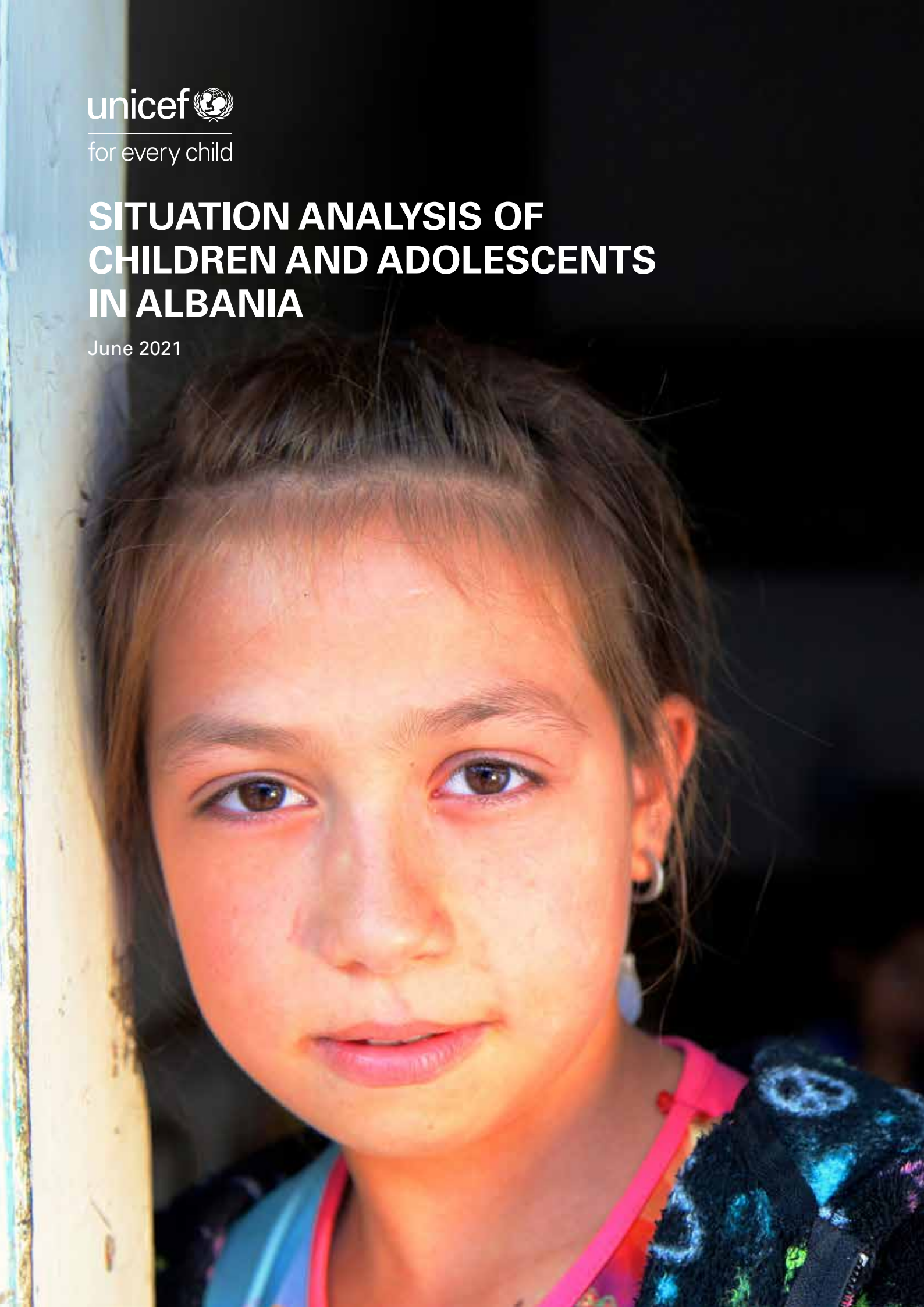




SITUATION ANALYSIS OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS IN ALBANIA

June 2021



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This report would not have been possible without the support and cooperation of UNICEF Albania staff, particularly Elda Denaj who supported the process. Special thanks are owed to the local partners Ilir Gadeshi and Eliona Kulluri who contributed their own wide knowledge and experience to the process. Finally, thanks are due to all the key informants who gave their time freely, not just to provide data and information, but also to share their experiences, opinions and insight. In return we have tried to respect their confidentiality and have refrained from attributing direct statements to them in this report.

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The recommended citation:

Byrne K., Kulluri E., Gedeshi I., 2021. *Situation Analysis of Children and Adolescents in Albania*. UNICEF Albania, Tirana



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Acronyms and Abbreviations

ABR	Adolescent Birth Rate
ADHS	Albanian Demographic and Health Survey
ANC	Antenatal care
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all forms Against Women
CHIF	Compulsory Health Insurance Fund
CPR	European Council Country Progress Report
CRC	Committee on the Rights of the Child
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability
CSEA	Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse
ECE	Early Childhood Education
ESCS	Economic, Social and Cultural Status
EU	European Union
EU28	The Member Countries of the EU
Eurofound	European Foundation for Improvement of Living & Working Conditions
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organisation
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GP	General Physician
GRETA	Group of Experts on Action Against Trafficking in Human Beings
HBSC	Health Behaviour in School-Age Children
HDI	Human Development Index
HIV / AIDS	Human Immunodeficiency Virus. It is the virus that can lead to Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome/AIDS.
ICF	International Classification of Functioning Disability and Health
ICMW	International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IDM	Institute for Democracy and Mediation
IEP	Institute for Environmental Policy
INSTAT	National Institute of Statistics
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
KAP	Knowledge, Attitudes and Practice
LEO	Local Education Office
LGBTI	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transexual and Intersex
LGU	Local Government Unit

MCH	Mother and Child Health
MESY	Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth
MFE	Ministry of Finance and Economy
MHSP	Ministry of Health and Social Protection
NACR	National Agenda for Child Rights
NCCRP	National Council on Children's Rights and Protection
NE	Economic Aid (Ndihma Ekonomike)
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
NSPS	National Social Protection Strategy
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
OSCE	Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PHC	Primary Health Care
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
RED	Regional Education Directorate
SACRP	State Agency for Child Rights and Protection
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal(s)
SECTT	Sexual Exploitation of Children in Travel and Tourism
SSS	State Social Services
STI	Sexually Transmitted Infection
TALIS	Teacher and Learning International Survey
TAR	Territorial Administrative Reform
TLAS	Tirana Legal Aid Society
UN	United Nations
UNCRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNECE	UN Economic Commission for Europe
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UPR	Universal Periodic Review
VAWG	Violence against Women and Girls
VET	Vocational Education and Training
WB	World Bank
WHO	World Health Organisation

Overarching Summary

Albania has made enormous development gains over the past two decades and has moved from being a poor, isolated country to one with a middle-income, high development status. It has enjoyed a relatively stable political environment and consistent economic growth and has now been accepted as a candidate country for European Union (EU) membership. The country has committed itself to all major international human rights treaties and successive governments have supported reform initiatives aimed at transition towards an open, democratic and pluralist society. Regardless that the rights-based legislative and policy frameworks are in place, these do not translate easily into practical action. Implementation and enforcement frequently lag behind policy and systemic and structural barriers to full access to entitlements, especially for vulnerable populations, are both acute and chronic. **Inequality appears to be an inherent element of the Albanian development model.** Economic growth has been accompanied by unemployment, low wages, job insecurity and increasing migration of young people. Development discourse in Albania tends to emphasise regional, and rural and urban, disparities but one of the major divides in Albanian society is between those who live in poverty and those who do not. Family poverty may manifest itself differently in different regions, and the gap between economic quintiles may vary over time, but **the full extent of family poverty is significant when viewed overall.**

Human rights values are not yet embedded in Albanian society. **Albanians register high levels of mistrust in government institutions and low levels of engagement in social issues.**

The population is ageing, and social norms tend to reflect traditional, conservative and patriarchal values. Social cohesion is strong, and communities tend towards homogeneity, but difference tends to be associated with stigma. Roma and Egyptian families¹ endure particularly high levels of prejudice, discrimination and segregation that keep them living in poverty and deprivation. Similar is the situation with people (including children) with disabilities.

¹ This text seeks to comply with the European Union and the Council of Europe's adopted usage of the term Roma. The term, as used in official EU, Council of Europe and Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) documents, includes Roma, Egyptian, Traveller, Sinti and other groups often inaccurately described as 'Gypsies'. For readability purposes, the adjective Roma in this document refers to the Roma people as a whole or to groups or individuals, e.g. Roma children, Roma families, while Romani refers to languages and culture. Readers should note that the use of the term Roma is not intended to deny the diversity that exists across Roma, Egyptian, Traveller and other groups.



Commitment to family is strong and traditional extended families constitute the core building blocks of communities. This aspect is positive overall, but it is important to note that the family and community environments are also those where women tend to be undervalued, violence is tolerated, and children have low status. The social perception of family obligations with regard to care of children, the elderly and individuals with disability undoubtedly reduces demand for proper services and facilities, but it also constrains women within traditional roles, restricting their potential contribution to society more widely and reducing a key constituent for social change. **It is important that efforts are invested heavily in changing the social norms about the benefits of adopting a child-rights approach, particularly challenging public attitudes towards Roma, children with disability and women and girls.** It will be particularly important to harness women's potential as community leaders by challenging existing patriarchal stereotypes, amplifying women's voices and actively supporting women's leadership, not just in relation to children's rights, but in national development discourse generally.

Emigration reduces Albania's social capital even further. Although remittances make a significant annual contribution to the national exchequer, and provide a safety net for many poor families, the continual drain of young men and women acts to suppress social change and impede innovation, business entrepreneurship, civic engagement and community development, thus reinforcing the drivers of migration for the next round of school-leavers. Many government services, including health and education, face significant personnel crises as the existing cohort of qualified and experienced professionals age out of public service. While poverty and unemployment are undoubtedly the primary factors in most Albanians' decision to emigrate, the increasing numbers of families leaving implies a general dissatisfaction with the country as a place to raise children and a desire for a better quality of life for the next generation. The same downward spiral can be observed in Albania's pattern of internal migration too, with those who leave remote rural communities for the towns and cities. Increasing urbanisation is exacerbating existing regional disparities, and rural families are increasingly isolated from health, education and protection services. More research is needed to establish the non-income-related drivers of migration, internal and external, in order to develop a child-focused response that supports and strengthens Albanian families, wherever they live.

The country's significant economic gains are offset by extremely high levels of foreign debt, which constrain social investment. The current model of industrial development does not seem geared to mitigate against the high levels of unemployment and family poverty, while the existing wage structure and high level of informal employment mean that employment is not a guaranteed path out of poverty. In these circumstances, it is vital that levels of Economic Aid for families are increased until, coupled with improved access to quality social care services, it functions as a genuine poverty reduction tool. The whole model of social protection may need to be reviewed in light of Albania's slow and sporadic progress towards full employment and economic independence, as well as the potential increase of poverty in the coming years as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The greatest practical obstacle to realising children's rights in Albania is government's consistent refusal to invest in children's targeted services, even within the constraints of the national finances. Successive governments over many years have under-funded health, education, protection and welfare services, consistently allocating budgets below the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) member countries, EU member states and regional averages, even as Gross Domestic Product (GDP) have risen and the country has achieved upper-middle-income status. This deficit has inevitably eroded infrastructure, stifled innovation, lowered quality standards, encouraged petty corruption and incrementally reduced the fitness for purpose of services. The next few years are likely to be particularly difficult for children and families as the country copes with an anticipated drop in GDP as a result of the global pandemic. It is likely that services for children, which are not robust, will struggle to respond and **it is important to ensure not just that there is no further erosion of child-related budgets, but that the national pattern of underinvestment in children is reversed and that services for them and their families are protected, expanded and strengthened.** It is vital that a comprehensive child-focused budget analysis is undertaken as soon as possible to feed into the emergency response, rehabilitation and post-Covid-19 planning. At the same time, the pandemic has demonstrated the government's real capacity to respond and demonstrated clearly the strengths and weaknesses of the various child related services.

Another long-standing obstacle to provision of quality social services is the slow progress made in developing and implementing a coherent, consistent model of devolution that supports local authorities to meet their delegated responsibilities to plan, procure and provide a comprehensive, portfolio of relevant child-centred services. Municipalities now have greater responsibility for service delivery but have not yet been delegated the resources or authority to fulfil their mandate. The financial resources available to Local Government Units (LGUs) are inadequate and the social fund mechanism is still not fully functional. Central government allocates only about one percent of GDP to LGUs,² the lowest level in the Western Balkans.³ Most municipalities have a low tax base so their capacity to deliver quality public services is limited and likely to remain so for some considerable time. It is important that this bottleneck in resource allocation is unblocked and that mechanisms are put in place rapidly to ensure fair, timely distribution of the funding and resources required to ensure proper provision of child and family services equitably across municipalities.

Divergent sectoral approaches also make it difficult at the field level to plan, develop and manage the kind of holistic, child-centred, cost-effective approach required to deliver children's rights. Planning is still hampered by lack of robust data, weak coordination mechanisms, and insufficient consultation with appropriate stakeholders. The sectoral and municipal management information systems are either under-invested or designed to produce data on institutional performance, while data on the situation of the most vulnerable children and adolescents is almost non-existent, leaving these groups of children invisible and their needs unmet.

The weak and under-resourced coordinating and accountability mechanisms for children at national and local levels, combined with an ingrained silo-type approach by most decision makers and professionals, militate against development of responsive measures and shut down dialogue with communities, families and other concerned stakeholders. There is little culture of demand or complaint within communities and neither civil society nor the media are yet strong enough to hold government to account at the local or national level. **Horizontal and vertical quality control and accountability systems need to be strengthened and extended through establishment of open organisational cultures with an active commitment to listening to children, adolescents and parents.**

Whereas all stakeholders acknowledge the need for greater strategic coordination between levels of government, the need to strengthen and extend dialogue and engagement with civil society is less clearly recognised. Although non-government organisations (NGOs) are envisaged as a major provider of services for children at the local level, the legal framework regulating their access to funding remains incomplete. As a result, most social service facilities are funded by international bodies on a project-by-project basis and the concern exists that donor funding will inevitably decline as Albania approaches full EU membership. Government has appointed the Agency for the Support of Civil Society to provide financial support for civil society, but only limited progress has been made in implementing the 2015 Road Map for the Albanian Government Policy Towards a More Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development,⁴ the strategic document guiding government policies towards civil society. **Any strategy aiming to improve and extend child-related service provision has to include strengthening of civil society and unleashing their potential, not just as contractors, but as innovators, advocates, entrepreneurs and watchdogs.** This arrangement may require a redefinition of its relationship with statutory authorities. Furthermore, given the likely financial constraints on government action over the next years, it makes sense that **works should be strengthened and expanded into other constituencies of support for children's rights in the country, including private sector** (businesses).

² European Commission, 2019a. *Staff Working Document: Albania 2019*. Report SWD, 215, 2019 (*hereafter*, CPR 2019). Brussels, available at <https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20190529-albania-report.pdf>

³ The Western Balkans usually refers to Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia or various combinations of these.

⁴ CPR, 2019. *op. cit.*

To sum up, despite real commitment to children by government and wider society in Albania, much remains to be done in terms of realising children's rights in the country. Adequate legal and policy frameworks are mostly in place, but service planning and implementation have been consistently hampered by chronic underinvestment in children's services, as well as failure to allocate resources and authority to the appropriate duty-bearers. This has led to declining numbers of experienced personnel, decaying infrastructure, insufficient facilities, equipment and supplies, poor management, and falling professional standards. This situation should be viewed critically against the fact that Albania faces critical threats in terms of potential natural disasters and environmental and public health hazards. For immediate and long-term results, much will depend on the willingness of government and other stakeholders to acknowledge and tackle outstanding blockages that have held back child-centred development for some time.



CHAPTER 1

Introduction

UNICEF Albania commissioned the present study in order to obtain an independent analysis of the situation of children and adolescent and their rights in Albania that can be used by all stakeholders in the country to identify and address barriers to, and opportunities for, full achievement of every right for every child. The study is intended to inform UNICEF’s programme planning and guide policy advocacy and partnership efforts. It is also intended to contribute to development of the new Country Programme Document, the United Nations (UN) Common Country Assessment and the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework. The study aims to contribute to shaping the national development agenda and accelerating achievement of the country’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)⁵ with equity.

The report adopts a human rights-based approach⁶ that puts the child at the centre and filters analysis through the lens of article 2.1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC),⁷ which guarantees: “the rights set forth in this Convention to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child’s or his or her parent’s or legal guardian’s race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status⁸”. While examining the situation of all children in Albania, the present report focuses on those who are most disadvantaged.



⁵ Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Resolution 70/1 adopted by the 70th meeting of the United Nations General Assembly on 25 September 2015 available at <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld>

⁶ As outlined in Garde M., Parameswaran S., Tso S-YK, et al, 2019. *Core Guidance: New Generation Situation Analysis* UNICEF, May 2019. NY.

⁷ Convention on the Rights of the Child adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on 20 November 1989 hereafter ‘the Convention’ or UNCRC. For the full text see <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>

⁸ See Hodgkin R., Newell P., 2002. *Implementation Handbook for the Convention on the Rights of the Child*. UNICEF. New York. pp. 19–38.

The methodology includes:

- A desk review of studies, surveys, statistics and data on legislation, policies and programmes produced by the Government of Albania, the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), OECD, Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), EU bodies, UN agencies, academic institutions, NGOs and other sources. The report incorporates official government data and analysis, supplemented by documented evidence from independent sources.
- Semi-structured interviews with key informants from government, civil society and academia, and consultations with key UNICEF Albania staff. Input from key informants was triangulated with data from other sources. No one statement in this report can be attributed to a single key informant.

The research base related to child and adolescent's rights in Albania is fragmented, inconsistent and non-comparable. The authors prioritised post-2015 research, but drew on earlier studies when no later data were available. Where possible, analysis was disaggregated by age, gender, ethnicity and region (though a significant proportion of national data is insufficiently disaggregated, particularly by ethnicity). Every attempt was made to achieve a fair balance between the perspectives of government and civil society, though time and Coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19) constraints limited our cohort of key respondents. Parents' and communities' perspectives in particular are not sufficiently represented, although key informants spoke with us as parents and concerned citizens, as well as in representing their formal role. Covid-19 also made impossible direct consultation with children. Thus, the report drew instead upon a recent review of 23 studies⁹ of children's attitudes, opinions and experiences that involved direct participation of children. The data collection and analysis for the study were designed to comply at all times with UNICEF Procedures for Ethical Standards in Research, Evaluation, Data Collection and Analysis.

⁹ Cuninghame C., 2020. *Child Rights Issues in Child Participatory-Focused Documents – a Short Review*. UNICEF in Albania. UNICEF Albania recently undertook a review of 23 documents, published in Albania after 2016 that involved some level of participation by children. The authors of this SitAn. chose a post-2015 sample that included "*Children's World*"—A National Survey of Children's Well-Being Save the Children, Universiteti Marin Barletti, 2018. Tirana; Ministry Quality Department at World Vision Albania and Kosovo *Baseline & Action Research Report Youth Standing Up for Human Right in Albania*. World Vision (2019). Tirana. Stephenson P., 2018. *Children's Consultations on Child Friendly Materials Albanian National Child Rights and Protection Law 18 Findings and Recommendations* UNICEF Tirana. Observatory for the Rights of Children and Youth, 2018. *Mid-Term Implementation Report of the National Agenda for the Rights of Children*. UNICEF Albania. Tirana.

CHAPTER 2

Country Overview

2.1 DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

The population size of Albania in 2021 is 2,829,741, a slight decrease of 0.6 percent compared to 2020.¹⁰ The proportion of Albanians of age 0–17 years fell from 23 percent in 2016 to 21.2 percent in 2019.¹¹ In 2021, the age-group composition is: 5.1 percent are of age 0–4 years; 5.7 percent, 5–9 years; 5.7 percent, 11–14 years; and 6.7 percent 15–19 years. In 2021, the youth dependency ratio (between the number of persons younger than the working age of 0–14 years and the number of working age, 15–64 years) decreased from 24.6 percent in 2020 to 24.2 percent, while the old age dependency ratio (number of persons above working age to the number of working age) increased, from 21.6 percent to 22.3 percent over the same period. The sex ratio at birth is 107, which indicates that for every 100 born girls, 107 boys are born. This ratio is higher than the natural ratio, which is 105.¹²

Albania's demographic trend reflects growing urbanisation—the rural population declined by 2.4 percent in 2017,¹³ faster than in neighbouring countries or the EU (0.7%)—though it retains a strong rural base: in 2018, about 40 percent of the Albanian population lived in a rural area, compared with the OECD average of 22 percent.¹⁴ National Institute of Statistics (INSTAT) data indicate that Tirana prefecture now encompasses 32.2 percent of the total population, and only Tirana and Durres experienced population growth in 2020, while the other regions experienced a decline. This change is partly due to a decrease of in the birth rate from 2008 to 2018.



¹⁰ Unless otherwise stated, figures are from INSTAT *Population of Albania* (1 January 2021), available at <http://www.instat.gov.al/media/8305/population-on-1-january-2021.pdf>. Pre-2015 figures are based on data from the *Population and Housing Census 2011*. INSTAT, 2012. Tirana, available at <http://www.instat.gov.al/en/census/census-2011/census-data.aspx> quoted in Byrne K. *Analysis of policies and reforms affecting the situation of children in Albania*. UNICEF, 2014. Tirana available at http://www.unicef.org/albania/Analyses_of_policies_and_reforms_affecting_the_situation_of_children_Al2014.pdf

¹¹ INSTAT, 2021b. *Children, Adolescents and Youth-Focused Well-being Indicators 2016–2019*. Tirana, available at http://www.instat.gov.al/media/8433/instat_unicef_2021_statistics_publication_en.pdf

¹² INSTAT, 2021a. *Women and Men in Albania 2021*. Tirana, available at <http://www.instat.gov.al/media/8696/grate-dhe-burrat-ne-shqiperi-2021.pdf>

¹³ World Bank Data, available at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SPRUR.TOTL.ZG?locations=AL>

¹⁴ Noted in Maghnouj S., Fordham E., et al., 2020. *Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education: Albania*. OECD, Paris, available at <https://doi.org/10.1787/d267dc93-en>

According to the Albania Demographic and Health Survey 2017–2018 (ADHS 2018)¹⁵ the total fertility rate in Albania is 1.8 children per woman, which is below the 2.1 replacement-level fertility rate. Since the median age at first marriage for women between 30 and 49 years of age has remained practically unchanged for a decade, the falling birth rate is likely due to longer average birth intervals. It should be noted that the adolescent birth rate (ABR; the % of women of age 15–19 years who have begun childbearing) increased from 2.8 percent in 2009 to 3.5 percent in 2018. Also, infant mortality rates (under the age of 1) are slightly rising as INSTAT reports about 10.5 deaths per 1,000 births for boys and 9.5 for girls for year 2020.¹⁶

Migration is a significant factor in the country's population decline. INSTAT¹⁷ estimates that during the period 2011–2019 migration involved 22.1 percent of Albanian households, of which 29.8 percent migrated as a whole. More males than females migrated and the active group of the population (20–44 years) constituted 74.3 percent of the flux. Over the same time period, some 95,964 persons returned from emigration, more than 85 percent from Greece, Italy and Germany. However, more than one-third of them wish to emigrate again.

