

Albania

Update on the context and situation of children

Albania Country Context

Albania is an upper middle-income country and has been a candidate for European Union (EU) membership since 2014. This ambition has been a shared political priority and a vital development driver of comprehensive reforms spanning across the various sectors. Progress has been swift and recognised by the European Commission. However, despite the recommendation of the European Commission and the European Parliament, the EU Summit of October 2019 did not approve opening of accession negotiations with Albania.

In 2019, the positive trend in the country's economic expansion continued with GDP growth in real terms at 3.7 percent, attributed mainly to an increase in exports, revival of construction, and tourism development. However, the year saw no major changes in the level of public investments for children. Social sectors—education (3.1% of GDP), health (2.9% of GDP) and social assistance (representing only 0.9% of GDP). The allocations are not comparable to international standards for an upper middle-income country and fail to provide the adequate human, technical and financial resources needed for improved services for children and for access to those services.

In addition, the ongoing decentralisation and territorial-administrative governance reform continued in 2019. For the first time, government allocated an additional USD 1.5 million from the national social protection budget to fourteen municipalities for services for the most vulnerable population, including children. In addition, the EU has explicitly prioritised to invest in social care services reform at the municipal level as part of the Instrument of Pre-Accession Assistance Framework to Albania. Meanwhile, the country has been affected only marginally by the movements of refugees and migrants crossing Western Balkans countries on their way farther west into Europe.

Situation Analysis of Children in Albania, 2019 Update

In Albania, generating data, evidence and knowledge on the situation of children continues to be constrained due to a lack of reliable, accountable and systematic monitoring of child rights. The challenges largely relate to gaps in the legal and policy framework, low allocation of financial resources on the monitoring of children's rights, and generally weak capacities in data collection, disaggregation and analysis. Furthermore, vulnerable groups, such as Roma, Egyptian and children with disabilities, continue to remain largely unaccounted for.

Nevertheless, the year 2019 marked several achievements with regard to the monitoring of child rights in the country. UNICEF supported the Government of Albania in preparing and submitting the combined fifth and sixth Periodic Report on implementing the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and its Optional Protocols to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. The Periodic Report includes the voices of at least 1,000 children, revealing perceptions on the realisation of their rights. A special hearing called by the Speaker of Parliament prior to the official submission of the Report concluded with an agreed statement of the priorities for children's rights in Albania for each main stakeholder to implement.

UNICEF led the compilation of the Mid-term Implementation Report on the National Action Plan for the Rights of the Child 2016–2020 (Agenda for Children). The report affirmed that only 28 percent of the actions planned for the previous two years had been fully realised, corresponding to achievement of 51 percent of the indicators and only 9.4 percent of the planned financial resources.

Independent mapping of child-targeted indicators for Strategic Development Goal (SDG) implementation revealed that 30 percent of the SDG indicators have not been measured, 24 percent of those that have been measured have not been reported and made available in any published report, and only 32 percent have been integrated into the national strategic documents. The National Institute of Statistics (INSTAT) has compiled an extended list of 47 child-relevant indicators, providing for the first time figures and data on 17 of them, including, among others, those reporting on international standards on child poverty, children in detention, child labour, participation in pre-primary education, incidence of diseases, violence and child trafficking.

In 2019, INSTAT reported for the first time on child monetary poverty, using the EU indicator Children at risk of Poverty, with the publication of data on monetary poverty of children for 2017 and 2018. Some 29.6 percent of Albanian children (30.6% girls and 28.7% boys) were reported to be at-risk of poverty in Albania in those years, with girls being affected more.

Albanian children's learning outcomes are gradually improving, as demonstrated in the latest Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results. Although the pupils still scored less than the OECD averages for reading, mathematics,

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and science in 2018 (OECD, 2019) the country has made a large positive jump in terms of PISA results for mathematics, with an average of 437 points compared to 413 points previously. However, the results for reading have stagnated at 415 points, and the average performance in science dropped 10 points to 417. Girls perform better than boys in all three areas.

