles of HRBA-equality, participation, transparency, and accountability-across the spectrum of governance.

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[13] European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, *Human Rights Cities in the EU - A Framework for Reinforcing Rights Locally* (2021), https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2021-human-rights-cities-in-the-eu_en.pdf. Page 22

[14] European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, *Human Rights Cities in the EU - A Framework for Reinforcing Rights Locally*.

[15] Constitution of the Republic of Albania. (1998, amended 2021). Official Gazette of the Republic of Albania. Retrieved from: https://www.parlament.al/Files/sKuvendi/kushtetuta.pdf

Law no. 139/2015 "On Local Self-Government"[16] represents the main legislative framework regulating decentralization and local democracy. It provides for the organization, competencies, and autonomy of municipalities, including the rights of citizens to participate directly in local decision-making through public consultations, referenda, and civic initiatives. The law places participatory democracy at the center of local governance and confers on municipalities key functional responsibilities in areas such as education, social care, culture, and local development that are crucial for the application of the HRBA approach.

However, despite the progressive provisions created by this law, its implementation remains uneven. Many municipalities still suffer from administrative, technical, and financial constraints-particularly in rural or remote areas-that have significantly limited their ability to engage in inclusive policymaking and accountability mechanisms.

The Law no. 10 221/2010 "On Protection from Discrimination,"[17] as amended, is the general legislative framework that ensures equality and prohibits discrimination based on a variety of grounds including gender, ethnicity, disability, religion, sexual orientation, and gender identity. It places a legal obligation on all public bodies, whether national or local, to prevent, address, and eliminate discrimination within their policies, programs, and practices, while at the same time adopting proactive measures towards promoting equality. The Commissioner for Protection from Discrimination is the independent monitoring body with competence to investigate complaints and issue binding recommendations.

Notwithstanding these solid legal bases, enforcement challenges remain. Limited institutional follow-up, low public awareness, and weak coordination between central and municipal authorities remain key barriers to effective implementation, according to independent assessments, including the U.S. Department of State 2023 Human Rights Report on Albania[18].

As far as minority protection goes, Law no. 96/2017 "On Protection of National Minorities"[19] provides guarantees for preserving and promoting the cultural, linguistic, and religious identity of recognized minorities. The law provides for minority languages to be used in education, public signage, and communication with local authorities in municipalities where at least 20 percent of the population is made up of minorities. On the other hand, the Council of Europe Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, the Fifth Opinion on Albania

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[16] Law no. 139/2015 “On Local Self-Government.” Official Gazette of the Republic of Albania, No. 252, 17 December 2015. Retreived from: https://qbz.gov.al/eli/ligj/2015/12/17/139

[17] Law no. 10 221/2010 “On Protection from Discrimination” (amended). Official Gazette of the Republic of Albania, No. 182, 2 March 2010. Retreived from: https://qbz.gov.al/eli/ligj/2010/02/04/10221

[18] U.S. Department of State. (2023). Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Albania. Washington, DC: Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor.
Identifies weaknesses in anti-discrimination enforcement and institutional coordination.

[19] Law no. 96/2017 “On Protection of National Minorities in the Republic of Albania.” Official Gazette of the Republic of Albania, No. 164, 13 October 2017. Retreived from: https://qbz.gov.al/eli/fz/2017/196/23dfc0be-d3a1-4f26-8ace-9eb38a1e9237

(2023)[20], criticized the threshold established in the law as excessively restrictive and recommended that Albania should have a village-based approach regarding language rights in order to ensure larger inclusion. The absence of detailed secondary legislation and guidelines on implementation continues to restrict consistent application at the local level.

The legal framework governing gender equality is the Law no. 9970/2008 "On Gender Equality in Society"[21]; it is further reinforced by provisions for gender-responsive budgeting in the Law on Local Self-Government Finances. Article 14 of the Gender Equality Law requires all public institutions, including municipalities, to apply principles of gender equality to planning, programming, and budgeting. Municipalities are obliged to perform gender impact assessments and introduce equality objectives into local development strategies.

In practice, however, the Fifth Periodic Report of Albania under Article 18 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, CEDAW 2023, states that most of the municipalities still lack necessary expertise, disaggregated data, and financial resources to systematically apply gender-responsive budgeting or even monitor outcomes related to equality[22].

In an effort to increase access, transparency, and efficiency of services, Albania created the Agency for the Delivery of Integrated Services, or ADISA, which extends one-stop centers to all citizens for local and national services. Complementary efforts from the Council of Europe and the Ministry of Interior have advanced participatory governance and inclusive decision-making at the municipal level. Yet civic participation, particularly among Roma and Egyptian communities, persons with disabilities, women, and LGBTI+, remains relatively low and often appears to be formal or consultative, not continuous in nature[23].

Fiscal and Institutional Dimensions The Organic Budget Law and related subnational finance regulations govern the preparation, approval, and execution of municipal budgets with an emphasis on fiscal transparency and accountability. While these regulatory frameworks-at least in principle-call for integrating considerations related to equality and inclusion in budgetary processes, most municipalities still lack the analytical tools, human resources, and mechanisms for inter-institutional coordination needed to apply the principles of HRBA in formulating and monitoring budgets[24]. In this regard, Albania has developed a complete legal and constitutional framework consistent with international standards for ensuring equality, non-discrimination, protection of national minorities, and gender equality. However, because of institutional fragmentation, weak capacity, and the lack of supportive secondary legislation, the same provisions are applied unevenly in different

[20] Council of Europe Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. (2023). Fifth Opinion on Albania adopted on 17 March 2023. Strasbourg: CoE.
[21] Law no. 9970/2008 “On Gender Equality in Society.” Official Gazette of the Republic of Albania, No. 104, 2008. Retreived from: https://qbz.gov.al/eli/ligj/2008/07/24/9970
[22] Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). (2023). Fifth periodic report submitted by Albania under article 18 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Geneva: United Nations Treaty Collection.
[23] United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC). (2025). Universal Periodic Review: Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review – Albania.
[24] OECD/SIGMA. (2022). Monitoring Report: Public Governance and Administrative Reform in Albania.

municipalities. For further development regarding the integration of HRBA within local governance, Albania needs to build the capacity of municipalities, systematically apply participatory mechanisms, and align budgetary and planning processes with equality and human rights standards.

2.3.2 North Macedonia

The integration of a Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA) within national and local governance in North Macedonia is anchored in several key legal instruments, most notably the Constitution, the Law on Local Self-Government, and the Law on Prevention and Protection Against Discrimination.

The Constitution of the Republic of North Macedonia[25] serves as the supreme legal act guaranteeing citizens' rights to local self-government. It stipulates, in Article 115, that, within units of local self-government, citizens participate directly and through their representatives in decision-making on matters of local relevance. Article 8 establishes the principle of equality before the law and explicitly prohibits discrimination, while Article 9 guarantees fundamental freedoms and rights, emphasizing the protection of human dignity. These constitutional provisions form the foundation for embedding equality, participation, and accountability core elements of the HRBA within governance processes.

The Law on Local Self-Government (LLSG)[26] regulates the organization, competences, and autonomy of municipalities, as well as the modalities of citizen participation at the local level. It defines key concepts such as "municipality," "decision-making process," and "direct citizen participation." The Law recognizes the citizens' involvement in decision-making that may be both individual and collective, and should occur at different stages of local governance.[27] This legal framework thus institutionalizes participatory democracy as a means of ensuring accountability and responsiveness to local needs.

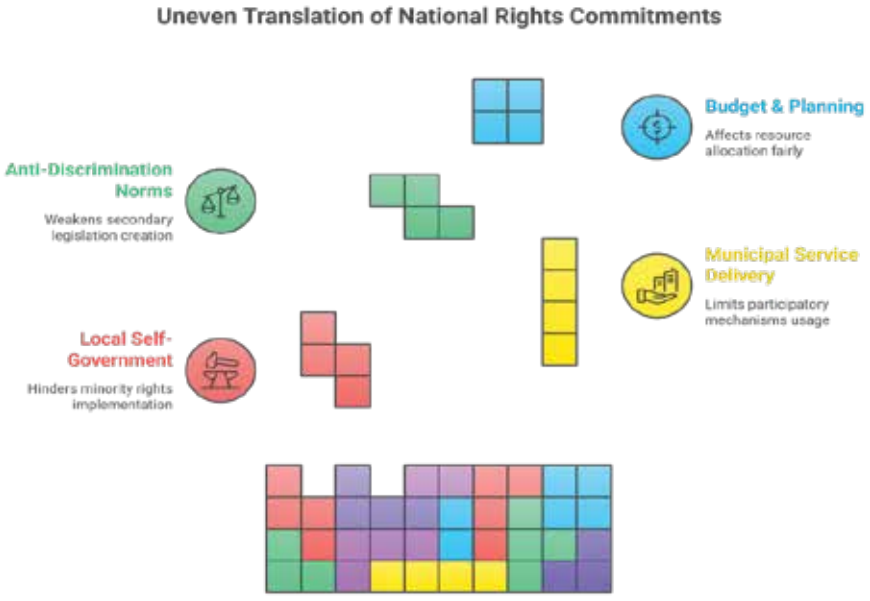
The Law on Prevention and Protection Against Discrimination[28] provides the legal foundation for the duty of equality, obliging all public authorities including municipalities to prevent, address, and eliminate discrimination in their policies, services, and practices. This duty represents a cornerstone of the HRBA, which demands that governance processes be guided by the principles of equality and non-discrimination. Under this law, duty-bearers such as municipalities, public institutions, and education and health service providers must not only refrain from discriminatory behavior but also actively promote equality (Article 3). They are required to identify and remove structural barriers impeding equal access to rights and services, especially for marginalized and vulnerable groups, including Roma communities, persons with disabilities, women, LGBTQ+ persons,

[25] Constitution of the Republic of North Macedonia [Устав На Република Северна Македонија] (2019), https://www.sobranie.mk/ustav-na-rm.nspx.
[26] Law on local self-government, [Закон за локална самоуправа], Official gazette of Republic of North Macedonia No. 5/2002 (2002) and 202/2024 (2024)
[27] Ibid, articles 25-30
[28] Law on Prevention and Protection against Discrimination [Закон За Спречување и Заштита Од Дискриминација], Official Gazette of Republic of North Macedonia No. 258/2020 (2020).

and others. Moreover, equality considerations must be systematically integrated into the design, implementation, and evaluation of all public policies and decisions.