If policies are not introduced to address emigration and falling birth rates, the Albanian population is likely to continue its downward spiral. **Emigration of young adults inevitably reduces the national birth rate exponentially, but it has also negatively impacted the economy, social care mechanisms and family patterns, and impeded economic growth and development by eroding the country's social capital.** A recent survey¹⁸ found that both children and parents view migration as a positive choice. The decision of almost 60 percent of senior high-school students to study abroad¹⁹ reflects their evaluation of not just their economic prospects, but also the national education system.

Although INSTAT reports that the number of immigrants fell by 12.3 per cent in 2019, it noted²⁰ a 9.7 percent rise in the number of foreigners with residence permits in Albania in 2018, compared to 2017. This discrepancy is probably due to the rising number of asylum seekers in the country.

Albania recognises nine national minorities: Aromanian, Bosniak, Bulgarian, Egyptian, Greek, Macedonian, Montenegrin, Roma and Serbian. Only 8,301 Roma and 3,368 Egyptians were recorded in the census of 2011, a mere 0.42 percent of the population. In July 2012, the Council of Europe estimated that Roma constituted up to 3.5 per cent of the total population,²¹ while the Albanian National Strategy for Improving Roma Living Conditions 2015–2020 indirectly refers to more than 25,000 Roma people. The issue of the total count of the Roma population is not yet settled, and hopefully will be resolved with Census 2022.

2.2 GOVERNANCE AND POLITICAL ECONOMY

Albania is a parliamentary, multi-party democracy for which the 1998 Constitution provides the institutional framework of democratic governance. Legislative power is vested in the unicameral Parliament of Albania, known as the Assembly, comprising 140 representatives elected through a multi-party, proportional representation system. Although Albania has maintained a stable democracy for two decades, fractured Parliamentary proceedings²² can delay reform, impede legislative development

¹⁵ Institute of Statistics, Institute of Public Health, ICF, 2018. *Albania Demographic and Health Survey 2017–18*. Tirana, available at <https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FR348/FR348.pdf>

¹⁶ INSTAT, 2021a. *Women and Men in Albania 2021*. Op. cit.

¹⁷ INSTAT, IOM, 2021. *National Household Migration Survey in Albania*. Tirana, available at <http://www.instat.gov.al/en/publications/books/2021/national-household-migration-survey-in-albania/>

¹⁸ King R., Gedeshi I., 2020. *The actual and potential migration of students from Albania: a putative brain drain*. F. Ebert Foundation, available at <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/albanien/17258.pdf>

¹⁹ Ibid. The senior high schoolers were asked: "Where would you like to study?"

²⁰ See INSTAT, 2019. *Foreigners and Asylum Seekers in Albania*. August 2019, available at <http://instat.gov.al/media/6181/foreigners-and-asylum-seekers-2018.pdf>

²¹ Council of Europe *Estimates on Roma population in European countries* as listed in the Document prepared by the Support Team of the Special Representative of the Secretary General of the Council of Europe for Roma Issues Publications <https://www.coe.int/en/web/roma-and-travellers/publications>

²² CPR, 2019. op. cit.

and constrain oversight. An ad hoc group of parliamentarians, The Friends of Children Parliamentary Group, acts to initiate and support child rights-related legislation and to hold responsible institutions accountable for its implementation. The judiciary is independent of the executive and the legislature. Judicial reform is ongoing and the EU indicates that it is making progress, but slowly²³. A recent poll²⁴ found that the courts were seen as the least independent institution for the third year in a row. Albania is divided into twelve prefectures, which are further subdivided into 61 municipalities (first-level local government units, LGUs), owing to the latest Territorial Administrative Reform (TAR). The Reform was accompanied by the approval of a new law on local self-government, a new strategy for decentralization, and the devolution of new functions to the local level. The European Council Country Progress Report (CPR) for Albania 2019 notes that the TAR needs further consolidation.

Faced with the current challenges, **LGUs and other local stakeholders need to be capacitated in the preparation of evidence-based plans that address the needs of children, adolescents and their families; in the implementation, coordination and oversight of local service delivery arrangements; and in developing and executing efficient, effective and equitable local budgets.**

Over the last three decades, Albania has achieved upper-middle-income status. The country was ranked 69th on the 2020 Human Development Index (HDI),²⁵ putting it in the High Human Development category with a total score of 0.795, behind Greece (32nd), Montenegro (48th), Turkey (54th) and Serbia (64th). Albania's HDI score slips by almost eleven percent to 0.708 when adjusted for inequality, and drops seven places. The Gini coefficient for 2010–2018 was 33.2 percent,²⁶ while INSTAT estimates a figure of 34.3 percent in 2019,²⁷ with a decrease of 1.1 percentage points.

The World Bank (WB)²⁸ reports a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for the country of USD 15.3 billion in 2020. CPR 2019 indicates²⁹ that GDP per capita increased from 30.4 percent of the average of the 28 member states of the European Union (EU28)³⁰ between 2010 and 2015 to 32.2 percent in 2018. However, even during times of economic growth, the government's capacity for investment in children's services has been constrained by debt. Perhaps as a result, Albania has not yet reduced its income disparity with the EU and remains one of the poorest countries in Europe.³¹ Drought slowed growth to 2.2 percent in 2019³² and then the earthquake, followed by the Covid-19 pandemic, forced major economic sectors into lockdown. According to INSTAT,³³ GDP in 2020 decreased by about 3.31 percent compared to 2019. This is better than projected when the pandemic was declared.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Vrugtman L., Bino B., 2021. *Opinion Poll 2020: Trust in Governance Survey Report*. Institute for Democracy and Mediation, IDM. Tirana, available at <https://idmalbania.org/trust-in-governance/>

²⁵ UNDP, 2021. *Human Development Report 2020; The next frontier: Human development and the Anthropocene*. New York, available at [hdr2020.pdf \(undp.org\)](https://hdr2020.pdf(undp.org))

²⁶ Ibid. Gini coefficient measures the inequality in income distribution, where 0% expresses the perfect equality where everyone has the same level of income, while a Gini coefficient of 100% expresses full inequality where only one person has all the income.

²⁷ INSTAT (2021) *Income and Living Conditions in Albania 2017–2019*. Tirana, available at <http://www.instat.gov.al/media/8364/income-and-living-condition-2019.pdf>. These figures derive from the main results of the Albanian Income and Living Conditions Survey undertaken in accordance with the Eurostat methodology used by all other EU member states.

²⁸ World Bank in Albania. Overview available at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/albania/overview>

²⁹ CPR, 2019. op. cit.

³⁰ The documents reviewed for the purpose of this study, were developed before United Kingdom left the EU. Therefore, the document continues to refer to EU28.

³¹ Leoncikis T. et al., 2019. *Life and society in the EU candidate countries, European Quality of Life 2016 series*. Eurofound. Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.

³² World Bank, 2020. *An Uncertain Recovery. Regular Economic Report on the Western Balkans No. 18*. Available at <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/34644>

³³ [Gross Domestic Product, Q4 - 2020 | INSTAT](https://www.instat.gov.al/media/8364/income-and-living-condition-2019.pdf)

2.3 POVERTY AND UNEMPLOYMENT

INSTAT³⁴ data record that the at-risk-of-poverty rate³⁵ in Albania in 2019 was 23 percent, a decrease of 0.7 percent since 2017. Severe material deprivation was estimated at 37.1 percent, against 38.3 percent in 2018, a decrease of 1.2 percentage points. Whereas there were slight decreases in the poverty rate for age groups 18–64 years and 65 years and above, the age group 0–17 experienced a 0.1 percent increase, reaching a level of 29.7 percent. Families with children continued to be at greater risk of poverty than anyone else, and that gap seems to be widening. In 2019, the at-risk-of-poverty rate for households without dependent children was estimated to be 14.2 percent, down from 15.9 percent in 2017, while among those with dependent children, the estimated poverty rate was 27.2 percent, slightly up from 26.9 percent in 2017.

In terms of absolute poverty, the WB in 2019³⁶ estimated that 34.4 percent of the Albanian population lived on less than USD 5.5 per person per day (the poverty threshold for upper middle-income countries). Although the absolute poverty level in Albania declined between 2012 and 2019, as a result of GDP growth and lower unemployment, Albania remained at the top of the list of Western Balkan countries in terms of absolute poverty. In the context of Covid-19, combined with the 2019 earthquake response challenges, poverty rates are expected to worsen if immediate measures are not taken by the government

In 2019, the largest number of *Ndihma Ekonomike* (NE)³⁷ beneficiary families were to be found in Kukës (37%), Dibra (29%) and Elbasan (21%).³⁸ The amount of NE is small,³⁹ and INSTAT indicates that social transfers excluding old age and family pensions reduce the at-risk-of-poverty rate by only 11.3 percent,⁴⁰ against an EU28 reduction rate of 32.3 percent. Income poverty needs to be examined together with deprivation, social exclusion and gender to obtain a realistic picture of how poverty impacts children and families,⁴¹ but it is clear that in terms of income poverty, access to services and social isolation, urban and rural families are experiencing different manifestations of poverty.

INSTAT notes⁴² that the employment rate in 2019 among people of age 15–64 years was 60.1 percent for men and 46.9 percent for women. However, only 25.5 percent of women were employed in paid positions, while fourteen percent were in unpaid work in family businesses, and were over-represented in the informal labour sector. The official gender wage gap is 10.7 percent,⁴³ but this excludes women working in the informal sector; the wage gap calculated through survey data is around 15.2 percent.⁴⁴ A *Labour Force Survey*⁴⁵ in 2018 showed that the full-time equivalent employment rate was 40.2 percent for women and 54.6 percent for men, a gender gap of 14.4 percent. Since entitlement to welfare benefits is based on participation in the formal labour market, women inevitably accrue disadvantages. More women than men are employed in agriculture (42.3% and 33.5%, respectively), yet land is primarily registered with men. Over half (52%) of 15–59-year-old men own a house compared with only 31 percent of women, and 28 percent of men own land⁴⁶ compared with 14 percent of women.

³⁴ INSTAT, 2021. *Income and Living Conditions in Albania, 2017–2019*. op. cit.

³⁵ The risk of poverty rate is defined at 60% of the median equivalised disposable income. Increasing or decreasing of this threshold affects at risk of poverty rate. The percentage of individuals at risk of poverty in cases where the threshold is set below 50% of the median equivalised disposable income is estimated at 17.3 % in 2018 compared to 17.5 % in 2017.

³⁶ World Bank, 2019a. *Western Balkans Regular Economic Report No. 15. Reform Momentum Needed*. Spring 2019.

³⁷ Economic Aid, the government's financial social assistance scheme support to poor families.

³⁸ INSTAT data on social protection available at <http://www.instat.gov.al/al/temat/kushtet-sociale/mbrojtja-sociale/#tab2>

³⁹ Nikoloski Z., 2019. *Mapping Social Protection Transfers to Poor Households in Albania*. UNICEF. Tirana, available at <https://www.unicef.org/albania/media/3161/file/Mapping%20Social%20Protection%20Transfers.pdf>

⁴⁰ INSTAT, 2021. *Income and Living Conditions in Albania, 2017–2019*. op. cit.

⁴¹ See European Commission, 2004. *Joint Report on Social Inclusion 2004*, D-G Employment and Social Affairs, Unit E.2. Brussels.

⁴² INSTAT *Women and Men in Albania 2020*. Tirana, p. 77. op. cit.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ INSTAT, 2020. *Gender Equality Index for the Republic of Albania 2020*. p. 11. Tirana, available at http://www.instat.gov.al/media/6661/gender_equality_index_for_the_republic_of_albania_2020.pdf

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Women are also primarily responsible for household chores and childcare within the home. Data from the *2011 Time Use Survey*⁴⁷ show that more than 90 percent of women, regardless of employment status, participated in unpaid work, compared to less than 50 percent of men. Employed women devote about four hours to unpaid work in the home compared to less than an hour for working men. **Given that women made up only 41 percent of the labour force in 2019⁴⁸ and are over represented in lower paid occupations,⁴⁹ it is important to assess the situation of women-headed households in the country generally.**

2.4 HUMANITARIAN RISK PROFILE AND RESPONSE

Albania is at risk of earthquakes, floods, droughts and coastal erosion.⁵⁰ The region around the country experiences at least one earthquake of magnitude ≥ 6.5 ⁵¹ annually. In November 2019, an earthquake, measuring 6.3 on the Richter scale, displaced at least 20,000 people, including 9,000 children. Environmental hazards include deforestation, soil erosion and water pollution from industrial and domestic effluents.⁵² Albania's Environmental Performance Review⁵³ noted some improvement in air quality and reduced use of fossil fuels, but air pollution remains a major environmental issue in the cities. The current network for monitoring air quality is insufficient and according to the Environmental Performance Index 2020, Albania now ranks 62nd with a score of 49/100,⁵⁴ well below the regional average for most parameters.

Law no. 8756, dated 26.3.2001, 'On Civil Emergencies' was repealed by Article 74 of Law 45/2019, dated 18.07.2019, 'On Civil Protection'. The new law introduced new concepts into the Albanian system, including Disaster Risk Reduction national and local emergency plans. It also provided for the establishment of the National Agency for Civil Protection (currently General Directorate for Civil Emergencies). However, the Agency currently does not have the administrative capacity to implement any of its entitled functions. To date, it has not approved any national or local plans or strategies. **It is vital that children's vulnerability, resilience and potential is fully recognised in any national Emergency Preparedness Plan or Disaster Risk Reduction Strategy. Meanwhile, children and adolescents' perspectives were needed to inform the envisaged creation of the Agency.**

Albania is vulnerable to changing climate.⁵⁵ Over the last 15 years, there have been increasing temperatures, decreasing precipitation, floods, droughts⁵⁶ and an overall increase in the number of days with temperatures above 35°C.⁵⁷ In the last decade, the number of heatwave days recorded has increased four-fold. Projections indicate a decline in summer rainfalls of about 20 percent by 2050, which puts energy security at risk and threatens children's health and well-being. Higher temperatures enable higher rates of gastroenteritis. **Children are likely to be acutely impacted by these shifts in climate, but no Climate Landscape Analysis has yet been undertaken. Albania has achieved some level of preparation for climate change, but alignment with the EU *acquis* is still limited. The national strategy on climate change should take into the account how to mitigate the impact of potential**

⁴⁷ INSTAT, 2011. *Albanian Time Use Survey 2011*. Tirana, available at <http://www.instat.gov.al/en/themes/social-condition/time-use-survey>

⁴⁸ World Bank Data and Gender Profile: Albania.

⁴⁹ INSTAT, 2020. *Women and Men in Albania 2020*. op. cit. p. 71.

⁵⁰ See Pacara E., 2015. *Coastal erosion in Albania*. Institute of Environmental Policy, IEP Tirana, available at <https://iep-al.org/test/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Coastal-erosion-in-Albania.pdf>

⁵¹ Measured on the European Macro-seismic Scale (EMS, 1998) of 12 degrees by the European Seismological Commission.

⁵² See Pacara E., Kalemaj I., 2010. *Albania's Struggle to Meet EU Environmental Criteria and Public Perception*. IEP Tirana, available at http://iep-al.org/docs/Albanias_Struggle_to_Meet_EU_Environmental_Criteria_and_Public_Perception.pdf

⁵³ UNECE, 2018. *Environmental Performance Review of Albania Third Review*. Geneva, available at https://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/env/epr/epr_studies/ECE_CEP183_Eng.pdf

⁵⁴ Environmental Performance Index, 2020. EPI Results, <https://epi.yale.edu/epi-results/2020/component/epi> Accessed 07 July 2020.

⁵⁵ See <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/albania/brief/climate-change-in-albania>

⁵⁶ UNECE, 2018. op. cit.

⁵⁷ Periods when, over six consecutive days, the air temperature is at least 5°C above the long-term average temperature for those days.

climate-related or man-made disasters on children and strengthen families’ and communities’ resilience and capacity to avoid, survive and recover from the consequences of such disasters.

The government released its Plan of Action on Prevention and Response to Covid-19 in May 2020. It assumes three pillars of actions—prevention, response and recovery—aiming foremost at the continuation of health services for the whole population.⁵⁸ Albania took unprecedented measures to slow the spread of the pandemic, including restrictions on travel and mandatory closure of public places, including schools. Despite the rapid response, Albania confirmed a total of 132,490 coronavirus cases, including 2,454 deaths, by July 2021.⁵⁹ Covid-19 related job losses have had a direct impact on food security, housing, shelter and access to basic services, and exacerbated the vulnerability of women and children, particularly those living in informal settlements and slum-like conditions.⁶⁰ There is also a risk that progress towards SDG 4 on education may be hampered in Albania as a result of the pandemic. Between 20 percent and 49 percent of Albanian children could be disadvantaged if they have to rely on remote learning via the Internet⁶¹ and prolonged absence from school is likely to lower retention and graduation rates and worsen learning outcomes, particularly for children that are already disadvantaged. Children at risk of violence and abuse are even more vulnerable.

2.5 GENDER PROFILE

Albania ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1993, and the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention) in 2012. The government submitted its fourth periodic report to the CEDAW committee in 2014, its first report on implementation of the Istanbul Convention in 2017, and the National Report on Implementation on the Beijing +25 Platform for Action in 2019. The Ministry of Health and Social Protection (MHSP) has prepared an action plan reflecting the received recommendations.

Albania ranked 20th among 153 countries on the Global Gender Gap Index⁶² in 2020, was placed 51st of 162 countries on the Gender Inequality Index⁶³ in 2019 and scored 60.4 in the Gender Equality Index⁶⁴ in 2017, seven points below the EU28 average (67.4) except in the domain of power (60.9), where Albania has higher gender parity. Women constitute 29.3 percent of Assembly members, up from 23.5 percent in 2017, and 57 percent of the government, up from 42 percent in 2013.⁶⁵ The Parliamentary Sub-Commission on Gender Equality and Prevention of Violence against Women oversees implementation of the National Strategy on Gender Equality and reports on the situation of domestic violence and discrimination against women. There is also an Alliance of Women Members of Parliament to promote a gender perspective in legislation, but in general, **men are over-represented at management level in the public service, even in the health, education and social sectors where women constitute a majority of the workforce.**⁶⁶

⁵⁸ Action Plan, available at https://shendetesia.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Covid_AL-spreads.pdf

⁵⁹ <https://shendetesia.gov.al/>

⁶⁰ Korunovska N., Jovanovic Z., 2020. *Roma in the COVID-19 Crisis*. Open Society Foundation, OSF. Berlin. The study covered Bulgaria, Hungary, Italy, Romania, Slovakia and Spain.

⁶¹ Dunja A., Gjergji O., Gvineria D., Hallkaj E., and Verzivoli I. 2019. *One Click Away: Children’s Experience of Internet Use in Albania*. UNICEF, IPSOS Strategic Marketing. Tirana, available at https://www.unicef.org/albania/sites/unicef.org/albania/files/2020-01/report_oneclickaway.pdf

⁶² See <https://ip.weforum.org/reports/gender-gap-2020-report-100-years-pay-equality>

⁶³ HDR 2010 introduced GII, which reflects gender-based inequalities across three dimensions: reproductive health, measured by maternal mortality and adolescent birth rates, empowerment, measured by the share of parliamentary seats held by women and attainment in secondary and higher education by each gender, and economic activity, measured by the labour market participation rate of women and men. For more details on GII 2020 for Albania, see https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/gender-equality-index_albania.pdf

⁶⁴ Gender Equality Index measures gender equality on a scale of 1 (full inequality) to 100 (full equality) in six core domains: work, money, knowledge, time, power, health, as well as two additional domains: intersecting inequalities and violence.

⁶⁵ INSTAT, 2020. *Gender Equality Index of the Republic of Albania 2020*. Available at <http://www.instat.gov.al/media/6661/gender-equality-index-for-the-republic-of-albania-2020.pdf>.

⁶⁶ See INSTAT, 2020. *Gender Equality Index of the Republic of Albania 2020*, p. 7, and World Economic Forum, *Global Gender Gap Report 2020*.

Article 18 of the Constitution stipulates that no one may be discriminated against for reasons of gender, Law no. 9970/2008 'On Gender Equality in Society' establishes institutions to protect against discrimination, and Law no. 9669/2006 'On Measures against Violence in Family Relations', amended by Law no. 47/2018, guarantees protection from domestic violence.

The Minister of Health and Social Protection is also the head of the National Council of Gender Equality, the highest advisory body in terms of gender equality. Each line ministry and municipality has a gender focal point. A new National Strategy and Action Plan on Gender Equality is under development but, **despite gender equality having a strong institutional framework, women in Albania continue to have limited access to assets, markets, resources and decision-making processes. They also face discrimination in the form of an unfair hierarchical status between men and women, as well as exposure to violence, abuse and exploitation.**

Although all forms of gender-based violence are legally defined as criminal, the most recent INSTAT Survey on Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG)⁶⁷ found that 52.9 percent of Albanian women had experienced some form of violence, and 3.1 percent of women of age 18–74 years reported they had been sexually abused during childhood. Gender-based violence is not only widespread but also socially accepted. The same survey revealed that 50 percent of women believe that domestic violence is a private matter, 46.5 percent that a woman should tolerate violence to keep her family together, and 26.1 percent that a woman should be ashamed to talk about her rape.