Two studies conducted by UNICEF—*One Click Away: Research into Children’s Experience of Internet Use in Albania*, and *WebFactor: Assessment of the Legal Framework and Institutional Readiness to address Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Online in Albania*—generated invaluable data on children’s online experiences and shaped the response around this rapidly growing concern in the country. The findings reveal that one in five children have seen violent content, 25 percent have interacted with someone they had not met previously, and 16 percent have met someone in person whom they first met on the Internet. In addition, one in ten children report at least one unwanted sexual experience over the Internet.

In 2019, government publicly committed to progressively reorganising the childcare system and ending children’s institutionalisation. There were 703 children registered in residential care, including 525 placed in public and non-public residential institutions, 62 with disabilities in development centres, 41 in the centre for victims of trafficking and 75 in the centres for victims of domestic violence. In addition, 684 children with disabilities were attending segregated, often residential, special schools.

Whereas Albania once had the highest proportion in the region of children in detention, there has been a continual reduction in numbers since 2014. Comparison of the General Directory of Prisons data for October 2019 with October 2017 show a 32.5 percent decrease in the number of children in detention and pre-trial detention, the lowest over the past five years. Although the trend is improving, the justice system is still not fully adapted to children’s needs, with poor infrastructure and lack of professional capacities to handle children in conflict or contact with the law in accordance with international standards of child rights.

Major contributions and drivers of results

UNICEF Albania Country Programme

The 2017–2021 Country Programme in Albania reflects the objectives of UNICEF’s Strategic Plan 2018–2021, the Sustainable Development Goals 2030 Agenda for a world where no child is left behind, and the EU integration agenda. With an approach that spans a child’s lifecycle and focuses on the most disadvantaged, the Country Office (CO) is supporting government in progressively realising the rights of all children and reducing equity gaps based on effective child-focused policies, strengthened accountabilities and adequate public resources. In line with this vision, two Result Areas of the Country Programme include the strengthening of governance for equity and social inclusion, and protection and access to justice for children. The UNICEF Country Programme is implemented as part of the GoA–UN Programme of Cooperation for Sustainable Development (PoCSD/UN Development Assistance Framework, UNDAF) 2017–2021.

Delivering Results for Children

Humanitarian Response to the Recent Earthquake

On 26 November 2019, a 6.4-magnitude earthquake struck Albania. Government reported 51 fatalities, including six children, and 913 people injured. More than 17,000 people have been displaced, a total of 222,778 people were affected in the country, of whom 50,614 were directly and 172,164 were indirectly affected and disruption of schooling for more than 12,000 children. The earthquake caused extensive damage to at least eleven of the country’s 61 municipalities, including the two most populous, the urbanised and developed municipalities of Tirana and Durrës.

UNICEF supported the Government of Albania in addressing the emergency response following the earthquake. Some 1,400 children and their caregivers benefited from UNICEF emergency response interventions mainly through six Child-Friendly Spaces (CFS) and four Temporary Learning Spaces (TLS). UNICEF is co-chairing the Working Groups for Education, Child Protection and Humanitarian Cash Transfers (HCT).

GOA requested support from the European Union, the United Nations and the World Bank to undertake a full and comprehensive Post-Disaster Needs Assessment (PDNA) to identify the damage, losses and recovery needs arising from the event. UNICEF led education sector PDNA and damages were reported to 321 educational institutions in the 11 affected municipalities, which represents 24% of all education establishments. The municipalities of Tirane and Durrës have the highest share of damage, with 55% and 21% respectively. 36 health facilities were partially or fully damaged, of which 22 are primary health care facilities. The total cost of the damage and losses amounting to hundreds of millions of EURO.

UNICEF has also invested in building the capacity of national and local actors involved in the child protection response, disaster risk reduction and shock-responsive social protection, improving their knowledge and skills in implementing and

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monitoring humanitarian standards. Earlier, UNICEF also completed Preparedness for Emergency Response through the migration to the new Emergency Preparedness Platform (EPP) and met 90% above compliance for the Minimum Preparedness Standards (MPS).

Every Child Survives and Thrives

The level of public spending on health continues to remain low, at 2.9 percent of GDP (INSTAT Report, 2018), with a disproportionately low resource allocation in primary health care. The 2019 budget allocated double the level of resources for secondary health care than to primary health care. The *WHO Global Monitoring Report on Financial Protection in Health* indicates that 6.7 percent of Albanian families are faced with impoverishing health spending, the second highest level in the region (WHO, 2019). Albania's large out-of-pocket health payments, disparities between urban and rural access to health facilities, and inadequacies in care for patients with special needs underscore the importance of increased investment in universal health coverage.