The equality duty has both substantive and procedural dimensions. Substantively, it requires institutions to ensure equal realization of rights, particularly for those historically disadvantaged. Procedurally, it calls for equality to be mainstreamed across all phases of decision-making through disaggregated data collection, inclusive consultations, impact assessments, and transparent monitoring mechanisms. In addition, the law mandates the adoption of positive measures to achieve de facto equality. This aligns with the HRBA principle of the progressive realization of rights, recognizing that formal equality alone is insufficient to overcome structural inequalities. For instance, ensuring accessibility for persons with disabilities or targeted outreach for Roma youth constitutes necessary steps to achieve substantive equality under both national and international human rights obligations. Despite the solid legal framework, implementation remains limited due to insufficient knowledge, institutional capacity, and resources at both national and local levels.[29]

The Organic Budget Law[30] establishes the procedures for preparation, adoption, and execution of national and municipal budgets. Complementing this, the Law on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men[31] in Article 14 obliges units of local self-government to integrate the principle of gender equality into their strategic plans and budgets and to monitor the gender impact of their programs. Together, these laws reinforce the cross-cutting obligation to ensure that human rights, equality, and non-discrimination are systematically embedded within all governance and policy processes.

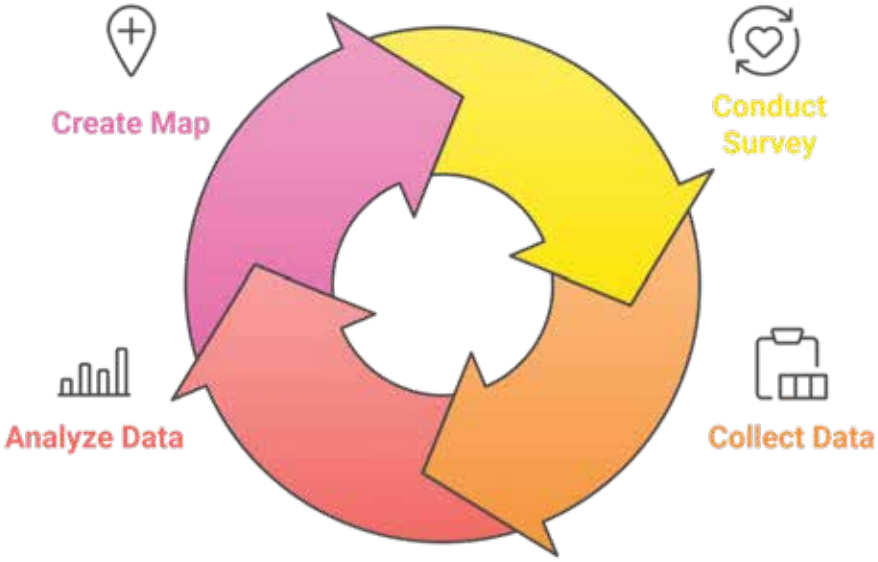


[29] Poposka Žaneta et al., *Commentary on the Law on Prevention and Protection against Discrimination* (Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe - Mission in Skopje, 2023), https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/2/0/583105.pdf.

[30] Organic Budget law, [Закон за буџетите] , Official gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia 64/2005, 4/2008; 103/2008; 156/2009; 95/2010; 180/2011; 171/2012; 192/2015; 167/2016; 151/2021; 87/2022; 203/2022; 272/2024; 3/2025

[31] Law on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men [Закон За Еднакви Можности За Мажите и Жените], Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia [Службен весник на Република Македонија] no 201/2015 Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia no 201/2015 (2015), http://www.slvesnik.com.mk/Issues/66a918f670d84cab9a2ae3a0c2d02b61.pdf.

3. Methodology



The survey was designed to assess the integration of the Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA) within local governance in municipalities across Albania and North Macedonia. The instrument aimed to identify existing practices, gaps, and opportunities for embedding HRBA principles — participation, accountability, non-discrimination, transparency, and empowerment — in local decision-making and service delivery.

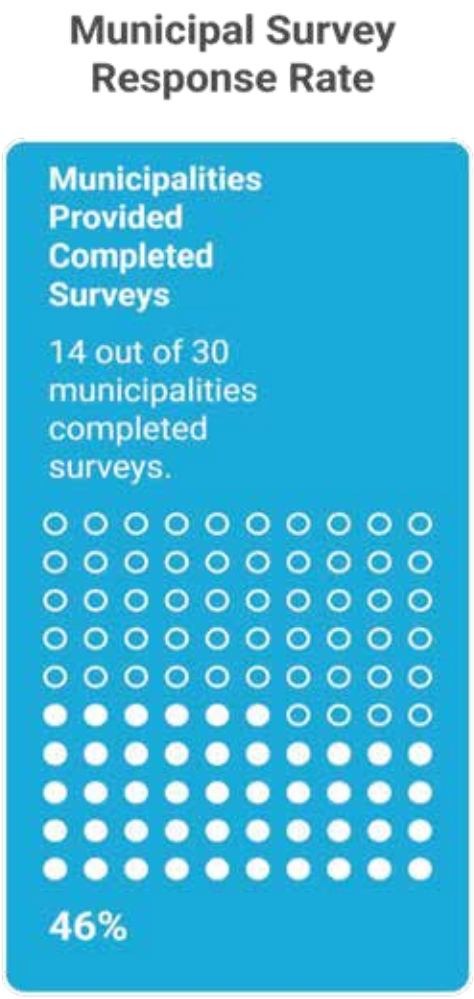
The results feed into the creation of a Map of Challenges and Opportunities, which visualizes disparities across municipalities and serves as a tool for capacity-building, policy design, and advocacy.

The questionnaire was developed collaboratively by the consortium (ASDO, EPI, IHR), drawing on:

- International frameworks: UN HRBA Practitioners' Portal, SDGs, European Convention on Human Rights.
- National legal frameworks: Albania's Law on Local Self-Government and North Macedonia's Law on Prevention and Protection against Discrimination.
- Good practice examples from Human Rights Cities initiatives in Europe (RWI, ECCAR).

The instrument combined quantitative and qualitative components, structured around:

- Governance structures (municipal strategies, legal frameworks, budgets).
- Participation and inclusion (mechanisms for citizen engagement, marginalized groups).
- Accountability and transparency (complaint mechanisms, data use).
- Capacity building (training of staff, partnerships with CSOs/universities).



Target group: Municipal officials (administrators, policy officers, social services).
Sample size: 30 municipalities contacted in total (15 in North Macedonia, 15 in Albania).
Responses: 14 municipalities (7 per country) provided completed surveys.

The survey was distributed starting from May 2024, followed by two reminder rounds. Responses were collected over an 8-week period. The modest response rate reflects **political sensitivities** and approval bottlenecks, particularly during Albania's central elections.

Collected data were processed using **Excel and SPSS** for quantitative analysis and **thematic coding** for qualitative open responses. Analysis was guided by:

- **Descriptive statistics**: frequency counts, percentages of municipalities adopting certain practices.
- **Comparative analysis**: contrasting Albania and North Macedonia responses.
- **Visualization**: development of a GIS-based "Map of Challenges and Opportunities.
- **Cross-cutting themes**: integration of HRBA with EU integration standards, gender equality, and the Green Agenda.

Limitations were related to:

- Low response rate: only 12 municipalities, limiting representativeness.
- Political sensitivity: delays due to election cycles and clearance processes.
- Data gaps: very limited disaggregated data (gender, age, ethnicity, disability).

Nevertheless, the results are indicative of systemic trends and provide a baseline for HRBA integration at the local level.

4. Findings from the survey

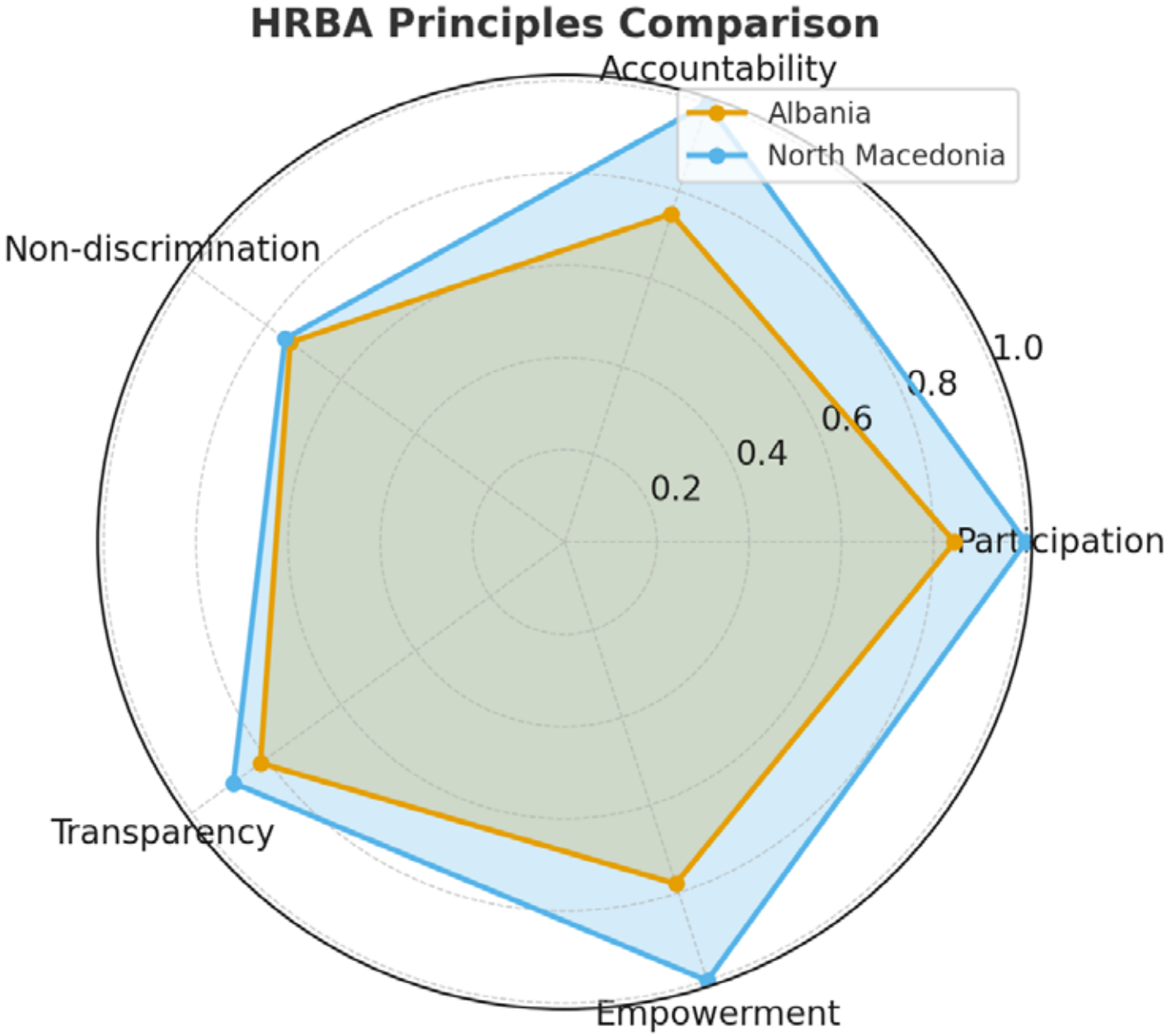
Although the questionnaire was distributed to 30 municipalities across North Macedonia, only 14 provided responses. While this limited sample still allowed for a general insight into the conditions, practices, and institutional capacities of local duty bearers in relation to the Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA), the low response rate itself is a telling indicator of broader systemic challenges.