Although legislation on domestic violence is generally in line with the Istanbul Convention, the country fails to address in a comprehensive way other forms of violence against women, including stalking, harassment and sexual violence. Legislation does not create space for victims of these forms of violence to benefit from protection and prevention measures, nor from services normally available to victims of other forms of violence. Also, Albanian criminal law needs to be brought fully in line with the Istanbul Convention with regard to the definition of rape, which remains forced-based rather than consent-based.

2.6 ENABLING ENVIRONMENT FOR CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

Albania has ratified all nine core international human rights treaties,⁶⁸ and Article 122 of the Constitution provides that ratified international agreements, including the UNCRC, are part of domestic law. Directly applicable treaties can be applied by the courts, but international agreements that are not self-executing require national legislation to give them effect. Certain provisions of the Convention are considered to be insufficiently defined to be applied directly, but where the Convention contradicts national law, the Convention should be applied. It may be **that a comprehensive pro-active review of child-related legislation is needed to establish gaps, and to ensure compliance with international instruments.** The country has also ratified⁶⁹ the UNCRC's Optional Protocols and is one of the few European countries⁷⁰ to have ratified the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families.

⁶⁷ INSTAT, 2019. *Violence against Women and Girls Survey (VAWG 2019)* UNDP, UN Women, Tirana available at <http://www.instat.gov.al/en/publications/books/2019/violence-against-women-and-girls-in-albania-2018/>

⁶⁸ These are: International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination; International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women; Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment; Convention on the Rights of the Child; International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families; International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance; and Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Each of these instruments has established a committee of experts to monitor implementation of the treaty provisions by its states' parties. Some of the treaties are supplemented by optional protocols dealing with specific concerns.

See <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CoreInstruments.aspx>

⁶⁹ See United Nations Human Rights Treaty Body Database, available at https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Treaty.aspx?CountryID=173&Lang=EN

⁷⁰ Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Turkey have ratified ICMW, and Montenegro has signed it. See https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=IV-13&chapter=4&lang=en

Government submitted its Universal Periodic Review⁷¹ (UPR) in 2019, restating its commitment to the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms. Albania's legislative harmonisation to international treaties is ongoing, but the CRC concluded in 2012⁷² that the major barrier to full realisation of children's rights in Albania is weak enforcement of legislation and poor implementation of policy. Government has now submitted its fifth and sixth periodic reports⁷³ to the CRC, but it has not yet been heard. Law 18/2017 'On the Rights and Protection of the Child' came into force in June 2017. It defines the duties, institutions, structures and mechanisms to ensure respect for children's rights by individuals, the family and the state, while strengthening the system of protection of children from violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect.

A recent review⁷⁴ of the National Agenda for Child Rights (NACR) 2017–2020 found that 39 percent of agreed indicators had been achieved, with 44 percent partly achieved, and 87 percent of the expenditures forecast had been spent, with the state budget covering 59 percent of reported expenditures and donors funding 41 percent. However, the review found that 71 percent of indicators contained insufficient information on initial measurements (baseline values), 81 percent were missing at least one of the baseline value, mid-term or end-term targets, and twelve percent were unmeasurable. Also, reporting institutions provided, in most cases, only cursory information on the level of progress of the action measures, thus creating difficulties in undertaking a real analysis of progress. In general, the review found that information on children's issues is fragmented, reflecting the sectoral approach to the implementation of children's rights. **The new National Agenda for Child Rights, currently in the making, needs to address the priority actions from the perspective of inter-sectoral collaboration to achieve results for children. The strengthening of the governance mechanisms for child rights implementation and capacities to produce and use quality data at the national and local level should be the underpinning pillars of the new Agenda.**

MHSP is the authority responsible for coordinating and monitoring progress in implementation of relevant policies and enforcing laws, national strategies and action plans for children. The National Council on Children's Rights and Protection (NCCRP) is the highest advisory body established by order of the prime minister to coordinate actions on issues of rights and protection of the child. It comprises members from government, NGOs and independent institutions, with mechanisms for participation of children as observers. **NCCRP needs to be revived, strengthened and better resourced to perform its role, including the promotion of a child rights-based, equity-focused approach to national development and reform.** All duty-bearers should seek to engage the burgeoning business sector in promotion and protection of children's rights and a fairer and more equal society that supports every child to realise his or her full potential.

The State Agency for Child Rights and Protection (SARCP), established in 2011, is the executive body within MHSP charged for both coordination of the integrated child protection system pursuant to national policies and monitoring implementation of NACR. It is generally acknowledged⁷⁵ that insufficient resources, whether financial or human, are awarded to SARCP. The structure, authority and mandate of **SARCP needs to be strengthened and expanded so that it can facilitate development of clear cross-sectoral strategies to address the social exclusion of particularly vulnerable populations, including Roma children, children with disabilities, migrant children and children in detention or institutional care.**

⁷¹ National report submitted in accordance with paragraph 5 of the annex to Human Rights Council resolution 16/21* Albania. February, 2019. Available at <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/UPR/Pages/ALIndex.aspx>

⁷² UNCRC, 2012. *61st Session Consideration of reports submitted by States parties under article 44 of the Convention. Concluding Observations: Albania*. Geneva

⁷³ Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2019. Consideration of reports submitted by States parties under article 44 of the Convention on the Rights of the child Fifth and Sixth Periodic Reports Convention, and its two optional protocols (State Report 2019). Tirana, available at https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/SessionDetails1.aspx?SessionID=801&Lang=en

⁷⁴ MHSP, 2021. *Four-Year Implementation Report on the National Agenda for Children's Rights 2017–2020*. April, 2021. Tirana, available at <https://www.unicef.org/albania/documents/four-year-implementation-report-national-agenda-rights-children-2017-2020>

⁷⁵ See CPR, 2019, p. 29, and State Report to CRC, 2019, para. 27.

In 2014, the Law on the Ombudsperson was amended, establishing a Section for Children's Rights Protection and Promotion within the institution of the People's Advocate, comprising one Commissioner for Children's Rights Protection and Promotion and three assistant commissioners. The Strategic Plan 2019–2022 of the institution has placed children as a priority, especially those who belong to vulnerable groups. In 2020, Parliament approved amendments to the Anti-discrimination Law that improve the effectiveness of the work of Commissioner for Protection against Discrimination processes, including children's participation and access to the remedies provided by the Commissioner. However, the Ombudsperson, the Commissioner for Protection against Discrimination and other independent institutions still face poor implementation of their recommendations by the Albanian administration. It is necessary to strengthen the capacities of these institutions in handling cases of human rights violations, especially adequate budgeting to fulfil their functions.⁷⁶

Between 2015 and 2019, Albania's GDP growth averaged 3.26 percent per year.⁷⁷ **However, increased national income has not translated into improved education, health or social protection services, and successive governments have underinvested in children's services. Public expenditure on education accounted for only 3.3 percent of GDP in Albania in 2019, less than the OECD (5.4%) and EU (4.6%) averages in 2018. Public spending on health as a share of GDP was only 3.05 percent in 2019, while that on health as a share of total public spending was 10.41 percent⁷⁸. Albania ranked last on the European Health Consumer Index in 2018,⁷⁹** with disproportionately low resource allocations to primary health care (PHC), especially in maternal and child health. There is clearly space to increase revenue available for children, even within the context of falling GDP due to the Covid-19 pandemic. At present, Albania collects taxes equivalent to around 27.3 percent of its GDP⁸⁰ as against the OECD average of 34 percent in 2018.⁸¹ The loss of taxes through the informal labour market is another area of fiscal reform that could be used to directly benefit families, as well as recouping funds lost through corruption and mismanagement.

Although local NGOs are viewed as important partners in the provision of social services, the incomplete legal framework continues to limit the access of NGOs to local government funds. These organisations are generally unable to provide sufficient services to all who need them and struggle to recover the costs of providing services. Many beneficiaries are unable to pay for services, and NGOs have insufficient access to other sources of financial support to cover the costs of service provision. Meanwhile, the interest of donors in supporting service provision is dropping. **The number of NGOs engaged in service provision, including welfare, education and health services has gradually increased and diversified. While state structures at the central and local levels value the role that NGOs can play in providing services, especially those aimed at vulnerable groups and individuals, there has been limited progress towards providing realistic and sustained financial support.**

⁷⁶ CPR, 2019. op. cit.

⁷⁷ Bank of Albania, 2020. *Annual Report 2019*. Tirana.

⁷⁸ INSTAT, 2021b. *Children, Adolescents and Youth-Focused Well-being Indicators 2016–2019*. Op. cit. pg. 17

⁷⁹ Health Consumer Powerhouse, 2019. *Euro Health Consumer Index 2018 Report*. 25 February 2019.

⁸⁰ Bank of Albania, 2020. *Annual Report 2019*. Tirana.

⁸¹ OECD data. Tax Revenue available at <https://data.oecd.org/tax/tax-revenue.htm>

CHAPTER 3

The Rights of Children

3.1 RIGHT TO HEALTH⁸²

General context

Despite environmental, sanitation and lifestyle hazards, 69 percent of men and 52 percent of women in Albania reported⁸³ that they had good health in 2016, a higher proportion than in some EU member states. ADHS 2018 found that half of women of age 15–49 years have a normal body mass index, four percent are thin, and 45 percent are overweight or obese. Only five percent of women and two percent of men of age 15–49 years consumed the recommended combined number of portions of fruit and vegetables, and only one in ten of that age group engaged in regular physical activity. The proportion of women of age 15–49 years who are anaemic increased from 19 percent in 2008 to 23 percent in 2018. More women report a risk of depression (35%) than do men (26%). ADHS 2018 found that thirteen percent of women and 18 percent of men of age 15–59 years reported feeling depressed a lot of the time but only 2.1 percent of women and 4.2 percent of men in this age group had been diagnosed with depression. This proportion is also supported by the statistics on suicidal mortality rate, reported (for 2018) as 2.8 per 100,000 women and 6.2 per 100,000 men.⁸⁴ **These data are concerning given the social stigma that exists around mental illness and the fact that mental health care is one of the areas that needs further investment within the overall health system.**⁸⁵

One-third (34%) of 15–49-year-old women reported at least one problem in accessing health care. The most frequently mentioned problem was affording treatment (25%), followed by distance to the health facility (14%) and not wanting to go alone (13%).

Five percent stated that even obtaining permission to go to the health centre presented a serious problem. Household wealth and level of education strongly

⁸² Unless otherwise noted, the figures in this chapter are drawn from ADHS 2018. op. cit.

⁸³ See Eurofound, 2019. op. cit., and Noted in Charities Aid Foundation's *2018 World Giving Index* CAF, available at https://www.cafonline.org/docs/default-source/about-us-publications/caf_wgi2018_report_webnopw_2379a_261018.pdf

⁸⁴ World Health Organisation, Global Health Observatory Data Repository, available at [Suicide mortality rate for Albania](#)

⁸⁵ MHSP, 2021. *Four-Year Implementation Report on the National Agenda for Children's Rights 2017–2020*. op. cit.



determine the existence of serious problems that prevent access to health care: 62 percent of women in the lowest wealth quintile mention at least one serious problem compared to only ten percent in the highest quintile, while 66 percent of women with primary, four-year education, or less, report at least one serious problem, compared with 15 percent of women with a university education.

The Health Behaviour of School-age Children (HBSC) survey⁸⁶ of 2018 **found that 73 percent of respondents reported a “very good” self-perceived health status**. Overall, the prevalence of very frequent complaints was highest for tension, irritability and bad temper (about 11%), followed by headache and difficulties in getting to sleep (both 6.6%), and the lowest for feeling dizzy (3.6%) and stomach ache (2.3%).

Girls reported a higher prevalence of health complaints than did boys. Meanwhile, boys reported a higher level of daily physical exercise than girls (29% and 20%, respectively). The overall prevalence of smoking among young people was 9.7 percent: 13.2 percent in boys and 6.5 percent in girls. About 78 percent of the children interviewed had never consumed an alcoholic beverage, with a significant difference between boys and girls (73% and 83%, respectively). However, among children of age 15 years, 5.1 percent reported use of cannabis during their lifetime and 2.7 percent such use within the previous 30 days. Boys (5.5%) reported a higher frequency of cannabis consumption than girls (1.1%).

General framework of health services

The Albanian health system is a combined public–private partnership, though the state provides the majority of services in terms of promotion, prevention, diagnosis and treatment. The private sector covers pharmaceutical and dental services, as well as some specialised diagnostic services, mainly concentrated in Tirana. The vision for health care in Albania encompasses many aspects of health and well-being, including the reduction of inequalities in health, further infrastructure development, modernisation of medical technology, human resources and institutional capacities, improvement of safety and quality, equal access for all, and protection from the financial burden of disease. **Albanian law guarantees equal access to health care for all citizens**. Responsibility for health services is vested in MHSP. The National Operator of Health Services and its four regional directorates are charged with planning and administration of the primary and the secondary health care services. Health coverage in Albania is provided through the mandatory health insurance system administered by a single purchasing agency, the Compulsory Health Insurance Fund (CHIF). For employees and other economically active people, entitlement to CHIF benefits is linked to payment of contributions. CHIF membership is voluntary for self-employed people, small family businesses and farmers. Children under the age of 18 are covered free of charge. According to ADHS 2018, 62 percent of women and 64 percent men of age 15–49 years report not having any form of insurance. The majority of these individuals are from the poorest quintile.

Through providing only 3.05 percent of GDP in 2019,⁸⁷ **Albania has consistently committed less to health spending than the average for Europe and Central Asia**.⁸⁸ Projections for upcoming years indicate that this pattern will continue,⁸⁹ which is concerning given the continued need to address Covid-19. CPR 2020 notes disproportionately low resource allocations to primary health care, especially in maternal and child health and this continuing decline in resources allocated to primary care is particularly worrying.⁹⁰ In 2018, the World Health Organisation (WHO) calculated that out-of-pocket spending constitutes 44.6 percent⁹¹ of the total Albanian health expenditure (one of the highest rates in Europe), effectively reducing access to services for families unable to pay. The consequences are confirmed by analysis of INSTAT’s *Income and Living Conditions in Albania* survey data, which show that the unmet need for health care grew from 19 percent in 2017 to 21.5 percent in 2018, and that for

⁸⁶ Health Behaviour in School-age Children of 11, 13 and 15 years: Main Findings (2018). Tirana.

⁸⁷ INSTAT, 2021. *Children, Adolescents, youth-targeted well-being indicators*. op. cit.

⁸⁸ World Bank, 2019. World Development Indicators. Online database, available at <https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators/preview/on> accessed 14 July 2020.

⁸⁹ Ministry of Finance and Economy website <https://www.financa.gov.al/buxheti-ne-vite>.

⁹⁰ CPR, 2019. op. cit.

⁹¹ World Bank Database, available at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.XPD.OOPC.CH.ZS?locations=AL>

dental care grew from 20.5 percent to 23.6 percent. Unmet need in Albania is much higher than the EU average (3% for health care and 4% for dental care in 2018). The main cause of unmet need for health care and dental care is reported to be related to cost.⁹² In addition, 36 percent of Roma surveyed (>15 years of age) report unmet needs for health care,⁹³ raising more concerns over inequality in service provision and the requirement to address the needs of the most vulnerable.

PHC centres are meant to offer services to between 8,000 and 20,000 inhabitants on average, on a 24/7 basis, though not all services are provided in every centre. The composition of PHC teams varies but each is managed by a chief physician. The capacity of the community nursing and midwifery services needs to be increased significantly, and the coverage, scope, reach and quality of the service should be strengthened and extended. The nursing service's role, remit and authority within the Mother and Child Health (MCH) system should be clarified, updated, upgraded and expanded as appropriate. Urgent measures need to be put in place to develop and maintain a suitable cadre of professional expertise.

General physicians (GPs) serve the population on their lists and the schools located in the PHC catchment area. They specialise either in adults or in children. However, in small rural areas, GPs provide services to people of all ages. Urban teams usually have paediatricians and nurses caring for sick children. The number of positions assigned is meant to ensure a doctor to patient ratio of 1:2500, and a nurse to patient ratio of 1:400. However, **the 2018 WHO assessment⁹⁴ found wide variation in the number of doctors and nurses, and a Universal Health Coverage index of only 59, the lowest in the region.** A survey⁹⁵ in 2018 found that 24 percent of doctors were planning to emigrate, and 54 percent would leave if given the chance, seeking better financial support and improved working conditions abroad. Almost 51 percent of doctors are concentrated in Tirana,⁹⁶ and in many remote districts of the country there is a lack of specialised doctors, including paediatricians. Government has responded with a package of actions that include: perinatal training courses for maternal and neonatal staff at all levels, continuing health care education and accreditation, patronage and bonus systems, binding contracts for new specialists to work in districts outside the capital, and allowing those not on a government contract to apply to work in districts for bonus payments.

The important role of PHC in the Covid-19 response and recovery needs to be acknowledged through increased budget and appropriately targeted resource allocation mechanisms. The process of allocating PHC staff and resources, and particularly MCH specialists, needs to be examined urgently. Mental health is particularly under-resourced, with no significant progress,⁹⁷ which becomes concerning in light of the year-on-year increasing numbers of adolescents in need of services.⁹⁸

Maternal health care

Antenatal care (ANC), which is identified as a priority in national health policies, includes periodic medical examinations, laboratory tests, screening for sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and testing for Rhesus factor. ANC and post-natal care are integrated into the basic package of the PHC. Delivery care is mainly provided by public district maternity hospitals or specialised (tertiary) health care facilities such as the Tirana Obstetrics and Gynaecology Hospital. ADHS 2018 reported that almost nine out of ten women (88%) received ANC from a skilled provider for their most recent birth, down from 97 percent in 2008. The majority (70%) received this care from an obstetrician or gynaecologist, 16 percent from a

⁹² Tomini F, Tomini S., 2019. *Can people afford to pay for health care? New evidence on financial protection in Albania. Summary.* Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe available at <https://www.euro.who.int/en/publications/abstracts/can-people-afford-to-pay-for-health-care-new-evidence-on-financial-protection-in-europe-2019>

⁹³ UNDP, World Bank, EC., 2017. *Regional Roma Survey—Albania.*

⁹⁴ WHO, 2018. *Primary health care in Albania: rapid assessment.* Copenhagen, available at https://www.euro.who.int/_data/assets/pdf_file/0011/373718/alb-phc-ra-eng.pdf?ua=1

⁹⁵ Gjypi AS., 2018. *Doctors leaving Albania.* Together for Life; Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. Tirana, available at <https://togetherforlife.org.al/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Doctors-leaving-Albania.pdf>

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ CPR, 2019. op. cit.

⁹⁸ *National report submitted in accordance with paragraph 5 of the annex to Human Rights Council resolution 16/21* Albania.* February, 2019, available at <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/UPR/Pages/ALIndex.aspx>

family doctor, and two percent from a nurse or midwife. While the percentage of women receiving ANC from a skilled provider is high, it ranges from 76 percent among women with primary education or less to 92 percent among those with university education, and from 86 percent for women in the lowest wealth quintile to 97 percent for those in the highest quintile.

In Tirana, the PHC centres provide diagnostic services staffed with specialised doctors. However, other PHC centres, especially in rural areas, lack diagnostic and treatment equipment, and each centre has different equipment. Both providers and clients reported to WHO⁹⁹ that the services included in the package according to the guidelines were not always covered. However, 78 percent of Albanian mothers complied with the WHO recommendation to have at least four antenatal visits and 82 percent had the first visit in the first trimester of pregnancy. The proportion of deliveries in health facilities is close to 100 percent, regardless of the place of residence or socio-economic characteristics of the mother. The proportion of births occurring in private health facilities tends to increase with the mother's education and household income, and home deliveries decreased from three percent in 2008–2009 to 0.4 percent in 2017–2018. Close to a third (31%) of live births in the five years preceding the ADHS 2018 survey were delivered by Caesarean section, with the highest proportion performed on mothers with a university education (41%), and those in the highest wealth quintile (38%).

There is no specific budget assigned for neonatal screening and other important prevention and early detection interventions in the early years, and insufficient budget for neonatal care services generally. This is particularly important due to the increasing rate of neonate mortality in the past three years.¹⁰⁰

In terms of postnatal care, three-quarters of women (76%) had their postnatal check less than four hours after delivery, while the majority (88%) received a postnatal check-up during the first two days after their most recent birth. Only six percent of mothers did not receive any form of postnatal check-up, a reduction from twelve percent in 2008–2009.

As with the mothers, the vast majority of newborn babies in Albania have a postnatal check-up soon after birth. Some 86 percent had a postnatal check within the first two days, 40 percent within the first hour, and 39 percent, 1–3 hours after birth. Most newborn babies received the essential tests required for assessment of their health within the first two days following delivery. Only 8.2 percent of newborn babies did not.

Child health

The under-5 mortality rate in Albania was reported as eleven per 1,000 live births in 2019.¹⁰¹ ADHS 2018 reported that two percent of children under the age of five years experienced symptoms of acute respiratory infection in the two weeks prior to the survey, and 82 percent received advice or treatment. The protocol for preventive maternal and child health services is very detailed for monitoring the growth and development of children and calls for frequent check-ups during the first three years. Checks are then required annually between four and six years of age. ADHS 2018 found that only six percent of children born in the five years preceding the survey weighed less than 2.5 kg and there was no clear pattern of reported weight at birth by education or household wealth, suggesting that the determining factors are not necessarily determined by socio-economic conditions.

