



Case Study

Navigating civil society governance in rural areas: Governing Agropuka

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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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ABOUT CASE STUDY

Good governance of civil society organisations is essential for public trust and the sustainability of the civil society sector. Research reports on the state of civil society by the EU TACSO 3 project, and based on surveys of more than 1,000 CSOs, have identified CSO Governance in the Western Balkans and Türkiye as a challenge in recent years.

As a consequence, the EU TACSO 3 Project commissioned three case studies on the CSO Governing Bodies good practices from the Western Balkans and Türkiye region. The aim of the case studies is to provide an up-to-date understanding of current practices in governance in the Western Balkans and Türkiye region. These case studies provide the core evidence of good practice and challenges facing governance, to be used as material for training and development opportunities for members of governing bodies, and senior staff of CSOs in the region.

The case studies present a variety of practices in terms of governing bodies, including key roles and responsibilities as well as the reasons behind the chosen governance arrangements. The case studies shed light on perceived advantages and challenges in terms of governance from the people within in their daily operations.

These up-to-date examples provide inspiration and a basis for reflection on the issues and dilemmas faced by CSOs in real life. They include practical lessons learned to initiate and inspire organisations to strengthen good governance practices. The case studies may be used as reading for interested parties and as capacity-building training material.

The author and the EU TACSO 3 project team thank the AgroPuka team for agreeing to be part of this project and for their unconditional support during the research.



A LOCAL CHAMPION: OVERVIEW OF AGROPUKA



AGROPUKA is an association of agriculture and livestock producers, organised and professionally managed by local people from the Puka district (Northern Albania).

Its activities and projects intend to meet the needs of its membership and farmers in general.

The organisation works in three priority areas: agricultural production, marketing, cooperation models, protection and development of the environment, and promotion of local democracy and social inclusion.

AgroPuka established a small social business that acts as a separate entity from the organisation and is registered as a small business. Training and advisory services are the strongest point, providing technical support and adapted content for the needs of the constituencies. The training for women in home-processing of fruit, for example, is highly appreciated and in demand.

AGROPUKA works closely with the local government in Puka district and the agriculture departments in the neighbouring districts.

AGROPUKA collaborates with the office of agriculture through information on its activities, joint activities, mobilizing the specialists of the section for purposes of AGROPUKA etc.

It has well-established institutional cooperation with the Department of Agriculture and Food of Shkodra Prefecture, local government and local NGOs. Agropuka is a member of regional and national networks.



GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE & DECISION-MAKING

Agropuka's governance structure consists of several bodies. The General meeting of the Members, i.e. the Assembly, is the highest decision-making body of Agropuka. In line with the Albanian law on NPOs, the Assembly approves statute amendments, approves strategic and activity plans, oversees the work and elects other bodies of the organisation. Since its establishment, the membership base has grown significantly.

Many villagers from the Puka region see a benefit in being part of the organisation, and due to AgroPuka's open membership policy (allowing anyone interested to join), this has led to an increase in the membership base. While the minimum number of members must be at least 10, the organisation currently has more than 300 members. Women are in the majority, while young people make up a significant portion of the organisation's members. The majority of them are farmers, and a few are agronomists, veterinarians, zoo technicians, agricultural economists, etc. All members have the right to vote, elect and be elected in the governing board.

Membership comes with a duty to contribute to the organisation's work, and to pay the annual entrance fee.

The large number of assembly members, however, results in varied demands. Meeting the frequent requests for support from farmers and citizens at large has been a challenge that AgroPuka is dealing with every day.

Moreover, in the mountainous Puka region, gathering 50% + 1 for a simple majority vote to pass decisions has been a real challenge for the organisation.

Additionally, migration trends, particularly of young people, have affected the stability of the membership base. Interviews suggest that in the past, AgroPuka has taken an informal practice of proxy voting where one representative represents eight members in the assembly.

The Presidency of the organisation, as AgroPuka calls its Governing Board, is responsible for implementing assembly decisions, overseeing the executive staff, including financial management and activity, and ensuring accountability. Elected by the assembly members, the board is tasked to direct the activities of the Association between General Meetings of the organisation. The board has the power to approve for implementation all the projects of the association.

The Board, as per statute, has the obligation to meet at least twice a year, but in practice, this may happen more frequently. While there are no fixed rules in the Statute or internal policies of the organisation, in practice, the Board may be changed because of the resignation of any Board member or changes in the organisation's policies for representation, natural, and migration factors. All board members sign a conflict of interest statement upon their election.