The reluctance or inability of the majority of municipalities to engage with the questionnaire reflects not only gaps in institutional responsiveness but also suggests a lack of prioritization or understanding of human rights obligations at the local level. In a democratic society striving toward EU integration and alignment with international standards, such limited engagement raises concerns about the transparency, accountability, and openness of local governance structures to rights-based scrutiny.

This trend also highlights an urgent need to strengthen the culture of cooperation between municipalities and civil society, particularly around issues of inclusion, non-discrimination, and participatory governance. The lack of response may be symptomatic of insufficient awareness, inadequate internal coordination, or limited capacity within local governments to address human rights as an integral part of their mandate.

In this context, the findings gathered from the responding municipalities are valuable not only for what they reveal about existing practices but also for what they imply about the prevailing institutional landscape. Building the capacity of municipalities to understand, implement, and report on HRBA principles remains essential not just for fulfilling legal obligations, but for fostering inclusive, rights-respecting local governance that meets the needs of all citizens.

The responses reflect a mixed level of awareness, implementation and readiness to engage with human rights standards across different mandates of local governance.


HRBA Principles Comparison
Accountability
Albania
North Macedonia
Non-discrimination
1.0
0.8
0.6
0.4
0.2
Participation
Transparency
Empowerment

Main Findings

Section 1: Data Gathering and Disaggregation in Local Governance

Albania

In Albania, survey responses revealed significant challenges in the systematic collection of disaggregated data at the municipal level. Only a small number of municipalities reported having mechanisms to collect and maintain data separated by characteristics such as gender, age, ethnicity, or disability status. For many local authorities, data gathering practices are limited to general population registries, which are insufficient for identifying and addressing the needs of vulnerable or marginalized groups.

This gap highlights a lack of capacity and resources in municipalities to operationalize equality obligations under national legislation, including the Law on Social Care Services and anti-discrimination frameworks. Without reliable disaggregated data, municipalities are unable to design targeted social policies or monitor the impact of their interventions on specific populations.

However, municipalities that did report efforts in this area emphasized collaboration with NGOs or donor-supported initiatives, suggesting that external partnerships can be an enabling factor. This underlines the importance of building municipal capacities and creating standardized methodologies for HRBA-aligned data collection in Albania.

North Macedonia

The survey results from North Macedonia point to a similar pattern, but with slightly more institutionalized practices. A minority of municipalities indicated that they gather disaggregated data, often linked to national statistical requirements or donor projects. Yet, the majority admitted that such data is either not systematically collected or not analyzed in ways that inform policymaking at the local level.

Respondents stressed that while local registries exist, they rarely include disaggregated fields beyond basic demographics. Furthermore, municipal staff often lack training on how to use disaggregated data to inform local policies, creating a disconnect between data collection and practical application.

Nonetheless, some municipalities demonstrated emerging good practices, such as involving youth councils or gender equality commissions in identifying specific community needs. These practices remain isolated, but they highlight potential entry points for scaling HRBA-aligned data approaches across municipalities in North Macedonia.

Comparative Analysis

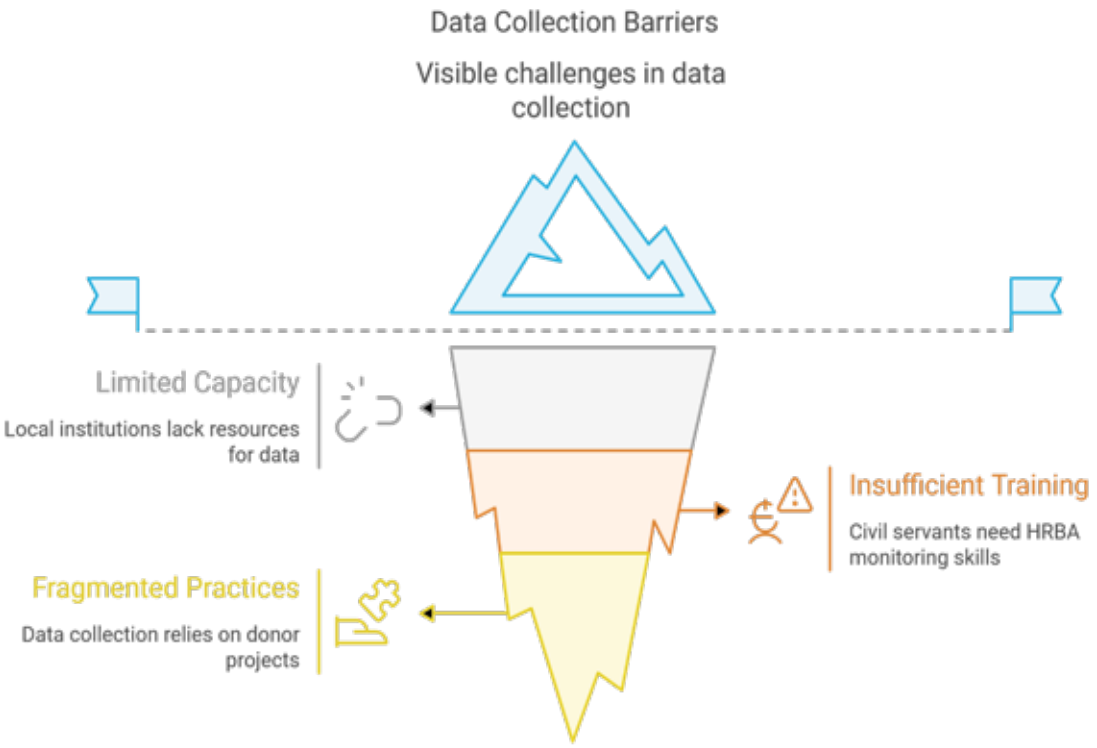
When comparing Albania and North Macedonia, both countries face common systemic barriers to disaggregated data collection:

- Limited institutional capacity at the local level;
- Insufficient training for civil servants on HRBA-aligned monitoring;
- Fragmented practices, often dependent on donor-driven projects rather than standardized national policy.

That said, North Macedonia demonstrates slightly higher levels of structured practice, particularly in municipalities where local bodies (e.g., gender equality commissions, youth councils) are active. Albania, on the other hand, shows greater reliance on external actors such as NGOs and international partners to fill capacity gaps.

The comparative results make it clear that without reliable disaggregated data, both Albania and North Macedonia risk failing to identify and address the needs of marginalized groups. Strengthening municipal-level data systems and embedding HRBA principles into local governance structures is therefore essential for ensuring that no one is left behind.

Systemic Barriers to Data Collection in Albania and North Macedonia.



Section 2: Citizen Participation in Local Governance

Albania

In Albania, municipalities reported that formal mechanisms for citizen participation exist, most commonly in the form of public hearings, budget consultations, or community meetings. These processes are mandated by law, but in practice they are often procedural rather than meaningful. Many municipalities organize consultations to fulfill a legal requirement, but they rarely result in substantive changes to planning or decision-making.

A recurring issue highlighted in responses is that participation tends to be dominated by better-informed and urban-based citizens, while rural residents, women, Roma communities, persons with disabilities, and youth are often excluded. The absence of targeted outreach or adapted formats (for example, using accessible materials, translation for minority languages, or mobile consultations in rural areas) further limits the inclusivity of these mechanisms.

Some municipalities have experimented with participatory budgeting or thematic forums, but these are fragmented and usually dependent on donor-supported projects rather than embedded in municipal practice. This points to a lack of institutional capacity and political will to make participation a genuine tool for accountability and policy improvement.

North Macedonia

In North Macedonia, municipalities demonstrated slightly more structured mechanisms for citizen participation compared to Albania. A number of local governments reported using participatory budgeting pilots, community forums, and youth councils as avenues for citizen engagement. These practices reflect the influence of EU accession processes and national legal obligations for transparency and participation.

Nevertheless, participation is often described as formalistic. Marginalized groups—including Roma communities, women in rural areas, and persons with disabilities—remain underrepresented. Municipalities frequently invite citizens to consultations but lack strategies to ensure diverse voices are included. In practice, meetings often attract the same small group of active citizens, limiting representativeness.

Positive examples do exist: some municipalities mentioned using online platforms or partnerships with civil society organizations to reach wider audiences. However, sustainability remains uncertain since these initiatives are not systematically funded or integrated into local governance frameworks.

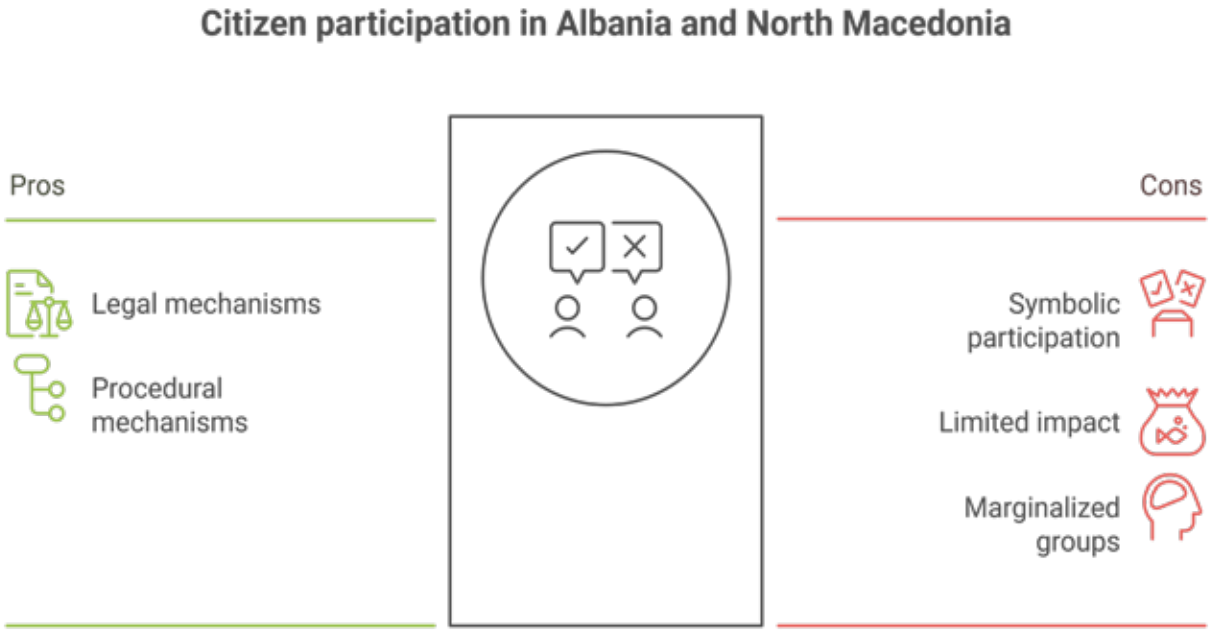
Comparative Analysis

Across both Albania and North Macedonia, the principle of participation is recognized but weakly implemented. Key comparative insights include:

- Shared Strengths: Both countries have established legal and procedural mechanisms for citizen participation, ensuring at least a formal avenue for public input.
- Shared Weaknesses: In both contexts, participation is often symbolic, with limited impact on actual decision-making. Marginalized groups are the least represented, undermining the HRBA principle of inclusivity.

