

Albania

Update on the context and situation of children

Out of Albania's estimated child population of 615,000, 29.6 percent were at risk of poverty in 2017 and 2018 (SILC, 2019). The November 2019 earthquake and the COVID-19 pandemic further deepened pre-existing inequalities, exposing vulnerabilities in social, political and economic systems and in turn amplifying their impact on the realisation of rights of children.

Child wellbeing was challenged particularly as a result of:

a. increased poverty

The crises have revealed the weaknesses of the social protection system. A significant number of families are at risk of being left without protection from economic shocks. Preliminary data from the World Bank reveal that extreme poverty in Albania that in the absence of response measures, poverty could increase from 40 percent to 44 percent. Many families, especially those with dependent children and older persons, risk to fall back into poverty.

b. reduced learning opportunities

21,000 children affected by earthquake of November 2019 moved to other schools and are conducting the lessons in shifts. A total of 3,752 pre-university education institutions and 571,566 students across all levels of education interrupted their regular learning in Spring 2020. Learning resumed with safety procedures in place in September and shifted to a hybrid methodology (face-to-face and online learning). At least 11,000 children were at risk of not being able to learn online. The most vulnerable, particularly girls, children coming from the Roma and Egyptian communities, affected by earthquake children with disabilities and those coming from families with socio-economic challenges, were faced with additional risks linked to access to essential services, including school psychologists, after-hours programmes, information on disease prevention, referral for cases of violence, among others. Learning is estimated to drop by the equivalent of 9 PISA points overall. As most students in the country perform around the threshold for functional literacy the percentage of students performing below functional literacy will increase by eight percentage points. New emerging inequalities surfaced, increasing the already existent equity gaps. Absence of Internet-enabled devices at home, connectivity costs (mobile or broadband), coupled with a lack of digital literacy, has widened the gap between children and families who cannot afford and do not know how to follow online schooling, and the rest of the population

c. increased violence, abuse, neglect

Albania had to deal with a plethora of COVID-19 and earthquake-related protection challenges, such as movement restrictions and closure of many community services; loss of shelter, shortage of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for frontline workers; trauma, house lockdown anxiety and mental health issues; growth of violence against children; heightened exposure to online risks, etc. Parents and caregivers are now under enormous pressure to care for their children while at the same time trying to make ends meet. Children who were victims and witnesses of domestic violence found themselves in a more dangerous position. Government database, REVALB (all age groups) indicates an increase from 741 cases in 2019 to 791 cases in 2020, of which 82% are women and girls. COVID-19 also increased the risk for children on the streets, of child marriage, child labour and child exploitation, as many families see their income and livelihood sources diminish.

d. temporary closure of health facilities and fear to access health services

The temporary closures of health facilities and reduced population movements resulted in the reduction of home visiting. Vaccination coverage reduced, as the childhood vaccinations were done only by appointment and only a limited number of children could be offered service within a day. The vaccination coverage for children older than 1 year suffered the most. During 2020 there were also

cases of health centers and maternities temporarily closed because of health personnel being infected by COVID-19.

Political situation

Albania's political priorities remain European Union (EU) accession, justice system reform, sustainable economic growth and more inclusive prosperity. The global sustainable development report index score of 70.8 suggests that Albania is more than two-thirds of the way towards achieving the SDGs. Progress monitoring is impeded by data gaps, and the Voluntary National Report (VNR) notes that "inclusion is especially unsatisfactory for the poor, Roma and Egyptians, and persons with disabilities". Albania ranked 51/162 countries per the Gender Inequality Index 2019 and 20/153 countries based on the Global Gender Gap Index. The third National Strategy for Development and Integration (2021–2026) is in preparation with interim nationalised SDG indicators and targets. The end of 2020 marked an increased mobilisation towards preparations for the elections of April 2021. In the first half of December, Albania witnessed a series of, sometimes violent, protests against the government. Many of these events involved children and adolescents.

Decentralisation

The reform that started in 2015 brought a new framework for more efficient, effective and autonomous local governance. While the available financial resources to municipalities show an upward trend, their allocation seems to have unequal effects on local economic development, while the available resources cannot match the delegated functions. A recent report shows that only five municipalities performed well with regard to all the following criteria: effectiveness and efficiency, transparency, accountability, and citizens' participation. While legally shocks and disasters are managed centrally, local governments have a significant role in managing disasters but are technically and financially weak to do so.

Economic situation

The World Bank report *Global Economic Prospects* indicates that Albania's GDP decreased by 6.2 percent over 2020, with a projected growth of 5.1 percent in 2021. In November 2020, the IMF projected the current account deficit might have widened to more than ten percent of GDP. Nevertheless, Albania's government did manage to maintain macroeconomic and financial stability. Within the domestic market Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), manufacturing (6% of 2017 GDP) and tourism sectors (8.5% of 2018 GDP) will be among the most affected. (OECD 2020) Unemployment rates as reported by INSTAT for the third quarter of 2020 reach 21,9 % for 15-29 years old males and 20.8 % for 15-29 year old females, and 9.3 for 30 – 64 year old males and 9.8 for the 30 – 64 year old females.

