



ALBANIA //
**Designing a Decentralised Integrated
Social Care Service System**





Issue

Despite economic progress and improved living standards, Albania's wealth distribution remains unequal, and vulnerable groups continue to be underserved in the areas of health, education, social care, and child protection.¹⁴³ Albania is among the poorest countries in Europe, with children disproportionately affected by poverty. Regular national poverty measuring and reporting, including child poverty, still remains an issue in Albania. UNICEF analysis¹⁴⁴ indicates that 19.2% of households with children live in absolute poverty,²⁰ and 24.9% of households with children aged 0-5 years old experience absolute poverty.

Albania has a relatively well-established social protection system in place, but this faces challenges regarding effectiveness and adequacy. While the state's financial allocations for the social sector make up the largest share of public expenditure as a percentage of GDP, they are not comparable to international standards for an upper-middle-income country. They provide inadequate human, technical, and financial resources needed for improved services for children. According to government data, the budget allocated for social protection is approximately 9% of GDP. However, 80% of this is assigned to contributory social insurance

programmes. The rest is allocated for child and family allowance, including cash transfers for persons or children with a disability.¹⁴⁵ Arguably, social protection allocations should be comparable with other countries in the region, where the average social protection investment in ECA equates to 16% of GDP.¹⁴⁶ Fiscal space is a challenge and the country is struggling to reduce public debt and nominal budgetary increase seem difficult. Therefore, using existing resources more effectively and strengthening coordination and integration between social protection entitlements might be required.

Given these challenges, the government is leading three major reforms in the domain of social protection as outlined in the National Social Protection Strategy 2015 – 2022 and its national action plan. The strategy outlines three policy reforms under the vision and commitment for an integrated social protection system. These attempt to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the poverty-targeted cash assistance, improve the situation of persons with disability, and establish an integrated system of social care services at the decentralised level. Importantly, this policy intent has been accompanied by adequate and effective budgetary estimations.

Actions



In 2012, the Government recognised the need for the reform of a wide range of services related to the social protection and better inclusion of vulnerable individuals/groups. The reform of the Social Care Service (SCS) has had two main phases. During phase 1, 2012-2016, UNICEF was mandated by the Government to support the design of an integrated SCS system at the decentralised level. At the government's behest, UNICEF conducted an in-depth situation analysis to facilitate this. As part of this analysis, a compendium of analytical reports was produced on various aspects of the SCS reform. The reports provided a common point of reference for national policymakers and technical experts on the major reform 'building blocks' such as delivery and monitoring; HR gaps and training needs; and public finance mechanisms at the central and local level. This analysis established a need to reconfigure the SCS infrastructure at the local level owing to critical shortcomings. These shortcomings included a lack of understanding of what social services are; and the absence of clear policy guidance from the Ministry of Social Welfare and Youth (MSWY) on what constitutes effective social protection. Moreover, appropriate legal statutory provision was required for a full-spectrum social

protection system, instead of the pre-existing legislation that regulated only cash assistance. A lack of clear accountability and weak monitoring and inspection and a lack of financial mechanisms to fund SCS were also a problem. These composite challenges meant there was a lack of integration and decentralisation which hampered SCSs. Following such analysis, the government recognised the need to undertake a thorough reform of the social protection system and SCS. Finally, to support this reform, UNICEF managed to raise about USD4.2 million from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, and UNICEF itself contributed additional funding of USD1.1 million, to support a four-year programme aiming to establish a national comprehensive normative policy framework to start the SCS reform.

During Phase 2, 2017-present, the revamped SCS system had a more decentralised focus and began to be piloted at the municipality level from 2017. In the second phase, UNICEF is using approximately USD700,000 to support the implementation of the SCS policies and strategies at the local level to enable all children to benefit from the equitable quality services to which they are entitled.

²⁰ Absolute poverty is defined as real per capita monthly consumption below 4,891 ALL (in 2002 prices).