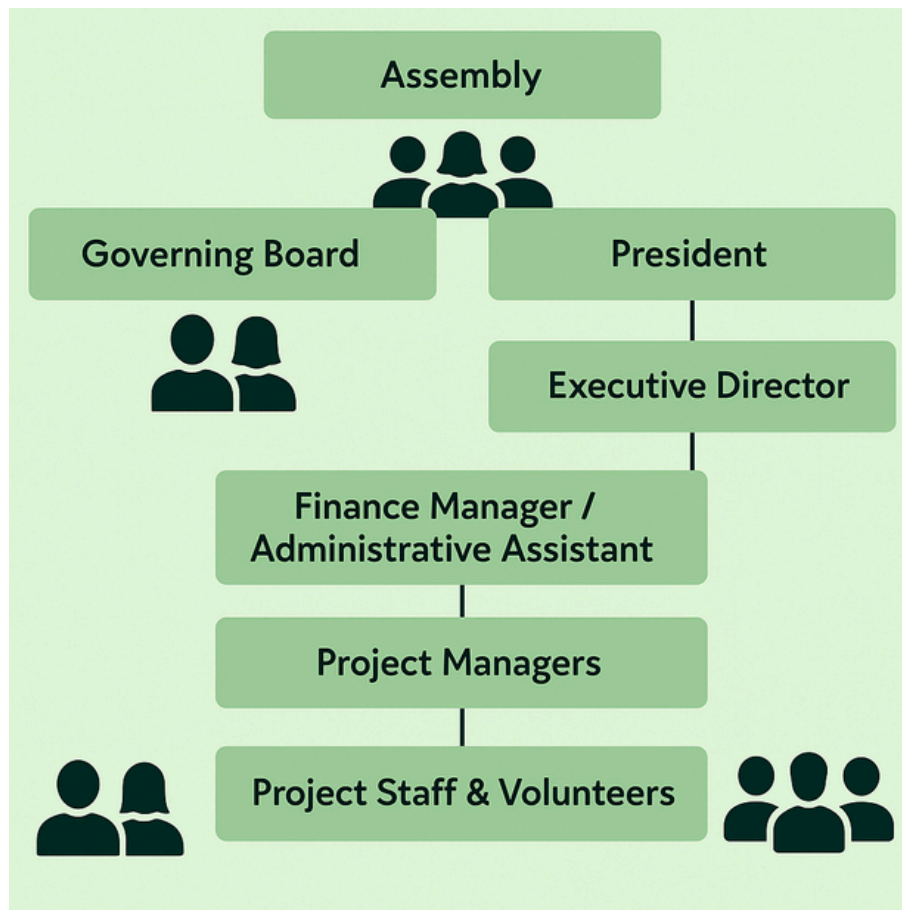
A key feature of Agropuka's Governing Board is its' geographical and stakeholder representation requirement. The Board members should represent different agricultural sectors and come from different territorial units to account for fair and equal representation of regions, activities and institutions directly related to the agricultural and livestock potentials of the Puka district.

Interviewees suggest that this pre-requirement has been instrumental for the organization's cooperation with relevant stakeholders.

Board members are selected from different rural regions to ensure geographical and sector representation in decision-making.

The Executive Director is a member of the Governing Board, while the Directorate of Agriculture and the Chamber of Commerce and Tourism may be invited and represented *as guest both without the right to vote*.

Organigram of Agropuka



The Agropuka statute allows, in special and urgent cases, decisions to be made by circulating material and gathering the opinions of the Board members without the need for them to convene in a meeting. The Governing Board has never met without ensuring the quorum of five members, although the statute allows it with only four. However, the interviewed board members noted that maintaining active participation due to the region's geography and lack of digital infrastructure leads to costly logistical difficulties for them.

.As in the case of the Assembly, the Governing Board meeting is considered valid with at least 3 members present, the President and 2 others, while decisions with simple majority with no fewer than 4 votes casted. Although the Governing Board members' are considered to hold different opinions regarding preferences for allocation of funds and projects' focus, in practice, discussion and debates among members help them to reconcile differences. Decisions are generally made with full consensus.

Agropuka also has a President of the organisation, who has the competencies to implement the decisions of governing bodies such as the Assembly and the Presidency. The President convenes and chairs the meetings of the Assembly and the Governing Board and proposes the Executive Director. The Executive Director leads the operational staff (office) of Agropuka. According to the general rules and procedure, the Executive Director has the right to select the best candidate for the staff position. The rules and procedures define the employment and compensation policies as well as the process under which the Executive Director conducts evaluations and appraisals for the employees of Agropuka.