ADHS 2018 also found that three-quarters (75%) of children of age 12–23 months received all basic vaccines, 98 percent were vaccinated against diphtheria, pertussis and tetanus, hepatitis B and *Hemophilus influenzae*, 96 percent against polio, and 79 percent against measles. Less than one percent of children did not receive any vaccines, **though the proportion receiving all basic vaccinations had declined from 94 percent in 2008**. Also, there is a noticeable gender imbalance, with 82 percent of

⁹⁹ WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2019. *Assessment of sexual, reproductive, maternal, newborn, child and adolescent health in the context of universal health coverage in Albania*. Copenhagen, available at <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/330457/9789289054706-eng.pdf>

¹⁰⁰ INSTAT, 2021. *Children, Adolescents and Youth-Focused Well-being Indicators 2016–2019*. op. cit., p. 8.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

boys receiving all basic vaccinations compared with 67 percent of girls. Gender also seems to influence coverage with diphtheria, pertussis and tetanus, and polio vaccines, and coverage is markedly better in rural areas than in urban areas (85% and 67%, respectively). Six percent of children under the age of five years had a diarrheal episode in the two weeks prior to the survey and treatment was sought for 64 percent of them. Ten percent of children in households in which the source of drinking water is unimproved had a diarrheal episode compared to five percent of children with access to an improved source of drinking water. Similarly, 15 percent of children in households with an unimproved sanitary facility had diarrhoea compared with six percent of those in households with improved facilities. **Overall, the present data call for a boost to the neonatal screening programme and infant and child development monitoring mechanisms, with focus on early identification of the impairments and adequate care.**

Adolescent health

Adolescent health services in Albania are integrated into PHC, so that all family doctors are expected to see young people. However, there is a concern in rural areas, where health staff may have to share offices and their ability to maintain confidentiality is limited.

Very little is known about the mental health status of the population, especially among adolescents, due to limited publications in the field.¹⁰² However, the 60 percent annual increase (from 2016–2017) of the age group 0–14 years undertaking mental health visits in regional polyclinics, and 89 percent increase in inpatient visits for 0–24 year-olds,¹⁰³ coupled with a high suicidal rate of 6.03 per 100,000 of the 10–24-year-old population,¹⁰⁴ should serve as a wake-up call to urgently address the situation. **This should be done not only by improving the health care services, but by taking a holistic approach, investing in early intervention and prevention programmes, establishing counselling and psycho-social support mechanisms, and strengthening mental health education in schools and universities, to promote health literacy, address stigma and improve adolescents' help-seeking attitude and behaviour.**

Access to services for young people with disabilities is a particular issue, because of a lack of physical access and poor attitudes and practices of health personnel towards those with disabilities. **It is urgent that MHSP establishes a discrete adolescent health service, encompassing particularly adolescent sexual and reproductive health and mental health services.** These are essential, not just to protect the individual child's right to health but also to encourage adolescent take-up of services, and to prevent potential increases in the birth rate and the prevalence and incidence of Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) among adolescents.

ADHS 2018 reports progress in relation to family planning and reproductive health, with 97 percent of women and almost 96 percent of men of age 15–49 years knowing at least one contraceptive method and all unmarried sexually active men and women knowing at least one contraceptive method. However, Albanian adolescents need to visit the main PHC centre to receive reproductive health advice, while parental consent is required to access contraceptives. This is worrying given the evidence from HBSC 2018 of a slight increase in the prevalence of sexual intercourse among young people of age 15 years since 2014 (21% and 19%, respectively). On a positive note, only 26 percent in the HBSC 2018 survey had commenced sex at the age of 14 years compared with 34 percent in 2014, but 47 percent of young people had commenced sex at the age of 15 compared with 31.2 percent in 2014. More than two-thirds (67%) of 15-year-olds (71% of boys and 36% of girls) reported having used a condom during their last sexual encounter.

¹⁰² WHO, 2017. *Mental Health Atlas Albania*. Available at https://www.who.int/mental_health/evidence/atlas/profiles-2017/ALB.pdf?ua=1

¹⁰³ *National report submitted in accordance with paragraph 5 of the annex to Human Rights Council resolution 16/21 * Albania*. February, 2019, p. 84, available at <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/UPR/Pages/ALIndex.aspx>

¹⁰⁴ INSTAT, 2020. *Children, Adolescents and Youth-Focused Well-being Indicators 2016–2018*. Tirana, available at <http://www.instat.gov.al/en/publications/books/2020/children-adolescents-and-youth-focused-wellbeing-indicators-data-from-2016-2018/>

The lack of adolescent-friendly services in Albania means that adolescents may avoid both public health care and private facilities, leaving them without access to contraceptives or liable to making purchases from other sources. ADHS 2018 reports that only 0.4 percent of women of age 15–19 years were using any modern method of contraception, and that there is a 27 percent unmet contraceptive need among married girls in this age bracket. The absence of adolescent health services may be a factor in the country's rising adolescent birth rate. The abortion rate for 15–19-year-old girls was 0.27 per 1,000 women, translating into 18.9 terminations per 1,000 live births.¹⁰⁵ Adolescent pregnancy, early childbearing, and teenage motherhood have negative socio-economic and health consequences. Adolescent mothers are more likely to have complications during labour, which can result in higher morbidity and mortality for themselves and their children. Moreover, childbearing during teenage years frequently has adverse social consequences, particularly on female educational attainment, because girls who become mothers in their teens are more likely to curtail education and subsequently compromise their future prospects. Although less than four percent of girls of age 15–19 years had begun childbearing at the time of the ADHS 2018 survey, the national adolescents birth rate had increased to 3.5 percent from 2.8 percent in 2008, while two percent had already had a child and one percent were pregnant at the time. The national figure of 3.5 percent is somewhat deceptive as, although the birth rate was only one percent among 15-year-old girls, it was seven percent among 19-year-olds.

Nutrition

All malnutrition indicators declined between 2008–2009 and 2017–2018, though eleven percent of Albanian children of age 6–59 months are stunted, two percent are wasted, 16 percent are overweight, and two percent are underweight. The proportion of severely wasted and severely stunted children declined from six percent to less than one percent, and from eleven percent to four percent, respectively. WHO and UNICEF recommend that infants be breastfed within one hour of birth, breastfed exclusively for the first six months of life, and continue to be breastfed up to two years of age and beyond. Starting at six months, breastfeeding should be combined with safe, age-appropriate feeding of solid, semi-solid and soft foods. Almost all (93%) children born in the two years before the ADHS 2018 survey were breastfed, but only 57 percent were breastfed within one hour of birth, though this still represents an increase in the percentage of children who start breastfeeding within one hour of birth, from 43 percent in 2008. The proportion of children breastfed within the first hour increases with household wealth.

Some 37 percent of children younger than six months are exclusively breastfed, and eleven percent are breastfed and receive only water as a supplement. Exclusive breastfeeding declines slightly with age, from 47 percent among children of age 0–1 months to 43 percent among those 4–5 months old. Some 58 percent of children continue to be breastfed at one year, and slightly less than half (47%) at 0–23 months have age-appropriate breastfeeding. The median duration of any breastfeeding among children born in the three years before ADHS 2018 was 16.8 months, and that for exclusive breastfeeding was 3.4 months. Median duration of breastfeeding increased from 15 months to 16.8 months, and exclusive breastfeeding increased from two to 3.4 months between 2008 and 2018.

Nine in ten (89%) Albanian children were introduced to solid, semi-solid or soft foods at 6–8 months, mainly grains, cheese, yogurt and other dairy products. The consumption of supplementary foods and milk other than breast milk, increases with age, from seven percent among infants less than two months old to 52 percent among infants 18–23 months old. Similarly, the consumption of grain foods increases from four percent to 74 percent. There is also an increasing trend in the use of protein-rich food, such as meat, fish, poultry and eggs. **Some 29 percent of last-born children of age 6–23 months living with their mother were fed a minimum acceptable diet** and more than one in two (59%) were fed according to minimum dietary diversity, i.e. from at least four food groups. One in two (51%) were fed according to minimum meal frequency; that is they were fed 2–4 times per day depending on age and breastfeeding status.

Iron is a key component of haemoglobin, and iron deficiency is estimated to be responsible for half of all anaemia globally. Anaemia can impair cognitive development, stunt growth and increase morbidity

¹⁰⁵ INSTAT, 2021. *Children, Adolescents and Youth-Focused Well-being Indicators 2016–2019*. op. cit., p. 8.

from infectious diseases. One in four (25%) Albanian children of age 6–49 months are anaemic, with 17 percent mildly anaemic, seven percent moderately anaemic, and less than one percent, severely anaemic. The prevalence of anaemia among 6–59-month-old children has increased from 17 percent in 2008–2009 to 25 percent in 2017–18, mostly due to the increased prevalence of mild anaemia, from eleven percent.

HBSC 2018¹⁰⁶ concluded that about a quarter (23%) of 11–15-year-olds never had breakfast on weekdays and nine percent never had breakfast at the weekend. Less than half (47%) ate fruit more than once daily, but only 1.2 percent reported no fruit consumption at all. Girls reported more frequent fruit consumption (more than once daily) than boys (52% and 42%, respectively). Less than one-third (about 31%) of the young respondents consumed vegetables more than once a day, while slightly more than three percent did not consume vegetables at all. Girls also reported more frequent vegetable consumption (more than once daily) than boys (34% and 29%, respectively). In 2018, the prevalence of being underweight among school-age children (grade 1, 4 and 8) was reported at 3.2 percent, while the prevalence of being overweight and obesity were about 17 percent and 11 percent, respectively. The prevalence of obesity was significantly higher in boys and those living in urban areas.¹⁰⁷

Improving adolescents' nutrition-related behaviour and status remains paramount, and only coordinated measures among several relevant institutions could yield results. Efforts towards implementation of the existing legislation in the field and monitoring of the measures taken should be reinforced.¹⁰⁸

Sexual Transmitted Infections

ADHS 2018 results indicate that **not enough Albanian adults have accurate knowledge about the ways in which HIV can and cannot be transmitted.** Only two-thirds (66%) of women and half (48%) of men know that a healthy-looking person can be infected with the HIV virus. Similarly, less than half of respondents (46% of women and 42% of men) believe that a person cannot become infected by sharing food with a person who has HIV. This indicates that the percentage of men and women with comprehensive knowledge of HIV/AIDS remained practically unchanged between 2008 and 2018. Fortunately, almost three-quarters (74%) of women of age 15–49 years know that HIV can be transmitted during pregnancy, 70 percent know that it can be transmitted during delivery, and 69 percent that it can be transmitted during breastfeeding, with 63 percent of women knowing of all three modes of transmission. Nearly one-third of women (29%) and 22 percent of men know that the risk of mother-to-child transmission can be reduced by the mother taking special drugs. **Although HIV reporting seems to be very low in Albania, mother-to-child transmission is a growing concern, representing 3.5 percent of all reported cases in 2018.**¹⁰⁹

Most HIV infections in Albania are the result of heterosexual contact. Most women were infected by their husbands (particularly husbands who had resided abroad). ADHS 2018 also reveals that often men refuse the request of their partners to use condoms or other contraceptive methods. Hence, limiting the number of sexual partners and having protected sex is crucial. **Although less than one percent of 15–49-year-old women reported having had more than one sexual partner in the previous twelve months, seven percent had had sex with a person who was neither their husband nor partner, and only 18 percent reported using a condom during the last sexual intercourse with such a person. Only three percent of men of age 15–49 years reported having had more than one sexual partner in the previous twelve months, but only 59 percent of those reported having used a condom. Some 26 percent of men reported having had sex with a person who was neither their wife nor lived with them, and 43 percent of those did not use a condom during the last sexual intercourse with that person.**

¹⁰⁶ Health Behaviour in School-age Children of 11, 13 and 15 years: Main findings (2018). op. cit.

¹⁰⁷ Hyska J., Burazeri G., Menza V., 2018. *Assessment of nutritional status and nutrition-related knowledge, attitudes and practices among school-aged children in Albania 2017–2018*. FAO. Tirana.

¹⁰⁸ MHSP, 2021. *Four-Year Implementation Report on the National Agenda for Children's Rights 2017–2020*. April 2021. Tirana.

¹⁰⁹ INSTAT, 2020. *Women and Men in Albania 2020*. op. cit., p. 138, and ADHS, 2018, op. cit., p. 93.

It is interesting to note that 15–19-year-old men are more likely (76%) to have used a condom during their most recent sexual intercourse than older men. Also, the percentage of women who had sex with someone who was not their husband or living with them in the past twelve months increases from one percent among those with no education to twelve percent among those with more than a secondary education.

One quarter of women and men of age 15–49 years know where to get a HIV test, but women are twice as likely (4%) as men (2%) to have ever been tested for HIV, while over the last decade HIV testing has only increased from two percent to four percent. It is of some concern that women in rural areas are three times less likely to be tested during ANC (4%; 12% in urban areas) and that no women with primary education or less were tested, and only two percent of those in the lowest wealth quintile. It is precisely the cohort of least-tested women—those of age 15–19 years (16%), those in rural areas (14%), those with no, or primary, education (14%), and those in the lowest wealth quintile (16%)—who are most likely to report having a Sexual Transmitted Infection (STI) or symptoms related to STI. Although only ten percent of women and two percent of men of age 15–49 years reported having an STI or symptoms associated with an STI, less than half who did (44% women, and 28% men) sought advice or treatment from a clinic, hospital, doctor or other health professional. This implies that there could be a larger number of asymptomatic girls and young women with HIV+ status who are unlikely to seek testing, counselling or treatment.

In Albania, only 35 percent of women and 45 percent of men of age 15–24 years have comprehensive knowledge of HIV, including knowing that consistent use of condoms during sexual intercourse and having just one uninfected faithful partner can reduce the chance of getting HIV. While knowledge of the risk of HIV and how to reduce it is important, the actual power dynamics around negotiating sexual activity is ultimately the factor most likely to be determining the spread of HIV in Albania, particularly among young people. Those who initiate sex at an early age are also more exposed to the risk of contracting an STI, or becoming pregnant. One percent of women and three percent of men of age 15–24 years report having had their first sexual intercourse before age 15, and fourteen percent of women and 23 percent of men from this age group that they experienced sexual intercourse before the age of 18 years. Although 15–19-year-old men are more likely to use a condom during sexual intercourse than older men, it is clear that 15–19-year-old women, the cohort of least tested women, are at particular risk from unprotected sex: ADHS 2018 notes 16 percent of those who tested for STIs were in this age group, where abortion rates are the highest. Given these figures, the absence of a discrete youth sexual and reproductive health service seems an unnecessary risk.

3.2 RIGHT TO WELFARE

General context

The Albanian welfare system consists of several pillars, attained through social protection programmes such as pension schemes, employment promotion, and NE. **Social assistance for families consists primarily of cash assistance, with minimal investment in social support and social care services. The main cash assistance scheme is aimed at poverty reduction, but, unfortunately, it has proved to have a limited impact, as well as poor targeting of families in need.**¹¹⁰ Owing to the limited coverage of households with children, ineffective targeting and low monetary value of cash transfers per family, the national NE scheme has faced challenges to adequately protect children from poverty and deprivation. Other transfers provided to Albanian households, although not regular and not accounted for in the social protection budget, include subsidies for energy bills, water consumption, free school meals and free textbooks for children from poor or vulnerable families, as well as free public transportation for the disabled and the elderly. However, little is known about their coverage, efficiency or the impact they have on achieving equity. **The social protection institutional set-up and mechanisms require a more systemic approach to responding to the multi-dimensional nature of poverty and deprivation, and the underlying vulnerability that children and families experience.**

Social protection framework

Ultimate responsibility for social protection lies with MHSP. This ministry is the government institution responsible for drafting and developing health policies and for drafting, overseeing and monitoring the implementation of national policies on social protection, care and integration of individuals and groups in need. The State Social Service (SSS) is the institution, within MHSP, with responsibility for implementing the particular policies relating to NE, disability and social care services. Social protection in Albania before 2016 oriented towards cash-transfer schemes but new legislation¹¹¹ has enabled de-institutionalisation, delegated responsibilities to LGUs, stipulated a basic portfolio of compulsory social services at the local level, designed a unified system of social service standards, and established monitoring and control structures, as well as licensing and accreditation criteria for social service providers.

Overall, the amount of investment in social protection in Albania was 9.47 percent of GDP in 2019,¹¹² including pensions, social assistance, labour market programmes, social care services and other components. This figure represents **almost half the EU¹¹³ average and less than the other Western Balkan countries, except North Macedonia.**¹¹⁴ Given the country's demographic trends, it is

¹¹⁰ European Commission, 2019. *Staff Working Document: Economic Reform Programme of Albania 2019–2021*. Report SWD; 166; 2019. Brussels.

¹¹¹ Law and sublegal acts: Law 'On Social Care Services'.

¹¹² *Children, Adolescents and Youth Focused Well-being Indicators 2016–2019*. op. cit.

¹¹³ Nikoloski Z. 2019. *Mapping Social Protection Transfers to Poor Households in Albania*. UNICEF in Albania, May 2019. Tirana.

¹¹⁴ World Bank, 2019. *Western Balkans Regular Economic Report N. 15. Reform Momentum Needed*. Spring 2019.



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understandable that pensions take up about 70 percent of total social protection spending in the country.¹¹⁵

In 2016, the Government of Albania, supported by the WB, began reform of the social assistance programme, aiming to strengthen the design, administration and governance of cash transfers. A study by UNICEF showed that households in the bottom 20 percent and 40 percent are now respectively 2.7 times and 2.8 times more likely to be NE recipients than other households. It also showed that between 2017 and 2018, the share of one-member and two-member households receiving NE dropped by more than a half, while the share of households in receipt of NE with four- or five-members increased.¹¹⁶ However, the overall number of households benefiting from NE has fallen, from 80,057 in 2015 to 60,496 in 2019. **Meanwhile, the average amount of NE is still extremely small¹¹⁷ and, so, cannot really take families out of the poverty cycle.** The maximum NE payment is roughly only 25 percent of the average monthly expenditure of the bottom 20 percent of households.¹¹⁸

A National Electronic Register of Social Care Services was set up in 2018¹¹⁹ and contains an electronic database of beneficiaries, providers and responsible institutions, and the type and duration of social care services. The Registry has streamlined NE and enabled better management of its funds, but it is not yet functioning in every municipality. MHSP has also supported improvement and efficiency enhancements in service delivery. The law now provides for a three-phase complaints procedure¹²⁰ giving applicants the right to file a complaint at the municipal, regional and administrative court level against refusal of an application.

The National Social Protection Strategy (NSPS) was extended until 2023. The Strategy consolidates the monitoring and control of the benefits system and streamlines application and decision-making processes. However, it has not redefined or reshaped the actual social protection system, which continues to incorporate three priority areas: poverty alleviation, improving quality of life of people with disability, and development of social care services. NSPS still outlines measures for vertical reforms in these priority areas, but the adequate tools, standards and measures are missing to deliver integrated social protection.

Although the precautionary measures introduced by the government in response to the Covid-19 pandemic succeeded in keeping the parameters of the pandemic at relatively low levels, they have had a heavy toll on the population, particularly upon the most vulnerable households¹²¹. Lockdown resulted in increased unemployment and poverty among those working in the informal sector, dependent upon daily wages or who are self-employed. The closure of public services hit hardest those who already had difficulties in accessing such services and have little access to communication channels. Households have had to adjust to new childcare responsibilities, with added burdens for women.¹²² The adoption of social distancing and forced confinement may also have reduced access to informal community support, as well as the limited formal support mechanisms available locally.

In designing a new social protection response to Covid-19, there is a clear need for a mechanism to ensure effective linkages between social protection, child protection and the other social sectors. The allocation of resources for social protection have to be substantially increased, and the distribution of resources within it urgently reconsidered in order to support the better families with children, especially the most vulnerable among them. Foremost, the social protection

¹¹⁵ Nikoloski Z., 2019. *Mapping Social Protection Transfers to Poor Households in Albania*. UNICEF in Albania, Tirana. op. cit.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Decision no. 136, dated 7.3.2018, 'On the Operation and Management of National Social Care Services e-Register'.

¹²⁰ Article 41/1, Law no. 44/2016.

¹²¹ Metanj B., Elezaj D., Peci Dh., 2021. *Knowledge, attitude and practices with regard to Covid-19 among the general population in Albania: Findings on national survey of second wave*. USAID, UNICEF in Albania, IDRA.

¹²² See Plaku A., 2020. *The Impact of Covid-19 on Women's and Men's Lives and Livelihoods in Albania: Results of a Rapid Gender Assessment*. UN Women, available at <https://albania.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/12/the-impact-of-covid-19#view>

system needs to be **risk-informed and shock responsive** to adequately face any situations, such as the November 2019 earthquake and Covid-19.

Poverty alleviation and mitigation

The overhauled NE scheme began in January 2018. Due to the removal of certain exclusion criteria, some 18,730 new families applied for assistance at the same time as some 20,000 applicants were excluded or rejected because of abuses or false statements.¹²³ **Low-income families and vulnerable groups are the main beneficiaries of the reform and the new selection criteria generally seem to target the poorest families.** Beneficiary households are generally the larger ones, with many children, with poorer housing conditions and lower household expenditures than those excluded from the new scheme. From January 2019, the government introduced a new scheme that paid a one-off bonus for every newborn, regardless of the parents' income.

The ministry also enabled municipal councils to grant NE to those families in need who have been deemed ineligible for NE by the scoring scheme, thus allowing the local governments to help families that they deem to be poor by their own criteria. This is due to be paid by granting an additional fund at the level of six percent¹²⁴ over and above the NE block for the relevant municipality. It will be important to ensure that eligibility criteria are clarified and applied consistently across municipalities, and that payments allotted are sufficient, so that LGU assistance does not simply become a lower grade benefit for those who are deemed ineligible for NE, especially if eligibility becomes linked to employability.

It is important to note that the NSPS neither is driven by periodical nationally approved poverty measurement nor does it include a target to reduce poverty in line with the SDGs.

The NSPS aims to integrate families on the NE scheme into community social life through programmes of employment promotion and vocational training that facilitate those of active working age to be involved in the labour market. In 2018–2019, 5,697 individuals were placed in employment and a further 846 were enrolled in vocational training programmes.¹²⁵ All NE applicants must register on a monthly basis as unemployed jobseekers. This practice is deemed to have had positive results in employing the working-age members of poor households. **While it is undoubtedly positive to provide NE beneficiaries with employment placement and training opportunities, there may be risks in too rigidly equating employment with elimination of family poverty and social integration. It is clearly a key factor in fostering both social cohesion and social inclusion, but over-emphasis on employment to resolve family poverty may ignore the low-skills, low-wage pattern of the Albanian employment market, the exclusion of many women in particular from the formal labour market, and the reality of the working poor. This policy needs to be tied to improvements in employment patterns and wage levels, if it is to succeed in significantly reducing family poverty rates.** Also, investments need to be made in employment placement services, which are limited in Albania.

