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**AUTHOR:** *BRADEN KAY, DAVID PIJAWKA, MICHAEL UNDERHILL*  
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# A Bike Ride for Local Pomegranate Juice / Opportunities for Sustainable Regional Development in Shkodra, Albania

*Braden Kay, David Pijawka, and Michael Underhill  
Arizona State University / USA*

## Abstract

Regions around the world face challenges related to economic development, sustainability, and social stability. In the context of Albania, Shkodra provides an important case study for the region. An interdisciplinary group of researchers from Arizona State University worked with Polis University and the Municipality of Shkodra to ensure sustainable development in the newly created Shkodra regional structure. The team analyzed the current state of the region, and the vision and strategy developed by the Albanian Ministry of Urban Development and Polis University. A series of interviews with stakeholders provided insights into key trends and challenges for future governance and development. This article outlines the findings, identifies three themes that regional municipalities and partner universities can explore, and provides recommendations for moving forward. Importantly, knowledge gained regarding university-government-civil society collaborations for economic and governance transitions, and the potential to incorporate emerging technologies and social innovations into these efforts, provides a model for a strong collaborative regional approach to 21st Century sustainable development.

## Introduction

Cities and surrounding regions are leading the way in sustainable development. They are finding solutions that not only support economic development and quality of life, but protect environmental health as well (Nevens, et al., 2003). There are no one-size-fits-all solutions,

however, as political, social, and economic contexts affect how a region transitions (Kemp and Lorbach, 2003; Frantzeskaki, 2007). Creating the momentum to shift away from environmentally, socially, and economically divisive practices requires collaboration between government, business, civic society, planners, and researchers. It requires developing projects, programs, policies, plans, and funding mechanisms that support sustainable development and economies (Miller, et al., 2014; Lorbach and Rothmans, 2009). While many Northern European cities have made major strides in this space, some are just now beginning the transition. This paper explores current efforts underway in Shkodra, Albania.

## Background

Albania's Ministry of Urban Development (MZHU) developed a national program for long-term regional development planning for every region in the country. Each region is anchored by a major city with city and regional decision makers, Albanian planning experts, and firms with international expertise providing strong leadership. The regional planning effort in Shkodra paired the Municipality of Shkodra with Polis University and an interdisciplinary team, including the authors, from Arizona State University (ASU) in Tempe, Arizona, USA (Figure 1).

## Methodology

Between January 2016 and early 2017, the team performed a detailed technical analysis including geo-spatial analysis, public engagement, regulatory planning,



Fig1 / Mayor of Shkodra with ASU and Polis researchers.  
source / Braden Kay

and strategy development. Polis University was the technical lead and worked closely with municipality staff to ensure appropriate data was collected and analyzed.

Research included a literature review of national and international reports and articles, previous planning documents, and previous work of Polis University researchers; observations from several large-scale public engagements in March and June 2016; and informal interviews with stakeholders, Polis University researchers, and MZHU members (Figure 2). The ASU team also completed ten stakeholder group interviews with local transportation advocates, business owners, farmers, residents, elected officials, and members of civic society. Interviewees were asked for input on how Shkodra can move forward with regional sustainable development that supports national interests and economic development, while enhancing the social and environmental vitality of the region. The universities and municipality worked closely together on community engagement to ensure the perspectives of residents, businesses, and civic society were incorporated. Participants were recruited by the municipality, researchers, and local non-profit organizations. Data were compiled and analyzed to determine key trends and challenges for future governance and development.

## Results

The following themes emerging from this project highlight points of entry for regional development:

- Regional identity and strategic regionalism with a focus on critical assets
- Sustainable economies catalyzed by transformational investments
- Emerging technologies
- Anticipatory governance

### **Regional identity and strategic regionalism**

**Issue 1** / While a vague notion of Shkodra as a region exists, there is a need to create a cohesive regional identity. The Municipality of Shkodra should play a leading role in developing this identity.

#### **Recommendations:**

- Municipality development must model sustainability principles, green infrastructure, and community engagement for the broader region.
- Development must position Shkodra to embrace its role as the seat of regional governance, history, and culture; the regional transportation hub; and a haven for education and entrepreneurship.

