

Albania

Part 1: Situation update in the country

Albania is an upper middle-income country with a high human development index, ranking 68th of 189 countries in 2017 (*Human Development Report, 2018*). The country 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 different sectors. Progress has been swift and recognised by the European Commission, which, in April 2018, recommended considering accession negotiations be opened in June 2019, deepening the reform momentum in the country.

Over the last quarter of a century, living standards in Albania have seen significant improvement, with per-capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP) quadrupling from 1992 to 2017. In 2018, this positive trend in economic growth continued with GDP growth in real terms at 4.3 per cent (*UNICEF Albania calculation based on Albania Institute of Statistics/INSTAT 2018 data*) for the first three-quarters of the year, attributed mainly to foreign direct investment projects and the revival of construction along with tourism.

Despite this economic progress, wealth distribution has not been equal, and vulnerable groups continue to be underserved in the areas of health, education, social care and child protection. Albania remains one of the poorest countries in Europe, with high unemployment rates especially for youth and women. Unemployment among those aged 15–29 years is 23.2 per cent (male - 22.8 per cent, female - 23.8 per cent), almost double that of the 15-64 year working age population at 12.7 per cent (*INSTAT, 2018*). At 47.2 per cent, the participation rates in the labour market continued to be lower for women compared to 64.9 per cent for men (*Human Development Report, 2018*). The uneven figures between men and women are an example of the gender disparities present in Albania, which is ranked 52nd place among 160 countries for its gender inequality index (*Human Development Report, 2018*).

Concerns also arise regarding the rapid demographic changes and decline in the size of the working-age population due to rapid aging and continuous high levels of emigration. Data from INSTAT showed a decline in the total population size, from 2.89 million in 2014 to 2.87 million in 2018. The percentage of the population aged under 19 years has also fallen from about 28 per cent in 2014 to 25 per cent (*INSTAT, 2018*).

Article 4 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) requires states to invest appropriate resources to guarantee that all those rights are fulfilled to the maximum extent possible. The year 2018 saw no major changes in the level of public investment for children. Social sectors - education, health and social protection - made up the largest share of public expenditure as a percentage of GDP. However, 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.

Investments in health care, at 2.9 per cent of GDP in 2018 (*INSTAT*), have remained relatively constant over the last five years but substantially less than in other countries in the region.

Since 2015, for social protection, social assistance represents only 1.2 per cent to 1.3 per cent of GDP (*INSTAT, 2018*), mainly in cash transfers, rather than targeted services to families and children in need.

The low-level allocation of public funds in education, 3.1 per cent of GDP (*INSTAT, 2018*), one of the lowest in the region, resulted in public resentment throughout the last quarter of 2018. Anti-government student rallies were held demanding a larger education budget, cuts in university tuition fees, and a greater presence of students on decision-making boards. Anti-government protests were also held in other cities, where protesters complained of poverty and high fuel prices.

In addition, the ongoing decentralization and territorial-administrative governance reform was accompanied by major restructuring of ministries and central government departments in 2018, followed by shifts in functions and staff reassignments. Such changes brought further uncertainties into Albania's overall government structures and political situation.

Albania's national priorities are aligned with global commitments as the country has embraced the partnership for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 2030 Agenda. However, the National Baseline Report on SDG Alignment found that only 32 per cent of the global indicators can be monitored based on the currently available national data. Nevertheless, on a positive note, a Mainstreaming, Acceleration and Policy Support Report 2018 (MAPS) prepared by the United Nations (UN), World Bank, and the Government of Albania found that child-relevant indicators are mainstreamed throughout the EU accession negotiation chapters, which, in turn, are strongly convergent with the SDGs. In addition to the coherence among national, regional and global priorities, the child-relevant indicators present an opportunity for strengthened accountabilities and the measuring of the impact of development policies on children's well-being in Albania.

The country has been affected only marginally by the movement of refugees and migrants crossing Western Balkans countries on their way to northern Europe. Nevertheless, in 2018 there was a five-fold increase in the total number of persons (5,401) - of whom 531 were children (189 girls and 342 boys) - intercepted in the border areas in comparison to 1,049 in 2017. Requests for asylum also increased from 309 in 2017 to 4,095 by the end of November 2018, with women and children representing 18 per cent of all requests lodged. Of the total, 451 were asylum-seeking children, with 112 either unaccompanied or separated from their parents. Most of the migrants and refugees intercepted in Albania come from Syria (50 per cent), Pakistan (15 per cent), Iraq and Afghanistan (11 per cent) and Palestine (7 per cent) (*United Nations High Commission for Refugees/UNHCR report, 2018*).

Situation analysis of children in Albania

Since its ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Government of Albania has been committed to making child rights in the country a reality. While conditions have steadily improved, one of the main constraints in generating robust knowledge on the situation of children continues to be the lack of a reliable, accountable and systematic monitoring of child rights.

The challenges are largely related to gaps in the legal and policy framework, low allocation of financial resources on monitoring of children's rights, and generally weak capacities in data collection, disaggregation and analysis. In addition, there is limited use of available data for

evidence-based policy making and budgeting as well as limited interest to understand how the present policies' implementation impact the lives of boys and girls. Furthermore, vulnerable groups such as Roma, Egyptian and children with disabilities continue to remain largely unaccounted for.