MHSP is developing an 'exit strategy' intended to limit family entitlement to five years. It is posited on the assumption that families can be fully integrated into the labour market within five years by linking social protection programmes with other incentive schemes. While the main focus is on offering a tailored package of services to NE beneficiaries that draws on a range of social enterprises, it also leaves open the possibility of withdrawing NE packages based on participation in 'territorial development' initiatives such as rural development and infrastructure development. Such initiatives may prove to be stepping stones to further employment but **there is also a risk, given Albania's labour market and employment trends, that these will develop into a public works model that traps young**

¹²³ MHSP, National Social Protection Strategy 2020–2023.

¹²⁴ Instruction no. 5, dated 17.02.2017, 'On the Use of Conditional Fund for the EA Block Grant up to 6%'.

¹²⁵ MHSP, 2021. *Four-Year Implementation Report on the National Agenda for Children's Rights 2017–2020*. op. cit.

unemployed in particular in low-paid jobs.¹²⁶ Without a commitment from public employment agencies to tackle employer discrimination, there is a risk that Roma and other vulnerable population groups will continue to fail to obtain regular employment and end up trapped in a series of public work schemes.

Despite recent reforms it is still impossible to gauge accurately the capacity of the existing system to cope with the increased levels of family poverty likely to follow the pandemic. In response to the Covid-19 crisis, government doubled the amount of cash assistance per recipient and expanded the pool of eligible persons. It provided financial compensation for the self-employed, and subsidies were provided to small business to be able to pay their employees. The new scheme of unconditional one-time cash transfers piloted as part of the Covid-19 response benefitted 2,800 children in 1,699 families.¹²⁷ **But there is a clear need to generate robust knowledge on child poverty to help policy makers understand the nature of child poverty and the challenges that poor families face.**

As part of its longer term planning, government should continue moving towards reducing poverty and inequality through a resilient and pro-poor social protection system that protects people's lives and livelihoods. This system should mitigate against adverse economic consequences during the crisis and in the recovery period and support vulnerable families who risk being left behind to continue to access social support services (including education, social care, violence prevention and child protection) even in the new circumstances created by Covid-19. Also, it should expand and amend the existing NE system to evolve into a child-friendly, family-focused supportive welfare system that has the flexibility and facilities to offer a tailored service to poor families, enabling them to meet basic and immediate needs, while working towards a realistic and sustainable route out of poverty, no matter how long it takes.

People with Disability

According to the SSS, the number of persons officially recognised as having a disability in Albania in 2020 increased by 19 percent from year 2018. The system now supports 168,243 individuals¹²⁸ (5.9% of the country's population). The number¹²⁹ of children benefiting from the disability scheme in 2019 was 15,321, 46 percent of whom were girls. The 2014 Law on Inclusion of and Accessibility for Persons with Disabilities makes provision in Article 10 for a multi-disciplinary commission to assess disability based on the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF).¹³⁰ Yet, the medical assessment for disability still prevails, through which children with mild to moderate disability are commonly not defined as having a disability. This impacts the prevalence rate of children with disabilities and the ability of families to access support and services for their child with mild to moderate disabilities.¹³¹

¹²⁶ For examples of both good and bad practice in this area see 'Employment' by Agata Scharle in Hojsik M., Fremlova L., (eds), 2020. *A synthesis of civil society's reports on the implementation of national Roma integration strategies in the European Union Assessing the progress in four key policy areas*. Center for Policy Studies of the Central European University. Brussels, available at <https://cps.ceu.edu/sites/cps.ceu.edu/files/attachment/basicpage/3172/rcm-civil-society-monitoring-report-synthesis27-2019-eprint-fin.pdf> Pecak M., Szira J., in discussing 'Education' in the same volume address some of the consequences for Roma NEET and the wider education system.

¹²⁷ MHSP, 2021. *Four-Year Implementation Report on the National Agenda for Children's Rights 2017–2020*. op. cit.

¹²⁸ MHSP, 2020. Programme Report of the National Strategy for Social Protection.

¹²⁹ See SACRP dashboard of statistics <http://statistikafemijet.gov.al/index.php?searching=true#treguesit>

¹³⁰ The International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health, known more commonly as ICF, is a classification of health and health-related domains. As the functioning and disability of an individual occurs in a context, ICF also includes a list of environmental factors. ICF is the WHO framework for measuring health and disability at both individual and population levels. ICF was officially endorsed by all 191 WHO Member States in the Fifty-fourth World Health Assembly on 22 May 2001 (resolution WHA 54.21) as the international standard to describe and measure health and disability. ICF is operationalised through the WHO Disability Assessment Schedule (WHODAS 2.0). WHODAS 2.0 was developed through a collaborative international approach with the aim of developing a single generic instrument for assessing health status and disability across different cultures and settings. For more information see <https://www.who.int/classifications/icf/en/>

¹³¹ See Rogers J. Sammon E. 2018. *We All Matter*. UNICEF. Tirana, available at <https://www.unicef.org/albania/reports/we-all-matter>

The Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disability¹³² in 2019 expressed concerns about insufficient efforts being made to revise the existing legislation in Albania, and about interpretation of the bio-psycho-social model in reforming disability assessment systems. The government's commitment to adopting the ICF is unclear within the NSPS.

There have been improvements made since 2018 in terms of streamlined paperwork and reduced bureaucracy cutting back delays in decision making. Public institutions now carry out the process of diagnosing and referring cases for evaluation and delivering documentation from one institution to another that had previously been done by the applicant. Individuals with disabilities now appear for diagnosis and examination only at the health facilities, though the evaluation is carried out on the basis of medical documentation, avoiding the need for their physical appearance. The benefit rate has also increased over the years, by about 2–4 percent annually.¹³³ Evaluating the ability to perform basic life tasks in accordance with age clearly indicates the presence and degree of disability, despite inflated, subjective and abusive examinations by some physicians.

The reform of the disability assessment system appears to be more about improving cost-efficiency by providing administrative mechanisms that significantly reduce the rate of abuse, reduce the evaluation cost and improve services, rather than fostering social inclusion.¹³⁴ Furthermore, the reform of the social protection system needs to ensure proper planning of cash transfers for children with disability that cover not only cash allowances for the child and their family, but also the necessary amounts for community-based care services, which are instrumental to supporting the reintegration and inclusion of children with disability.



@UNICEF Albania Benzenberg 2018

Social Care Services

The third priority of the NSPS is the development of social care services as they affect social inclusion, facilitated access to social services and improvement of the lives of children, individuals and families for their social well-being. This is a particularly vital strand of the Strategy as both other strands depend on it to a large extent for their own success, while it also acts as a safety net. However, currently, publicly funded social care services are very limited.

The Law on Social Care Services¹³⁵ stipulates a list of social services, rules for insurance and social care provision impacting needy individuals and family living standards. Responsibility for provision of key social services is delegated to LGUs. This requires new funding and effective management mechanisms to deliver coordinated services across different levels of government, though the details have yet to be completely worked out. Since 2005, successive governments have undertaken social care service reform, but the process has not been sustainable, mainly because a reliable formula for funding social care services has not been in place. In 2018, Albania adopted a decision 'On the Functioning of the Social Fund', meant to enable municipalities to set up social services for vulnerable groups by guaranteeing minimum social services and sustainability of the current services specified in a municipality's social

¹³² Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disability, 2019. *Concluding observations on the initial report of Albania CRPD/C/ALB/CO/1* UNHCHR. Geneva, available at https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbol-no=CRPD/C/ALB/CO/1&Lang=En

¹³³ MHSP National Social Protection Strategy 2020–2023.

¹³⁴ CPR, 2019. op. cit.

¹³⁵ Law no. 121/2016 'On Social Care Services in the Republic of Albania'.

plan. This mechanism is being put in place, but still not all LGUs have accessed it. As a result, despite the piloting of a series of social service initiatives at the local level in 2019, services for children account for only 27 percent of the services provided by public social services, where about 69 social centres provide services for children. Although 50 municipalities have now approved local social care plans, 37 municipalities (61 %) do not provide services for individuals with disabilities.¹³⁶ Social services provided through the non-public sector represent up to 46 percent of all services provided¹³⁷ and are mainly funded by international development partners. Such dependence on donor funding could leave serious gaps in service coverage and quality.

Since the Social Fund is the mechanism through which financial support is provided to LGUs in order to improve the availability and quality of social care services, it is essential that fair, equitable and sustainable mechanisms are developed soon and implemented consistently across all LGUs. Capacities of the LGUs should be strengthened in the design, costing, implementation and monitoring of (new) child-focused services, including through contracting of private providers and NGOs.

Other challenges include the development of community-based alternative care services for children, home-based services for people with disabilities, and family and parenting services, as well as transformation of residential institutions into multi-disciplinary and multi-functional centres, and the provision of integrated social services by care professionals. One major step towards deinstitutionalisation and transformation of social care services is the adoption of the National Action Plan for De-Institutionalisation 2020–2022 (DI) and a compilation of actions to prevent placement of children of age 0–18 years, especially those with disabilities, in social care institutions and, instead, promote their support in the family. However, this would require further financial support and the adequate allocation of human resources by government.¹³⁸

The Law on Social Care Services stipulates that each municipality will establish a needs assessment and referral unit and dedicate one social worker for every 6,000–10,000 inhabitants, reflecting the legislation's intention for general social work teams to be responsible for provision of a range of services for social care, family support and financial assistance. The role and responsibilities of these structures are defined, but the resources available to them are inadequate for accomplishing these responsibilities. Compilation of standards in service delivery is meant to guarantee provision of quality services, regardless of gender, age, ethnicity, special needs, religion, gender identity or sexual orientation. MHSP has developed and adopted standards for four new services: home support for the elderly, home support for people with disabilities, emergency services for victims of sexual violence and a multi-disciplinary community service.

The law provides for the certification and accreditation of ongoing education of those employed in social, public and non-public care institutions, and forces public and non-public institutions of social care services to design and implement continuing education programmes for their professionals, whose quality will be ensured through accreditation. All entities intending to provide education, training or qualifications in the field of social care services need to be accredited periodically by the competent ministry. **The implementation of these provisions must urgently take place, including the approval of the registration procedures for the continuous education of social care service professionals, and the mandatory package of training.**

Furthermore, strong horizontal and vertical coordination between MHSP and other line ministries, and institutions at the local level is essential for the successful implementation of social care reform. Civil society, NGOs and the private sector also need to be involved as full partners at every stage from planning through implementation and monitoring.

¹³⁶ Figures from *Four-Year Implementation Report on the National Agenda for Children's Rights 2017–2020*. op. cit.

¹³⁷ MHSP, 2020. Programme Report of the National Strategy for Social Protection.

¹³⁸ CPR, 2019. op. cit.

3.3 RIGHT TO EDUCATION, LEISURE AND CULTURAL ACTIVITIES

General context¹³⁹

Albania has undertaken significant education reforms over the last two decades that have improved access to education and raised learning outcomes, including decentralisation of school governance and introduction of a competency-based curriculum. These have contributed to improvement across key education indicators. Access to compulsory education has expanded and student performance on international surveys has improved, but learning levels remain among the lowest in Europe. A large share of Albanian students still leave school without mastering basic competences.¹⁴⁰ **This limits the employment and life chances of many individuals and risks holding back national development. Closing the skills' gaps by improving educational outcomes is seen as crucial to attracting foreign direct investment as Albania moves towards EU accession.**¹⁴¹

Equity is also a concern, with continued disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes according to gender, ethnic background and geographical residence. Whereas enrolment of boys and girls is virtually identical in the EU28, in Albania the gender gap favours slightly boys in lower education but reverses in tertiary education, where female graduates outnumber male graduates. **Educational access and outcomes tend to be lower for ethnic minorities than for the majority Albanian population.**¹⁴² The National Action Plan for the Integration of Roma and Egyptians 2015–2020¹⁴³ and the National Action Plan for People with Disabilities 2021–2025¹⁴⁴ both aim to remove barriers to mainstream education and promote the integration of these marginalised groups into broader Albanian society. Demographic changes and migration are driving changes in the geographic distribution of students within the country and presenting a dilemma in terms of education planning, particularly around resource allocation, as schools are emptying in some municipalities and filling up in others. Poor road and transport infrastructure places further restrictions on student access to school, while reducing the capacity of LGUs to consolidate schools in remote areas.¹⁴⁵ The pursuit of quality education is a key factor driving Albania's emigration.¹⁴⁶

¹³⁹ For a full assessment of education in Albania see Maghnoaj S., Fordham E., et al., 2020. *Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education: Albania*. Paris, available at <https://doi.org/10.1787/d267dc93-en>

¹⁴⁰ OECD, 2019. *PISA 2018 Results (Volume I): What Students Know and Can Do*. Paris, available at <https://doi.org/10.1787/5f07c754-en>

¹⁴¹ World Bank, 2019. *Europe and Central Asia Macro Poverty Outlook: Country-by-country Analysis and Projections for the Developing World*. Washington, <http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/107191492012467509/mpo-eca.pdf>

¹⁴² Maghnoaj S., Fordham E., et al., 2020. *Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education: Albania*. OECD. op. cit.

¹⁴³ Government of Albania, 2015. *National Action Plan for Integration of Roma and Egyptians in the Republic of Albania, 2015–2020*. Ministry of Social Welfare and Youth, Tirana, available at https://www.rcc.int/romaintegration2020/download/docs/2015%20Action_Plan_Albania%202015%20

¹⁴⁴ <https://qbz.gov.al/eli/vendim/2021/05/12/276/0426af6c-f905-4823-b2dd-1947a8fab811>

¹⁴⁵ CIA *The World Factbook : Albania* (2019) available at <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-worldfactbook/geos/al.html>

¹⁴⁶ Barjaba K., Barjaba J. 2015. *Embracing Emigration: The Migration-Development Nexus in Albania*, Migration Policy Institute. Available at <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/embracing-emigrationmigration-development-nexus-albania>



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National education framework¹⁴⁷

Overall responsibility for education in Albania lies with the Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth (MESY), though vocational education falls within the ambit of the Ministry of Finance and Economy (MFE). The national vision for education is to be laid out in the National Education Strategy 2021–2026.¹⁴⁸ Government's overall goal remains to ensure education for all, including equity, equality and non-discriminatory access for children with disabilities and children belonging to minorities.

The recently established General Directorate for Pre-University Education (at MESY) and its subordinate structure, the Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-University Education, oversee the work of four regional pre-university education directorates (REDs), while 61 local pre-university education offices (LEOs) are tasked with managing the delivery of education through schools. Government has devolved responsibility to LGUs regarding school infrastructure (construction, infrastructure, maintenance and utilities).

The pre-tertiary education system includes pre-school, **basic education** (i.e. primary and lower secondary) and **upper secondary education** (often referred to simply as secondary education). Basic education comprises nine years of free compulsory schooling. The minimum instruction time for compulsory education in Albania (6,025 hours) is less than in most EU member states, but higher than in Croatia, Montenegro or Serbia.¹⁴⁹

Albania's current curriculum framework sets out a constructivist and student-centred approach to teaching and learning. It sets forth the key competencies for lifelong learning that all students are expected to achieve by the end of upper secondary education, informed by the EU's 2006 Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning. Schools in Albania have greater flexibility around choosing the textbooks than schools in other Western Balkans countries. With approval from their local education institutions, schools can choose from the variety of textbooks available, provided the choice aligns with the standards approved by MESY. Data from OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2015 show that **about 79 percent of the responsibility for curriculum implementation lies at the school level, a percentage similar to the OECD average (73%) and higher than in Montenegro (34%), North Macedonia (41%) or Croatia (44%).**¹⁵⁰

Albania's assessment regulatory framework defines policies and practices such as portfolio assessment, formative assessment and continuous assessment, **though these definitions sometimes lack clarity and concreteness.** The framework also describes the role of teachers, as well as the role and responsibilities of other stakeholders such as school administrators. However, the implementation of many processes and activities outlined in the framework is left to schools, regional directorates and local education offices, with little additional support or guidance from the national level.

School autonomy has grown but planning and self-evaluation remain weak. School-level governance in Albania involves school principals along with their deputies and school boards. According to Albanian law, each school must have its own teacher, parent and student councils that help shape policies at the school level. School councils now play an important role in hiring and dismissing teachers and selecting textbooks. However, the ministry, regional directorates and local education offices continue to make all decisions related to financial resources, and schools receive no discretionary funding, thus reducing their autonomy further. Even with limited budgetary discretion, schools' ability to reflect on their own policies and practices is crucial for making effective use of school resources, but the capacity for planning and self-evaluation remains weak in most Albanian schools.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁷ This section draws heavily on Wort S., et al., 2019. *Appraisal of the current Strategy of Pre-University Education 2014–2020*. UNICEF. Tirana.

¹⁴⁸ As of July 2021, the document is drafted and available online for public consultation.

¹⁴⁹ European Commission, EACEA, Eurydice, 2019. *Recommended Annual Instruction Time in Full-time Education*. European Union. Luxembourg, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.2797/714725>.

¹⁵⁰ OECD, 2016. *PISA 2015 Results (Volume II): Policies and Practices for Successful Schools*. Paris, available at <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264267510-en>.

¹⁵¹ Maghnouj S., Fordham E., et al., 2020. *Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education: Albania*. OECD. op. cit.

National spending on education accounted for only 3.3 percent of GDP in Albania in 2019,¹⁵² less than in its neighbours¹⁵³ and the EU average (4.6%) in 2018.¹⁵⁴

Spending on primary education fell by six percentage points between 2015 and 2019, while spending on secondary education rose slightly,¹⁵⁵ but overall spending on pre-university education fell in both absolute and relative terms. The medium-term budgeting framework of 2021–2023 does not foresee any significant increase in the budget for pre-university education, except for tertiary education, for which is planned an increase of 21.9 percent compared to year 2020. The value of basic education in promoting equity, prosperity, well-being and social development should be concretely acknowledged by significantly increasing the proportion of the national budget assigned to education, to at least bring it into line with EU averages. An independent review is needed of the disparities in education services between municipalities that could inform a revision of existing formulas and processes for allocating block grants to ensure focus on guaranteeing every child a quality, inclusive education through optimum distribution of resources. **Albania will find it difficult to achieve significant gains in learning outcomes without higher investments in education.**



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Funding to schools is allocated centrally and managed at the regional and local level. Funds flow from the central budget to REDs and LEOs, but other central funding streams are administered by the LGUs. RED and LEO budgets cover the costs of most educational services (e.g. teachers' salaries), while municipalities are responsible for construction, infrastructure, maintenance and utilities. **Challenges around the allocation of funds to regional and local entities include a lack of clarity about roles, responsibilities, authority and competencies between local and central government, insufficient funds assigned to enable local bodies to fulfil their functions, and weak financial management capacity and personnel at the local level to manage funds and deliver quality services.**¹⁵⁶

In some countries, formulas are applied to enable differential funding based on need and so help to redress educational disparities,¹⁵⁷ but in Albania there is still no formula for the allocation of such funds to local education offices, and regional and local entities have to choose how to allocate funds among the schools they manage without clear guidelines or orientation.¹⁵⁸

There is no clear process for making allocations based on disparities among schools or students, and schools do not have the budget autonomy needed to allocate their own funds based on school needs. A portion of central funds, known as unconditional transfers, is calculated based on a per-pupil formula created in 2002, but these do not provide differential funding based on the needs of students but rather respond to population characteristics such as the number of pupils or the average income in the LGU. **Further capital investment is also needed to ensure that school environments**

¹⁵² INSTAT, 2021. *Children, Adolescents and Youth-Focused Well-being Indicators 2016–2019*. op. cit.

¹⁵³ UNESCO, *Welcome to UIS. stat*, <http://data.uis.unesco.org/>, last accessed 29 July 2020.

¹⁵⁴ Eurostat. *Total general government expenditure on education, 2018, % of GDP*. Available at https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=File:Total_general_government_expenditure_on_education,_2018,_%25_of_GDP.png

¹⁵⁵ MFE, Annual Budget 2015–2019.

¹⁵⁶ See Haxhimali A., 2019. *Local Government in Albania: Status Report*, Association of Albanian Municipalities. Tirana, available at <https://www.alda-europe.eu/public/doc/LocalGovernmentinAlbania.pdf>

¹⁵⁷ See OECD, 2017. *The Funding of School Education: Connecting Resources and Learning*, *OECD Reviews of School Resources*. Paris, available at <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264276147-en>

¹⁵⁸ Maghnouj S., Fordham E., et al., 2020. *Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education: Albania*. OECD. op. cit.

and infrastructure meet contemporary standards.¹⁵⁹ Many schools, particularly in rural areas, struggle to meet basic infrastructure and operational needs such as heating.¹⁶⁰ Some have become overcrowded, and lack sufficient laboratory equipment, furniture and facilities, including Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) infrastructure, for supporting high-quality learning.¹⁶¹ Only 47 percent of computers in rural schools are connected to the Internet, compared to 70 percent in North Macedonia and 94 percent in OECD countries.¹⁶²

Between school years 2005–2006 and 2014–2015, enrolment in private schools grew faster than in public schools at the basic education level. The share of students attending private schools increased from four percent in 2006–2007 to seven percent in 2016–2017, and around nine percent of basic education schools in Albania are private. While enrolment in private schools at the upper secondary level has increased, enrolment in public schools at the same level has decreased.¹⁶³ Albanian law allows financial support to be provided to private, not-for-profit pre-tertiary education institutions that have been operating for at least five years, though this provision has not yet been implemented due to budget constraints. However, **private spending on education by individuals and households increased from 0.8 percent of GDP in 2009 to 0.9 percent of GDP in 2017.**¹⁶⁴ **One notable area of private spending is tuition, which can range from EUR 50–300 per month,**¹⁶⁵ **excluding educational materials and textbooks.** The Albanian Teachers Code of Conduct has banned the practice of teachers providing private tutoring to their own students, and legally such an arrangement is considered malpractice. Meanwhile, very little attention has been paid to the effects of private tutoring on educational equity.