Major contributions and drivers of results

The Country Office (CO) focused on addressing the aftermath of the 2019 earthquake, the COVID pandemic and providing support to the country's reform efforts towards EU accession. The impact of COVID 19 caused adjustments to be made to the programming to respond to new needs while ensuring achievement of results for children in alignment with the government's priorities, engage in the design of the new UN Sustainable Development Framework, conduct evaluation of the current Country Programme and start the process of designing UNICEF Albania's new programme for 2022–2026.

Earthquake response:

Beginning of 2020, UNICEF was focusing on addressing the emergency response following the

earthquake. Some 1,400 children and their caregivers benefited from UNICEF emergency response interventions mainly through six Child-Friendly Spaces and four Temporary Learning Spaces.

COVID-19 response

UNICEF's support to response and recovery is programmed within the framework of the global COVID HAC and reported through the sitreps. Interventions are aligned to the UN Recovery and Response Plan, which complements the Government of Albania National Response Plan and the National Strategic Preparedness & Response Plan (SPRP).

Every Child Survives and Thrives

The level of public spending on health continues to remain low (2.9% of GDP); the overall trend of less investment in primary health care (PHC) than in secondary health care remains, and projections reveal that allocation to hospitals will grow to 70 percent of the total, and primary care will decline to 19 percent.

UNICEF contributed to infection prevention and control, hygiene promotion and risk communication: strengthened government capacities, developed norms and standards, provided direct supplies and increased community awareness. In thirteen municipalities, over 150,000 people and 400 pre-school institutions received hygiene supplies, including sanitary pads and information on hygiene practices. UNICEF provided PPE for 1,136 health-care workers and supplied disinfectants for over 10,000 frontline health workers (407 PHC Centers). UNICEF strengthened the case management of COVID-19 cases.

Through the #SuperHeroesWearMask #WeHugwithHeart communication campaign UNICEF reached over 500,000 people (48% f).

UNICEF made available the Multi-Scenario Interactive Statistical Projection Tool, enabling the projection of COVID-19 spread and hospitalisation estimates.

UNICEF continued its support for strengthening the national information management system to develop the web-based, disaggregated data collection system for child (<5 years) nutrition monitoring and adjust reporting to COVID-19. Over 5,000 children were monitored.

Over 4,500 mothers received advice on infant and young child feeding (IYCF), and more than 80 health professionals were coached in data collection, analysis, reporting and IYCF counselling.

UNICEF continued to provide procurement services to government for a supply value of USD 3.53 million for childhood vaccines, influenza vaccine and antiretrovirals, expanding to anti-TB drugs, for around 200,000 children of age 0–6 years and more than 650 individuals living with HIV–AIDS.

Albania's Parliament approved the revised Universal Salt Iodisation (USI) law, strengthening monitoring and inspection for USI and introduction of the concept of traceability of iodised salt.

UNICEF engaged with the government partners to review food standards in schools, marketing of unhealthy food to children, and to draft standards and review the marketing regulation framework.

Every Child Learns

UNICEF is the sector lead agency for both post-earthquake recovery and COVID-19 response, and supported government in preparation of the PDNA education chapter, the COVID-19 Response Plan and provided educational support to approximately 462,000 children.

Public expenditure in the education system rose from 3.2 percent of GDP in 2018 to more than 3.6 percent in 2020. However, the education expenditure in Albania was still low (EU average - 4.6 percent).

In addition to low public investment, and despite focus on the quality and inclusiveness of education reforms, Roma and Egyptian children, children with disabilities and those living in rural areas, particularly girls, continue to face exclusion.

A National Strategic Plan for Education 2021–2026, from pre-school to higher education is being drafted with UNICEF's technical and financial support. It includes elements of inclusion and equity, quality of education, and managing the quality of education, teachers, lifelong learning and digitalisation of education. It builds on the diagnosis of the education system developed in 2020 jointly with OECD, includes a monitoring and evaluation component and has a strong equity, gender and

disaster risk reduction (DRR) focus.

UNICEF with partners supported the development and roll-out of safety guidelines in 2,100 schools, where 462,000 children benefitted from COVID awareness materials and safety kits, and continued learning, during school closure, thanks to the UNICEF-supported and scaled-up digital, disability friendly, interactive learning platform akademi.al.

Through LearIn, UNICEF partnered with the National Agency for Education Quality Assurance (ASCAP) to promote a system for teacher support, collaboration and skills development benefitting 350 teachers, while 1,200 teachers were trained in new ICT standards.

UNICEF continued its support to prevent and respond to levels and risk of out-of-school children (OOSC) and dropping out, adapted the Early Warning System, reached more than 360 students with socio-emotional support and 700 teachers and professional networks with professional development, and continued supporting implementation of the funding formula to address financial barriers.