**Issue 2** / Connectivity between major urban and surrounding areas is fundamental to sustainable development (Newman and Kenworthy, 1999). MZHU showed significant foresight in delineating regional zones centered around an urban hub. Interviews and observations highlighted the need for more strategic regionalism that preserves Shkodra's character and encourages connectivity.

#### **Recommendations:**

- Connectivity must include strong economic linkages between regional activity (agriculture, eco-tourism, rural development) and the city.
- Development should focus on greater



Fig2 / Shkodra farmer discussing the need for regional transportation infrastructure to support agriculture / source: Braden Kay

density, complete streets, enhanced walkability, open space/parks, and regional public transportation development and transit investments that connect urban and rural areas, decrease automobile usage, and lower carbon emissions.

- New growth in rural areas may be best developed as dense nodes or villages organized along current and potential future transportation corridors.

**Issue 3** / There is a need to solidify and protect Shkodra’s historic character while promoting a livable city that attracts youth and business. The regional planning process presents an opportunity for strategic visioning and action plans that draw people in, engage them, and celebrate the region’s history.

**Recommendations:**

- Planners and developers must resist sprawl and disorganized new development
- Form-based rather than use-based zoning encourages compatible growth
- Greater densities should not negatively impact historical and cultural assets. Concentrated low-rise developments that create walkable, welcoming streets while promoting density rather than high-rise housing options are suggested (Figure 3).

Rowhouses (vertical detached single-family houses) and townhomes (vertical single-family houses attached by common walls) use space efficiently while providing community members easy access to homes, businesses, education, and amenities. Both can support ground-level retail, making them ideal for urban centers.

**Issue 4** / Park connections add value to communities, especially when they are integrated with key places (Tzoulas, 2007). Park planning was viewed as important by the universities, and the city’s concepts and plans for its parks were publicly supported.

**Recommendations:**

- New development needs to be integrated with open public spaces and recreational green spaces.
- Existing development should be evaluated for opportunities to integrate green spaces, i.e., green roofs, community gardens, small parks, etc.

**Issue 5** / Residents and small business owners reported that there is capacity for enterprises to celebrate and monetize the region’s environmental and geographical assets. In fact, an emerging economy based on environmental assets is evident. Simply having the right economic development plans will not suffice, however.

**Recommendations:**

- Predictable governance, planning, place-making, business incubation, and job training will nurture the desired economy and provide a strong economic foundation.
- To support existing and future efforts, we recommend that the most recent development plan be revisited to determine what has and has not been implemented, impacts, and gaps.
- Regular monitoring, evaluation, and community feedback is needed to ensure investments are being allocated as intended and allow for adjustments as needed.



Fig3 / Rowhouses (left) and townhomes (right) support density and economic development without detracting from a city's history and inherent livability / source: Urban Land Institute

**Issue 6** / Regional development needs to go beyond sound planning, and empower conservation and stewardship of environmental assets. We found that there were numerous national government assessments completed that identified locations in need of cleaning up and potential approaches.

**Recommendations:**

- These assessments should be revisited through the regional development planning lens. This is especially important as the region faces serious challenges in wastewater, lake quality, river flooding coastal development, and reforestation.

**Issue 7** / Some stakeholders expressed concerns that future planning and development efforts would not fully acknowledge or fund the necessary investments.

**Recommendations:**

- Integrating environmental and ecological planning into regional development planning will promote investment, encourage sustainable practices, and protect natural resources.
- Innovative green infrastructure approaches, such as constructed wetlands, should be explored to provide investment opportunities as well as build community sustainability and resilience.

This comprehensive approach offers a unique opportunity to fully embrace a new regional narrative for environmental assets. But to push Shkodra to its full potential, sustainable economic development is needed as well.

**Sustainable economies**

Sustainability planning must connect physical elements to the social and economic elements that draw people to a place. Shkodra brings together history, universities and education, a new food industry, etc., to form the basis for creative economic development. Our experience drinking local pomegranate juice harvested from the mountain region in the city center is an example of the ways business owners are leveraging the region's rich environmental assets and entrepreneurial spirit.