North Macedonia demonstrates more structured approaches (such as participatory budgeting pilots and youth councils), whereas Albania relies more on ad hoc public meetings with minimal follow-up. Albania shows higher dependence on NGO-facilitated participation, while North Macedonia benefits from institutionalized but underutilized frameworks.

In conclusion, while progress has been made in establishing formal mechanisms for participation, both Albania and North Macedonia face significant challenges in transforming these procedures into meaningful, inclusive, and empowering processes that align with the HRBA standard of participatory governance.



Section 3: Inclusion in Local Governance

Albania

Survey results from Albanian municipalities reveal that inclusion remains one of the weakest HRBA principles at the local level. While national frameworks such as the Law on Social Care Services and the National Action Plan for Equality and Non-Discrimination formally oblige municipalities to promote inclusive governance, in practice these commitments are not sufficiently translated into municipal strategies or budgets.

Most municipalities lack dedicated departments or focal points responsible for monitoring inclusion and equality. Instead, responsibilities are spread thinly across social service units or general administration staff, often without the necessary expertise or resources. Inclusion efforts tend to be project-based, supported by NGOs or international donors, rather than systematic municipal policy.

Groups most at risk of exclusion—Roma and Egyptian minorities, persons with disabilities, elderly citizens, women in rural areas, and LGBTQ+ individuals—are rarely engaged in municipal decision-making processes. Even when services exist (such as community centers or social programs), they are often not adapted to ensure accessibility, whether linguistic, physical, or cultural. This indicates a gap between legal commitments and practical implementation, with local governments struggling to operationalize inclusive governance.

North Macedonia

In North Macedonia, municipalities demonstrated a slightly stronger institutionalization of inclusion. Several respondents reported the existence of equality commissions or focal points, created in line with the Law on Prevention and Protection Against Discrimination. These bodies, however, tend to be underfunded and underpowered, limiting their effectiveness.

Municipalities also face challenges in embedding inclusion across all sectors. While some progress has been made in ensuring access to education and health services for marginalized groups, structural barriers remain—particularly for Roma communities, rural populations, and persons with disabilities. Engagement with marginalized groups is often consultative rather than participatory, meaning that while municipalities may gather input, the actual influence of these groups on policymaking remains minimal.

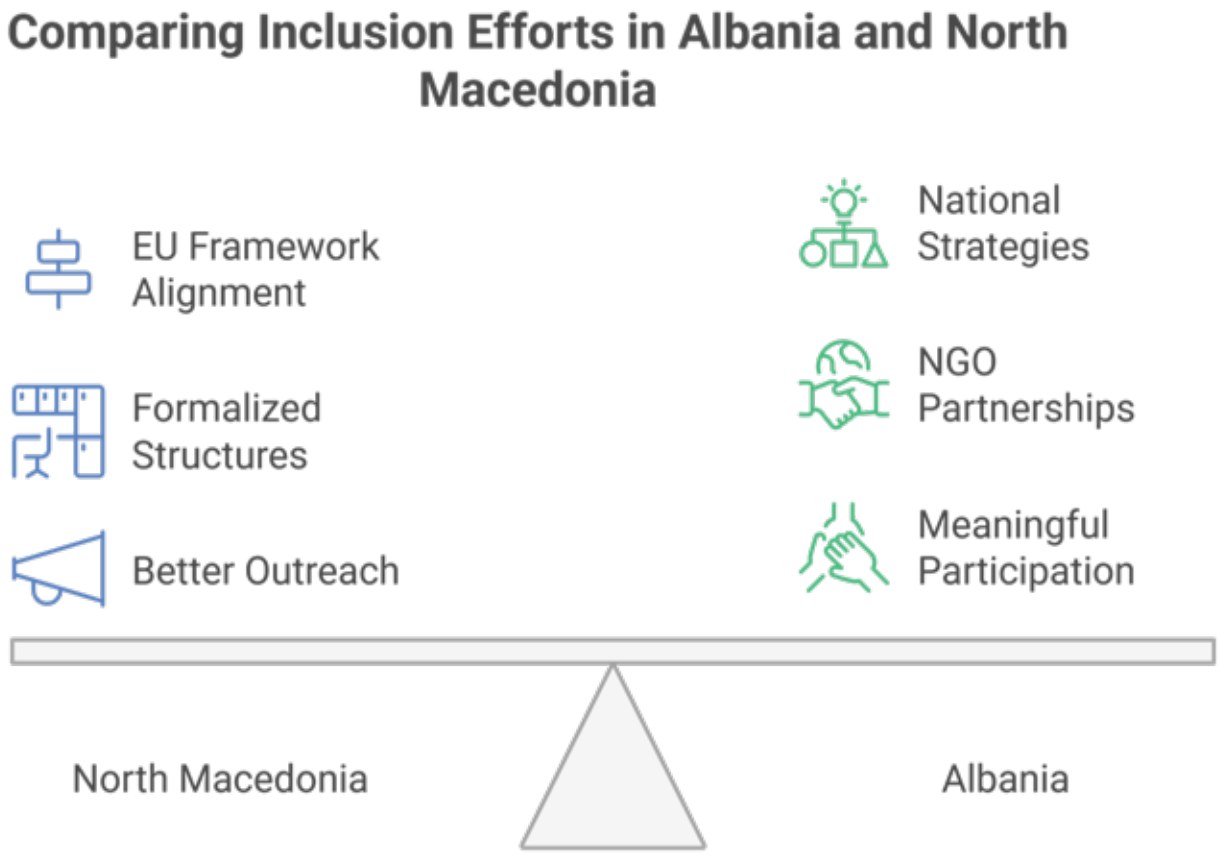
Nevertheless, positive examples exist: some municipalities highlighted collaboration with civil society organizations to co-design social programs or conduct outreach to underrepresented groups. These partnerships show potential, but they are not yet institutionalized or uniformly practiced across the country.

Comparative Analysis

When comparing Albania and North Macedonia, several patterns emerge:

- Legal Frameworks: Both countries have laws and strategies promoting equality and non-discrimination. North Macedonia shows greater alignment with EU frameworks through its anti-discrimination law and municipal equality commissions. Albania has national strategies but struggles to localize them effectively.
- Institutional Mechanisms: North Macedonia demonstrates more formalized structures (e.g., equality commissions, focal points), whereas Albania relies more heavily on NGO partnerships to advance inclusion at the municipal level.
- Implementation Gap: In both contexts, inclusion remains more aspirational than operational. Policies exist on paper, but resources, training, and monitoring mechanisms are insufficient.
- Marginalized Groups: Roma communities, persons with disabilities, and women remain the most excluded in both countries. North Macedonia shows slightly better outreach, but both countries face difficulties ensuring meaningful participation and accessible services.

The comparative picture suggests that while both Albania and North Macedonia recognize the importance of inclusion in local governance, implementation is inconsistent and heavily dependent on external support. To align with HRBA standards, municipalities must institutionalize inclusion mechanisms, allocate budgets for equality policies, and create accessible participation channels for marginalized groups.



Section 4: Transparency in Local Governance

Albania

Transparency in Albanian municipalities is recognized in law as a cornerstone of accountable governance, but implementation is uneven and often superficial. Most municipalities reported that they do publish public documents such as budgets, council decisions, or annual reports. However, in practice, these documents are not easily accessible, user-friendly, or timely. Many municipal websites are outdated, poorly structured, or lack essential information, limiting their usefulness for citizens.

Another challenge is the absence of standardized formats across municipalities. Some local authorities publish budget allocations in detailed breakdowns, while others provide only summary-level information. This inconsistency makes it difficult for citizens and civil society organizations to compare or monitor municipal spending effectively.

Moreover, while the Law on the Right to Information obliges municipalities to proactively disclose information, responses to information requests from citizens or NGOs are often delayed or incomplete. Citizens with limited digital literacy or those living in rural areas face additional barriers, as physical notice boards remain the main information channel in many municipalities. These shortcomings undermine public trust and reduce opportunities for citizen oversight of municipal activities.

North Macedonia

Municipalities in North Macedonia demonstrated slightly stronger practices in transparency, often linked to EU integration processes and obligations under national legislation. A majority of municipalities reported that they publish budgetary information and council decisions online, and some also provide access to local development plans or strategic documents.

However, the survey highlighted that transparency is still largely formalistic. Information is published but rarely in a way that is understandable to ordinary citizens. Complex technical language, lack of summaries in minority languages, and inaccessible formats for persons with disabilities limit the effective use of this information.

Additionally, municipalities admitted that proactive communication remains weak. While formal documents are posted online, outreach to citizens is minimal. Citizens are expected to “find” information rather than municipalities making efforts to bring information closer to them through community meetings, social media, or targeted campaigns.

There were some promising practices, including municipalities experimenting with interactive budget platforms or online tools to collect feedback, but these remain isolated examples rather than systemic practice.