Nevertheless, in 2018 several major achievements were made in the monitoring of child rights in Albania, including:

- The national data collection and management processes, including in the field of children's rights, was strengthened with adoption of Law 17/2018 'On Official Statistics'. This Law strengthened the independent role of the national statistical body, INSTAT, to ensure that all official statistical agencies use standards, definitions, classifications and methodologies of the United Nations and Eurostat;
- The 2018 Decision of the Council of Ministers on child-targeted statistics assembled by the State Agency for Child Rights and Protection introduced a statistical framework for child-rights monitoring in the country. The framework comprises 58 indicators on a wide range of children rights, and their annual reporting will enable systematic monitoring of the situation of children in Albania and allow for better evidence-based policy making;
- With UNICEF support, completion of the Fifth State Periodic Report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child was a stimulating national process that engaged Government, civil society and children. It was also one of the most comprehensive child rights-focused reviews prepared by the Government in recent years;
- The situation of children and the major gaps faced in the realisation of their rights were highlighted in two major Government reports on the SDGs: Mainstreaming, Acceleration and Policy Support for Achieving the SDGs in Albania and the Albania Voluntary National Review on SDGs. Those reports will feed into the processes of prioritising and nationalising the SDGs and the adaptation for Albania of Agenda 2030, including connecting it with the EU integration processes;
- The monitoring process of the National Action Plan for Child Rights commenced, aiming to obtain the most up-to-date information on implementation of the Government's commitments to realising the rights of the child.

The Albanian Demography and Health Survey 2017–2018 (DHS) was completed, providing standardised and internationally comparable data on a wide range of demographic and health characteristics of the Albanian population, including children, both nationally and at the regional level.

The DHS found that 34 per cent of women aged 15–49 years reported at least one problem in accessing health care for themselves. Access was strongly determined by the wealth quintile: with 62 per cent of women in the lowest quintile mentioning at least one serious problem compared to 10 per cent of women in highest quintile.

The DHS indicated improvements in the prevalence of stunting in children aged under five years, which decreased from 19 per cent in 2008 to 11 per cent in 2018. Stunting in children was closely linked with the level of mother's education. Some 22 per cent of children whose mothers had no education or only primary education were stunted, compared to 8 per cent of children whose mothers' education was higher than primary level.

Malnutrition remained a public health concern for children aged 6–59 months. The DHS found that only 38 per cent of children born in the two years prior to the survey were exclusively breastfed in the first six months of life as World Health Organisation and UNICEF guidelines

recommend. Some 57 per cent were breastfed within one hour of birth, and only 59 per cent continued with breastfeeding at one year. Furthermore, only 29 per cent of children aged 6–23 months living with their mothers were fed a minimum acceptable diet in the 24 hours before the survey. One in four (25 per cent) children aged 6–49 months were anaemic. Mostly affected were children belonging to households in the lowest wealth quintile. Moreover, 9 per cent of children in lowest wealth quintile had a diarrhoeal episode in the two weeks preceding the survey, compared with 3 per cent of children in the highest quintile.

Although national immunization coverage rates remained satisfactory with levels above 97 per cent, coverage rates as low as 64 per cent for the MMR 1 vaccine have been observed in some regions of the country. Stronger focus is required in addressing public hesitancy around the vaccine. This is particularly important in light of the measles outbreak that occurred during the first half of 2018, with 1,367 laboratory-confirmed cases of measles among children between January–December, with three registered deaths. Consultations with health professionals indicated that there was a gap in interpersonal communication skills in conveying to parents that vaccines are safe, and in being able to address their fears, misconceptions and concerns around vaccination.

The DHS results confirmed that school attendance by school-age household members was high. The net attendance rate (NAR) for children attending primary school is 95 per cent, and the gross attendance rate (GAR) is about 99 per cent. The difference between NAR and GAR indicates that some students are either under-age or over-age for the class in which they are enrolled. The NAR and GAR for primary school did not vary much by gender, residence or wealth. However, compared with the 2009 DHS, rates of attendance in primary education have experienced a slight decrease from 95 per cent to 93 per cent.

A 2018 UNICEF study on children with disabilities in Albania confirmed the barriers and discrimination they face in accessing basic services. While administrative data suggested that there was an increase in the number of children with disabilities accessing services from 3 per cent in 2015 to 8 per cent in 2017, demands on social care services in the community are growing and the current coverage and quality of the services do not meet fully the needs of children and their families. Based on the available sources, between 2.5 per cent and 4 per cent of children in Albania have a disability and only around half of school-age children in receipt of disability allowance are in education. Children with disabilities are also over-represented among the small number of children who are in public residential care. Educational special needs and poverty are two of the main reasons for family separation and the placement of children in public institutions.