**Issue** / Shkodra's local business leaders and entrepreneurs have many ideas of what a more sustainable development pattern in the region could look like. Those interviewed report spending years establishing businesses, from juice shops and bakeries to internet start-ups, that contribute to the creative hub model. But, they were quick to point out that this was not fully embraced in city and regional decision making. Furthermore, several potential investment ideas that we heard, such as a large port, offer less sustainable economic trajectories. These types of investments will not fully take advantage of Shkodra's assets and can, in fact, be detrimental.

**Recommendations:**

- Shkodra's overreliance on industries discarded by Western Europe (i.e., call centers) needs to be addressed. This can be done by acknowledging and embracing the city's potential as a creative hub.
- Concrete job creation strategies and capacity building support for entrepreneurs



Fig4 / Researchers drinking pomegranate juice at a local business during a group interview.  
source / Braden Kay

and businesses are needed.

- Transformational investments must support sustainable businesses and industry.

**Municipality collaboration with local business**

**Issue /** Business leaders noted that Shkodra businesses need support services and small business incubation in partnership with government investment in critical infrastructure such as business associations, transportation, and internet capacity. These investments would allow local businesses to thrive, nurture a place-based culture, and connect them to the region and the rest of the world. They expressed the belief that this would, in turn, make Shkodra a more desirable region for further investment.

**Recommendations:**

- Decision makers and regional planners should use community and participatory planning processes to elicit viable, sustainable development options and build consensus.

These processes engage the community in decision making, enabling high-quality, democratic governance and strengthening civil capacity; building public confidence, trust, and broader support for solutions by reflecting a wider range of public concerns and values; empowering ownership; satisfying public demands and generating a greater understanding of issues, concerns, priorities, and solutions; and ensuring that decisions and policies incorporate knowledge and expertise that is often overlooked to obtain the most

appropriate solutions (Slocum, 2003; Wates, 2014).

**Sustainable enterprise**

**Issue /** There is significant opportunity for Shkodra to define and invest in sustainable enterprise. The ASU team recognized the region’s potential to become a leader in eco-centric enterprises based upon its abundance of natural assets, the connection with European tourism, and entrepreneurial spirit.

**Recommendations:**

- The sage industry’s success should be replicated for local pomegranate, honey, and raki production (Gecaj, 2017).
- The region can become a culinary destination by further developing its food-based economy.
- Developing markets in sustainable apparel and crafts made from local products, such as olive wood, are viable options.
- Cutting-edge sustainable enterprise trends, such as renewable energy and the circular economy, should be explored as both sustainable industries and a mechanism for making Shkodra products more desirable. For example, processing locally produced goods using renewable energy adds value to the product, reduces the region’s dependence on fossil fuels, and lowers the product’s and region’s carbon footprint<sup>1</sup>.
- Regional government should play a major role in securing support from external sources (NGOs, philanthropies, etc.) to help launch sustainable enterprises.

Efforts around the world to develop clean



*Fig5 / Multimodal bridge in Portland, Oregon is an example of a transformational investment that supports a low-carbon and resilient city / source: City of Portland*

and renewable energies are opening myriad business opportunities and encouraging the exploration and creation of new energy sources (solar, wind, and biomass) as tools for economic development (Koçak and Şarkgüneş, 2017). We were impressed by the solar enterprises encountered in Albania and recognize the potential for similar enterprises in the Shkodra region.

Circular economies move beyond simple recycling to reintroducing materials into the supply chain for future goods. Much like sustainable development, Shkodra has the capacity to replace its linear economy and establish itself as a center for innovation in this area (Kobza & Schuster, 2016). This would provide environment benefits and create new jobs.

### **Transformational investments**

**Issue /** Selecting the right transformational investments are key to local, sustainable economies. For instance, Portland, Oregon's Tilikum Crossing (Figure 4) embodies a transformational investment in a low carbon future by supporting pedestrians, bicycles, buses, streetcars, and the city's light rail system but not automobiles (Sadik-Khan, 2017). Continued investment in fossil fuel economies and individual transportation will hinder progress towards a truly sustainable region.

#### **Recommendations:**

- Investments need to drive development towards the future Shkodra wants

by focusing on local transformational businesses, industry, and programs.