Comparative Analysis

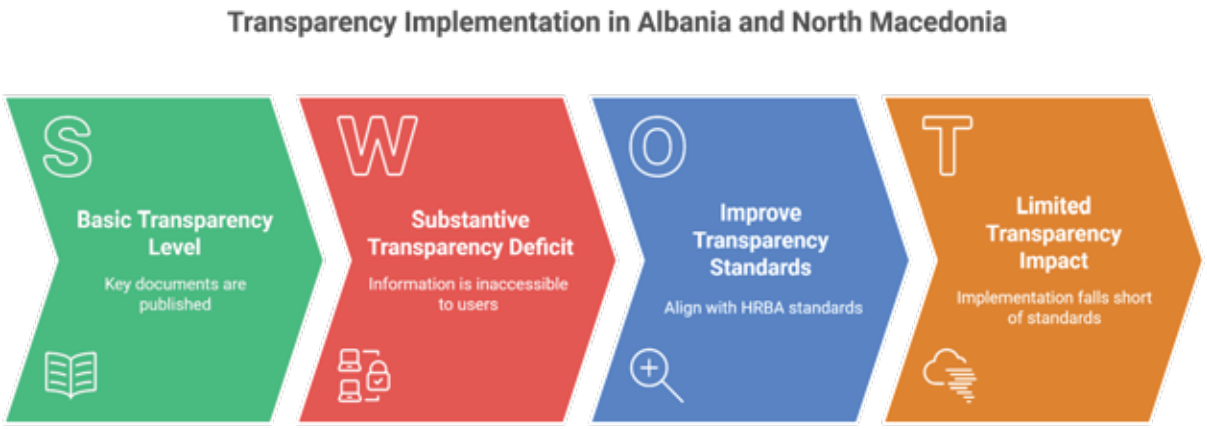
Both Albania and North Macedonia recognize transparency as a legal obligation, but actual implementation falls short of HRBA standards.

Shared Strengths: Municipalities in both countries do publish key documents, particularly budgets and council decisions, which provides a basic level of transparency.

Shared Weaknesses: Transparency is largely procedural rather than substantive. Information is available but often inaccessible—due to technical language, lack of user-friendly formats, or insufficient dissemination.

North Macedonia shows slightly more structured and consistent publication practices, often influenced by EU alignment pressures. Albania, however, demonstrates more variability across municipalities, with some entirely failing to publish documents online.

Overall, the comparative picture indicates that while municipalities in both countries meet the minimum legal standards of transparency, they do not yet provide information in ways that are inclusive, accessible, and empowering for citizens. For transparency to support HRBA principles, both countries must move beyond publishing documents to creating open, citizen-friendly, and interactive transparency systems.



Section 5: Youth Engagement in Local Governance

Albania

Survey responses indicate that youth engagement remains largely ad hoc across Albanian municipalities. A minority report a dedicated youth budget line or sustained programming; most reference occasional activities (e.g., cultural/sport events, one-off consultations) rather than structured participation in decision-making. Where youth councils exist, they are often informal, lack clear mandates, or function without a link to municipal planning and budgeting cycles. Consequently, youth input rarely translates into policy change or resource allocation.

Barriers cited include: limited municipal funding and staff, unclear roles for youth bodies, weak coordination between education/social services and municipal administration, and limited outreach to rural youth, Roma and Egyptian youth, young women, and youth with disabilities. Communication is typically broadcast-style (posts on municipal pages) rather than two-way channels (co-design workshops, participatory budgeting, or digital feedback tools). Several municipalities expressed readiness to improve if provided with templates (ToR for youth councils, rules of procedure), facilitation support, and training on inclusive methods and safeguarding.

Positively, some municipalities cooperate with CSOs and schools to organize volunteerism and community projects; these partnerships are promising but project-dependent. Without formal anchoring (decisions, timelines, and budget codes), youth engagement risks remaining peripheral to governance.

North Macedonia

North Macedonian municipalities show equally formalized structures for youth participation, reflecting national policy incentives (e.g., local youth councils and advisory bodies). Still, many of these structures face capacity and mandate gaps: irregular meetings, limited agenda-setting power, and no earmarked youth budget. Where youth councils function better, it is due to a named municipal focal point, approved work plans, and integration with annual budgeting (even if modest).

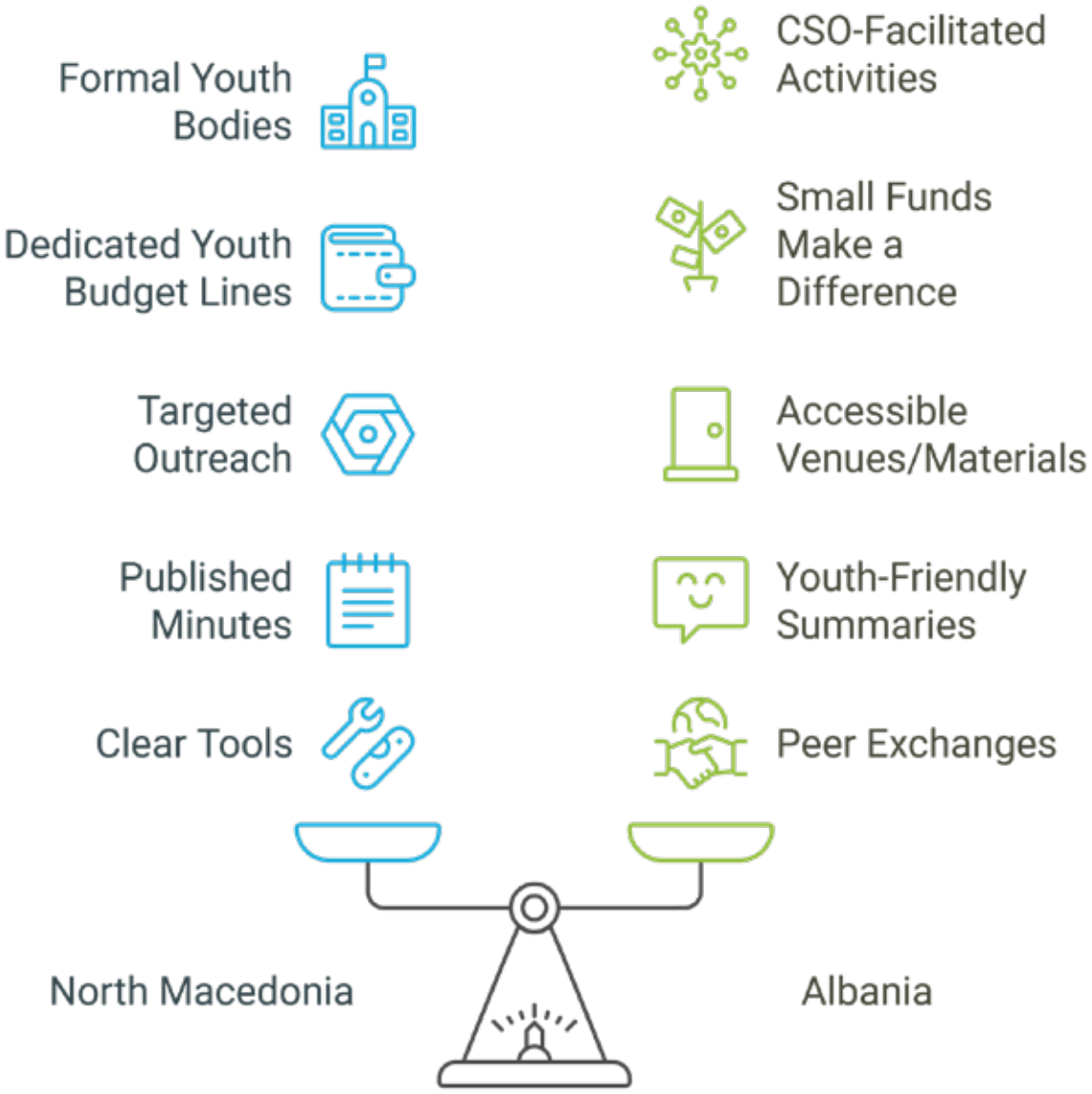
Municipalities increasingly use hybrid engagement—in-person forums plus online forms or social media polls—but systematic feedback loops are rare (youth seldom see how inputs change plans). Inclusion challenges persist: rural youth, Roma youth, and youth with disabilities remain underrepresented; accessibility and transport costs are practical barriers. A few municipalities highlighted youth-led micro-grants and school-municipality partnerships as effective entry points, especially when paired with mentoring by CSOs and clarity on small procurement rules.

Overall, the architecture for youth engagement exists, yet implementation is uneven and impact is constrained by limited funding, facilitation skills, and monitoring.

Comparative Analysis

- North Macedonia generally has more formal youth bodies; Albania relies more on CSO-facilitated activities. In both contexts, practice lags behind policy: advice rarely becomes allocation.
- Dedicated youth budget lines are the exception. Where present, even small funds make a noticeable difference—enabling micro-grants, internships, and youth-driven pilots that build trust and continuity.
- Both countries struggle to reach underrepresented youth. Targeted outreach (schools, VET centers, youth clubs, Roma mediators), accessible venues/materials, and transport support are not yet standardized.
- Engagement is too often one-way. Without published minutes, youth-friendly summaries, or "you said—we did" reports, credibility and participation drop.
- Municipal staff and youth bodies in both countries express willingness to learn. Clear tools (mandates, agendas tied to policy cycles, simple M&E) and peer exchanges are high-leverage.

Balancing Youth Development Strategies



Section 6: Inclusive Infrastructure in Local Governance

Albania

Survey responses and follow-up notes indicate that inclusive infrastructure is one of the most uneven HRBA dimensions across Albanian municipalities. While many local governments reference accessibility in planning documents, implementation is fragmented and project-driven rather than systemic. Ramps on public buildings, tactile paving near main squares, and limited school retrofits are the most frequently cited actions. However, continuity and usability are weak: ramps are too steep, sidewalks are obstructed, curb cuts are missing at crossings, public transport remains largely non-accessible, and maintenance is irregular.

Urban planning instruments (General Local Plans, sectoral plans) rarely embed universal design standards with enforceable targets, checklists, and budget codes. Building permits mention accessibility clauses, but compliance inspections are inconsistent and often limited to paperwork. Affordable and social housing projects exist in a few municipalities, yet design adaptations for persons with disabilities, older people, or families with children are not standard. Public spaces are upgraded in central areas, but peripheral neighborhoods and informal settlements (including Roma/Egyptian communities) see little improvement. Digital public services are expanding, but digital accessibility (plain language, screen-reader compatibility, minority languages) is rarely considered.

Budgeting remains the key bottleneck. Municipal investment programs seldom earmark funds for accessibility retrofits or gender- and child-responsive design. Where progress is visible, it typically stems from donor/CSO partnerships, not institutionalized practice. Finally, climate resilience (shade, flood management, heat-aware materials) is still a niche criterion in local works, despite clear needs in flood-prone and heat-exposed areas.

North Macedonia

Municipalities in North Macedonia report similar approaches to inclusive infrastructure, linked to alignment with EU standards and national accessibility regulations. Several local authorities cite upgrades to schools, health centers, and municipal buildings, as well as safer pedestrian crossings and selective tactile guidance. A number of municipalities also reference social housing projects that include basic accessibility features. Still, as in Albania, the picture is uneven: compliance focuses on flagship sites while secondary streets, rural settlements, and transport nodes lag behind.

Procurement documents more often mention accessibility criteria, yet supervision and post-occupancy evaluation are limited, with few municipalities measuring real-world usability (e.g., gradient, width, turning radius, signage contrast, lighting). Public transport accessibility varies widely between cities, and inter-municipal connectivity remains a challenge for people with mobility or sensory impairments. Some municipalities are experimenting with participatory design workshops (youth, disability organizations, cyclists), but these processes are not yet standardized.