In 2019, UNICEF in Albania continued advocacy for child health, nutrition and well-being outcomes focusing on important issues such as child nutrition and immunisation. The National Forum on Child Health and Well-being, and activities during immunisation week, were used to convey important messages for improved child nutrition and the addressing of vaccine hesitancy. The Forum brought together high-level decision makers and representatives of professional associations to discuss the situation of children, based on the Albania Demographic and Health Survey (ADHS) and administrative data for child health and nutrition.

UNICEF continued its support for capacity development of 180 health-care workers in four regions (Elbasan, Korca, Tirana and Vlore) who have acquired knowledge and skills for implementing universal progressive home visits. Elements of child development, disabilities, child protection and gender issues were introduced for the first time in an accredited training programme, and mechanisms for intersectoral collaboration were developed following consultations with health, social care, child protection and local government representatives.

UNICEF continued its support for strengthening the national information management system to develop a web-based age and sex disaggregated data collection system that links regional and central-level data for monitoring child growth and infant and young child feeding practices in Albania. In 2019, the first National Report on Child Nutrition offering real time and disaggregated data for evidence-based policy action was produced. In addition, 344 health professionals benefited from capacity development activities, contributing towards improved reporting rates and better quality data for child growth, and infant and young child feeding (IYCF) practices. A customised dashboard was launched during the second half of 2019 with all data displayed by region, gender and residence type (urban or rural). Furthermore, UNICEF continued its direct engagement and advocacy with the Ministry of Health and Social Protection (MoHSP) and the Parliamentary Commission of Health and Social Affairs to approve the Universal Salt Iodisation (USI) Law.

Strengthening of the Procurement and Supply Management (PSM) system for health commodities related to HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis (TB) was at the centre of UNICEF technical assistance in partnership with the Global Fund. Assessments of the HIV/AIDS and TB laboratories, accompanied by a budgeted action plan, analysis of the procurement system and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for quantification, forecasting, inventory management and quality assurance of medicaments are expected to contribute towards optimisation of quantification and forecasting for improved availability of health commodities related to antiretroviral therapy (ART).

In 2019, the UNICEF CO, in partnership with the Supply Division in Copenhagen, continued to provide procurement services to GoA for supplying childhood vaccines and antiretroviral medicines. UNICEF provided technical assistance to government to prepare a successful grant application to the Global Fund totalling USD 1.6 million.

Every Child Learns

Albania's education system reforms continued in 2019 to ensure better coverage, quality and inclusiveness of learning. There are continuous efforts for effective implementation of new curricula, standards and teaching methodologies, including from the gender equality and non-discrimination perspectives developed over the last couple of years.

Public spending for education remained at 3.1 percent of GDP, one of the lowest in the region and below the five percent target planned in the Pre-University Education Strategy. In addition to low public investment, and despite focus on the quality and inclusiveness of education reforms, Roma and Egyptian children, children with disabilities and those living in rural areas, particularly girls, continued to face exclusion due to poverty, structural barriers and discrimination.

The year 2019 was marked by pre-university education sector reform with the aim of bringing the services closer to citizens, improving the performance of the education system, with a focus on quality, training and inspection. The results of this reform are still to be proven, while the OECD review and UNICEF mid-term assessment of the national strategy raise

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concerns over the independent role of the inspection. With UNICEF technical assistance, the Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth (MoESY) diagnosed the system through two major evidence-generation exercises, OECD-UNICEF review of the assessment and evaluation system and Mid-Term review of the National Strategy of Pre-University Education, offering a substantial range of recommendations to feed into the development of the new sector strategy and trigger debates on the quality and inclusiveness of the education system.

UNICEF continued to mainstream inclusive education practices in schools, training 200 teachers in compulsory school and 400 in preschool and developing a training curriculum that serves to set up a core professional network of assistant teachers. This core group trained an additional 500 assistant teachers.