Children in Albania face a range of types of violence and exploitation at home, at school, and in the community, although progress has been noticed. According to the latest DHS 2017–2018, 37 per cent of 2–14 yearold children had experienced non-violent methods of discipline, although the figure was 22 per cent in 2009. Some 48 per cent of children had been subject to at least one form of psychological or physical aggression, down from 75 per cent in 2009. Furthermore, preliminary analysis of the 2018 UNICEF study (to be published in 2019) on children's experiences of the Internet revealed that one in five children had seen violent content, 25 per cent had interacted with someone they have not met before, and 16 per cent had met someone in person whom they first met on the Internet. In addition, one in 10 children reported at least one unwanted sexual experience over the Internet.

Whereas Albania once had the highest rate of children in detention in the region, there has

been a continual reduction since 2014. A comparison of General Directory of Prisons' data for the month of October in 2017 and in 2018 showed a 32.5 per cent decrease in rates 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.

Part 2: Major Results including in humanitarian action and gender, against the results in the Country Programme Documents

The 2017-2021 Country Programme in Albania reflects the objectives of UNICEF's Strategic Plan 2018-2021, the SDG 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, UNICEF Albania is supporting Government to progressively realize the rights of all children and reduce 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 programme seeks to target the key barriers that deny children the opportunity to reach their full potential by establishing strong policy frameworks and implementation mechanisms in the sectors of health, education, social protection and justice, allowing duty bearers to effectively reach and assist children and families in situations of vulnerability and exclusion.

The UNICEF Country Programme is implemented as part of the 2017-2021 Government and UN Programme of Cooperation for Sustainable Development. 2018 marked the second year of programme implementation based on a well-established partnership mechanism between the UN agencies and Government, providing space for joint action planning, monitoring and reporting through output and outcome working groups. Theme-specific steering committees continued to be used as instruments to support and coordinate collaborative arrangements among the national stakeholders, UN agencies and international development partners.

Goal area 1: Every child survives and thrives

As part of Government restructuring in 2018, the merging of the health and social welfare ministries into a single Ministry of Health and Social Protection (MoHSP) opened new opportunities for integrating health, social care and protection services in Albania. The Government passed a new sub-law (Decision of the Council of Ministers No. 419) on the organization and functioning of health services operators and initiated a major process on reorganization and rationalization of the health sector. This aims to create four major health operators which will manage the health service delivery in the country.

The level of public spending on health remained low at 2.9 per cent of GDP (*INSTAT 2018*), with a disproportionately low resource allocation in primary health care. The 2018 budget allocated double the level of resources for secondary health care than to primary health care. UNICEF advocacy, based on costing analysis and development of a budgeting tool for maternal, neonatal and child health services, resulted positively in the development of a

Medium-Term Budget Framework (2018–2020) that links the budget with results for children and women.

One main area of concern in the health sector remains out-of-pocket expenditures, which were 54 per cent of total health expenditure. According to the EU's April 2018 Annual Report, "significant progress needs to be made to ensure everyone in Albania has health-care coverage." 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. The WHO report on the SDGs published in 2018 indicated that Albania is among the bottom three countries in the region with regard to Universal Health Coverage (service coverage indicator 3.8.1).

The DHS 2017–2018, a major household survey and multi-partner effort between the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), UNICEF and UN Women, was successfully completed. Filling the gap since the previous DHS of 2009, the survey provided standardized and internationally comparable data on the lives of women and children to support evidence-based policy making. Most importantly, the data will inform the processes for national target-setting for the SDGs. Based on corporate knowledge and expertise of household surveys, UNICEF's technical advice contributed towards all stages of the DHS undertaking, from preparation to data analysis. It will continue in 2019 with further secondary data analysis. In 2018, UNICEF supported capacity development of national stakeholders for health system strengthening (HSS). A selected team of government representatives from key health institutions attended the sub-regional HSS workshop organized in March. A national road map to deliver equitable maternal, newborn and child services was developed, following the above activity organized in Albania with support from the UNICEF Europe and Central Asia Regional Office (ECARO) and Headquarters.

UNICEF advocacy and direct technical support for strengthening of national capacities in achieving sustainable iodine nutrition for mothers and children showed progress. With the order of the Minister of Health and Social Protection issued in 2018, the multi-sectorial National Iodine Deficiency Disorders (IDD) Committee was established to coordinate action and advise the Minister on interventions aiming at achieving sustainable iodine optimum nutrition for mothers and children. The Committee contributed to conduct the assessment of the enforcement mechanisms for the current Universal Salt Iodization (USI) law, develop the salt situation analysis and prepared the Regulatory Impact Assessment document. Based on the technical consultations at national and regional levels it proposed required legislation changes to the Minister of Health and Social Protection. The revised legislation was submitted for approval to the Council of Ministers.

UNICEF continued its support to strengthen 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 2018, UNICEF trained 140 statistics officers and health professionals in the 12 regions and 36 districts and operationalised quality assurance mechanisms, resulting in an increase of regular reporting of data from 67 per cent in 2017 to 83 per cent in 2018.

UNICEF facilitated discussions of key government institutions (INSTAT and Institute of Public Health) with the UN Inter-Agency Group for Child Mortality Estimation team to revise the child mortality estimates, bringing them in line with the administrative data.