A positive differentiator is that several municipalities connect inclusive infrastructure to safety and resilience—improving lighting, traffic-calming near schools, and basic green infrastructure (trees, permeable surfaces) to mitigate heat and flooding. However, operation and maintenance budgets are tight; newly built features degrade quickly without routine upkeep. Digital service portals are more common than before, but WCAG-style accessibility and multilingual interfaces are not consistently applied.

Comparative Analysis

Both countries have formal references to accessibility, but North Macedonia shows slightly stronger alignment with EU norms in permitting and procurement. Albania relies more on ad hoc donor-backed projects and less on enforceable local standards.

In both contexts, investments privilege central areas and administrative buildings, leaving transport, sidewalks, crossings, and peri-urban/rural areas under-served. North Macedonia features more instances of safety- and resilience-aware upgrades; Albania shows more CSO-driven pilots.

Paper compliance is common; on-site verification and usability testing are rare. Neither context systematically uses checklists, audits, or user testing with DPOs (organizations of persons with disabilities) before accepting works.

Design for sensory, cognitive, and neurodiverse users is largely missing in both countries (signage, contrasts, quiet zones, clear wayfinding). Digital accessibility is an emerging gap in both contexts.

Both countries struggle to extend improvements to Roma settlements, informal areas, and remote villages. Targeted micro-investments (e.g., safe routes to school, accessible clinics, shaded stops) are not yet institutionalized.

Dedicated budget lines for accessibility/universal design and life-cycle maintenance are rare in both contexts, making progress fragile.

Accessibility Comparison: North Macedonia vs. Albania

Characteristic	North Macedonia	Albania
Policy & Standards	Stronger EU alignment	Relies on donor projects
Implementation & Coverage	More safety-aware upgrades	More CSO-driven pilots
Monitoring & Enforcement	Paper compliance common	Paper compliance common
Inclusion Beyond Mobility	Largely missing	Largely missing
Equity & Targeting	Improvements struggle to extend	Improvements struggle to extend
Finance & Maintenance	Dedicated budget lines are rare	Dedicated budget lines are rare

Section 7: Complaints Mechanisms in Local Governance

Albania

In Albania, municipalities generally report the existence of complaints or feedback systems, but their effectiveness and visibility remain limited. Mechanisms most often include:

- A formal complaints office within the municipal administration,
- Dedicated phone lines or email addresses,
- Physical "complaints boxes," and
- Use of official websites and sometimes social media.

While these channels technically exist, several gaps undermine their impact:

- Many citizens are unaware of how and where to lodge complaints.
- Few municipalities have clear procedures for acknowledging, processing, and responding to complaints in a timely and transparent manner.
- Data on complaints (e.g., number, type, resolution) is rarely made public, making it difficult for citizens to hold municipalities accountable.
- Mechanisms are not always adapted for vulnerable groups (e.g., minority languages, easy-to-read formats, disability accessibility).

As a result, citizens often perceive complaints systems as formalities rather than effective accountability tools. Vulnerable groups in particular remain hesitant to use them, fearing that their concerns will not be addressed.

North Macedonia

Municipalities in North Macedonia also report having complaints mechanisms, typically in the form of citizen service centers, online portals, or phone lines. Some municipalities go further by creating dedicated units for citizen engagement. However, as in Albania, the effectiveness of these systems is uneven:

- Procedures exist on paper, but municipalities often lack the staff and resources to process complaints systematically.
- Feedback is rarely published, leaving citizens in the dark about whether issues were addressed.
- Citizens, particularly from marginalized groups (Roma communities, women, persons with disabilities), show low confidence in the system, viewing it as slow and unresponsive.
- A few municipalities are experimenting with digital dashboards or regular citizen forums to enhance feedback loops, but these are exceptions, not the norm.

Overall, North Macedonia shows slightly more structured systems, sometimes linked to national-level efforts on good governance and EU alignment. Still, most municipalities lack robust monitoring and accountability mechanisms to make complaints handling truly effective.

Comparative Analysis

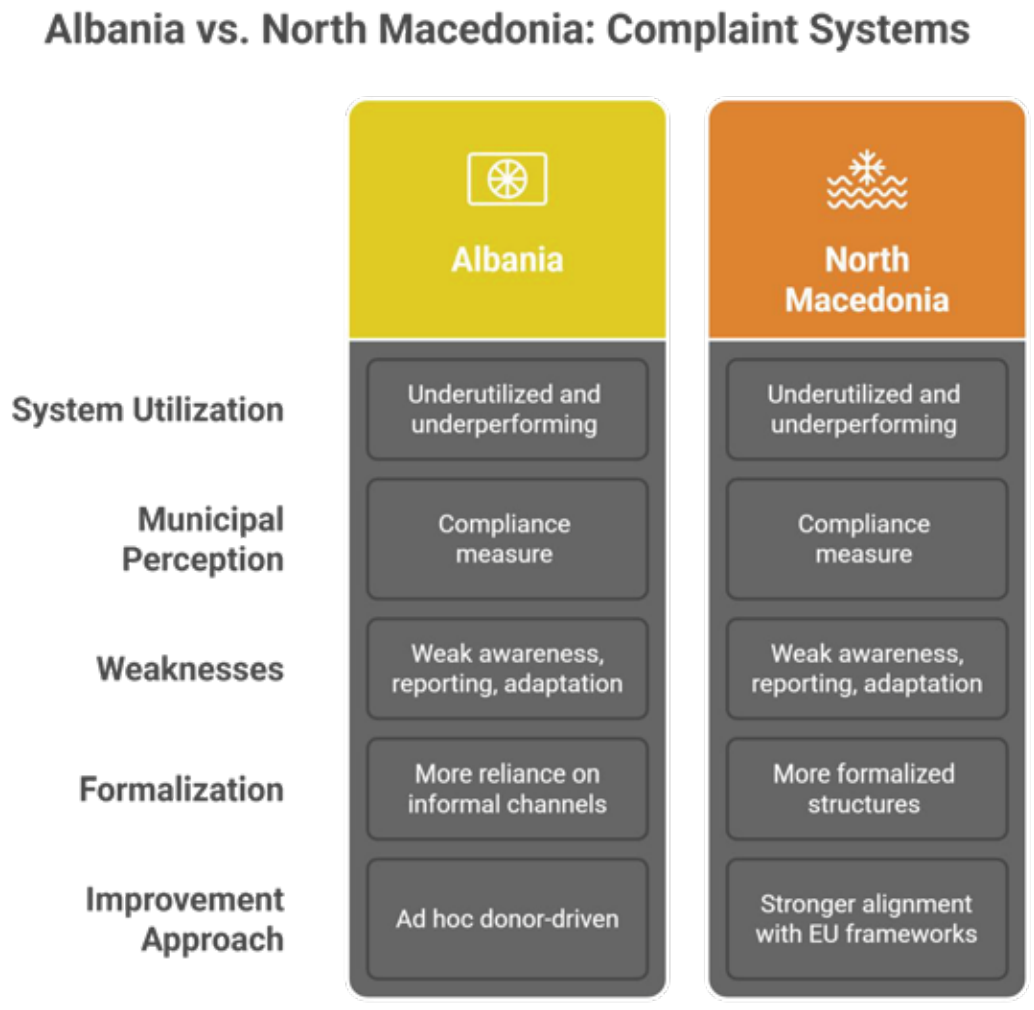
Commonalities:

- In both Albania and North Macedonia, complaints systems exist but are underutilized and underperforming.
- Municipalities tend to see them as compliance measures rather than proactive accountability tools.
- Both contexts suffer from weak awareness campaigns, lack of systematic reporting, and limited adaptation to vulnerable groups.

Differences:

- North Macedonia has slightly more formalized structures (e.g., citizen service centers, digital portals), reflecting stronger alignment with EU good governance frameworks.
- Albania, however, shows more reliance on informal channels (social media, personal contact) and ad hoc donor-driven improvements.

A functioning complaints system is critical under the Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA), as it ensures **participation, accountability, transparency, and empowerment**. Current practice in both countries falls short, as citizens — especially vulnerable groups — do not yet see these mechanisms as reliable or impactful.



Section 8: Anti-Discrimination Policies in Local Governance

Albania

In Albania, municipalities formally recognize anti-discrimination as an important component of governance. However, the practical implementation of anti-discrimination policies remains weak and uneven across local governments.

- Most municipalities do not have comprehensive or explicit anti-discrimination policies in place. Instead, they rely on national legal frameworks such as the Law on Protection from Discrimination (2010, amended in 2020). However, local-level adaptation is limited, and few municipalities have developed action plans or dedicated strategies that specifically address equality and non-discrimination.
- When policies exist, they typically address gender equality or accessibility for persons with disabilities, but less attention is given to other marginalized groups such as Roma, LGBTQ+ individuals, or elderly citizens.
- Municipal staff frequently lack training on anti-discrimination principles. This results in policies being formalistic rather than proactive. Monitoring and enforcement mechanisms are rare, and citizens often have no clear pathway to report discrimination at the municipal level.
- A few municipalities have established gender equality offices or appointed gender focal points, but their resources and influence remain minimal.