UNICEF assistance also served the development of a clearer understanding of the assistant teacher profile, resulting in a new guideline for assistant teachers approved by MoESY (Order of Minister, No. 26, date 25.11.2019) for a collaborative and inclusive assistant teacher contributing as such to a more inclusive school. Prejudices and wide-spread myths on children with disabilities have also been addressed, aiming at introducing/promoting children through their skills and abilities, rather than through impairments. The awareness campaign, that run through the main TV channels and social media in Albania, reached 175,0000 people through TV and 24,020 people through the social media.

Notable results have been achieved in implementation of a mechanism for an Early Warning System for Drop-out prevention, with 200 teachers and an additional 1,000 teachers trained as part of the peer-learning activity of teacher professional development networks (51 networks) set up by UNICEF. The end line assessment of school interventions showed improvement in the situation of students at risk of school drop-out in three main areas: school performance, behaviours and school attendance in the four target municipalities.

The C4D strategy ‘#myschool is a safe place’ has played a crucial role in changing the attitudes of schools and communities towards violence in school. Shifting school environment for better and more positive classroom management techniques which lead to creative, passionate teaching and engaged, empowered learning, are all elements used by the project that targeted teachers, students and parent in four municipalities: Berat, Lezha, Tirana and Korca. Under the motto “Be Safe, Be Respectful, Be Responsible”, 500 teachers, who reach at least 10,000 students were approached through various training and events organized by the project. While the project results will be summarized by the end of the academic year 2020, on a macro level, latest PISA results (2018), in the school climate section, have indicated that the disciplinary climate is one of the best compared to other countries and economies and that students in Albania are one of the most cooperative.

From an equity perspective, UNICEF supported a model for enhancing quality pre-school education for children with disabilities through designing a professional development programme for teachers, promoting an inclusive and stimulating environment for children, and focusing on respect and promotion of diversity and social inclusion. As a direct contribution towards improved national pre-school quality, the assessment framework and curricula for the pre-primary year, both supported by UNICEF, were approved this year by MoESY and have a national reach.

UNICEF continued to convene central and local government stakeholders and make them aware of the importance of the issue of out-of-school children. The agency provided technical assistance and evidence-based advocacy on financing for inclusive education, resulting in a national budgeted policy for financially supporting schools to cover the needs of children at risk of drop-out and out-of-school based on a per child cost of USD 65 per month.

Every Child is Protected from Violence and Exploitation

After significant gains achieved in the previous years through upstream work, the child protection programme focus, in 2019, purposefully shifted towards implementation of an improved policy legal framework, investment in the overall sustainability of efforts, generation of critical evidence and data, and further expansion of partnerships, especially with adolescent-led initiatives, as well as the private sector dealing with technology, Internet communication and broad innovation.

UNICEF in Albania reaffirmed its leadership in addressing child protection through its programmatic flagship Ending Violence against Children, which witnessed notable progress at many levels. Two dedicated studies, one on children’s experiences online (One Click Away) and the other on a systemic response to online harm (WebFactor), laid a very solid foundation to current and future programme interventions and contributed to national and global knowledge generation on this rapidly emerging new area for child protection.

Furthermore, an in-depth assessment report *The Lost Cases*, on the Albanian State Police’s current response to child sexual abuse online, revealed a staggering gap between the volume of referrals from the international law enforcement agencies and the actual number of cases investigated in the country. The report highlighted structural and procedural gaps and significant professional shortcomings in law enforcement, and, as a result, a dedicated task force was formed by the

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prosecution and police to urgently address this issue, together with UNICEF.

Strategic partnership with the National Cyber-Security Authority and MoESY yielded excellent results in terms of a broader and more diverse approach to Violence Against Children (VAC). The VAC awareness and preparedness programmes were built together with school children, thus generating a strong feeling of ownership and participation. As a result, more than 12,000 school children benefited from the peer-to-peer programme on online safety and VAC that was designed together with and implemented by more than 300 peer educators. Additionally, 13,000 children were reached with VAC prevention activities and 4,000 children and adults became involved in improving their Internet literacy through an online tool developed together with adolescents.

A technological response to prevention of online child sexual abuse was further sharpened through the Friendly Wi-Fi Albania initiative, an innovative solution protecting children and families from harmful online content while accessing free Wi-Fi in public spaces. This endeavour brought together local governments and private businesses with overall coordination undertaken by UNICEF in an attempt to establish an example of how a successful business can also be child and family friendly. Within a year, the capital city Tirana developed five public spaces that are now providing certified free Wi-Fi for the family. It is particularly informative that one friendly Wi-Fi spot managed, over five months (June–October 2019), to block 43,000 Internet requests to access blacklisted or adult sites, and 4,000 sites containing child sexual abuse and pornography.