During 2018, UNICEF Albania, working with UNICEF Supply Division in Copenhagen, continued to provide procurement services to the Government for supplying childhood vaccines and antiretroviral medicines. Around 200,000 children aged 0-6 years benefitted from provision of childhood vaccination services, and 558 individuals living with HIV received antiretroviral therapy, including 16 children. The Ministry of Health and Social Protection was supported by UNICEF ECARO and UNICEF Albania to plan the implementation of the Procurement Service Management of the Global Fund to Fight HIV, Tuberculosis and Malaria support to Albania, following a request by the national Principal Recipient.

Goal area 2: Every child learns

Albania's education system reforms have reached milestones in recent years in ensuring better coverage, quality and inclusiveness of learning. The year 2018 saw continuous efforts for effective implementation of new curricula, standards and teaching methodologies, including from gender equality and non-discrimination perspectives, developed over the last couple of years. Nevertheless, several challenges remain to be overcome.

One main barrier for further implementation of education sector reform is a mismatch between policy priorities and the allocation of public investment. Public spending for education remained at 3.1 per cent of GDP (*INSTAT, 2017*), one of the lowest in the region. In 2018, this low level of public investment in education came to the fore of public and political attention as protests led by students of University of Tirana, and echoed in other cities in the country, demanded education budget increase, more accountability and an improved quality of teaching. Pressure from students for increased allocations for higher education constitutes a possible risk of budget realignment from pre-university education to higher education, putting at risk the reforms already underway aiming to strengthen the pre-university education.

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, continue to face exclusion due to poverty, structural barriers and discrimination. A 2017 report from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Bank revealed that the percentage of Roma children attending primary education was 66 per cent (same for boys and girls) compared to the national enrolment rate of 95 per cent in primary education (*UNESCO, 2017*).

For some time, out-of-pocket expenditures, particularly on books, has been a financial barrier for poor and vulnerable families keeping their children in school. UNICEF advocacy bore positive results in 2018 as part of measures to fill the equity gaps and ensure the right of all children to free education. This resulted in all girls and boys in grades 1–4 benefitting from free textbooks, with plans to extend this result to higher grades in the coming years.

In the past year, UNICEF continued to support the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MoESY) to strengthen the policy framework and institutional mechanisms for inclusive education. As part of these efforts, UNICEF provided technical assistance to develop a roadmap for inclusive education in line with the Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (CRPD) General Comment on Inclusive Education. UNICEF also contributed towards changes in the updated law on pre-university education, ensuring increasing school autonomy and school leadership, as well as a new administrative instruction facilitating the reintegration into school of children who drop out.

The UNICEF technical expertise provided for pre-school education resulted in the development and approval by MoESY of a series of regulatory documents. These included a Curricula Programme for children aged 4–5 years, Pre-school Teacher Standards, and a Framework for Pre-school Assessment, with approval expected in 2019.. The documents approved so far, which include elements of educating children with concepts of human rights, gender equality, non-discrimination, are part of the national pre-school system quality framework. As such, they have a national reach and constitute a direct contribution towards improved national pre-school quality.

Furthermore, UNICEF also supported MoESY with a review of the competency-based curriculum for grades 1–9, aiming at addressing challenges and drawbacks of the current curriculum and its implementation. The review highlighted issues of gender stereotypes that should support the Ministry to adapt the curricula into an intentional mechanism to promote the culture of non-discrimination and equality between boys and girls.

In partnership with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), UNICEF and the Government initiated an assessment of the education system. Together with the review of the current sector strategy, the knowledge generated by these reviews will better inform and support the development of the new sector strategy 2020–2025.

A skilled teaching workforce is essential for safe, inclusive and supportive learning environments. Training programmes developed with UNICEF assistance were accredited by MoESY and are now part of the Government's professional development programme. With a cohort of 675 teachers trained in 2018, some 25,000 children of preschool and primary education in four regions of Albania (Berat, Durrës, Korça and Tirana) benefitted from improved child-centred teaching methodologies on inclusive learning, drop-out prevention and disaster risk reduction.

A communication campaign #myschoolyourschool against discriminatory social norms towards Roma and Egyptian children in four municipalities (Berat, Durrës, Korça and Shkodra) was implemented by UNICEF in close collaboration with MoESY, regional departments of education and civil society organizations working for Roma inclusion. A shift from solely awareness activities to a sustainable approach aiming at changing attitudes, knowledge and behaviours of all actors was pursued successfully. The campaign contributed to 10 per cent improvement (36 per cent to 46 per cent) in the awareness of Roma parents of their responsibility for enrolling children in school, particularly girls, and an even larger increase of non-Roma parents approving of their children developing friendship with Roma children (15 per cent to 36 per cent). The initiative reached around 4,000 children, 8,000 parents, 400 teachers and 4,000 community members.

UNICEF continued to convene central and local government stakeholders and make them aware of the importance of the issue of out-of-school children. In 2018, a new instruction on how schools should report dropouts was prepared with UNICEF assistance. In addition, 2,000 service providers in the areas of health, education, police, social services, and child protection units, among others, were reached with awareness-raising messages on implementation of the mechanism for out-of-school children. A new three ministry agreement on identification of out-of-school children was signed by the Ministry of Interior, MoHSP and MoESY as a direct contribution of UNICEF programming. In parallel, to increase the demand from communities and parents for education participation, an awareness campaign was conducted. It reached

15,000 parents with children and provided direct support to 760 parents of vulnerable groups, informing them on the procedures for enrolling children in school.