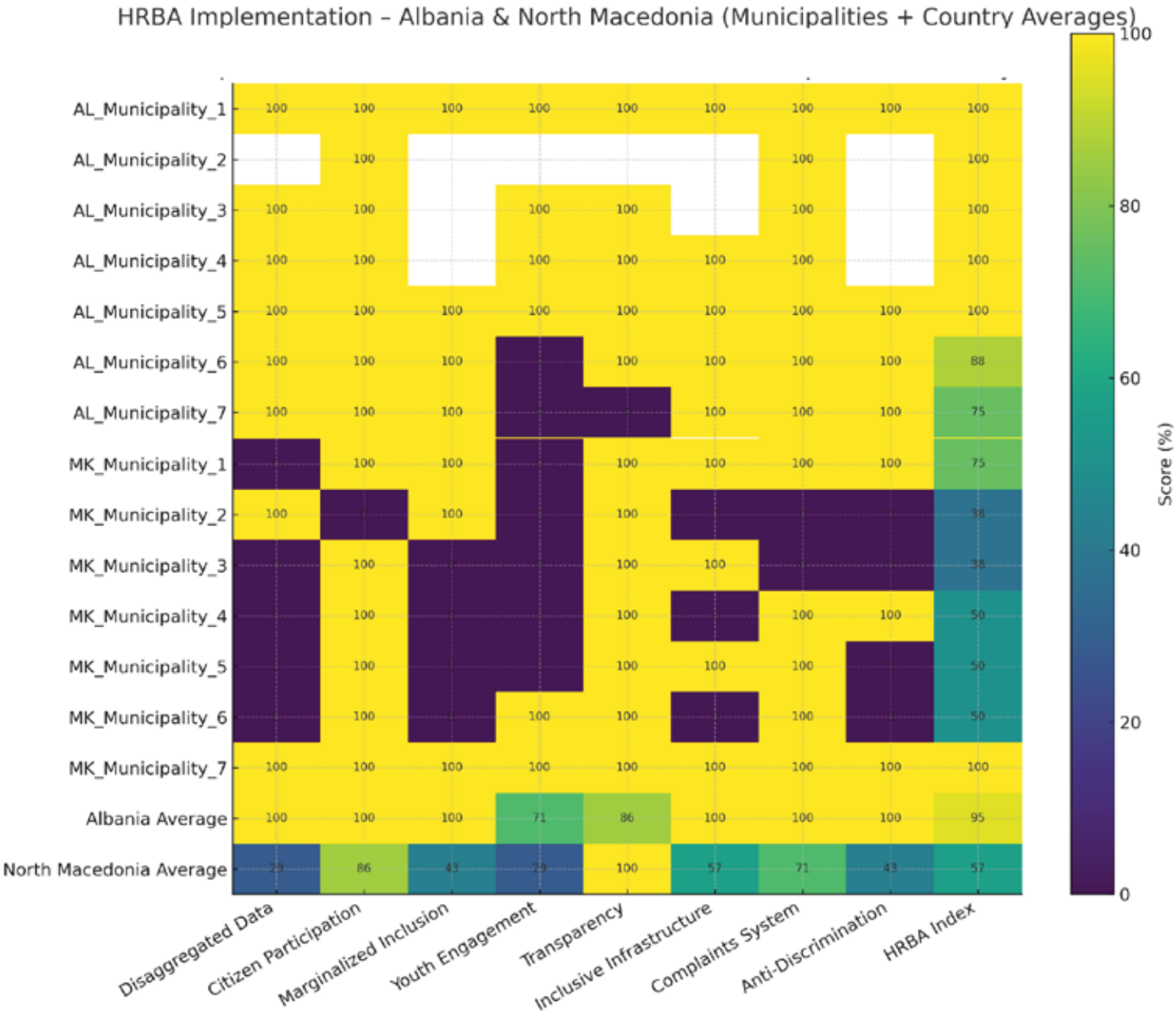
Overall, Albania's municipalities show low institutional ownership of anti-discrimination obligations, with progress largely dependent on donor-driven projects or civil society partnerships.

North Macedonia

In North Macedonia, municipalities report a slightly higher degree of formalization of anti-discrimination policies compared to Albania, partly due to alignment with EU integration requirements.

- The 2020 Law on Prevention and Protection Against Discrimination provides a strong legal framework. Some municipalities have attempted to integrate equality and inclusion principles into local plans or create working groups for vulnerable communities. Still, actual enforcement remains inconsistent.
- Even when municipalities claim to have anti-discrimination strategies, most do not monitor or evaluate them systematically. This leads to gaps between policy adoption and practice.
- There is limited, irregular training for municipal staff. Where trainings exist, they are often organized in partnership with civil society or international organizations, not institutionalized within municipal systems.
- Some municipalities have youth councils and consultative mechanisms that include diverse community representatives, signaling progress toward inclusive policymaking.

Overall, North Macedonian municipalities demonstrate greater awareness of anti-discrimination frameworks than Albanian ones, but face similar barriers of weak implementation and lack of monitoring.



Where the likely gaps are (reading between the lines):

- ***Accountability follow-through:*** Complaints systems exist, but low keyword presence for investigation, redress, public reporting suggests weak monitoring/feedback loops.
    - *Risk*: "Mechanisms on paper" vs. measurable corrective action.
- ***Empowerment***: Few references to structured legal empowerment, capacity-building of rights holders, or measurable citizen uptake.
    - *Need*: Institutionalized training, rights awareness, and assistance pathways (e.g., referrals, legal aid coverage).
- ***Quality of disaggregated data:*** "Yes" ≠ fit-for-purpose. The survey doesn't (yet) validate frequency, completeness, accessibility, use in decisions, or GDPR-compliant open formats.
    - *Need*: Minimum data standards + periodic publication.
- ***Targeted inclusion:*** Many participation mechanisms are general; fewer signs of adapted formats (sign language, easy-to-read, multilingual, child-friendly, timing/location accommodations).
    - *Need*: Universal design + targeted outreach.
- ***Policy & budget embedding***: HRBA training appears ad-hoc (written answers).
    - *Need*: HRBA focal points, annual training plans, and budget lines attached to equality/participation actions.
- ***Partnership depth:*** "Cooperation with CSOs" is universal by Yes/No—but open answers show few structured MoUs, co-monitoring frameworks, or joint indicators.
    - *Need*: Co-governance formats (e.g., CSO co-chairs in equality councils, participatory M&E).

Challenges to note on the ground are:

- *Accountability systems*: lack of public dashboards on complaints, low rate of published follow-ups, no independent oversight.
- *Empowerment pathways:* limited legal awareness/aid coverage; no standardized referral protocols with CSOs/NHRI.
- *Data for equality duty:* collection exists, but unclear on disaggregation depth, periodicity, and policy use.
- *Inclusive participation*: mechanisms exist, but accessibility & targeted inclusion remain inconsistent.
- *Institutionalization*: HRBA not embedded in by-laws, job descriptions, training curricula, and budgets.
- *Partnership robustness:* cooperation not formalized into co-monitoring, co-design, and joint reporting.

Only one municipality reports that it systematically collects disaggregated data on its population, such as by ethnicity, gender, age, or disability. This lack of disaggregated data significantly limits the capacity of local governments to design inclusive and equitable policies. Without clear statistics and disaggregated data of the population, especially of marginalized groups, municipalities are unable to effectively target resources or measure impact.

Most municipalities state that they have some mechanisms for enabling public participation in planning and decision-making. These include tools such as public debates, community forums, or budget consultations. However, when it comes to the inclusion of marginalized and vulnerable groups in these processes, such as women, youth, persons with disabilities, and ethnic minorities, the approaches described are often general or symbolic. The participation of these groups is rarely based on targeted outreach or supported through adapted formats to ensure accessibility and meaningful engagement.

Youth engagement is mentioned by several municipalities, with some reporting the existence of youth councils or funding for youth-led initiatives. Nonetheless, the examples provided suggest that structured and sustainable youth involvement remains limited. In many cases, there is no dedicated budget or policy framework to systematically include young people in governance processes.

The availability of public spaces for marginalized groups and inclusive infrastructure varies greatly. Some municipalities have centers for the elderly or youth, while others lack any dedicated facilities. Similarly, while municipalities acknowledge the importance of transparency, there is limited information on the accessibility of budget documents or whether public reports are available in formats accessible to persons with disabilities or in multiple languages. Most complaints mechanisms exist in principle, but there is little evidence of systematic follow-up, reporting, or public sharing of outcomes.

In terms of anti-discrimination measures and human rights policies, few municipalities have established formal strategies. Among those that claim to have such policies, few can demonstrate how they are monitored, reviewed, or aligned with national legislation or international standards. Moreover, training for public servants on human rights, gender equality, or accessibility is sporadic and not institutionalized.

One of the recurring themes in the responses is the lack of structured partnerships with civil society organizations, academia, or national human rights institutions. Very few municipalities report any form of cooperation with such actors, which is a missed opportunity given the expertise and support they could offer in building local human rights capacity.

Nonetheless, there is a notable willingness among several municipalities to engage in training and capacity-building initiatives related to the Human Rights-Based Approach.

Overall, the analysis highlights a need for more structured and systemic efforts to integrate human rights principles in local governance. There are possibilities for improvement in data collection, inclusive policymaking, transparency, monitoring of anti-discrimination efforts and institutional collaboration. While certain municipalities demonstrate isolated good practices, broader capacity-building and strategic planning are necessary to ensure meaningful implementation of human rights obligations at the local level.

5. Opportunities and Challenges in Advancing Human Rights-Based Local Governance

The findings from the HRBA Municipal Needs Assessment highlight a shared regional reality: while most municipalities recognize the principles of human rights and inclusion, few have the systems, data, or institutional capacity to translate these principles into consistent practice. However, the responses also show a significant degree of openness, willingness to learn, and interest in regional collaboration, forming a solid foundation for scaling up human rights integration at the local level.

5.1 Key Challenges

1. **Limited Institutional Awareness and Capacity**

Most municipalities, especially in smaller and rural areas, lack a structured understanding of the Human Rights-Based Approach. Training and knowledge on participation, non-discrimination, and accountability are not systematically embedded in municipal staff development. This has led to fragmented or symbolic efforts rather than strategic policy application.

2. **Weak Data Collection and Evidence-Based Planning**

Only one municipality across both countries reported collecting disaggregated population data. Without information on gender, age, ethnicity, or disability, it is nearly impossible to assess equality gaps or design inclusive services. This challenge reflects broader systemic weaknesses in monitoring and evaluation frameworks.

3. **Insufficient Citizen Participation Mechanisms**

While many municipalities formally claim to have public consultation processes, these mechanisms are often generic and lack proactive inclusion of marginalized groups such as women, youth, Roma, and persons with disabilities. Participation remains procedural rather than empowering, with few opportunities for co-decision-making.