In 2019, the government publicly committed to progressively reorganising the child care system, ending child institutionalisation and ensuring a transition from institutional to family and community-based care. In partnership with national NGOs, all 240 children residing in nine public residential institutions were comprehensively assessed, with Individual Child Development and De-institutionalisation Plans developed across the country. Currently, UNICEF supports MoHSP and local authorities with implementation of individual plans and development of support packages for each child and family. Furthermore, UNICEF supported development of a new and comprehensive deinstitutionalization nation action plan that was costed. Further UNICEF facilitated establishment of a Steering Committee (technical advisory group) to govern the reform process. The technical assistance also includes revision of the child care legal framework, with analysis of the legal barriers and inconsistencies in the legislation and development of relevant legal amendments, as well as a costing of the new service models that have to be developed to replace the existing institutions. The process of transformation of two residential institutions, in the municipalities of Korca and Vlora, was also conceptualised.

In terms of addressing children's access to justice, UNICEF's active advocacy efforts to improve the normative framework on justice for children resulted in the acceleration and shaping of five Decisions of the Council of Ministers, one Prime Minister's Order and two Ministerial Directions. These normative acts were based upon the Criminal Justice for Children Code and paved the way to guaranteeing procedural rights for children, including the right to be heard, establishing a new justice for child institutions, governing data on children in criminal justice processes, and specifying the authorities responsible for implementation of the normative framework.

With UNICEF advocacy, the High Judicial Council decentralised the court's review of criminal justice for children cases. Every judicial district court is now required to select at least three judges to specialise in justice for children, a move expected to reduce the length of juvenile pre-trial detention and increase access to justice for all children.

UNICEF further cemented its leadership role in the overall child protection coordination work in Albania through a child protection coalition comprising UNICEF, Save the Children, World Vision, Terre des Hommes, OSCE Presence in Albania and Council of Europe. The coalition was instrumental in supporting the national child protection system development, by establishing an annual national conference of child protection workers (in May 2019), jointly developing a child-friendly version of the law on the Rights and Protection of the Child, supporting local governments in advancing child-centred budgeting in their local social development plans, and, last but not least, mobilising an excellent coordinated response to the emergency caused by the earthquake of 26 November 2019.

Every Child has an Equitable Chance in Life

Social protection systems play a vital role in reducing poverty, inequalities and barriers that prevent families and children from accessing services, and, as such, are crucial for human and economic development. The current social protection programmes in Albania fall short of addressing in a comprehensive manner the multiple vulnerabilities faced by children and families. Social care is limited to cash transfer schemes, subsidies and tax exemptions, while services are fragmented, with limited coverage. No specific programmes exist to ensure income security for children, though many are covered by programmes targeting poor and vulnerable households.

In 2019, INSTAT for the first-time reported official data on child monetary poverty, using the EU indicator Children at risk of Poverty. With UNICEF support, INSTAT collected data on child non-monetary deprivation for 2018 and 2019. The Institute has a roadmap to measure child multiple deprivation using the EU child deprivation index. Meanwhile, government

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has approved an updated National Protection Strategy and Action Plan (extended to 2022) that set out its vision in pursuing three major reforms: on economic aid, disability allowance and social care services.

UNICEF continued supporting social care reforms at the decentralised level focusing on overcoming one of the key bottlenecks: sustainable financing of quality social care services at the municipal level. Eleven municipalities were supported to develop three-year social care plans, fully costed and with clear targets to reach at least 60 percent of vulnerable children. Each of these municipalities developed a budget brief, informing the decision makers on the planning and financing of social care plans and services in each local authority.

UNICEF direct support to government has expanded the scope of the Management Information System (MIS) for the programme of cash transfers to social care services, while workflows and SOPs for these services as part of the MIS for social protection have been developed, and about 300 staff in 19 municipalities have been trained and mentored in the use of the system.