- Investments should support a more resident-friendly, livable region, and build on its reputation for being a pedestrian- and bike-friendly city.
- The university-government-civil society collaboration can play a key role in identifying and developing these investments and garnering national and international funding support.

### **Emerging Technologies**

**Issue /** Emerging technologies and innovation create challenges for sustainable development. For example, autonomous cars, nanotechnologies, and artificial intelligence will have increasingly disruptive effects in coming years. An excellent example is the use of unmanned aerial vehicles (drones), which raises public safety, liability, and privacy issues (Guston, 2013). Peer-to-peer services, such as Uber, Lyft, and Airbnb, also raise public safety and regulation challenges.

#### **Recommendations:**

- Developing an awareness of, and systems for responding to, these challenges will encourage benefits and mitigate problems.
- Plans and regional governance must be able to adapt to change while preserving key sustainability principles.
- One interviewee recommended building in opportunities to solicit input from citizens about emerging technologies and how they might be integrated into

*1 / The amount of greenhouse gases and specifically carbon dioxide emitted by something (such as a person's activities or a product's manufacture and transport) during a given period.*

community and regional practices.

### **Anticipatory Governance**

The shift towards regional governance opens the way for regional stability. We witnessed skepticism in this national effort, but hope the people of Shkodra and Albania can see the forest for the trees and continue down the pathway of strategic planning and regional governance.

**Issue /** Youth and young professional interviewees embrace the governance transition and strategic planning taking place in the region. To ensure continued support, their ideas need to be consistently cultivated.

#### **Recommendations:**

- The region needs to resist the urge to copy Western European and North American governance systems and planning regimes.
- Decision makers, planners, and citizens must embrace anticipatory and open governance systems and the flexibility it offers.
- The university-government-civil society model currently being used promotes these governance structures and collaboration. Thus, they should continue to play a primary role in the region.
- It is strongly recommended that citizens be engaged in discussions on the region's future.

Crowdsourcing has proven effective in supporting innovation while building citizen trust and buy-in. Innovation forums and online engagement are inexpensive tools for ensuring that citizens play an active role in governing. Using tools these and similar tools will help develop local expertise and support.

### **Conclusions**

Shkodra has the building blocks for sustainable regional development. The people that we interviewed represented a regional pride and creativity that will drive a sustainable economy if given the right support, strong governance, and well-placed investments. For instance, a focus on the region's geographic diversity and its natural resources, agriculture, and culinary traditions can support the growing tourism industry. Sustainable transportation infrastructure development, planning regulations, and growing enterprises such as renewable energy and the circular economy can support low-carbon lifestyles, nurture innovation and creativity, and ensure living wages and quality of life. The current regional governance and development

models will go a long way to making the region truly sustainable if they embrace the region's innovative and creative spirit and remain flexible.

The university-government-civic society collaboration we participated in during this project shows promise. Continued work among these partners is expected to produce the information necessary to determine critical changes needed. It will also build support for programs and transformational investments necessary to move the region forward. These partnerships will not succeed alone, however. Anticipatory governance and community engagement are needed to build capacity.

Sustainable regional development demands rethinking policies and decisions, strategic planning, and community-based visioning that brings residents into discussions on community needs and goals. Making decisions based on future scenarios requires identifying areas of vulnerability as well as strengths, then working towards making the community less vulnerable and more resilient, a key concept for sustainability. Constant and consistent monitoring and evaluation are needed to ensure needs and goals are met.

Development will need to occur in tandem with smart investments to support a thriving, sustainable region. Shkodra's resources have the potential to transform the region, but it may be more successful with external support. It is important to recognize that this brings challenges as there is an inherent threat that long-standing interests can steer resources in the wrong direction. We suggest that regional decision makers consider the future that Shkodra wants and prioritize internal transformational investments towards that future.

If the desired future includes a low-carbon, environmentally responsible, resilient future then investments must focus on creativity, innovation, and an urban development model that meets regional needs. Dedication to good governance and planning will prove best in the long-term. While Albania may not have a long history of this type of governance, MZHU has provided Shkodra and Albania the opportunity to craft a new trajectory that honors its history and culture, and embraces a sustainable and exciting future.

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