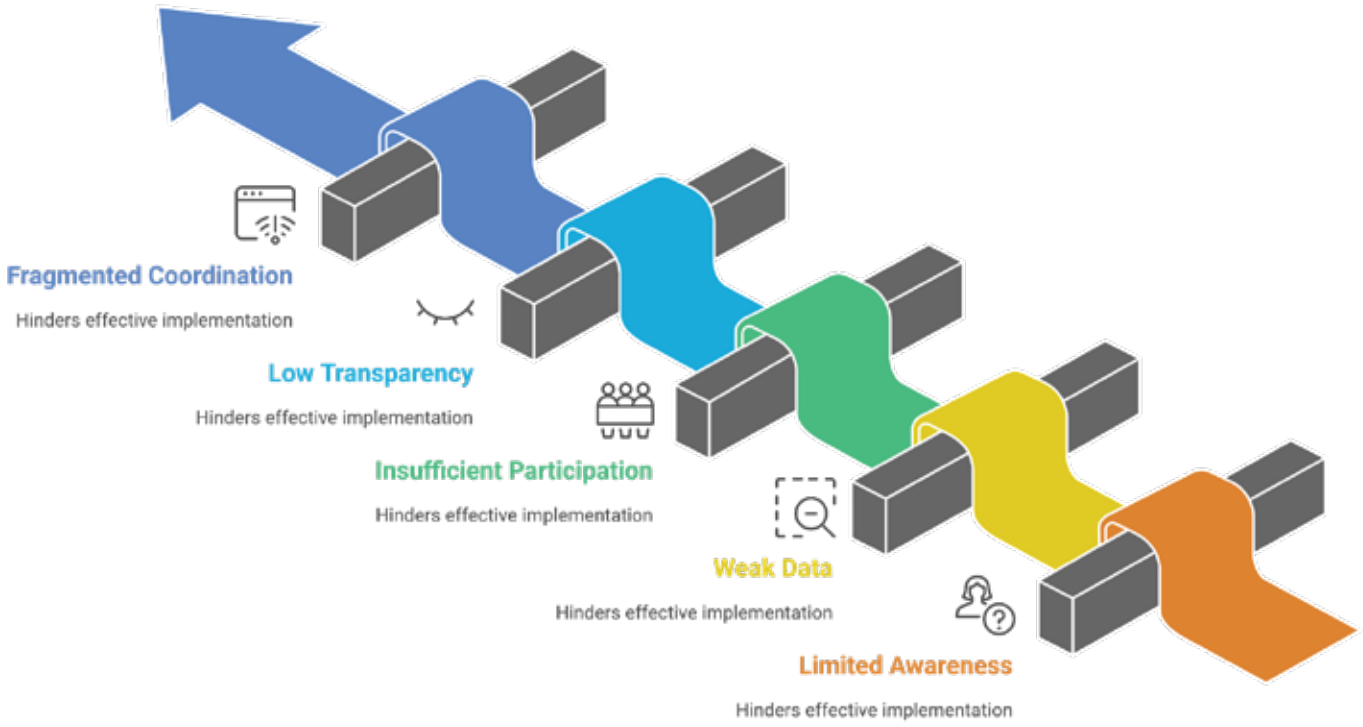
4. **Low Transparency and Accountability**

Few municipalities publish budgets or decisions in formats accessible to the public, and fewer still make them available in minority languages or disability-friendly formats. Complaints systems, when they exist, are underutilized or lack follow-up mechanisms, reducing citizen trust and weakening accountability loops.

5. **Fragmented Coordination and Political Influence**

Municipal governance is heavily affected by political polarization. Local administrations frequently await central government or party approval before engaging in independent partnerships or reforms. This limits innovation and responsiveness, especially in areas related to human rights and social inclusion.

Addressing Key Challenges



5.2 Emerging Opportunities

1. **Municipal Willingness to Engage**

Despite limitations, over 60% of responding municipalities expressed a clear interest in future HRBA training and collaboration. This presents a strong foundation for institutional capacity-building and sustained partnership with civil society.

2. **Legal and Policy Momentum**

Both Albania and North Macedonia have adopted frameworks conducive to local-level human rights implementation, such as national equality strategies, anti-discrimination laws, and OGP (Open Government Partnership) commitments. These create a supportive policy environment for HRBA localization.

3. **Civil Society and Academic Collaboration**

Institutions like ASDO, EPI, and IHR have built trust among municipal actors and are well-positioned to act as intermediaries between local governments and international networks. Universities and CSOs can also play a vital role in data analysis, monitoring, and participatory research.

4. **Regional and International Linkages**

Engagement with European networks—such as the Human Rights Cities movement, Raoul Wallenberg Institute (RWI), and OGP—offers access to tested methodologies, peer learning, and visibility for Balkan municipalities committed to rights-based governance.

5. **Digital and Data Innovation**

The use of GIS mapping and online participatory tools can transform how municipalities collect data, visualize challenges, and engage citizens. Digitizing HRBA monitoring systems also improves transparency and accountability in the long term.

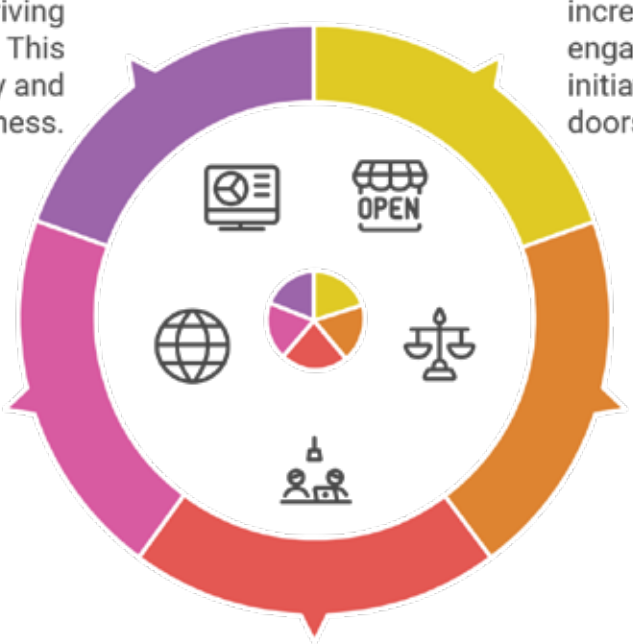
Emerging Opportunities

Digital Innovation

Digital and data innovation are driving new possibilities. This enhances efficiency and effectiveness.

Municipal Engagement

Municipalities are increasingly willing to engage in new initiatives. This opens doors for collaboration.



Regional Linkages

Stronger regional and international linkages are being formed. This expands reach and impact.

Legal Momentum

There is growing legal and policy momentum supporting new opportunities. This creates a favorable environment.

Civil Collaboration

Civil society and academic institutions are collaborating more. This fosters innovation and knowledge sharing.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

The findings of the HRBA survey across Albanian and North Macedonian municipalities highlight both persistent structural barriers and promising entry points for embedding human rights in local governance. While the majority of municipalities still operate within traditional administrative frameworks—characterized by limited data systems, fragmented participation, and weak accountability—there is a growing recognition that inclusion, transparency, and citizen engagement are essential for trust-building and effective service delivery.

The analysis demonstrates that external partnerships, especially with NGOs, international organizations, and donor-funded initiatives, have been key enablers of HRBA-related practices. Municipalities that reported tangible progress—such as engaging youth councils, conducting needs assessments, or establishing gender equality commissions—did so primarily with civil society or donor support. This underscores the need to institutionalize collaboration and move from project-dependent efforts to permanent, budgeted municipal functions.

There are emerging good practices in youth and gender engagement, participatory planning, and cooperation with schools or community groups. Yet these remain isolated and dependent on individual leadership or external facilitation. Municipalities expressed readiness to strengthen participation mechanisms but require practical support: standardized templates, clear mandates, and facilitation tools.

The situation analysis also confirms that infrastructure and services are rarely designed with universal access in mind, leading to systemic exclusion of persons with disabilities, Roma communities, and rural citizens. Bridging this gap demands a shift from reactive compliance to proactive, rights-based design.

Overall, municipalities show willingness but lack technical capacity, dedicated funding, and coherent methodologies. Embedding HRBA principles—participation, accountability, non-discrimination, transparency, and empowerment—into local systems is therefore essential for ensuring that no one is left behind.

6.1 Recommendations

A. **STRENGTHENING DATA AND EVIDENCE SYSTEMS**	• Establish standardized HRBA-aligned data collection methodologies at the municipal level, disaggregated by gender, age, ethnicity, and disability. • Integrate HRBA indicators into local monitoring frameworks and ensure open data publication to promote transparency. • Develop inter-institutional coordination between municipalities, national statistical offices, and civil society for consistent data use.
B. **INSTITUTIONALIZING YOUTH AND CITIZEN PARTICIPATION**	• Legally institutionalize youth councils with annual work plans, dedicated budget lines, and clear roles within municipal structures. • Introduce micro-grant schemes and participatory budgeting to give youth and citizens tangible decision-making power. • Expand outreach beyond urban centers—rural, Roma, women, and disability-inclusive sessions—to ensure equitable participation. • Build municipal staff capacities on facilitation, safeguarding, and conflict-sensitive dialogue to create safe spaces for engagement.
C. **ADVANCING INCLUSIVE INFRASTRUCTURE AND SERVICE DELIVERY**	• Embed universal design standards in all public infrastructure projects, including accessible transport, digital platforms, and service facilities. • Institutionalize co-design processes with Disabled Persons' Organizations (DPOs), women's groups, and youth representatives. • Allocate dedicated budget lines for accessibility improvements and establish public dashboards to track implementation. • Incorporate climate resilience, gender, and child-responsive design principles into urban planning frameworks.
D. **STRENGTHENING COLLABORATION AND TRUST**	• Formalize long-term cooperation frameworks between municipalities, NGOs, and academic institutions through Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs). • Engage municipalities in regional peer learning networks—such as the Human Rights Cities initiative and Open Government Partnership (OGP)—to foster cross-border exchange and accountability. • Promote mutual trust through transparent communication, citizen feedback loops ("you said / we did" mechanisms), and regular reporting on commitments.
E. **BUILDING INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY AND OWNERSHIP**	• Provide continuous HRBA training for municipal staff, linking it to performance evaluation and professional development. • Encourage central governments to integrate HRBA criteria in grant schemes, national programs, and local budget assessments. • Develop a Toolkit on HRBA in Local Governance (to be piloted in the next phase) with templates, checklists, and case studies to support consistent application.

Framework for Sustainable Development



Data and Evidence Systems

Enhancing data collection and analysis for informed decision-making.

Youth and Citizen Participation

Encouraging active involvement of youth and citizens in governance.

Inclusive Infrastructure

Developing infrastructure that serves all members of society equally.

Collaboration and Trust

Fostering strong relationships between stakeholders for collective action.

Institutional Capacity

Building robust institutions capable of driving sustainable development.

6.2 Way Forward

The survey underscores that while municipalities face structural barriers—such as lack of data, limited training, and political constraints—there is a strong opportunity for transformation through collaboration, capacity building, and trust-building.

Sustainable progress in human rights-based local governance will depend on shifting from ad hoc initiatives to systemic integration. Municipalities must become both duty bearers and partners, collaborating with citizens, NGOs, and regional networks to co-create solutions. The next phase of the Balkan Human Rights Cities Initiative offers an opportunity to anchor HRBA principles in municipal practice, build institutional trust, and align local governance with European human rights and OGP standards—ensuring that inclusivity and dignity guide every policy and service delivered.

Scaling the Balkan Human Rights Cities Initiative to new municipalities will not only enhance technical capacity but also cultivate a new culture of participatory, inclusive, and accountable governance, aligned with European integration and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions).

Incorporating the equality duty into HRBA-based local governance strengthens accountability, participation, and responsiveness—core principles of democratic institutions. It ensures that all citizens are treated with dignity and that no one is left behind in accessing public services or enjoying fundamental rights. Thus, the effective implementation of this duty is a practical necessity for inclusive, equitable, and rights-respecting development.