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ALBANIA'S FUTURE

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Children's Alliance Calls on Government to Make Children Top Priority

At its third National Assembly, the Albanian Children's Alliance addressed an open letter to the President and Prime Minister, calling on the government to make children its top priority. As a result, the Government will launch a comprehensive revision of the National Strategy on Children on 1 June - Children's Day. The Children's Alliance, a network of 150 NGOs working for realization of

children's rights throughout the country, also called for creation of a national register of crimes against children.

The letter concluded with a reminder to the Albanian Government that European integration cannot take place if children's rights are not taken into account.

Deputy Prime Minister Namik Dokle addressed the Assembly, stating that, "Poverty is the main issue in Albania, and the changing of the system found Albanian children unprepared." He added that the

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Members of the Steering Committee participate in the National Assembly of the Children's Alliance, 27 February 2004

WELCOME TO UNICEF'S NEW LOOK!

UNICEF has recently gone through a worldwide 'branding' exercise to ensure that we present the same face from Albania to Zimbabwe. We hope you like it!

It was a cold winter in 1993 when Drita and her husband decided to leave their village in Kukes, northern Albania, and seek another place to live, hoping to find a better life for their children.

“When I first arrived on the outskirts of Tirana I had no house and nothing to live with,” she remembers. “I walked 2 km twice a day every day to collect water to make bricks and help my husband to build our house here.”

Working by candlelight

Hope turned to tragedy when her husband was shot to death on his way to work. Drita, age 33, was left alone with full responsibility for her three children: Zamira, now 15; Edlira, 13; and Albert, 9. She found a temporary job sewing shoes for a factory, earning 3,000 lek per month (about Euro 25) — enough only to buy bread, sugar and beans. She worked at home at night by candlelight as her days were full of caring for her children.

But in October 2002 Drita’s life began to improve. That was when the first Garden of Mothers and Children opened in her neighbourhood, sponsored by UNICEF and implemented by Christian Children’s Fund. The project provides a place where children aged 1 to 6 come

A ‘Garden’ for Everyone’s Children



Drita teaching the kids at the “Garden of Mothers and Children” in Bathore

Photo by Zhani Terpini 2004

together to play, and learn and get ready for school. Children under three come with their mothers.

“At the beginning it was hard for me to be part of the mothers’ group, as our tradition says that after her husband’s death a woman is not allowed to go out of the house alone”. “My mother-in-law wanted to have complete control of my life. I had to fight this mentality to gain my freedom.”

Training sessions provided by

UNICEF and Christian Children’s Fund helped Drita to learn new things — such as good parenting skills and how to stimulate pre-school children. Consistent with the training she received, Drita has a detailed work plan for different subjects, including painting, reading and singing. So far 59 Gardens of Mothers and Children have opened around Tirana and in the north of Albania. They are serving 1,800 children and 3,600 families. In an effort to involve men in child-rearing, which is

typically seen as a woman’s responsibility in this patriarchal country, 90 father volunteers have also been recruited. Free counselling and health checks are offered during pregnancy within the centres or in home visits. Funding for each garden is around \$1,800 per year.

“Now I’m feeling useful”

When other mothers have problems, Drita provides support. “I’d lost faith in myself, but thanks to the staff of CCF and UNICEF, now I’m feeling useful,” she says. “I’m helping those who suffer like me, and this makes me feel good and a complete person.”

Asked what she would like to see next, Drita mentions how important would be government recognition of the Gardens of Mothers and Children. She adds that better social services in the community are crucial, such as improving the quality of health centres.

Drita feels especially confident working with children who are in the greatest difficulty. “I had a case of an isolated girl of age 5, who didn’t know even how to write her name and was a very difficult person to deal with,” she remembers. “It took me two or three months of hard work with her before she learned enough to write, read and interact with other kids. What a joy for me, and for her mother too,” she says, smiling at the memory.