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Agropuka engages multiple stakeholders, including farmers and women's groups. Stakeholder engagement is primarily facilitated through regular meetings, consultations, and project-based collaborations. Despite these efforts, stakeholder engagement remains informal in some areas. Agropuka initially organises an annual meeting with rural development organisations in Puka for information sharing and coordination, but also to foster cooperation and partnerships for project implementation.

A notable example is the formation of a Climate Coalition in 2023, which includes 80 partners from local municipalities and farmer associations. This coalition meets regularly to discuss sustainability policies and has successfully lobbied for climate-related action plans, signed by the mayors of Puka and Fushe-Arrez.



The current number of board members came after statutory change in 2017. Following advice from a long term Swedish donor, Agropuka initiated structural adjustments of the board to allow for interest representation in the organization's work. First, the number of seats on the board was increased by two additional members. The current seven seats serve as liaisons with rural communities, making decision-making more effective and responsive to local needs. In practice, this resulted in a larger number of women holding seats.

Moreover, the current board members hold various positions in municipalities or schools, which feeds in local institutions' input and support for Agropuka's work.

While there is general consensus among board members that the relatively small board allows more efficient decision making, some members consider that an even bigger board may be instrumental to allow greater interest representation of its constituencies.

STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT & OVERSIGHT

The core team learned from their donors that a strategy and plan are essential, soon after they established the organisation. Initially, Agropuka had a mission, vision, and ran simple one-year operational plans with a small set of activities to sustain the organisation.

Over time, the planning process evolved from one-year to two-year plans to the current five-year strategic plans. While the vision has remained largely unchanged, the mission has been adjusted in each strategic planning cycle to align with evolving priorities.

Currently, the organisation follows four main strategic orientations, which are outlined in its strategic plan.

Strategic planning is conducted as a participatory process with the engagement of key stakeholders and external support. Consultants prepare guidelines and facilitate the development of the strategy. They are procured and paid for their work as Agropuka does not have enough capacity to conduct such procedures for strategic documents.

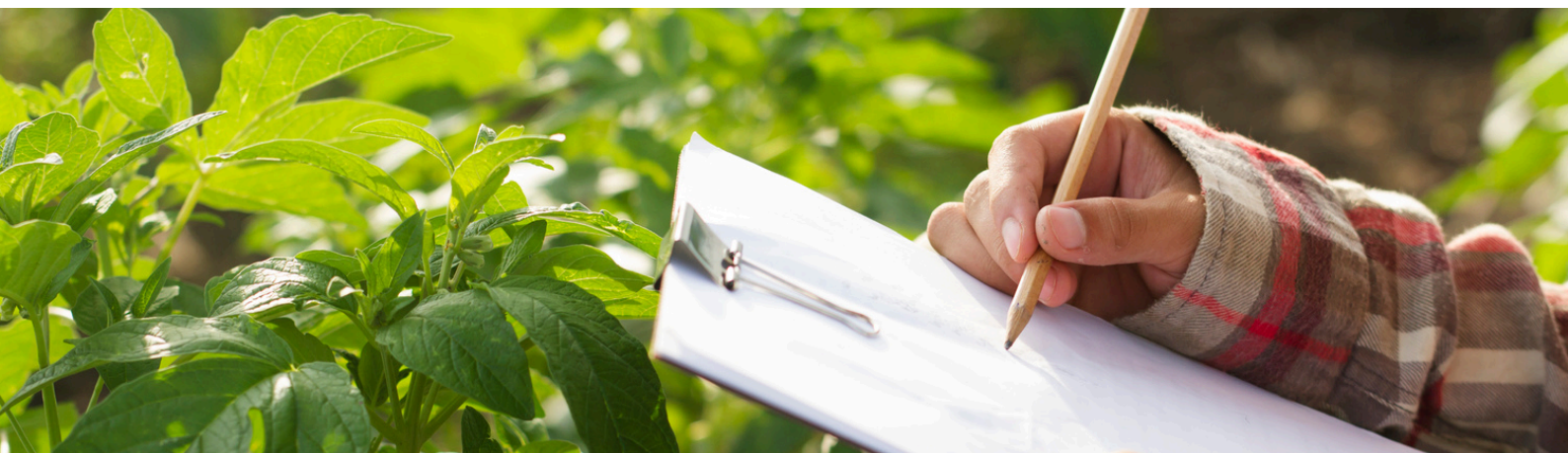
Hired consultants are not members or staff of the organisation members. The initial phase included a document analysis allowing Agropuka to align their scope of work related to the strategic priorities of local authorities and fill in gaps to meet the needs of the community. The planning is conducted during and between two workshops. At the first one, initial input is collected, and at the second one, an early draft of the strategy is discussed with the assembly and the board members of Agropuka.