Early childhood development, care and education

All young children, especially the most vulnerable, from conception to age of school entry, should achieve their developmental potential, and have equitable access to all relevant services. In Albania, there are a series of disparate relevant laws covering health, education, nutrition and child and social protection, but a national policy framework for early childhood development, care and education is missing.¹⁶⁶ There are limited mechanisms in place to align multi-sector policymaking and implementation to promote holistic development of children younger than six years. Action under NACR, targeting children under three years of age, have remained largely unimplemented.¹⁶⁷ Programmes that target parents and caregivers are sporadic and mostly implemented by NGOs.

Early childhood education (ECE; pre-school) in Albania is optional and offered through kindergartens and preparatory classes for children of age 3–6 years. Kindergartens operate in age groups of 3–4 years, 4–5 years, and 5–6 years, while preparatory classes (pre-primary) take place in primary schools and target five-year-old children who may or may not have previously attended pre-school. The universalisation of pre-primary classes has been long discussed, but not yet institutionalised.

Most Albanian children attend pre-school (net enrolment rate reached 75.9% in 2019),¹⁶⁸ while the rate of enrolment for Roma children in Albania is reported as 33 percent.¹⁶⁹ These figures are significantly

¹⁵⁹ Psacharopoulos, G. 2017. *Albania The Cost of Underinvestment in Education: And Ways to Reduce It*. UNICEF Tirana, available at <https://www.unicef.org/albania/reports/cost-underinvestment-education-and-ways-reduce-it>

¹⁶⁰ Gjokutaj M., 2013. *Albania: the situation of pre-university education*, Albanian Coalition for Child Education, quoted in Maghnouj S., Fordham E., et al. op. cit.

¹⁶¹ See Psacharopoulos, G., 2017. op. cit.

¹⁶² OECD, 2016. *PISA 2015 Results (Volume III): Policies and Practices for Successful Schools*. op. cit.

¹⁶³ MESY, OECD, 2018. *Review of Evaluation and Assessment: Country Background Report for Albania*. Tirana, quoted in Maghnouj S., Fordham E., et al. op. cit.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Based on the exchange rate of June 2021, the value ranges from 6,140 to 36,840 Albanian Lek.

¹⁶⁶ European Commission, 2019. *Staff Working Document: Economic Reform Programme of Albania 2019–2021*. Report SWD/166; 2019. Brussels.

¹⁶⁷ MHSP, 2021. *Four-Year Implementation Report on the National Agenda for Children's Rights 2017–2020*. op. cit.

¹⁶⁸ INSTAT, 2021. *Children, Adolescents and Youth-Focused Well-being Indicators 2016–2019*. op. cit.

¹⁶⁹ UNDP, World Bank, EC., 2017. *Regional Roma Survey—Albania*.

below the average level in EU28 countries of 95 percent of children between the age of four years and the age for starting compulsory primary education that participate in ECE.¹⁷⁰

Age is a factor: ADHS 2018¹⁷¹ found that 65 percent of three-year-old children were participating in ECE programmes, compared with 80 percent of children of age four. Most children (73%) in households headed by men participate in ECE compared with 66 percent in households headed by women, indicating the importance of the economic well-being of families in terms of opportunities for early care for children. ADHS 2018 also found that children in urban areas are more likely to have been exposed to stimulating activities in the three days preceding the survey, 96 percent with their mothers, 62 percent with their fathers, and 61 percent with another person, compared with 87 percent, 52 percent, and 52 percent, respectively, in rural areas. Similarly, children in the highest wealth quintile are more likely to be exposed to stimulating activities, 96 percent with their mothers and 74 percent with their fathers, compared with 85 percent and 45 percent, respectively, in the lowest wealth quintile.

MESY adopted a new competency-based Pre-School Curriculum Framework aligned to contemporary child development practice¹⁷² in 2016 and a law that set new minimum standards and selection procedures for pre-primary principals in 2018.¹⁷³ However, the quality of teaching staff and the physical condition of pre-schools remain key challenges.¹⁷⁴ Responsibility for staffing pre-schools now lies with LGUs, but many have insufficient funds and emigration makes it even more difficult to find qualified pre-school teachers.

Since evolving skills in early childhood are acquired through interaction with the environment, parents and caregivers are critical as they are the architects of this environment. For this reason, **programmes targeting development, care and education of children under six should address both the children as direct beneficiaries, as well as parents and caregivers. They should benefit from well-coordinated multi sectorial interventions that include the essential elements of stimulation, education, health, nutrition and protection. Foremost, such interventions should meet the needs of all children, including those with disability and those belonging to minorities.**

Basic education

The net enrolment rate in basic education in Albania in 2018–2019 was about 96 percent¹⁷⁵ and HBSC 2018 data indicate that more than half of respondents (53%) in basic education liked school “a lot”; with girls being more positive than boys (57% and 49%, respectively). However, there was a considerable age-gradient, with older students being far more negative than their younger counterparts. Due to issues with a proper functioning of the education management information system, the dropout rates are not regularly measured and reported. The cumulative dropout rate in primary education was 6.8 percent in Albania in 2016 (the most recent year for which there are international data),¹⁷⁶ more than double the rate in the EU (2.5%).¹⁷⁷

A 2017 study¹⁷⁸ highlighted several reasons for school dropout in Albania, including distance between school and home, pressure to contribute to family income, family obligations (e.g. caring for children and elders), social pressure from other students who have left school, and risk factors such as disability, ethnicity, migration and poverty. Albania has implemented several initiatives to give students additional opportunities to finish school. It has provided free textbooks and

¹⁷⁰ Eurostat, 2020. *Eurostat regional yearbook 2020 edition*. Belgium, available at [f1ac43ea-cb38-3ffb-ce1f-f0255876b670](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&plugin=1&code=sdg_4_3_10&plugin=1) (europa.eu)

¹⁷¹ ADHS, 2018. op. cit.

¹⁷² ASCAP, 2016. *Pre-school Curriculum Framework*. Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports. Tirana, available at <https://ascap.edu.al/wpcontent/uploads/2018/03/Korniza-Kurrikulare-e-arsimit-parashkollorit-IZHA-Dhjetor-2016.pdf>

¹⁷³ MESY, 2018. Additions and changes to law no. 69/2012 ‘On the System Pre-university Education in the Republic of Albania’, Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth, Tirana quoted in Maghnouj S., Fordham E., et al. op. cit.

¹⁷⁴ Psacharopoulos G., 2017. op. cit.

¹⁷⁵ INSTAT, 2019. *Albania in Figures 2019*. Available at <http://www.instat.gov.al/media/7176/albania-in-figures.pdf>

¹⁷⁶ Maghnouj S., Fordham E., et al., 2020. *Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education: Albania*. OECD. op. cit.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ MESY, 2017. *Educational Policies for Dropout Reduction*. Tirana, quoted in Maghnouj S., Fordham E., et al. op. cit.

home schooling options, established a psycho-social unit to follow up on students who have dropped out of the system, adopted criteria for auxiliary teachers for students with disabilities,¹⁷⁹ and piloted an early warning system in 20 schools and four municipalities. This system needs to be strengthened and expanded, and **budgetary incentives could be provided to schools to increase completion rates of children from marginalised communities. Child representatives and teaching staff should receive training and support in developing mechanisms for enabling participation and dialogue.**

Issues remain with quality and with access and, despite significant improvements in learning outcomes in recent years, the number of students mastering basic competencies remains low, with very few developing higher order skills by the age of 15 years. Equity of access and outcomes remain a challenge, particularly on the basis of gender, ethnic group and geographical distribution.

There are real issues around the efficiency of the system, given that more than 50 percent of schools operate with fewer than 50 children.¹⁸⁰ The inability to redistribute resources cost-effectively impacts negatively on teaching quality across the rural–urban divide. Since 2013, the number of teachers has not changed; therefore, the student : teacher ratio is decreasing, especially in rural areas.¹⁸¹ Whereas the average ratio in pre-university education among OECD countries was 15, for the academic year 2018–2019 it was 13.3 in Albania.

The country’s efforts to improve the quality of teaching include raising entry requirements and standardising curriculum content for teacher training programmes, updating teaching standards, implementing a state exam for new teachers, and strengthening further the professional learning networks. The percentage of teachers with some level of higher education has increased, from two-thirds in 2006–2007 to 91 percent in 2016–2017,¹⁸² though the level is still below the average across OECD countries (98%) and the EU (98%).¹⁸³ Principals in the PISA 2015 survey reported that the gap between rural and urban schools in the quality and quantity of teaching staff is particularly large in Albania.

Another feature of the basic school system in Albania is the relatively large number of students enrolled in multi-grade classrooms (9.1%), leading to lower levels of reading and writing skills.¹⁸⁴

Covid-19 has introduced the need to further develop the blended-learning modality of teaching and learning. This requires additional resources in infrastructure, improved curricula and continuous professional development of teachers in ICT.

Upper secondary education

Enrolment in upper secondary education has been almost unchanged over the past four years, but Albania’s net enrolment at the level of 76.2 percent¹⁸⁵ is still significantly below the average of OECD countries (84%).¹⁸⁶ In 2017, the pass rate of the final tests completing basic education was 99.2 percent, indicating that the National Basic Education Examination provides little barrier for entry into upper education.¹⁸⁷

Regardless of the overall improvement over the years, PISA 2018 results indicate that a high proportion of children entering upper secondary school lack basic competency. More than half (52.2%) of Albanian 15-year-olds lack basic reading skills, compared with the OECD average of less

¹⁷⁹ UNESCO, 2017. op. cit.

¹⁸⁰ Wort M., Pupovci D., Ikonomi, E. 2019. *The Mid-term Appraisal of the Pre-University Education Strategy 2014–2020*. Tirana.

¹⁸¹ OECD, 2020. *Education at a glance*, p. 159, available at https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/education-at-a-glance_19991487

¹⁸² MESY, 2018. op. cit.

¹⁸³ See OECD, 2019. *TALIS 2018 Results (Volume I): Teachers and School Leaders as Lifelong Learners*. Paris, available at <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/1d0bc92a-en>

¹⁸⁴ UNESCO, 2017. op. cit.

¹⁸⁵ NSTAT, 2021. *Children, Adolescents and Youth-Focused Well-being Indicators 2016–2019*. op. cit.

¹⁸⁶ OECD, 2020. *Education in a glance*, p. 159.

¹⁸⁷ MESY, 2017. *National basic education exams public report about student achievements*. op. cit.

than a quarter (22.6%). In mathematics, 42.4 percent lack basic skills, compared with 24 percent in the OECD. Albania also has a high proportion (29.7%) of students not demonstrating basic proficiency in all three core PISA domains: reading, mathematics and science. On a positive note, the achievement gap between the highest- and lowest-achieving students is closing in every subject.¹⁸⁸ Also, the graduation rate has improved slightly in recent years,¹⁸⁹ from 80.1 percent in 2016 to 84.6 percent in 2018.

At the upper secondary level, students can choose to enter general, oriented or Vocational Education and Training (VET) programmes. Places in oriented programmes are limited and entrance is merit-based, with only about three percent of students in 2019 enrolled in an oriented programme.¹⁹⁰ The share enrolled in VET programmes is low, with only 17 percent enrolled in vocational studies in 2017¹⁹¹ compared to 37 percent in OECD countries¹⁹² and 48 percent in the EU28.¹⁹³ Students in vocational programmes are able to enter tertiary education after completing four years (or three levels) of vocational education. However, those in general programmes can enter university after only three years, thus disincentivising enrolment in vocational education by students who are interested in these programmes but who are also interested in attending a university.

At the upper secondary level, about 23 percent of schools are private and the share of enrolment in this sector has grown, from about eight percent in 2006–2007 to eleven percent in 2016–2017.¹⁹⁴ The increase in enrolment in private schools is related to factors such as smaller class sizes, better infrastructure, foreign language curricula and recognition of studies in Albanian private schools by some EU countries. State Matura Examination results show higher achievement among students in private schools than those in public school,¹⁹⁵ but these are not controlled for student characteristics such as socio-economic disadvantage or positive self-selection into private schools. PISA 2018 data show that on average private schools perform significantly higher in reading than do public schools, even after accounting for PISA's index of economic, social and cultural status (ESCS).

Overall, Albanian schools offer a positive classroom climate. Albania ranked top among PISA countries with regard to the percentage of students reporting that their teachers support them. **Based on student reports, Albania has one of the most positive disciplinary climates among the countries that participated in PISA 2018.** Moreover, UNESCO has found that mutual support is common among students, that teachers exhibit a collaborative spirit and that students feel happy in their interactions with teachers, though teachers find it difficult to differentiate instruction according to the level of ability of the different students.¹⁹⁶

Children in Albania are expected to complete thirteen years of pre-primary, primary and secondary school education by age 18 years. However, when years of schooling are adjusted for quality of learning, this is only equivalent to 8.9 years, meaning that 4.1 years of schooling time do not result in learning.¹⁹⁷ Instructional time in Albania is limited and prescribed in the guidelines, though schools do have some flexibility in how the school day is organised. A 2018 reform, entitled *Three Subjects in Six Hours*, has provided schools with more flexibility in how they choose to organise the instructional day. **It is reported that teachers have found the new curriculum difficult to implement in 45-minute lessons, in part because it takes longer to deliver the lesson by engaging students in activities.**¹⁹⁸ **With the new reform, teachers see their students for fewer days per week, affecting their ability to adequately assess them.**

¹⁸⁸ OECD, 2019. *PISA 2018 Results (Volume I): What Students Know and Can Do*. Paris, available at <https://doi.org/10.1787/5f07c754-en>

¹⁸⁹ NSTAT, 2021. *Children, Adolescents and Youth-Focused Well-being Indicators 2016–2019*. op. cit.

¹⁹⁰ Maghnouj S., Fordham E., et al., 2020. *Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education: Albania* OECD. op. cit.

¹⁹¹ MESY, 2017 *National Basic Education Exams Public Report about Student Achievements*. Tirana, available at http://qsha.gov.al/infos/publikime_raporte/raporti_pkab_2017.pdf

¹⁹² OECD, 2020. *Education in a glance*. p. 160. op. cit.

¹⁹³ DEPP, 2020. *Education in Europe: key figures*. Paris.

¹⁹⁴ Maghnouj S., Fordham E., et al., 2020. *Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education: Albania*. OECD. op. cit.

¹⁹⁵ MESY. *National Basic Education Exams Public Report about Student Achievements 2017*. op. cit.

¹⁹⁶ UNESCO, 2017. op. cit.

¹⁹⁷ World Bank, 2018. Human Capital Index.

¹⁹⁸ Gonzalez T., 2018. *Report on the Implementation of the New Competency Based Curriculum: Building on Strengths*. UNICEF. Tirana.

Tertiary education

The transition from secondary to tertiary education is characterised by a drop in enrolment rates. In 2019, the proportion of students that graduated from tertiary education was 1.6 percent higher than in 2018. Among the graduates from all programmes that year, girls or women accounted for 66.4 percent, with graduates in bachelor programmes comprising 53.6 percent of the total.¹⁹⁹ School-life expectancy (from primary through tertiary education) increased from 10.6 years in 2000 to 14.8 years in 2017, similar to neighbouring countries but lower than the EU average of 17.1 years. The gross enrolment rate in tertiary education fell from 66 percent in 2014 to 55 percent in 2018,²⁰⁰ partly due to closure of private universities awarding reportedly low-quality degrees, and partly to emigration in pursuit of education and career opportunities abroad. The quality of Albanian universities, partly due to their rapid expansion, is relatively low²⁰¹ and, according to the Webometrics Ranking of World Universities,²⁰² rank among the lowest in the region.²⁰³ Low budget allocation is one factor affecting the quality of university education but so is emigration: around 40 percent of university academics, mainly those who have specialised abroad, emigrated between 1990 and 2008.²⁰⁴

Youth unemployment in Albania is high (27.2%) and the rate of young people not in employment, education or training reached 25.5 percent in 2019.²⁰⁵ Whereas Albania's global competitiveness is now slightly above that of other Western Balkan countries, many young Albanians are employed in low-skilled, low-wage jobs, particularly in the agriculture sector. In order to ensure that Albanians have the skills needed to be employed, Albania's National Employment and Skills Strategy has called for investments in VET, and human capital development more broadly.²⁰⁶ The National Education Strategy plans to improve the quality of tertiary education by re-organising and expanding the study programmes, bringing them closer to the market demands, modernising the infrastructure, introducing financial schemes to promote enrolment, and strengthening the governance of the education institutions.

Equity

Socio-economic conditions have a significant impact on access to education and educational outcome, and students from disadvantaged backgrounds perform less well than more advantaged students.²⁰⁷ Data from PISA 2018 indicate that students in the bottom quarter of the ESCS in Albania achieved 61 fewer points in reading than those in the top quarter, equivalent to two years' schooling. **This finding indicates a lack of opportunities in less well-off households and in poorly developed, rural or remote communities where access to education for both girls and boys is significantly lower than elsewhere. Despite this gap, disadvantaged students are academically resilient and achieve higher performance levels in Albania (12.3%) than in the OECD countries on average (11.3%).**

Females in Albania are also more likely to graduate from various levels of education and to complete more schooling, and they outperform males in the country across many outcome measures: e.g. data from PISA 2018 show significantly higher performance for girls than for boys in the domains of reading and science. For mathematics, the difference between girls and boys is not significant. Meanwhile, fewer females than males lack basic science and reading skills, and the percentage point gap in favour of females is greater in Albania (10.7 in science; 20.1 in reading) than in OECD countries (2.4 and 10.2, respectively).

¹⁹⁹ INSTAT, *Albania in Figures 2019* op. cit.

²⁰⁰ Maghnouj S., Fordham E., et al., 2020. *Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education: Albania*. OECD. op. cit.

²⁰¹ *QS World University Ranking*, available at <https://www.topuniversities.com/qs-world-university-rankings>

²⁰² *Webometrics Ranking of World Universities*, available at <http://www.webometrics.info/en>

²⁰³ <http://www.webometrics.info/en/Europe/Albania>

²⁰⁴ Gëdeshi I., King R., 2018. *Research Study on Brain Gain: Reversing Brain Drain with Albanian Scientific Diaspora*. UNDP. Tirana; World Bank, 2010. *Albania, the New Growth Agenda: A Country Economic Memorandum*. Washington DC: World Bank No.53599-AL.

²⁰⁵ INSTAT, 2021. *Children, Adolescents and Youth-Focused Well-being Indicators 2016–2019*. op. cit.

²⁰⁶ See Maghnouj S., Fordham E., et al., 2020. *Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education: Albania*. OECD. Paris, available at <https://doi.org/10.1787/d267dc93-en>

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

On average, **children in urban regions in Albania attain two more years of schooling than those in rural regions (10.5 and 8.6, respectively).**²⁰⁸ Data from PISA 2018 indicate that, in all three domains, students from rural schools in Albania have lower mean scores than students from urban schools. Remote rural areas cannot offer the same spread of learning opportunities as urban areas. Meanwhile, internal migration has led to overcrowded classrooms in urban areas and difficulty in recruiting quality teachers for rural areas. Efforts to improve learning opportunities by rationalising schools are limited by poor transportation infrastructure.

Although Roma access to education increased from 44 percent in 2011 to 66 percent in 2017,²⁰⁹ the **educational outcomes for Roma and Balkan Egyptians remain among the lowest in Albania. Only one percent of Roma and five percent of Balkan Egyptians of age 7–20 years have completed secondary education.**²¹⁰ Among Roma children specifically, the school dropout rate is about 50 percent²¹¹ and, by some estimates,²¹² more than half of Roma children of age 6–16 years have never been enrolled in school. Policy responses include cost-reimbursement for textbooks and efforts to promote education among Roma and Egyptians. However, the level of funding in the sector is inadequate for providing access, promoting inclusivity and improving outcomes for this minority. Priority should be given also to implementing the recommendation²¹³ of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on the inclusion of the history of Roma and Travellers in school curricula and teaching materials. **Children, particularly girls, with disabilities face challenges in attending school.** According to MESY, the proportion attending school increased from 75 percent in 2014 to 85 percent in 2018, though this only refers to 57.6 percent of children of age 6–17 years who receive disability allowances.²¹⁴ **Whatever the real figures, children with disabilities are clearly under-represented in mainstream schools and the first challenge in supporting them may be to identify them.** Gonzales²¹⁵ posits that parents and children may be reluctant to identify children with disabilities for fear of stigma and bullying, and that this prevents them from receiving extra support. INSTAT figures show that, for the academic year 2018–2019, the proportion of girls among the disabled students in lower and upper secondary education was lower than that of boys (33.2% and 39.2% respectively), while the figure for higher education was as high as 58.4 percent.²¹⁶

Schools have received additional services to support inclusion and are implementing inclusive education principles. It is reported²¹⁷ that teachers are positive about the inclusive education approach, but despite these efforts, CPR 2019 indicates that the quality of education for disabled children is still a cause for concern. Difficulties remain in organising school transport for children with disability and **assistant teachers require further tailored training.**²¹⁸ Meanwhile, **assessment of disabilities is still based on an outdated medical model**, and monitoring of how disability-related measures are being implemented is hampered by a lack of data. Given national commitments to enrolling all children with disability into regular schools and to enable migrant children to access schooling, teacher training needs to prioritise cultural sensitivity and multi-cultural teaching and how to combat prejudice and stereotyping in class. Training around special needs should be a mandatory element of mainstream teacher education, in-service training and professional support systems.

²⁰⁸ Psacharopoulos, 2017. op. cit.

²⁰⁹ UNDP, World Bank, EC., 2017. *Regional Roma Survey—Albania*.

²¹⁰ UNESCO, 2017. op. cit.

²¹¹ Psacharopoulos, 2017. op. cit.

²¹² UNESCO, 2017. op. cit.

²¹³ See Recommendation CM/Rec(2020)2 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the inclusion of the history of Roma and/or Travellers in school curricula and teaching materials adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 1 July 2020 at the 1380th meeting of the Ministers' Deputies available at https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result_details.aspx?Objec-tID=09000016809ee48c

²¹⁴ See Rogers J., Sammon E., 2018. op. cit.

²¹⁵ Gonzalez T., 2018. op. cit.

²¹⁶ INSTAT, 2020. *Women and Men in Albania*. op. cit.

²¹⁷ Rogers J., Sammon E., 2018. op. cit.

²¹⁸ CPR, 2019. op. cit.