Children's Alliance Calls on Government to Make Children Top Priority



Youth organizations participating in the Children's Alliance Meeting

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government is conscious that more work needs to be done to realize all children's rights. Also attending the gathering, held on 27 February, were Minister of Public Order Igli Toska and Minister of Labour and Social Affairs Engjell Bejtja.

Participants at the meeting approved the Alliance's National Plan of Action for the next two years. It calls for strengthening collaboration with the government to fulfil children's needs and using the Convention on the Rights of the Child as a concrete instrument for protection of children's rights.

Children's Alliance is supported by UNICEF, Plan International, Save the Children Albania and Every Child.

UNICEF Participates with Albania in Regional Poverty Reduction Meeting

Assessing progress in reducing poverty was the purpose of a recent meeting in Thessaloniki attended by the governments of Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, FRY Macedonia and Serbia & Montenegro, as well as donors supporting the poverty reduction process, including UNICEF.

Among the actions reported by the governments was a system of indicators to measure poverty, which all the countries have implemented. Good practices noted by Albania include the creation of poverty-monitoring units

in each ministry. Albania has also served as a resource in the region's poverty reduction efforts. At the request of the provincial government of Montenegro, Albanian officials gave training workshops in Podgorica for Montenegrin officials on development of the National Strategy for Socio-Economic Development, or NSSD.

UNICEF has provided extensive support to development of the NSSD and the process of implementing it (see box).

UNICEF'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE NSSD

- **Information:** Assistance in developing the communication campaign to raise awareness of the poverty reduction process among policy makers, the media and the general public, aiming to stimulate civil society participation:
- **Publication of studies:** In particular, the *Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (2001)* and *Social and Economic Assessment of Districts*. Both surveys provided valuable data on health, education and social protection.
- **Loan conditionalities:** UNICEF assisted in developing performance-based conditionalities for receipt of World Bank loans. These include establishment of a national plan of action to fight iodine deficiency disorders and a sustainable vaccine financing mechanism (based on a Memorandum of Understanding between UNICEF and the Ministry of Health) to achieve vaccine independence. As a result, Albania purchased 40 per cent of its vaccines in 2003.
- **Social business model:** UNICEF supported creation of the first social business in Albania. The Youth Albania Professional Services model is now endorsed in the NSSD as a strategy for reducing social exclusion.

UNICEF, GOVERNMENT OF ALBANIA ENDORSE PROGRAMME APPROACH



The UNICEF/Government of Albania five-year country programme of cooperation was endorsed at its midpoint when the partners met in March. The mid-term review, a half-day meeting to review progress and strategies, resulted in minor fine-tunings of structure but no recommendations for major changes in the programme. It was attended by around 80 government and civil society partners.

“The mid-term review is an opportunity to take stock of collaboration between UNICEF and its partners, particularly the government,” said UNICEF Representative Carrie Auer. “I’m pleased that the review process has determined this innovative country programme is relevant, efficient and showing measurable results for Albania.”

The situation of children and women has changed significantly since 2000, when the country programme began, for both the better and the worse. Children are healthier and child-rearing practices have improved, but there is evidence of decline in access and quality of services in certain geographic areas and population groups. Programme achievements noted in the review include:

- Child death rates have fallen and child-rearing practices have improved.
- Child trafficking is being fought through legislation, a national plan of action and enhanced collaboration with neighbouring countries.
- New legislation is in place to support families and protect juvenile workers and young people in conflict with the law.
- Youth Parliament, Youth Albania Professional Services (YAPS) and the young people’s television show Troç have all brought youth to the forefront of making positive change in Albania.

Challenges remaining fall into four categories: *institutional*, largely issues of government decentralization; *technical*, primarily the ongoing infrastructure problems including power shortages, out-of-date communication systems and a weak transportation network; *cultural/behavioural*, such as poor health-seeking behaviour, patriarchal social roles and taboos around discussion of sexual behaviours; and *financial*, which particularly affects health and education.



Children have become healthier but access to services is more difficult for some.