Goal area 3: Every child is protected from violence and exploitation

In the last couple of years, child protection and justice system reform in Albania have progressed through the adoption of the new Law on the Rights and Protection of the Child, and the first Code of Criminal Justice for Children. The former establishes a broader integrated child protection system with services that meet the needs of all boys and girls and helps them grow in a safe and inclusive environment, free from violence, neglect, abuse and exploitation. The latter lays the foundations for a child-friendly justice system accessible to child offenders, child victims and witnesses of crime that respects their integrity and dignity, uses detention as a last measure and supports their reintegration into their communities.

UNICEF took the lead in the development of secondary legislation required for efficient application of the new approaches that the new laws have introduced for child protection and justice for children. The reformed legal base was completed, with 23 by-laws drafted in collaboration with local legal expertise. Of these, eight have been approved and the remaining are awaiting the approval of the Council of Ministers. This secondary legislation further details the actions that child protection and justice for children professionals, as well as those from other sectors, need to take to ensure the rights and protection of the child in implementation of the laws. Furthermore, the sub-legislation describes procedures for handling child protection cases, indicates the criteria for appointment and recruitment of child protection workers, determines the data that professionals need to record and details how diversion, alternative sentences and re-education and reintegration should work for children in contact with the law.

Meanwhile, the two national strategies in the area of child protection (National Agenda for Child Rights 2017–2020 and Justice for Children Strategy 2018–2021), both developed with the direct support of UNICEF, have advanced the legislative framework and laid out the concrete steps and resources needed to implement the new legal responsibilities throughout different sectors.

This year marked a few additional important results achieved as a result of UNICEF's convening role and strengthened partnerships. Firstly, UNICEF's renewed strong partnership with the Parliament of Albania supported the re-establishment of the bipartisan caucus Friends of Children. With the support of the caucus and the Speaker of Parliament, UNICEF, in partnership with UNHCR, significantly advanced the work to end children's statelessness in Albania. The mapping of people at risk of statelessness identified that the overwhelming majority (97 per cent) of such persons in Albania were children, triggering a thorough analysis of the legal barriers playing a role in this phenomenon. Together with the local civil society partners, a set of legislative changes to the Civil Registry Law was developed and swiftly approved by Parliament in 2018. As an immediate result, at least 1,000 children who were without legal documentation and at risk of becoming stateless, benefitted from these improvements in legislation, enabling them to obtain identity documents and gain access to their basic rights to health, education and other social services. Furthermore, UNICEF supported Parliament to review a set of amendments to the Law on Domestic Violence from the child rights and protection perspective. These amendments were adopted by Parliament in 2018.

UNICEF's child protection work around one of its flagship components - ending violence

against children and the overall gender-based violence agenda - witnessed noticeable progress. In this regard, UNICEF provided direct support to the National Child Helpline ALO116, which continued to play a key role in addressing the harmful practice of under-reporting of cases of violence against children and strengthening the case referral service. As a result of ALO116 awareness-raising work, the number of reported cases of violence against children captured by the State Police and child protection workers increased from 2,123 in 2017 to 2,269 in 2018. Besides initial online direct counselling, ALO116 refers cases to the relevant competent authorities based on agreements that have been signed with the State Police, the State Agency on the Rights and Protection of the Child, and State Social Services. In total, 1,027 such cases were processed by ALO116 in 2018.

Due to UNICEF's continuous advocacy on the right of children to grow in the care of a nurturing family environment, the Government initiated the gradual and full de-institutionalisation process of children living in public residential care, with an Action Plan. In the first phase of this Plan, the assessment of 230 children living in nine institutions in Albania is being carried out. As the child care reform unfolds, UNICEF continued to play its role as convener and technical advisor to the Government with the objective of ending the institutionalisation of children in the country.

To improve child protection sectoral coordination among development partners, and with national Government and local municipality authorities, UNICEF initiated and led the child protection coordination working group of international organisations in Albania. This comprises UNICEF, Save the Children, World Vision, Terre des Hommes, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Presence in Albania and the Council of Europe. This coordination function helped to end a fragmented project-driven approach and enabled systems strengthening and support to the State Agency for Child Rights and Protection. Further, this coordination allowed for the establishment of a technical hub to manage knowledge, research and data on child protection in Albania. In 2018, the coordination group supported Government in implementing the Law on the Rights and Protection of the Child, the Children's Agenda 2017–2020 and, most importantly, the capacity building of some 223 child protection workers currently deployed across the country at the municipal level.