Right to culture and leisure

Article 2.1 of the Convention stipulates that governments must “ensure the rights set forth in this Convention to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child’s or his or her parent’s or legal guardian’s race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status.” This implies that children’s rights should be realised within the context of the child’s family and community, including respect for the child’s language, culture and religion, and recognition of age- and gender-related differences. Article 30 stipulates that “In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities, or persons of indigenous origin exist, a child belonging to such a minority shall not be denied the right, in community with other members of his or her group, to enjoy his or her own culture, to profess and practise his or her own religion, or to use his or her own language.” In Albania, as in most European states, Roma children are still denied the right to affirmation and validation of their language, culture and tradition, as well as the comfort, security and stability that wider social acceptance brings. This is most apparent in school, where Roma children usually find themselves in an alien environment, without any affirmation, validation or positive acknowledgement of their culture, language or tradition. There is little or no curriculum on Roma history, culture or community anywhere in Europe, while **in countries such as Albania, whose law enables Roma language and culture to be taught, the option is not usually available in practice due to a lack of qualified Roma teachers. However, there are opportunities to redress this situation within the country’s overall movement towards inclusive education, and to move quickly towards meeting the recommendation²¹⁹ of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on the inclusion of the history of Roma in school curricula and teaching materials that was recently adopted by the Committee of Ministers.**

Article 31.1 of the Convention recognises “the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and arts”.²²⁰ Article 31.2 places a duty on the state to “respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity”.²²¹ The importance of play to children’s development and well-being is now internationally recognised, along with the need to provide safe, secure and child-friendly environments for children. Analysis of data collected²²² in four Albanian cities in 2015 indicates that there is still some way to go to achieving the goals of the Child-Friendly Cities initiative in Albania. Overall, less than 30 percent of parents and children thought their city was safe for children, though children in Tirana were positive about being able to ride bikes and walk around. In Vlore, not one parent testified that their city was safe for children to cycle or walk around in. Children scored Korca and Peshkopi lowest in terms of feeling protected from being taken away by a stranger. **A study²²³ on play ranked all four cities less than satisfactory by all three indicators. Only 20 percent of participants felt that children have enough places to play games and sports, or adequate opportunities to participate in, or observe, cultural festival and events. The results also show that fewer than 50 percent of children and parents in all four cities knew of places to play where children can explore nature.**

²¹⁹ See Recommendation CM/Rec(2020)2 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the inclusion of the history of Roma and/or Travellers in school curricula and teaching materials adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 1 July 2020 at the 1380th meeting of the Ministers’ Deputies available at https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result_details.aspx?ObjID=090000016809ee48c

²²⁰ See Hodgkin R., Newell P., 2002. *Implementation Handbook for the Convention on the Rights of the Child*. UNICEF. New York.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² UNICEF, 2015. *Albania. Child Friendly Cities*. Tirana.

²²³ Ibid.

3.4 RIGHT TO PROTECTION, FAMILY ENVIRONMENT AND ALTERNATIVE CARE

General context

Limited research has been undertaken in Albania into child protection, and more child-focused research is required in relation to violence in the home, at school and in other institutions. Too little is known of the extent or prevalence of child sexual abuse, child labour and exploitation, while data on many vulnerable child populations are inadequate. A much greater effort is required to establish a satisfactory situation overview of Roma children, children with disability, children in detention, adolescents from the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) community, and, increasingly, children in migration. However, it is clear that children in Albania, despite the country's middle-income status, face a number of risks associated with poverty and deprivation. The Child Well-Being study²²⁴ in 2016 noted that 46.5 percent of school-age children have little family wealth, with a larger percentage of females (48.9%) reporting less family wealth than males (44%).

Gender roles also tend to be stereotyped and there is an unacceptably high level of tolerance of violence towards women and children, putting them further at risk. In HBSC 2018,²²⁵ 26 percent of 11-, 13-, and 15-year-old adolescents reported that they had been physically abused once or twice in their lifetime, and six percent had experienced physical abuse many times. The 2019 Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG 2019) Survey²²⁶ found that about one-third (31%) of women had experienced domestic violence, and 23.1 percent had had to spend nights in a hospital as a result. Nevertheless, only 16.9 percent of women had told someone and 8.4 percent had sought help over domestic violence, mostly from family (98.9%) and community networks rather than formal institutions such as police (4.4%), lawyers (3.4%), doctors and other health workers (3.1%). Most battered women in Albania continue to suffer in silence despite ongoing efforts to raise public awareness about domestic violence and newly created domestic violence legislation and victim support services.²²⁷

A 2015 report²²⁸ showed that the violence experienced by women and girls with disability is rarely reported. These people suffer multiple types of violence linked to stereotype, tradition, culture and health, social or economic status. They are not well-informed about reporting mechanisms, are largely dependent on the perpetrator, completely lack support services, and lack trust in the institutions.

²²⁴ Bradshaw J. et al., 2016. *Child Well-Being in Albania*. UNICEF Tirana (CWB 2016), available at <https://www.unicef.org/albania/sites/unicef.org.albania/files/2019-01/Child%20Well-Being%20in%20Albania.pdf>

²²⁵ Health Behaviour in School-age Children of 11, 13 and 15 years: main findings, 2018. Tirana.

²²⁶ VAWG, 2019. op. cit.

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ Çani B., et al., 2015. *Invisible Violence—An overview of the on violence against women and girls with disabilities in Albania*. Available at https://www.al.undp.org/content/albania/en/home/library/poverty/_invisible-violence—an-overview-on-the-phenomenon-of-violence-a/



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In 2019, 583 children were residing in public and non-public residential care.²²⁹ Government is strategically determined to reorganise the childcare system, recognising that residential institutional care provision does not offer children the best opportunity to grow and develop. There is a renewed policy, legal and institutional framework for social care and the child protection system with the aim of advancing gradual and full de-institutionalisation of children from all residential care facilities, through re-enforcement of family support and alternative care options.

Child protection frameworks

MHSP is the designated body responsible for child protection in Albania. The NCRPC acts as an advisory body whose main task is to coordinate government policy for guaranteeing rights and protection of the child, particularly in justice, social service, education, health and culture. **It would seem essential to support appointment of a specific standing advisory committee on child protection, as stipulated in the legal framework.**

SACRP holds responsibility for coordination and organisation of the integrated child protection system and for implementation of national child protection policies, interventions and measures for prevention of, and protection of the child from, abuse, neglect, maltreatment and violence. This makes the Agency the de facto body with ultimate responsibility for child protection in Albania, subject to ministerial authority and approval, **though it has no management function or role in relation to provision of protection services on the ground. SACRP's remit in relation to child protection at the local level includes quality control, data collection, provision of technical advice, training and capacity building, and general oversight and support. To effectively complete these functions, the capacities and resources of the Agency have to be further strengthened.**

Article 46 of Law 18/2017 identifies the municipality as the ultimate duty-bearer at the local level, and stipulates its statutory responsibility, for implementation of national child protection policies and protection measures, and establishment of effective child protection structures including allocation of funds. The source of such funds is not specified, nor the balance between central government and municipality responsibility to properly fund and resource child protection services. **However, the first specific responsibility assigned to municipalities under Article 46 a) is reflection and respect for the rights of the child in local development plans, programmes and projects in line with national policies, implying a legal obligation to adopt a child-rights approach to planning.**

Articles 46–52 set the framework for child protection services and outline the structures and staff required at the municipal level to support and protect vulnerable individuals, their families and communities and protect Albanian children from abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence through provision of child-centred, community-based quality services. However, **the situation regarding financing has not changed and lack of resources continues to impede development of a comprehensive, quality, child protection system.**

CPR 2019 acknowledges²³⁰ that the resources awarded to the child protection institutions, financial and human, do not correspond to their increased legal responsibilities. There were only 236 child protection workers in total (52% of the required number) in 2019 out of which only 45 (19%) worked full-time in this function. The new law requires all child protection workers to have a background in social work but currently only 78 out of 236 (33%) have such experience.²³¹ The child protection structure continues to suffer from a lack of consistent investment in capacities including allied sectors of education and health. The principle of a multi-disciplinary approach is clearly stipulated in the normative framework and is a principle widely acknowledged for its importance. But coordination remains one area in Albania that is not fully functioning²³² and challenged by behavioural, technical and structural aspects. For the most part it takes the form of sharing information, rather than effective and collective decision making and division of labour. Meanwhile, case management is

²²⁹ INSTAT, 2021. *Children, Adolescents and Youth-Focused Well-being Indicators 2016–2019*. op. cit.

²³⁰ See CPR, 2019, p. 29 and State Report to CRC, 2019, para. 27.

²³¹ MHSP, 2020. *4-years Monitoring Report of National Action Plan for Children 2017–2020*. op. cit.

²³² CPR, 2019. op. cit.

hampered by a lack of social care services to attend for the needs of the child and the family.²³³ All of the above issues seriously challenge the availability, accessibility, coverage and effectiveness of child protection services in Albania.

Violence

ADHS 2018²³⁴ found that 37 percent of children had been disciplined by non-violent means only, including the taking away of privileges or giving the child something else to do, without resorting to verbal or physical violence. Some 42 percent were subjected to psychological aggression, such as yelling, and 32 percent to some form of physical aggression. The VAWG survey found that 47.7 percent of women who experienced domestic violence had children of age 0–17 years living in their household and, **based on their sample, it was estimated that 286,498 children of this age had been exposed to domestic violence in their lifetime (ever), and that 246,707 were currently being exposed to domestic violence.** Children of age 5–17 years exposed to domestic violence in the previous twelve months were twice as likely to have frequent nightmares (25.3%) than were other children (9.5%), three times more likely to wet their bed often (20.4%), be timid or withdrawn (21.5%), and to act aggressively with their mother or other children, or both (6.9%).

Police administrative data in 2017 show that 61 percent (70 children) of all sexual abuse cases in Albania were committed against children.²³⁵ Sexual violence is of particular concern for girls and women, as well as children without parental care, with 3.1 percent of women of age 18–74 years reporting²³⁶ that they had been sexually abused during childhood.²³⁷ A few cases became known to the public in 2020 and 2021 of children being systematically sexually abused in their community and in residential care centres. The handling of the cases revealed a lack of specialised professionals and integrated services that could serve the best interest of the child. Government has now established an ad hoc high-level working group led by the prime minister to address and prevent violence against children, with a particular focus on sexual violence.

School is a vital element of a child's protective environment, and in the HBSC 2018 survey, about 22 percent of children reported having suffered at least one episode of bullying at school, with higher prevalence among boys than girls (24% and 20%, respectively). **These are not negligible figures and indicate that some mapping of violence in schools is required and most importantly a dedicated and clear policy to identify and address cases of violence at school setting.**

The child protection system needs to be further upgraded, expanded and adapted urgently to ensure adequate response to the diverse forms of violence against Albanian children. Further resources are required to bring child protection units up to full strength, while accountability, monitoring and quality control mechanisms need to be strengthened. Front line professionals (including health staff, police, teachers and other public employees) should proactively identify risks of violence, refer cases and deal with them when they occur. Availability of and accessibility to child protection services should be improved, including the specialised integrated services to child survivors of severe forms of violence and abuse. Parenting support programmes for families and caregivers, and safe reporting and referral mechanisms for children (at home and in institutional settings) need to be supported to transform the culture of tolerance towards violence, stigmatisation of victims and discrimination against survivors, for both girls and boys alike.

²³³ Terre des homes, 2020. *Report on the implementation of the Law no. 18/2017*. EU, ANNTARC.

²³⁴ ADHS, 2018. op. cit. p. 137.

²³⁵ INSTAT, 2018. *Crime and Criminal Justice Statistics 2016–2017*. Available at: <http://www.instat.gov.al/media/4824/crime-and-criminal-justice-statistics.pdf>

²³⁶ VAWG, 2019. op. cit.

²³⁷ 'had been touched sexually when they did not want or was made to do something sexual that they did not want'.

Child labour and trafficking

Submissions to the UPR²³⁸ reports on cases of children begging in the streets in Tirana and noted that such children were also used for begging in neighbouring countries.²³⁹ Most of the children involved came from poor and socially marginalised families, many from Roma communities. UPR notes that **measures taken to assist and protect street children in Albania were insufficient, despite efforts to bring the legislation in line with international treaties, and children continued to be victims of prostitution, pornography and sexual exploitation.** It found that child prostitution, child pornography and child sex tourism have been insufficiently addressed in the policy documents, and that no specific institutions or services were available for accommodation, care, protection and assistance to child victims of prostitution, pornography or sexual exploitation online. **Children involved in prostitution are not exempt from criminal responsibility and can, in principle, be prosecuted.**

There are little data or information on the prevalence of sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism (SECTT) despite the importance of the tourism industry in Albania. Children from all across the country are approached and recruited online by criminal networks and then brought to tourism cities such as Vlora, Durrës and Saranda, or to other large cities such as Tirana, Shkoder and Elbasan for sexual exploitation in hotels and motels. Organised networks are reported to be involved and often lure the children with pictures of luxurious hotels and lifestyles, as well as luring them with the promise of fast money. SECTT seems to be linked to internal child trafficking patterns as a form of trafficking of children for sexual exploitation.²⁴⁰

In its UPR 2019 submission, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance²⁴¹ expressed concern about trafficking of children, among whom a disproportionate number of victims were Roma and Egyptian. An OSCE review²⁴² of potential victims of child trafficking in 2020 found that working in Albania's nightclubs presents a trafficking risk for girls, and that trafficking for forced begging and criminal activity presents the principal trafficking risk for boys. Most cases were without an international aspect, but nevertheless showed the **need for law reform in Albania to recognise trafficking as a domestic, as well as an international, phenomenon, and provide for full pledge support to victims.** The review acknowledged the coordination of state actors but noted significant problems regarding case management including a lack of explicit decision making regarding trafficking identification, lack of follow up of criminal investigations, and lapses in provision of robust child protection measures. It found **that there is a considerable need to strengthen child protection systems in Albania in relation to child trafficking through increased training for key stakeholders, including law enforcement officers, child protection workers and schools. There is also a need for improved data gathering and more effective coordination** of child protection actors, as well as increased provision of specialised care for children who have been traumatised as a result of trafficking, including specialised services for child drug addiction. **The Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA) in their UPR submission noted that one of the major challenges to preventing trafficking in children was the high level of school dropout, especially in Roma and Egyptian communities.**

²³⁸ Collated in *Summary prepared by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in accordance with paragraph 15 (b) of the annex to Human Rights Council resolution 5/1 and paragraph 5 of the annex to Council resolution 16/21 Albania*. Available at <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/UPR/Pages/ALIndex.aspx> (UPR 2019)

²³⁹ See Vathi Z., 2014. *Children and Adolescents on the Move Involved in Street Work in Albania and Kosovo: Transnational and Internal Patterns*. Mario Project. Available at http://tdh-europe.org/upload/document/7231/Mario_Albania_Kosovo_Web.pdf.

Healy C., Rogoz M., et al., 2012. *Report for the Study on Typology and Policy Responses to Child Begging in the EU*. ICMPD. Available at https://ec.europa.eu/anti-trafficking/sites/antitrafficking/files/report_for_the_study_on_typology_and_policy_responses_to_child

Save the Children, 2012. *Regional Report on Child Begging: Prevalence, Prevention and Suppression of Child Begging*. Sarajevo, available at <https://childhub.org/en/child-protection-online-library/regional-report-child-begging> This report covered Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Slovenia and Serbia.

²⁴⁰ Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime's Observatory of Illicit Economies in South Eastern Europe (May 2021). *Exploited in plain sight - An assessment of commercial sexual exploitation of children and child protection responses in the Western Balkans*.

²⁴¹ UPR, 2019. op. cit.

²⁴² McQuade A., Rexha J., Trimi A., 2020. *A typology of child trafficking in Albania*. OSCE.

The 2021 Trafficking in Persons Report for Albania prioritised the rule of law as its prime recommendation: “*vigorously investigate, prosecute, and convict traffickers—including complicit officials*”. GRETA and observers reported that authorities confused overlapping elements of exploitation of prostitution and trafficking and at times applied the lesser charge, because it required less specialisation and time, or had the false belief that trafficking crimes required a transnational element.²⁴³ Same expectation is reported by Albanian youth surveyed as part of a UNICEF led study, agreeing that law enforcement measures are the most effective means for preventing human trafficking.²⁴⁴ However, same surveyed youth have reported that poverty is the key factor leading to human trafficking.

Access to justice

Although Albania approved the Criminal Justice Code for Children in 2017, adopting all the international principles and standards for child-friendly justice into national legislation, and approved the National Justice for Children Strategy (2018–2021), full implementation has been delayed. Laws, policies and practices are not yet harmonised and tailored to children’s experiences and can lead to unjust, inequitable and inappropriate outcomes. The justice system is not yet friendly to and accessible by all children.

CPR 2019 notes that there are still structural gaps in juvenile justice in Albania and fulfilling the regulatory framework would require a shift in the administrative culture, considerable capacity building, specific adapted infrastructure, the establishment of community services, and inter-disciplinary and inter-institutional coordination at the central and local level.

Social norms should be conducive to children’s equitable access to justice but a general lack of trust in institutions and the deeply entrenched social beliefs that make it unacceptable for children to confide in an adult outside of the home about problems within the home prevent children from accessing the justice system. Poor children are even less likely to approach the justice system to claim their rights, and this often overlaps with other factors such as disability, gender and ethnic origin. Court fees, the costs of legal representation, distance to justice institutions, limited knowledge on child rights, and where to seek redress, and lack of child-sensitive procedures further inhibit children and families from accessing remedies.²⁴⁵

A report²⁴⁶ in 2016 confirms that a significant gap still exists between law and practice. It **notes that police escort, arrest and pre-trial detention in many cases constitute a form of imprisonment, fail to take into account the context, age or best interests of the child**, and are done in the absence of professional assessment of the child’s psychological and developmental status. In its 2019 Report,²⁴⁷ the Ministry of Justice recognised that it had not advanced with ensuring free legal aid for children.

Juvenile sections still need to be established in some courts and there are considerable discrepancies in legal professionals’ understanding of justice for children. Data²⁴⁸ show a large number of boys detained, escorted or arrested. Stakeholders should develop a strong, independent monitoring framework for children in detention, institutions, reception centres and other holding facilities and insist that any facility where children are held in state care has an independent complaints mechanism, easily accessible to children.

The criminal justice system for children operates in a context of social inequality and lack of assessment of social factors and circumstances. The Probation Service needs to be involved by the judiciary and the prosecution at the early stages of the juvenile criminal process, rather than limiting their role only to

²⁴³ US Department of State, 2021. *Trafficking in Persons Report: Albania*. Available at <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-trafficking-in-persons-report/albania/>

²⁴⁴ Davy, D., and Metanji, B. (2020) *First Wave Survey Study on Youth Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices with Regard to Human Trafficking, in Four Regions in Albania* Report on Findings. UK Government / IDRA / UNICEF Albania available at <https://www.unicef.org/albania/documents/first-wave-survey-study-youth-knowledge-attitudes-and-practices-regard-human-trafficking>

²⁴⁵ UNICEF, The Regional Office for CEE/CIS, 2015. *Children’s Equitable Access to Justice, Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia*. Geneva.

²⁴⁶ Commissioner for the Protection against Discrimination/Albanian & Rehabilitation Centre for Trauma and Torture, 2016. *Children, access to justice and discrimination An overview of judicial decisions in relation to children from the point of view of discrimination and equality*. Tirana, available at https://www.unicef.org/albania/sites/unicef.org.albania/files/2018-12/2016-Access_to_Justice.pdf

²⁴⁷ Ministry of Justice, 2019. Monitoring Report on the Implementation of the Justice for Children Strategy.

²⁴⁸ INSTAT, 2021. *Children, Adolescents, youth-targeted wellbeing indicators*. op. cit.

the stage of execution of the sentence. **The public authorities need to critically review the entire spectrum of services to children linked in one way or another to the justice system and not only the police and the courts, but also teachers, child protection structures, social workers, psychologists and other community stakeholders who interact with children facing justice issues.** Involvement by social services and effective provision of social services to children, especially children in conflict with the law before release or reintegration is crucial to preventing discrimination and differential treatment.

National Human Rights Institutions have an important monitoring role to play over the implementation of national legislation and international standards on justice for children. These bodies may directly offer remedies for violations of child rights, and they may also advocate and provide advice to the Parliament and the Government on various pieces of legislation that affect children's equitable access to justice.

Child marriage

Although the minimum age for marriage under the Family Code (2003) is 18 years of age, eleven percent of women of age 20–49 years and two percent of men had married by the age of 18,²⁴⁹ while the percentage of women of age 15–19 years who have begun childbearing increased to 3.5 percent in 2017 and 2018, up from 2.8 percent in 2008 and 2009.²⁵⁰ Data from INSTAT and ADHS 2018, as well as a small number of qualitative studies, indicate that child marriage is still a significant, though under-explored issue, driven primarily by gender inequality, poverty and social exclusion. The laws to protect adolescents from child marriage are ineffectively or inconsistently implemented and to date there is no public policy document addressing this phenomenon.

Courts may allow marriage prior to the legal minimum age on a case-by-case basis. Recent study²⁵¹ indicates that courts allow marriage for girls under 18 years on the grounds of pregnancy, childbirth and cohabitation, but that they are often not making these decisions in the best interests of the children concerned. The Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices (KAP) study of 2018²⁵² found that while levels of knowledge of the legislation relating to child marriage and of the negative impacts of the practice are high, child marriages still happen in all population groups. There is a general perception that child marriage is more prevalent among Roma communities, but there are no conclusive data on the phenomenon in ADHS 2018 or from INSTAT. Roma respondents in the KAP 2018 study seemed aware of the social expectations pushing young girls towards early marriage but were equally sympathetic to the arguments against it. However, Roma and Egyptian girls are likely more vulnerable to the pressures of poverty, poor quality education and overcrowded conditions that push them towards early marriage.

This egregious violation of children's rights can only be addressed through strong and specific legal and policy measures that ensure full compliance with, and enforcement of, existing legislation, as well as sensitisation and education of police and judicial officials to conduct due diligence and apply the best interest of the child principle. There is also a need to create alternatives for children (particularly girls) other than marriage, and public education to tackle social norms that collude with and enable child marriage.