In 2019, UNICEF successfully advocated for effective and equitable budget allocations for health, education and social protection, including child protection, by making clear statements and recommendations in the parliamentary hearings for approval of the government budget for the year 2020.

Last year, Albania continued to be part of the Western Balkans U-Report initiative aiming to increase youth civic engagement in issues that concern them and their communities. Due to removal of the WhatsApp platform, UNICEF witnessed a decrease in the number of U-Reporters (3,015), 33 percent of whom are adolescents, with an almost equal representation of boys and girls in all 61 municipalities in the country. U-Report has completed a total of eight surveys: three at the country level, four regional and one global. U-report was also instrumental to ensure youth and adolescent in policy making and influenced new Youth Law that was passed by the Parliament. Contributing to the second decade learning, UNICEF engaged in Peace Building in Education, by developing a mapping of the best education peace building experiences in the region as well as a teacher training curriculum for peace building for secondary education, as part of an inter-agency and multi country project in cooperation with Regional Youth Cooperation Organisation (RYCO).

Albania has made advances in the area of women's participation in decision making and in addressing some forms of gender-based violence, though disparities, exploitation and violence against women and girls remain pervasive, with some affecting women and girls on the move. UNICEF CO focused on spreading knowledge and awareness of child marriage, among adolescents and teachers in Tirana County. UNICEF joined the Secretary General's UNiTE Campaign "Orange the World: Generation Equality Stands against Rape!"

To commemorate the 30th year of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, UNICEF CO partnered with City of Tirana to host the International Conference on Child Friendly Cities in Albania, which brought together more than 300 participants, including mayors, local leaders, technical experts, children and young people to discuss innovative approaches to advance child rights through local commitment and bring up cross-sectoral perspectives in planning and delivering services for children at the local level.

Lessons Learned and Innovations

There has been a minor slow-down in programme implementation because of the resignation of opposition parties from Parliament in February 2019 and the subsequent local elections in June that were also boycotted by the opposition. In recognition of the government's strong drive towards EU accession, UNICEF CO, throughout 2019, continued to support GoA in moving forward the reforms. The main focus was to progressively align the national legislation, policies and action plans with EU accession priorities and the 2030 Agenda. However, there continues to be low budget allocation for the social sectors, a determining factor for success of reforms in these areas and for Albania to reach the standards of the EU and other countries in the region.

There has been no change in the data gaps of 2018; these continue to remain a critical barrier to assessment of the extent to which new laws and policies have been implemented, and, most importantly, whether progress has been achieved in realisation of children's rights. UNICEF has put in place efforts to strengthen the sub-national (municipal) systems to generate data on children. Consequently, statistics on children have been published for the municipalities of Korca and Shkodra, for at least 20 indicators, none of which had been previously published or accessible for policy makers.

Recognisant of its unique role in oversight of accountability, Albania's Parliament has emerged as an important partner of UNICEF in the strengthening of governance for children. The parliamentarians' Friends of Children Group was this year vocal on behalf of children and passed a Resolution on Children. In addition, it speeded up legislative changes to the USI

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law, despite strong lobbying from the food processing industry, and to the law on social and economic aid. Effective parliamentary engagement is a long-term process that needs to be integrated regularly into UNICEF CO's programming.

The PISA results for Albania indicate the need for a renewed impetus towards improvement of learning outcomes, with a focus on science and reading (where the country's performance was weakest), and with regard to the relative performance of boys and girls. UNICEF has already engaged in interventions aiming at a more qualitative and inclusive education with curricula reviews and design of training in inclusive education. Nevertheless, the need for more investment in differentiated learning practices and professional development in how to implement the new curricula based on competencies would need to be pursued more arduously by UNICEF.

Low quality education provided in small and remote schools using multi-grade teaching continues to be an issue for quality education, based upon the results of an assessment made available by MoESY. Rural children living in remote and isolated areas are provided with lower quality teaching due to a lack of training opportunities and resources and a shortage of qualified teachers. To boost improvement in children learning outcomes, UNICEF is testing implementation of a digital learning platform that provides digital support to facilitate delivery of the official curricula through making the process of teaching and learning more interactive and child centred.

With regard to early childhood development, no institutional anchor to coordinate across the different sectors exists in Albania. There is lack of definition of responsibilities cross the central and local levels following on from the process of decentralisation reform. While this reform has given increased powers to municipalities to plan and administer pre-school services, it, unfortunately, has not been accompanied by the needed financial transfers and mechanisms for implementation.