The foundations for systematic programme intervention in the area of online protection of children in Albania were laid during the year. UNICEF initiated the process of obtaining new evidence and sex- and age-disaggregated data on children's online experiences and assessing the legal and normative framework, as well as human resource capacities to address violence against children online. As part of the Global Kids Online initiative, which aims to generate evidence on the impact of Internet upon children's lives, a national study on Albanian children's experiences on the Internet was finalised. It will be published in early 2019. The study provides a comprehensive picture of boys' and girls' experiences in using the Internet, the opportunities, practices and skills related to it, and the risks and vulnerability factors that affect their rights and well-being. In addition, a national assessment of the legal and normative framework, as well as human capacities to address violence against children online, was undertaken and the findings will form a baseline and basis for a full-scale programme intervention around online protection of children.

A strategic partnership was established with the newly created National Cyber Security Authority to advance child rights in the digital environment. Building on this partnership, and with the support of MoESY, UNICEF during the past year advanced its direct work with children, adolescents and teachers, reaching out to 300 school children from public schools across the country who were trained as peer educators on Internet safety. A peer educator's

manual that was also developed is going to become part of the extra-curricular educational tools to be utilised by MoESY in the future. The importance of this intervention lies in its sustainability and as a peer-to-peer driven model fully in-line with the core principle of empowering boys and girls to become change makers themselves.

In November, UNICEF organized the VIRAL Summit in Tirana, bringing together more than 250 participants, prominent child protection experts, senior government representatives, and public and private sector groups including Interpol, Facebook, Google, Microsoft and the UNICEF Office of Research in Innocenti. The event's key result was to exchange best international practices on the benefits and risks children may encounter when using the Internet and how the Government and the private sector in Albania – particularly the information technology industry - need to forge a new partnership for providing solutions to risks faced by children online. The event created high-level political momentum, public recognition and the culmination of the announcement of UNICEF's next initiative to create child- and family-friendly free Wi-Fi zones in the capital, together with the Municipality of Tirana.

A Communication for Development Roadmap addressing online violence against children was developed. The roadmap draws from the evidence generated around children's experiences of internet usage conducted in 2018 and aims to address the socio-cultural factors underpinning different forms of online violence affecting children in Albania.

UNICEF's direct technical assistance provided to the Ministry of Justice resulted in a multi-year National Strategy with a budgeted Action Plan on Justice for Children that was endorsed by the Government. In addition, UNICEF supported the Academy of Security at the Ministry of Interior to advance the specialisation of police forces around the handling of cases of children, through a training-of-trainers, resulting in enhanced capacities of 180 police officers across the country.

UNICEF's role as a convener and promoter of South-South cooperation on issues of justice for children was further employed and recognised in 2018. The 10th international conference of the European Forum of Restorative Justice in Albania brought together professionals from 47 countries, serving as a learning, networking and advocacy opportunity to 60 Albanian professionals. Similarly, the Albanian professionals interacted with other countries' professionals in Europe and Central Asia to collectively develop Child-Friendly Legal Assistance guidelines for attorneys.

Owing to UNICEF's advocacy efforts with INSTAT, the 2018 Crime Statistics Report now publishes official statistics on children in conflict with the law, as registered by the police, prosecution, courts and prisons.

Triggered by the increasing number of refugees and migrants intercepted in the border-crossing points in early 2018, a dedicated team from various UN agencies collaborated to develop a Rapid Needs Assessment Report. UNICEF ensured integration of a child protection lenses in the process and made use of the findings in its planning and intervention response processes.

Goal area 5: 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 the nation's human and economic development. The existing 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 and coverage limited. No specific programmes exist to ensure income security for children, although many are covered by programmes targeting poor and vulnerable households.

The National Protection Strategy 2015–2020 sets out the Government’s vision for an integrated social protection system, based on universal principles, capable of protecting all Albanian people from falling into poverty, better managing risks and shocks and enhancing their capacity throughout their life-cycle. Public expenditure on social assistance continued to be a small fraction of overall social protection public spending and is not based on a thorough analysis of impact and needs of the most vulnerable groups of the population.

In 2018, UNICEF continued to support MoHSP in strengthening the normative framework with secondary legislation that will guide implementation of the laws and development of social care services at both the national and the local level. Fourteen by-laws were drafted with UNICEF support and validated by national stakeholders, while nine have been approved and the rest awaiting approval.

The new Social Care Services Law, adopted in 2016, has strengthened the role of municipalities in assessing needs and planning and delivering services at the community level. According to the Law, a social fund will serve as a dedicated funding mechanism for municipalities to deliver social services and envisions a combination of funding sources from the state budget, local government revenues, and extra-budgetary replenishments through donor funding. Considering the vulnerabilities of municipalities in generating income, in 2018 UNICEF provided technical support to the Ministry of Finance and Economy and MoHSP to ensure sustainable resourcing of the social fund from the state central budget. Implementation modalities and a financing formula were validated and are awaiting approval.

UNICEF advocated and supported INSTAT to introduce a EUROSTAT module on child deprivation, as part of its annual survey consistent with European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions. As a result, data on child non-monetary poverty and deprivation were collected and will be processed during 2019, allowing for comparative analysis.