The operational office i.e. Agropuka staff is responsible for the development of the draft strategic plan, led by the Executive Director. Board members participate in the workshop providing their input to strategic development. In a later phase, the draft strategic plans are reviewed and analysed by both governing bodies before approved is given by the Assembly.

Based on the strategic plan, the operational Office prepares annual Plans for the work of the organisation which again are approved by the Board and General Assembly.

The implementation of strategic plans is monitored by the staff and the Governing Board, who provide annual reports to the Assembly. The expansion of the Board from five to seven members has been instrumental for the oversight function.

The wide membership base is also considered a check-and-balance mechanism, which in practice would require members to convene and reflect on the achievements at an assembly meeting. However, strategic evaluation remains largely informal, with limited documented assessments of governance effectiveness. Annual reports of Agropuka, for example, are not publicly available.



FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT & OVERSIGHT



Financial governance is overseen by the Governing Board, which supervises the work of the executive staff, including the financial activities. The Executive Director, supported by financial manager manages daily operations. The financial procedures are integral part of the general rules and procedure of AgroPuka.

The operational office prepares the annual activity and financial reports that are submitted for approval to the Board, which then forward them to the Assembly for their approval. The financial reports are not made public, but interviewees' general impression is that financial reports could be more accessible to the broader membership to enhance transparency.

A unique feature of AgroPuka is the financial Control Body, as foreseen in the statute. The Control Body should be composed of three members, of which at least two are economists, and is authorised to verify the activities of the executive staff.

The Control Body must submit an annual financial report to the President, including relevant findings and recommendations.

This body was introduced with the statutory changes of 2017, on suggestion of Swiss donors in view to improve oversight. Interviews suggest that there are situations where the this body has not functioned always according to the Statute as the quorum of three members out of them two must be economists has not been met. On the other hand, all organisational projects and annual financial reports have been audited by external auditors (licensed companies).

The auditors reports are reported to the Board and the General Assembly.



GENDER & DIVERSITY IN GOVERNANCE

Agropuka has integrated gender considerations into its governance policies. Gender equity is streamlined in key organisational documents such as the AP Strategic Plan 2021-2025 and the Policies and Procedures Manual. In the Manual, specific references are made relating to gender equity under different sections, such as the sexual harassment in the workplace procedure.

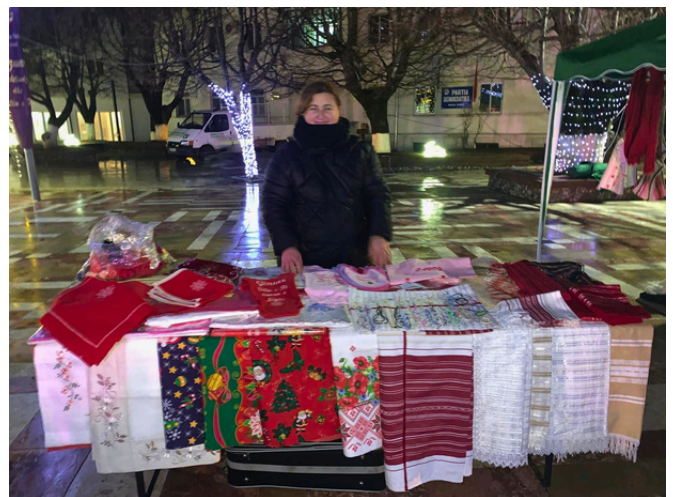
The organisation has a Gender Equality Policy and Strategy. An independent audit of this policy was conducted, and, building on the key findings, the policy was revised in 2024. Agropuka also has human rights based approach Policy and Procedures.

The words of the board members suggest that at the beginning of Agropuka's work, a focus on mainstreaming gender in the organisation's work was strongly influenced by donors, especially Swiss donors.

Later, however, it became a regular organisational practice. Commitment to gender issues is also reinforced by women constituents in the organisation. The majority of its Assembly and four out of seven board members are women. AgroPuka also has a gender issues manager in the operational staff.

A key success of AgroPuka is the establishment of women's consultative groups, which feed into governance decisions. Following the gender audit, the new gender policy seeks to formalise these cooperation groups.

The shortcomings in the monitoring and evaluation of Agropuka reflect in this area as well. The Gender Policy Logical framework has gender-specific indicators, but the organization has no records on the achievements on a regular basis. The gender audit found that neither the annual report nor regular project reports reflect specifically on the achievement of the gender indicators.