Reflecting on the numerous challenges facing UNICEF, the most complex concerns the work on law enforcements (mostly the prosecution) and the judiciary. This has been caused by the vetting process (part of the ongoing justice reform process in Albania), which side-lined a large part of the workforce from these two important stakeholder groups. Regardless of the agency's efforts, the majority of strategic discussions, large-scale capacity building efforts and long-term investment plans have not scaled up. In response, UNICEF counterbalanced this situation with more in-depth technical work with specific groups of professionals, and investment in identification of sector 'champions'. As a result, the three prosecutors (including the Chief Prosecutor of Tirana) who have been actively engaged in UNICEF efforts to address child online sexual abuse, facilitated establishment of a special task force to address the shortcomings of the system's failure to respond to cases of online sexual abuse of children.

In advancing the de-institutionalisation process, UNICEF managed to trigger a decisive political shift, as a result of which the government has openly committed to reorganising the child care system and end child institutionalisation. UNICEF addressed this issue first through coalition building efforts, gathering the most reputable local child care organisations and experts and enriching this group with high-level international expertise. This resulted in very strong advocacy efforts which made possible to fully revise the national de-institutionalisation action plan, which is now submitted for the approval of the Council of Ministers. The most important lesson learnt in the process was the ultimate significance of establishing a powerful coalition that, besides being a unified voice advocating a child's right to a family environment, ensured strong local ownership of the process from the very outset.

In terms of innovative approaches, the web-based platform for psychological and mental health counselling deserves special recognition. In a less than six months, 1,996 people (mostly adolescents) benefited from the service. The voluntary work of professionals (doctors) willingly contributing a few hours of their time every week to providing this service is another very promising element in this initiative. UNICEF will expand its scope in 2020 to cover an additional group of key beneficiaries, namely victims or potential victims of human trafficking.

The strengthening of capacities of municipalities to plan, deliver and monitor services for children as required by their new mandates remains central to the reform agenda. Service delivery at the local level has been coupled with UNICEF's advocacy at the central level to find solutions for sustainable

financing of social care services through proposing a feasible financial mechanism so that funds from the central social protection budget can be channelled to local governments. A positive example in 2019 was UNICEF advocacy that resulted in allocation of an additional USD 1.5 million from the national social protection budget to fourteen municipalities for social care services for children and the vulnerable population.

In the pursuit of establishing grounds for a Child Friendly City (CFC) initiative as an entry point for introducing a more cross-sectoral perspective in planning and delivering services for children at the local level, UNICEF partnered with Korca Municipality, resulting in the first CFC Action Plan 2020–2021 at this level. Concurrently, the budget approved by the municipality for 2020 reflected additional investments to be made in more playgrounds, green spaces and implementation of the Child Friendly Hotel and Restaurant initiative for ten private businesses. The last of these is an innovative approach

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to transforming premises into child-friendly spaces and providing minimum criteria for safety, play and healthy eating.

In health sector restructuring, a National Operator of the Health Services was established with overall responsibility for the management of the health services in Albania. While the regional and district operator structures introduced rationalisation of the health sector management and integration of primary, secondary and public health services under single management, they also created in short-term delays in obtaining necessary clearances and finalisation of joint activities, as new lines of responsibility and management approaches were introduced. To ensure timely implementation and sustainability of interventions, it has been crucial to gain a clear understanding of the functions of this new structure and how to involve the operator early in the planning, implementation and monitoring processes.

For the legislative and policy reforms to have a lasting positive impact on children's lives, the scope should be taken further and used to generate a shift in perception in Albanian society, where not only policy makers, but also the community at large, as well as particular professionals working with children—teachers, doctors, law enforcement officials and social workers—view them as individual rights holders, and empower them and their families to claim their rights. To this end, public dialogue on child rights, awareness raising and dissemination of information concerning the CRC and child rights-related domestic legislation are needed.

Last, but not least, 26th November earthquake has demonstrated weak national response capacities and coordination. Therefore, UNICEF is investing increased resources to strengthen emergency preparedness and disaster risk reduction focusing on education, child protection and risk-response social protection system.