UNICEF engaged with 11 local municipalities (Durrës, Korça, Librazhd, Malesia e Madhe, Maliq, Mallakaster, Saranda, Shijak, Shkodra, Tirana and Vlora) to build their capacities in planning and delivering social services. Some 200 municipal officials were trained and received on-the-job mentoring on the new legislation on social care services. In addition, 130 municipal officials were equipped with the skills and necessary tools to develop and implement social care plans for poor and vulnerable families and children. Four of these municipalities (Durrës, Korça, Tirana and Vlora) approved social care plans that are budgeted and partially financed through local finances, while two other municipalities (Librazhd and Shkodra) finalized costed social care plans that are ready for approval.

UNICEF is committed to continuing its support to Government with the planning, developing and financing of the social care workforce. To this end, in 2018, it prepared a case study on this workforce in Albania that was presented at the UNICEF Regional Conference on Strengthening the Social Workforce (Bucharest, November 2018).

In partnership with MoHSP, UNICEF initiated a diagnostic study to map the social assistance

transfers and subsidies for children, and how the various social transfers are planned and used to help reduce barriers for children and families to access social services. Preliminary data indicated a concerning decrease in the number of families and children benefitting from cash assistance, as well as limited integration between the different policies around transfers and services. It also indicated the lack of an effective system to monitor the impact of such policies in reducing child poverty. The data from the study will be key for UNICEF Albania to advocate with national authorities to make the necessary improvements.

In 2018, Albania joined the Western Balkans U-Report initiative aiming to increase youth civic engagement in issues that concern them and their communities. UNICEF launched U-Report in May and built a community of 4,900 U-reporters. Around 20 per cent are adolescents, with an almost equal representation of boys and girls in all 61 municipalities in the country. Since the launch, U-Report in Albania has completed seven surveys: three at the country level, two regional and two global. While drafting the national Law on Youth, MoESY recognised U-Report as the main tool to consult young people on important issues such as the age group to be covered, youth volunteerism and financing of youth groups and organisations. About 990 young people participated in each of the polls, supporting the public consultation process of the Youth Law.

New evidence around vulnerabilities that affect the most marginalised children in the country was produced in 2018. A comprehensive Situation Analysis of Children with Disabilities in Albania, *We all matter!*, revealed a number of staggering violations of children's rights and describes the difficulties children face daily. The report's findings cut across a multiple range of domains and suggest immediate actions that can no longer be left unattended.

While the country has made considerable advancements in the area of gender equality and reduction of gender-based violence, disparities, stereotypes and violence against women and girls persist. During the reporting period, UNICEF supported the finalization and launching of the Albania Knowledge, Attitudes and Perceptions Qualitative Study on Child Marriage, in collaboration with UNFPA. The study generated an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of child marriage among both Roma and non-Roma communities and reveals the deep-rooted social norms and harmful traditional practices. Most importantly, it raised the attention of high-level policymakers at the national level concerned with adolescent girls' education and removing barriers to their public participation. Significant efforts will be required in the coming years in achieving this goal and addressing child marriage practices in different communities in Albania.

A number of prominent actions were undertaken to mobilize boys and girls, men and women to convey messages of gender equality, elimination of gender-based violence and against harmful practices such as child marriage. These joining the ORANGE YOUR WORLD #HearMeToo campaign of the UN Secretary-General, launching the DHS and Child Marriage Study during the 16 days of activism against violence against women and girls, and support for the Municipality of Berat to light the town centre in orange.

Part 3: Lessons learned and constraints

Lessons learned and constraints

A slow-down in programme implementation this year was a consequence of the re-organization

of central Government following the parliamentary elections of summer 2017. This transient climate is expected to continue for a short while: in December, there was another cabinet reshuffle in which, among others, the Minister of Education, Sports and Youth, Minister of Finance and Economy, and Deputy Prime Minister, who have direct influence on UNICEF programmatic activities, were replaced.

In recognition of the strong drive towards EU accession, throughout 2018 UNICEF continued to support the Government in moving forward reforms in the areas of justice, social policy, education, health and statistics. The main focus was to progressively align national legislation, policies and action plans with EU accession priorities and the 2030 Agenda.

Data gaps remained a critical barrier to assessment of the extent to which these new laws and policies have been implemented, and, most importantly, if progress has been achieved in the realization of rights. There is a lack of availability and use of data, especially concerning vulnerable groups in the population, as well as at the sub-national level.

In addition, the low budget allocation for health, education, child protection and social care is 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. The ongoing student protests demanding an increase in the budget for education is indicative of the widespread awareness of under-financing of key social services in the country.

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. Throughout 2018, UNICEF engaged in identifying and proposing solutions to address key bottlenecks regarding the lack of coordination and defined accountabilities, missing financial investments, and low workforce capacities. As a positive example, UNICEF is supporting the municipalities not only to develop social care plans, but also to cost them and make proper analysis of the local budgets to finances such plans. Four municipalities have successfully approved and budgeted a three-year social care plan. Interventions at local level have been complemented with UNICEF's parallel efforts at central level to find solutions for sustainable financing of social care services. A feasible financial mechanism was proposed where funds from the central social protection budget are channelled to local government to support the social care plans. The experience gained indicated that stronger coordination between central and local government is needed to ensure municipalities receive adequate support for implementation of the new laws. Cross-sectoral initiatives around disability, juvenile justice, de-institutionalisation and decentralisation require strengthened multidisciplinary planning and coordination.