While gender inclusion is strong, diversity in other areas—such as youth representation and ethnic inclusion—was not extensively covered in the interviews. Further research could explore these aspects.

ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY IN GOVERNANCE

Environmental sustainability is one of the key commitments of Agropuka, as seen in its statute and the multi-annual strategy of the organization.

Agropuka integrates sustainable practices, such as promoting eco-friendly farming, community awareness, training and setting metrics in rural areas where we have worked with the local government, waste recycling and reducing paper usage.

Agropuka also mobilises stakeholders on the protection of the environment with its operation.

The organisation leads the Climate coalition, which pushed for the adoption of a climate change action plan and strategy for the Puka and Fushe-arrez municipalities.

The focus groups with which Agropuka works have had and have a contractual obligation to protect the environment, reduce waste, avoid environmental pollution and manage resources.



According to interviewed Board member, the Presidency is involved in improving environmental sustainability in the organization's work by taking steps not only by mobilizing stakeholders, but also providing training and resources. They also make decisions and monitor the integration of the policy into the organization's culture and operations.

LESSONS LEARNED

Agropuka's experience offers valuable lessons on the realities of CSO governance in rural areas.

The organisation carefully incorporates grassroots elements into its governance. Its practices in gender mainstreaming and territorial representation are commendable and can serve as a model for similar organisations. At the same time, the case reveals how statutory bodies may become ineffective without continuous review and adaptation, and how informal practices, though well-intentioned, can risk legitimacy if not embedded in clear procedures.

The case emphasises the importance of accountability, transparency, and inclusivity as ongoing processes that require institutional commitment and practical implementation.

Inclusive and representative Governing Board

Agropuka's statutes require that board members come from various agricultural sectors and geographical areas of the Puka region. This approach is instrumental for its legitimacy, improved coordination with local institutions, and strengthened responsiveness to local needs. The number of board members (seven) enables more efficient decision-making, while maintaining a representative character.

Strong gender Integration

The organization is proud of its commitment to gender equality, with a majority of women in both the Assembly and the Governing Board. The adoption of a Gender Equality Policy, gender audits, and the establishment of women's consultative groups provide a model for institutionalising gender perspectives in governance.

Participatory strategic planning

Agropuka's strategic planning process actively involves stakeholders, including rural members and external support, ensuring relevance and community ownership. The engagement of board members and consultations through workshops reflect a participatory and bottom-up approach, tailor-made for the organization by experts.

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

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Assembly and the quorum challenges

Despite being the highest decision-making body, having a majority of the Assembly members at the meeting has been a challenge. Gathering the minimum required members in a geographically dispersed rural region troubled with outward migration, given the size of the assembly, is a key obstacle. The informal use of proxy voting could be explored as an innovative solution, given that the use of digital participatory tools may be limited.

Inactive financial oversight mechanism (Control Body)

The Financial Control Body, though foreseen in the statute, may not be functional if the assembly does not elect its members. Its functioning can be useful for financial accountability of the organisation, avoiding a gap in internal control mechanisms.

Transparency and public access to information

Key organisation documents made available for this research, as well as annual activity reports and financial reports, are not publicly available, although Strategic Plans, Manual of Policies and Procedures, Gender Policy and procedures and other sectoral strategies are on the Agropuka website.

Attaching these documents on the organisation's website would improve transparency, and potentially increase broader membership and public trust in the organization's governance.

Informal evaluation practices

Monitoring is conducted on a project basis but without structured or documented strategic evaluations. While the gender audit stands as a good example, gender-related impact reporting is not conducted despite the existence of indicators. Beyond formalising monitoring and evaluation frameworks, their implementation could strengthen learning and accountability.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Agropuka is an example of an organisation with a multilevel governing body. Does this governance structure reflect the minimum or goes beyond the legal requirement of Albanian law? To what extent do relevant law(s) in your country detail the governance structure requirements?
- Agropuka had to make decisions to balance inclusiveness and functionality in their governance structures, the board in particular. What are effective models for ensuring broad representation (e.g., territorial, sectoral, gender), particularly for large or dispersed membership base of the organisation?
- CSOs such as Agropuka may face challenges of member engagement and participation. What innovative or context-appropriate methods can be utilized to facilitate participation in governance and decision making?
- This case study reveals that donors have been a main driver for changes in governance structure in several areas, leading to statutory changes to improve accountability mechanisms. To what extent is governance transformation donor driven? What other factors have influenced changes in the governing bodies or their responsibilities?
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- What are good practices for institutionalising gender equality and environmental sustainability in CSO governance?



