

# Building Local Governments to Stabilize Kosovo

On February 17, 2008, Kosovo unilaterally declared its independence from Serbia. Talks mediated by the United Nations (UN) to settle the status of the disputed territory had proven fruitless. While the world focused on the negotiations, however, Kosovar and international experts on the ground were laying a foundation for effective, transparent, and responsive local governance in Kosovo, which is crucial to stability throughout the region.

Building on its work across Eastern Europe over the past 15 years, RTI International has assisted Kosovo in strengthening legislation for decentralized government, building local leaders' management capacity, and meeting citizens' service needs. In 2004, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) awarded RTI the three-year Local Government Initiative (LGI) program while Kosovo was still under the administration of the UN Mission in Kosovo. LGI worked primarily in six host municipalities, scaling up successful activities across Kosovo.

By 2007, RTI had helped the Ministry of Local Government Administration (MLGA) draft provisional legislation for local government operations. The project then trained elected municipal officials in their roles and responsibilities. RTI also created municipal Citizen Service Centers as one-stop shops for all citizen applications and requests regarding land use and zoning, public utilities, and other services.

Recognizing the success of LGI, USAID awarded RTI a new three-year contract to implement the Effective Municipalities Initiative (EMI) program starting in 2007, a few months before Kosovo declared independence from Serbia.

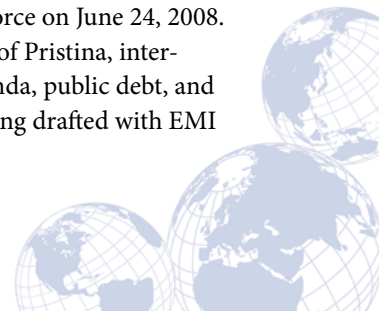
## Laying the Legal Foundation

EMI began by assisting the MLGA to prepare for implementing the decentralization provisions of the UN Special Envoy's plan for settling Kosovo's final status. Building the legislative framework for the functions of local government was a priority, so EMI helped the MLGA



write the chapter of the constitution on local government and five foundational laws on local self-government, administrative boundaries of municipalities, local government finance, public financial management and accountability, and local elections.

The laws define the rules for structuring municipal governments, establish municipal powers, and lay out the principles that govern local finance and central and local government relationships. In addition to transferring authority and finance to the local level, Kosovo decided to use decentralization as a tool for ethnic reconciliation. The new laws make concessions to the Serb minority in Kosovo to encourage their participation in the decentralized framework by redrawing municipal boundaries to constitute new Serb-majority communities and giving them some enhanced powers. The legislation was adopted by Kosovo's National Assembly shortly after the declaration of independence and entered into force on June 24, 2008. Five more laws—on the capital city of Pristina, inter-municipal cooperation, local referenda, public debt, and publicly owned enterprises—are being drafted with EMI assistance.



## Turning Policy into Practice

To ensure municipal compliance with the new laws, EMI helped the MLGA prepare handbooks and conduct workshops in summer 2008 for mayors and assembly members from all 33 municipalities, most of whom were newly elected and unfamiliar with their office. These workshops trained nearly 500 municipal officials in their roles and responsibilities under the new legal framework. EMI then devised a Municipal Legal Compliance Tracking Mechanism for the MLGA to monitor the municipalities' implementation of the laws and has begun developing outcome-based indicators that municipalities and the MLGA can agree to for measuring and improving performance of key local government functions.

However, forming competent municipal leaders and a professional civil service to support them requires ongoing, up-to-date training. So, EMI reviewed the core skills needed by municipal officials with more than 140 senior municipal staff. The local officials identified financial management, budgeting, human resource management, municipal assembly procedures, and legal expertise as the capacities needing the most strengthening. The project then developed a comprehensive capacity-building strategy for the MLGA to coordinate the disparate activities of various Kosovar and international agencies and limit "training fatigue" of local government personnel.

A vital partner in these efforts is the Association of Kosovar Municipalities (AKM). EMI assists the AKM by supporting its Collegia, peer groups of municipal officials that share technical knowledge and best practices. EMI staff members advise the various Collegia on finance and budgeting, municipal administration, spatial planning, and legal matters; help develop handbooks and training materials; and facilitate training and exchanges. Working with the Collegia, EMI will focus on equipping municipal leaders to control illegal construction, improve participatory capital investment planning, and optimize own-source revenue collection.

EMI manages a \$3-million Incentive Fund to assist and encourage municipalities' progress toward achievement of decentralization goals. These awards are available for improvements in service delivery, development of innovative management techniques, increasing own-source revenue collections, and compliance with the new decentralization framework. Part of these funds will also go to help establish the new Serb-majority municipalities.



EMI training program coordinator Vjollca Behluli (left) presents the core local government competencies to municipal officials of Kamenicë/Kamenica and Ferizaj/Uroševac municipalities. [Photo: Nenad Talic]

## Small Steps toward Stability

The government of Kosovo will need to respond rapidly to the service needs of its communities to solidify a fledgling democracy. In all activities, EMI is building the capabilities of the MLGA in legal drafting, research and analysis, training planning and assessment, and performance monitoring. EMI will also seek to draw the AKM closer to the MLGA and National Assembly to facilitate information exchange on issues of local governance and ensure that Kosovar municipalities have their voice heard at the central level and are equipped with the tools to serve their citizens.



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### For more information, please contact

Randolf Repola, Chief of Party  
rrepola@rti.org

David Dunbar, RTI Project Manager  
ddunbar@rti.org

<http://www.emi-kosovo-rti.org>

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