The Child Protection Units and the Needs Assessment and Referral Units are two mechanisms introduced at the municipal level and constitute key positive developments for the child protection and social care systems. In order to ensure that vulnerable families and children receive effective support and that the services are delivered in an integrated manner these structures need to be fully established nationwide. Under the new Law on Child Rights and Protection, the minimum requirement is for one child protection worker in every municipality and administrative unit with more than 3,000 children. However, there are currently only 223 child protection workers in Albania, of whom only 45 are hired full-time, and 78 have a background in social work. The existence of adequate capacities of the workforce is a key challenge that requires a dual approach of strengthening the academic preparation for new cohorts of social workers and the provision of on-the-job training programmes for current staff to obtain the skills and competences to deliver on the new standards.

Even though Albania boasts a relatively well-developed set of laws governing the sector policy and service delivery for all children, limited mechanisms are in place to align multi-sector policymaking to promote holistic development of children younger than six years. An institutional anchor to coordinate early childhood development across sectors does not yet exist, and there is a lack of definition of responsibilities between central and local level, following the decentralisation reform process. While the reform has given increased powers to municipalities to plan and administer pre-school services, this process has not been accompanied with the needed financial transfers and mechanisms for implementation.

In 2018, UNICEF Albania committed to supporting the Municipality of Korca in designing a municipal framework for a child-friendly city, aligned with the UNICEF Global Framework. This work, to be continued in 2019, could become an entry point for introducing a more cross-sectoral perspective in planning and delivering services for children at the local level.

With regard to justice for children, a steady reduction in the number of children deprived of their liberty was recorded, along with a gradual acknowledgement of the rehabilitative philosophy in criminal justice for children introduced by the new Code on Criminal Justice for Children. Interventions were guided by the results of a Multi-Country Evaluation of the Impact of Juvenile Justice System Reforms, which identified determinants for a successful approach to interventions in this field, demonstrating the importance of evidence-based programming.

In 2018, UNICEF expanded its child protection programme to address the risk of exposure to violence by children using the internet. As an emerging issue of child protection, a lack of knowledge on this subject and lack of capacities of professionals have been key constraints in implementation. To fill the gap, UNICEF invested in generating knowledge and evidence about children's rights in the digital environment and is spearheading work in this area in both the country and region.

For the legislative and policy reforms to have a lasting positive impact on children's lives, the scope should be taken further and be used to generate a shift in perception in Albanian society. In such a context, not only policy makers but also the wider community and particularly professionals working with children - teachers, doctors, law enforcement officials and social workers – would view children as individual right 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.

The Government's process of reporting to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has been a positive step in this regard. It has evolved into a vibrant national process, encompassing diverse actors within Government, civil society, inter-governmental organizations, and children themselves. UNICEF used the reporting process as an instrument to foster awareness and understanding of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, its optional protocols, and the Concluding Observation of the Committee to 1) stimulate a constructive dialogue among various state institutions on child rights issues; 2) encourage an accord on ways to use common statistical data and indicators to assess the situation of children; and 3) reinforce UNICEF's relations with government, NGOs and children, and strengthen its position as a leader in advocating for a participatory and transparent process of reporting on the realization of child rights. The momentum of high visibility around child rights issues will be sustained in 2019, with UNICEF advocating for improved implementation and

better results in the lives of children.

Recognizing its unique oversight role over accountability, the Albanian Parliament emerged as an important partner of UNICEF in the strengthening of governance for children. The reactivated group of parliamentarians, the Friends of Children, was vocal in 2018 on behalf of children and accelerated legislative changes that benefit child victims of domestic violence and those at risk of statelessness. The involvement of a dedicated focal point for cooperation with Parliament and the continuous interactions of UNICEF programme specialists with its Members transformed the formal agreement concluded in January 2018 between UNICEF and Parliament into a coordinated and coherent collaboration. Effective parliamentary engagement is a long-term process that needs to be integrated regularly into UNICEF's programming.

The leadership changes at the People's Advocate and the Commissioner for Protection from Discrimination were supported with a renewed commitment of UNICEF for fully-fledged collaboration with these key human rights institutions in monitoring child rights issues, investigating violations and offering a space for dialogue between children and the state. UNICEF advocacy was successful in increasing the budget for the Commissioner for Protection from Discrimination, enabling this institution to implement its mandate with intensified involvement in reported violations. This approach constituted a successful case to be replicated for other entities that struggle to fulfil their mandate due to limited financial resources. The People's Advocate has similarly become distinctively vocal in addressing policies and processes that threaten children's well-being. In synergy with UNICEF's voice and advocacy messages, the People's Advocate, as a direct accountability mechanism, undertook efforts to fill the gaps in checks and balances and to support child-targeted processes of remedy and reform when things have gone wrong or procedures or policies are inadequate.

The United Nations agencies continued to face challenges in direct cash transfer to government partners through the harmonised approach to cash transfers (HACT). There is need for capacity strengthening of government partners over HACT and enabling UNICEF and other UN agencies to complement the current dominant modality of programme delivery through NGOs or directly sub-contracted expertise with direct cash transfer to Government.

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