Impact

Phase 1 of UNICEF Albania's SCS reform engagement contributed to numerous important impacts:

1) *Streamlining of the institutional set-up*: the accountabilities and roles of the newly formed Local Government Units (LGUs) were rationalised down from 337 municipalities/communes to 61. Additionally, the SCS planning was clearly articulated and integrated into the 2015-2020 National Inter-sectoral Decentralisation Strategy and a new 2015 Law on Local Self-Government.¹⁴⁷ Two other new laws - *the Order of Social Workers*¹⁴⁸ and *Law on the Order of Psychologists*¹⁴⁹ - were developed and approved in 2014 and 2016, respectively. These laid the foundation for the institutionalisation of the 'social work' profession. Needs assessment and referral units were also introduced to enable prompt needs assessment and referral of cases. 2) *Financial mechanisms*: the new Law on Social Care Services¹⁵⁰ includes a chapter on SCS financing. It envisages a combination of funding sources from the central State Budget, the local government budget, the locally generated income for municipalities, and fees that can be introduced for some social services. The Law allows municipalities to establish a dedicated 'social fund' budget line, ring-fenced explicitly for activities relating to SCS. 3) *Increased human resource capacities*: UNICEF helped develop municipalities' budget tools to finance and manage the SCS delivery. 4) *The data supply for service planning and monitoring*: technical recommendations on establishing a comprehensive MIS encompassing cash assistance and SCS were developed and costed for 2016 and presented to the MSWY. 5) *Learning from service modelling*.

UNICEF also supported the Ministry of Health and Social Protection (MHSP) to complete, validate with national stakeholders, and approve a national legal framework which enables planning and financing of SCS at the decentralised municipalities level by completing 14 SCS by-laws approved in 2016. Furthermore, ensuring sustainable financing for the proposed SCS at the municipality level was a key bottleneck to overcome. It was reasoned that this could be reached through the establishment of a separate dedicated budgetary line of a 'social fund' at the local level, which would be resourced by central, local, and donor aid funds. Following the work with secondary legislation, UNICEF facilitated technical assistance to the Ministry of Finance and Economy and the MHSP to agree upon the approach and implementation modalities of resourcing the social fund from the central budget.

The Action Plan of the National Social Protection Strategy 2015 – 2020 has been updated and expanded to 2022, showing the government is now actively pursuing the SCS reform. UNICEF provided support, and facilitated a participatory process to review and update SCS policy objectives and actions to ensure adequate coverage and costing of quality SCS for all vulnerable children. Workflows and standard MIS operating procedures for SCSs have been developed, and approximately 300 municipal staff in 19 municipalities have been trained to use the system. Eleven municipalities have a three-year social care plan in place, fully costed and with clear targets to reach at least 60% of all vulnerable children in poverty in every municipality. The social care plans for eight municipalities have been approved, while the plans for three others have been finalised and validated, but are awaiting municipal council approval. Five of the eleven now have 2020 central budget funds to establish SCS. UNICEF has also supported all 11 municipalities in the finalisation of important documents to guide the outsourcing and procurement of goods and services in their efforts to implement the SCS plan.

UNICEF expects the SCS reform to have positive impacts on the 'Leave no one behind' agenda. It is envisaged that, by 2021, the vulnerable population will be covered and receiving adequate social services from local authorities, municipalities will effectively manage the provision of SCS, and national institutions will implement the relevant social policy framework.

UNICEF Albania has learned critical lessons from the SCS reform. For the reform to start producing results for vulnerable children, it is important to ensure LGUs have the necessary structures in place, such as social care plans and appropriate finances and capacity to deliver the services. UNICEF strove to strengthen the capacities of selected municipalities to make sure that SCS decentralisation and LGU structures work for children and increased local and central resource allocation occurred. Tailored training for LGUs on SCS was needed; active engagement with LGU decision-makers was crucial during the development of SCS plans. Moreover, it is important to underscore the role played by civil society organisations (CSOs), as they deliver up to 80% of all the SCS in the country and provide crucial field presence.

ENDNOTES

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Europe and Central Asia Regional Office

Palais des Nations
CH-1211 Geneva 10
Switzerland