Children's online safety

ICT is an important tool in children's lives, for learning, socialising, expression and fulfilment of their rights and fundamental freedoms. The Internet provides opportunities for growth, development and education, but at the same time it generates risks. One such risk is the facilitation of Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (CSEA) online, which enables abusers to gain access to large numbers of children while keeping their own identity anonymous. A recent survey²⁵³ found that almost eight in ten

²⁴⁹ ADHS, 2018. op. cit.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Observatory for Child and Youth Rights, 2018a. *Marriage in court? Children's rights, underage marriage and the role of the court* available at: https://observator.org.al/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Report2-Legal-social-analyze-underage-marriage_June2018.pdf

²⁵² Observatory of Children's and Youth Rights, 2018b. *Child Marriage Knowledge, Attitudes and Perception among Affected Communities*. Tirana, available at <https://observator.org.al/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Child-marriage-Report-Final-vesion.pdf>

²⁵³ Dunja A., Gjergji O., Gvineria D., Hallkaj E., and Verzivolli I., 2019. *One Click Away: Children's Experience of Internet Use in Albania*. UNICEF in Albania; IPSOS Strategic Marketing. Tirana, available at https://www.unicef.org/albania/sites/unicef.org.albania/files/2020-01/report_oneclickaway.pdf

Albanian children can access the Internet whenever they want, and children start using the Internet at some 9.3 years of age. About 95 percent access the Internet at home at least weekly and parental restriction is their most common constraint. Meanwhile, 30 percent of parents surveyed did not use the Internet, which explains how a restrictive attitude further limits positive parental supervision.

Younger children feel less confident than their elders with regard to online social behaviour but as they grow, they engage in a wider range of activities and become more confident. Some fourteen percent of children interviewed had upsetting experiences on the Internet. **The most common risk is exposure to violence, which affected more than three in ten Albanian children. One in four reported at least one online contact with someone whom they had never met face-to-face before and almost 20 percent reported meeting in person someone they had previously known only on the web.**

One in ten children reported at least one unwanted sexual experience through the Internet, often initiated by someone the child already knew. Exposure to all forms of online risks increases with age and boys are more likely to be exposed to such risks than girls, though girls report being more upset by them. **Parental reporting of their children's exposure to online risks is less common than reporting by children themselves, possibly indicating a lack of communication between parents and their children.** Children report that most parents surveyed do not employ an active parenting approach to their Internet use, while parents report a higher level of restrictive mediation, including use of parental controls and Internet monitoring. Education programmes for children, families and communities about the risks and strategies for staying safe on the Internet have to be boosted, using innovative and effective approaches.

Another recent study²⁵⁴ found that, while between 5,000 and 15,000 potential cases of child indecent images (pornography) were referred annually by international law enforcement bodies, the Albanian State Police were only able to open investigation into three or four cases per year and detect just one. The National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children alone referred 6,300 cases of indecent images of children from January to October 2019, with an average of 200 users in Albania accessing and sharing abusive material. Capacities for investigation and prosecution of crimes against children committed through the Internet need urgently to be strengthened.²⁵⁵

The newly approved National Strategy for Cybersecurity and Action Plan in Albania 2020–2025 incorporates a dedicated chapter on children's protection online, elevating the issue to a higher priority for the country. Five key pillars in the chapter focused on children look at tackling specific areas of their protection online, including capacities for investigation and prosecution of crimes against children committed through the Internet that remain a major bottleneck. The budgeting and implementation have to be closely monitored.

The current context with regard to CSEA calls for the child protection system to be sufficiently prepared to address the diverse manifestation of violence against children in the country, enabling a continuum of child protection services, from early identification to rehabilitation of the victims of violence and abuse, especially those affected from the worst forms.

Birth registration and statelessness

A UNHCR report²⁵⁶ in 2018 found 1,031 persons at risk of statelessness in Albania, but the actual number may have been higher as stateless persons often remain invisible.²⁵⁷ **The study found that the majority of persons at risk of statelessness in Albania are entitled to nationality according to the law on citizenship but find it difficult to have it confirmed in practice. The main obstacle is access to birth registration, which involves costly and lengthy administrative and judicial procedures. In 2018, 97**

²⁵⁴ Ali S., Ballo M., Gvineria D., Verzivoli I., 2020. *The Lost Cases: Findings and recommendations from an in-depth assessment of gaps in the investigation of online child sexual abuse cases in Albania*. UNICEF in Albania. Tirana, available at <https://www.unicef.org/albania/media/3361/file/The%20lost%20Cases.pdf>

²⁵⁵ CPR, 2019. op. cit.

²⁵⁶ UNHCR, TLAS, 2018. *Mapping of the population at risk of statelessness in Albania*. Tirana.

²⁵⁷ See Statelessness Index Albania at <https://index.statelessness.eu/country/albania> for more details.

percent of those at risk of statelessness were children, and just less than 50 percent were under five years of age. Altogether, 84 percent of those at risk of statelessness had obstacles related to birth registration procedures, only 53 percent were born outside Albania, twelve percent were born to unmarried parents, ten percent were born at home, and nine percent were born in hospitals that held incorrect personal information on the mother. With recent amendments, the law has now ensured that children born stateless on Albanian territory, abandoned children, adopted children and most children born to nationals abroad acquire nationality. Children still face difficulties if parents have irregular documentation and thus Roma and Egyptian communities are disproportionately impacted, while children born abroad to Roma parents, especially in Greece,²⁵⁸ face particular difficulties. Children repatriated from conflict-affected zones also face impediments to settlement of their legal status and obtaining citizenship.

Albania has signed the conventions on the Status of Stateless Persons (1954) and the Reduction of Statelessness (1961). The recent (2021) revision of the Law on Foreigners regulates for stateless persons to be granted a temporary (up to 1 year) permission to stay in Albania. The stateless status must be certified by the responsible authorities in advance. The temporary permission allows them to access health care, economic aid, free legal aid, translation and psychological support. Implementation of this legislation needs to be monitored closely.

Any strategy to prevent statelessness will need to involve a partnership between the state, international organisations and local NGOs. It might make sense to adopt a regional approach to this issue but the national process of civil registration and birth registration in Albania needs to be simplified further and staff trained to carry it out efficiently and without discrimination. Requirements around documentation should be simplified and costs reduced.

Children without parental care

Article 18 of UNCRC reinforces the central importance of family in a child's life and specifies that states must: "*render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities and shall ensure the development of institutions, facilities and services for the care of children*".²⁵⁹ Article 20 places a responsibility on states to provide proper and adequate alternative care for children deprived of family support. The advantages of a family environment over other models of care have been amply demonstrated over many decades²⁶⁰ but still kinship foster placements predominate. No LGUs have been able to compile and approve an inclusive list of foster families and the lack of community-based care services in most leaves little real child-friendly options available to children in need of alternative care. The financing mechanism is based on the concept that foster care is a charity and not a job. As a result, allocations are only made for children in care but not for remuneration, training and supervision of the foster care families and the related workforce to support foster care families. There is a belief that foster care is culturally alien to Albanian culture and traditions, that it is mainly practiced by foreigners in the country, and that very few people are willing to nurture other people's children, including those with disabilities.

In 2019, 218 children were residing in the nine public care institutions,²⁶¹ three of which operate under SSS and six are co-managed by MHSP and LGUs. **The dual-ownership model apparently creates some difficulties in terms of daily management, particularly regarding staff selection, appointment accountability and performance management.** There are also 69 children with disabilities placed in five public development centres,²⁶² two reporting directly to SSS and the others, jointly managed. A needs assessment²⁶³ in 2019 found that more than 90 percent of children in public care service

²⁵⁸ Hojsik M., Fremlova L., (eds), 2019. *A synthesis of civil society's reports on the implementation of national Roma integration strategies in the European Union*. Center for Policy Studies, CEU. Budapest, available at <https://cps.ceu.edu/sites/cps.ceu.edu/files/attachment/basicpage/3172/rcm-civil-society-monitoring-report-synthesis27-2019-eprint.pdf>

²⁵⁹ See Convention on the Rights of the Child Preamble in Newell P., Hodgkins R., 2012. *Implementation Handbook on the Rights of the Child*. UNICEF, New York. op. cit. p. 660.

²⁶⁰ See for instance Save the Children, 2009. *Keeping Children Out of Harmful Institutions: Why we should be investing in family-based care*. Available at <http://www.savethechildren.org/se/3067>; and Williamson J., Greenburg A., 2010. *Families not Orphanages*. Better Care Network, UNICEF. Geneva, available at <http://www.crin.org/docs/FamiliesNotOrphanages.pdf>

²⁶¹ INSTAT, 2021. *Children, Adolescents, youth-targeted wellbeing indicators 2017–2019* op. cit.

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ MHSP, UNICEF, 2020. Quoted in National Plan for Deinstitutionalisation 2020–2022. April 2020. Tirana.

institutions came from underprivileged, poor or economically disadvantaged family backgrounds, with unemployed parents, or parents with mental health problems, and lacking access to essential care services. Despite the legal obligations of LGUs to provide a standard basket of social care services, there is still no complete functional system at the local level that could provide programmes for efficient parenting, management of parental dependencies, treatment of abusive parents, or treatment of aggressive behaviour in an adult. More than 30 percent of children living in a residential care home are victims of neglect, abuse and exploitation.

The needs assessment found that **institutions do not provide a suitable environment for children's psychological and emotional development and that about 70 percent of children in them display developmental delays, caused by environmental factors.** Residential care institutions mainly focus on physical care rather than individual development. Also, their programmes are designed to serve orphaned children rather than survivors of abuse or neglect. **Children usually stay for a long time due to legal ambiguities and lengthy procedures regarding child custody.** Meanwhile, these institutions lack specialised services, such as psychotherapists and speech therapists, some lack qualified psychologists and social workers, and there is also a lack of professional supervision of care staff. Comprehensive assessments of children residing in non-public residential centres, and those with disabilities in development centres, have not taken place and the identification of immediate and long-term interventions for all children in residential care is required.²⁶⁴

Adoption of the National Action Plan on De-Institutionalisation of children from residential care, in September 2020, provides an opportunity to catalyse active collaboration among central and local governments, key development partners and local CSOs. The De-institutionalisation reform is prioritised in Albania's Economic Reform Programme 2021–2023 and, in March 2021, the central government allocated funds to pilot in two municipalities the development of alternative childcare services, such as professional foster care and guardianship, that will accelerate full and irreversible closure of residential institutions.

Lately, there has been an increased number of foreign unaccompanied children in Albania who were placed in temporary institutional residential care that is inappropriate, neither adapted nor able to provide the needed care. Normative impediments surrounding the provision of alternative care for non-Albanian residents mean that there is a need for urgent action to construct child-friendly and flexible alternative care options for those children who cannot be reunited with their biological families.

Children in migration

Migration and movement seem to be a factor in most Albanian children's life. The diaspora of 1.5 million includes about 388,000 children. Meanwhile, movement from rural to urban areas is common, and 10.6 percent of respondents in the 2011 Census had moved home in the previous decade.²⁶⁵ INSTAT figures indicate that children tend to either migrate with their parents or are cared for by extended family members, until they can be reunited with their parents.

During the period from 2010 to December 2019, around 200,000 Albanian citizens applied for asylum for the first time in EU countries.²⁶⁶ However, EU statistics show that, in 2018, only 2.1 percent of asylum applications from Albanian citizens were accepted by the host countries. The rest have either returned or presumably will return to Albania in the near future;²⁶⁷ during the three years 2015–2017, Albania was top of the list of countries for the number of returnees from EU countries.²⁶⁸ **Meanwhile, there are**

²⁶⁴ MHSP, 2020. *4-years Monitoring Report of National Action Plan for Children 2017–2020*. op. cit.

²⁶⁵ Kosta B., 2014. *Albania: Looking Beyond Borders*. Migration Policy Institute, <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/albania-looking-beyond-borders>. See also INSTAT, 2014. *Albania Population and Population Dynamics in Albania: New Demographic Horizons?* Tirana, p. 29.

²⁶⁶ OECD, 2019. *International Migration Outlook 2019*. OECD Publishing. Paris.

²⁶⁷ World Data info, <https://www.worlddata.info/europe/albania/asylum.php>

²⁶⁸ World Bank Group, 2019. *Supporting the Effective Reintegration of Roma Returnees in the Western Balkans*. Washington DC: International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, The World Bank; Morrica V., Stavrou S., 2018. PowerPoint presentation at the Inception Workshop 'Supporting the Effective Reintegration of (Roma) Returnees in the Western Balkans'. Vienna, 15 January.

still significant numbers of Albanian migrant children in public care in other European countries, while there were 1,393 Albanian unaccompanied children in Italy alone in June 2020.²⁶⁹

At present, the country is undergoing a culture change in terms of migration. For the last three decades, migration has acted as both a safety valve and a safety net for Albania, but the change in profile of those entering Europe since 2015 has curtailed the options of Albanian families. Prior to 2015, the majority of migrants in the EU came from Kosovo,²⁷⁰ Albania and Serbia,²⁷¹ but, in the first nine months of 2015, the top nationalities claiming asylum in the EU were Syrian (222,000; 25%), Afghan (103,000; 11%) and Iraqi (69,000; 8%).²⁷² **This shift in migration patterns has inevitably led to increased competition for jobs in the EU member states and a tightening of restrictions in general on asylum applications from non-priority countries, reflected in increased asylum rejections and faster returns. Furthermore, Albania and other pre-accession countries are now expected to host their share of foreign asylum seekers and migrants.** During the last decade, the number of requests for asylum made by foreign citizens in Albania has increased. In 2015, there were 106 such requests, in 2017 there were 309,²⁷³ and in 2019 the number rose to 6,677.²⁷⁴

In 2019, most irregular migrants in Albania came from Iraq and Syria,²⁷⁵ and in 2020, from Syria (38.3%), Afghanistan (16%), Iraq (15.6%) and Morocco (13.4%).²⁷⁶ Although children represent a minority (13.6%),²⁷⁷ their number is increasing rapidly and most need supplementary services.

UNHCR data for 2020 show that nearly 75 percent of asylum seekers are male, and that 25.6 percent are children.²⁷⁸ The number of child asylum seekers increased from 227²⁷⁹ in 2016 to 1,709 in 2020.²⁸⁰ **A Decision of the Council of Ministers issued in April 2019 to ensure this target group can fully access their entitlements under Albanian legislation has yet to be fully implemented, leaving migrant families without any means of support.** There is a particular need to address the ongoing issue of incompatible personal identification numbers, which prevents refugees from fully accessing social protection. Migrants seeking asylum or awaiting a final appeal decision stay in the National Reception Centre in Babrru. During 2019, there were 1,602 children in the centre, of whom 124 were unaccompanied.²⁸¹ Asylum seekers complain of inadequate living conditions. Some are obliged to beg for food and clothing or sleep in parks or on the street.²⁸² Conditions are even harder for unaccompanied children and separated foreign children that do not apply for asylum or are not classified as victims of trafficking.²⁸³ Their age determination is carried out without any particular methodology, mainly through self-declaration. Case management is not done in an integrated manner. The child welfare workforce has limited capacities in managing the cases, the presence of a psychologist during the interview is not always possible due to a shortage, and children do not receive social care services due to the existing legal loophole.

²⁶⁹ See <https://www.lavoro.gov.it/temi-e-priorita/immigrazione/focus-on/minori-stranieri/Documents/Report-MSNA-mese-giugno-2020.pdf>

²⁷⁰ Kosovo under UNSC 1244.

²⁷¹ *Safe Countries Directive* EC (September 2015) Brussels quoted in Byrne K. *Law, Policy and Practice Affecting Migrant and Refugee Children in Europe UNICEF Office of Research/Innocenti* (November 2016). Florence.

²⁷² European Migration Network, 2015. *EMN Inform*. Brussels, quoted in *Ibid*.

²⁷³ Ministry of Interior, 2018. *Migration Profile 2017*. Tirana.

²⁷⁴ UNHCR, 2020. *Asylum Seekers Dashboard 2020: Progressive overview*.

²⁷⁵ UNHCR, 2020. *Albania Border Protection Monitoring 2019 Report: Progressive overview*.

²⁷⁶ UNHCR, 2020. *Asylum Seekers Dashboard 2020: Progressive overview*.

²⁷⁷ UNHCR, 2020. *Albania Border Protection Monitoring 2019. Report: Progressive overview*.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid*.

²⁷⁹ Xhaho A., Tandili LI A., 2019. *Vulnerable Asylum Seekers and Irregular Migrants in Albania, Trends, Challenges, and Policy Solutions*. Policy Brief, Institute for Democracy and Mediation, June available at https://idmalbania.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/policy-brief_Vulnerable-asylum-seekers-and-irregular-migrants.pdf

²⁸⁰ UNHCR., 2020. *Asylum Seekers Dashboard 2020: Progressive overview*.

²⁸¹ National Reception Center For Asylum, 2020. *Annual Report 2019*. Tirana.

²⁸² Brakaj M., 2020. *Conditions and rights of refugees in Albania*. Voice of America, June 20, 2020. <https://www.zeramerikes.com/a/5470608.html>

²⁸³ Xhaho A., Tandili LI A., 2019. *Vulnerable Asylum Seekers and Irregular Migrants in Albania, Trends, Challenges, and Policy Solutions*. Policy Brief, Institute for Democracy and Mediation, June.

3.5 RIGHT TO PARTICIPATION, CIVIL RIGHTS AND FREEDOM



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Children enjoy full civil rights and freedoms in Albania but are not generally high on the political agenda. The safety, security and protection afforded them within tight-knit, extended families living in relatively homogenous communities is counter-balanced to some extent by loss of independence and agency, and lesser social status. Albanian children, while well-cared for and secure, are generally perceived as dependent and subject to adult, particularly patriarchal, direction. There is also stigma attached to children who are perceived as different, including those with disabilities, Roma and Egyptian children, those from poor households, children without parental care, and adolescents from the LGBTI community.²⁸⁴ **Children’s exclusion from civic participation therefore has to be viewed within the context of wider social and political norms, where public participation in governance processes is still a relatively new concept, trust in government institutions is low²⁸⁵ and there is no strong tradition of civic engagement.²⁸⁶**

There is a portfolio²⁸⁷ of child-centred research providing a partial picture of children’s perspectives on issues that affect them. The findings of a **Children’s World Survey**²⁸⁸ from 2019 reflect the generally safe, secure and happy life led by the majority of Albanian children. More than 80 percent declare themselves completely happy with their family and feel safe with them. However, in **both the Children World Survey and the HBSC 2018 survey, the older age group (12–14 years) were consistently less positive about their lives than the younger group, in line with their evolving critical faculties.** While 74.5 percent of ten-year-olds agreed that Albania is a safe place for children, only 56.4 percent of 12-year-olds thought so. While 82.8 percent of children reported that they know their rights, only 68.2

²⁸⁴ See Rogers J. Sammon E., 2016. *We All Matter*. op. cit.; Poni S., et al., *Being LGBT in Eastern Europe: Albania Country Report—Reducing Inequalities & Exclusion and Combating Homophobia & Transphobia experienced by LGBTI people in Albania*. USAID–UNDP.

²⁸⁵ Vrugtman L., Bino B., 2021. *Opinion Poll 2020: Trust in Governance Survey Report*. Institute for Democracy and Mediation, IDM. Tirana, available at [Trust in Governance – \(idmalbania.org\)](https://www.idmalbania.org/)

²⁸⁶ See Eurofound, 2019. op. cit., and Noted in Charities Aid Foundation’s *2018 World Giving Index* CAF, available at https://www.cafonline.org/docs/default-source/about-us-publications/caf_wgi2018_report_webnopw_2379a_261018.pdf

²⁸⁷ Cuninghame, C. 2020. *Child Rights Issues in Child Participatory-Focused Documents – a Short Review*. UNICEF in Albania. UNICEF Albania recently undertook a review of 23 documents, published in Albania post-2016, that involved some level of participation by children. The authors of this SitAn chose a post-2015 sample that included “*Children’s World*”—*A National Survey of Children’s Well-Being* Save the Children/Universiteti Marin Barletti (2018) Tirana; Ministry Quality Department at World Vision Albania and Kosovo, 2019. *Baseline & Action Research Report Youth Standing Up for Human Right in Albania*. World Vision. Tirana; Stephenson P., 2018. *Children’s Consultations on Child Friendly Materials Albanian National Child Rights and Protection Law 18 Findings and Recommendations*. UNICEF. Tirana; Observatory for the Rights of Children and Youth, 2018. *Mid-Term Implementation Report of the National Agenda for the Rights of Children*. UNICEF Albania. Tirana.

²⁸⁸ Save the Children, Universiteti Marin Barletti, University of Tirana, 2018. *Children’s World—A National Survey of Children’s Well-Being*. Tirana.

percent agreed that people respected those rights. Children between ten and 18 years of age²⁸⁹ indicated a fundamental mistrust of the institutions and actors in both the child protection and education systems. A culture of silence at home and in the community concerning violence compounds this lack of trust.

Examining child participation in Albania through a child-rights lens, it is clear that there is a strong capacity in-country to give children space and voice, but there is still resistance to allowing them audience and influence.²⁹⁰ As in most societies, children remain open to discussion and involvement in community affairs, but the difficulty lies in getting adults to listen, not in getting children to speak.²⁹¹ More energy and resources need to be invested in that half of the equation. Organisations in Albania have the technical skills and expertise to facilitate children’s input into decision making, but at present this occurs only as one-off initiatives, usually supported by donors. **Stakeholders could instead cooperate to strengthen and expand the role of Children’s Councils in school and genuinely and effectively involve children and parents in school management, and establish mechanisms to influence decision making on matters that affect children and adolescents at LGUs level.²⁹²** Particular initiatives may be required to address the barriers to full participation in society faced by girls, Roma and Egyptian children, those with disabilities, children from poor families and those living in rural areas.



²⁸⁹ See Stephenson P., 2018. *Children’s Consultations on Child Friendly Materials Albanian National Child Rights and Protection Law 18 Findings and Recommendations*. UNICEF, Tirana.

²⁹⁰ Adapted from Lundy L., 2007. *Voice is not enough: Conceptualizing Article 12 of the UNCRC*, British Educational Research Journal, Vol. 33, No. 6, pp. 927–42, 2007.

²⁹¹ See ‘Voice of children’ at the *Four-Year Implementation Report on the National Agenda for Children’s Rights 2017–2020*. op. cit.

²⁹² Ibid.

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