UNICEF partnered Vodafone in providing learning devices to address learning gaps and prevent dropping out for 10,500 disadvantaged students, including Roma and children with disability.

Gender equity, peace building, DRR, climate change and combatting violent extremism are being mainstreamed into curricula.

Every Child is Protected from Violence and Exploitation

UNICEF's ability to leverage resources and convene and lead strong coalitions were instrumental in addressing a rapidly deteriorating situation for children at risk of, or already affected by, violence. 2,120 children and 1,350 adults severely affected by November 2019 earthquake and still residing in temporary shelters, strengthened their coping abilities through by accessing psycho-social counselling provided.

UNICEF's sector leadership enabled around 20,000 children and 20,000 parents or caregivers affected by multiple adversities, exacerbated first by the devastating earthquake and then by the pandemic, to receive emergency and long-term protection services. The CO continued to provide technical support to government to advance the development and implementation of the national agenda for deinstitutionalisation (DI) and further broaden the coalition with national civil society groups and local government. The **National DI Action Plan 2020–22** was endorsed by the Council of Ministers in September, reaching a remarkable milestone in the overall childcare reform where UNICEF led and directly advised the government.

The entire workforce of 236 statutory child protection workers was supported through on-the-job and online coaching including on mental health, psychosocial support and gender based violence organised jointly with WHO.

Launching of The Lost Cases assessment report further strengthened the programming focus and created a solid advocacy base for further interventions to online safety. As a result of the BiblioTechs initiative 5,578 children and adults became involved in learning about digital safety and four public libraries turned into tech hubs for children. The Friendly Wi-Fi initiative pioneered in Tirana expanded its scope with 53 additional access points in eight additional public spaces in the capital, and managed to block around 516,0000 Internet requests to access blacklisted websites.

UNICEF increased its engagement with regard to children on the move and generated valuable evidence about knowledge, perceptions and attitudes of youth towards human trafficking, supported the development of a new National Action Plan on Anti-Trafficking 2021–23, and provided direct support to around 190 (128f) victims or potential victims of trafficking, including shelter, hygiene, food, clothes; mental and healthcare care support (COVID 19 testing); educational and social activities; registration and attendance in schools; vocational trainings, (legal) counselling and support for employment. As part of UNICEF's joint work with UNHCR, IOM, UN Women, WHO and other UN agencies, in response to the refugee and migrant crisis in Europe, UNICEF supported 210 unaccompanied and separated children with child-friendly services. UNICEF is providing psycho-social services to four children and their mother who were repatriated by the Albanian government from Syria's Al Hawl refugee camp.

System strengthening efforts resulted in the setting up of infrastructure for the online Integrated System of Data on Criminal Justice for Children (www.drejtisipertemitur.gov.al) of the Ministry of

Justice; seven of the twelve regional police departments established modern child-friendly interview units and 200 attorneys, prosecutors, police officers and other professionals benefited from capacity building on a new normative framework on justice for children (including from the gender equality perspective), 296 children (65 girls) in contact with the law obtained free legal assistance, psychosocial counselling, restorative justice services, economic reintegration support and referral to service providers. As a result of UNICEF advocacy, the number of magistrates tasked with justice for children cases grew from twelve in 2018 to 143.

Every Child has an Equitable Chance in Life

Leveraging its leadership role in strengthening social protection systems for children in Albania UNICEF led the development of Pillar 2 of the UN Albania COVID-19 Socio-economic and Recovery Plan: Protecting People.

UNICEF supported government in piloting humanitarian cash transfers and supported some 2,800 children in 1,699 households (471f), with a one-time multi-purpose unconditional cash transfer (CT) in three municipalities (Durrës, Korça and Shkoder), including of a feedback mechanism to ensure that the money reached the targeted families. The process of distribution and use of cash was monitored by the Observatory for Children and Youth Rights through a process of 622 random telephone calls with cash recipients in three municipalities. The pilot was presented at the international webinar.

UNICEF co-led the Humanitarian Cash Transfer Working Group partnering SDC, UN Women, *Terre des Hommes* and IFRC, and developed COVID-19 joint Standard Operating Procedures. Advocacy efforts resulted in MHSP discussing the importance of integrating CT into emergency response and considerations to shock responsive social protection.

Following recent evaluation of the Social Care Reform (2019), UNICEF strengthened capacities for implementation of the normative framework for social care and sustainable planning and financing of social care services at the local level. In partnership with UNDP it continued supporting the development of social care plans jointly covering 45 municipalities (out of 61). By the end of 2020, these were fully costed, gender-responsive, three-year social care plans. UNICEF supported the Faculty of Social Sciences in revising the curricula for the bachelor degree in social work, developed an Online Platform on Social Protection and Social Services in Albania, providing social workers information on social protection and social services policies, laws, standards, protocols and work manuals, and improved skills of 25 social workers on a core set of interpersonal communication and community engagement competencies.

Gender

Gender in CO's COVID response plan, was informed by evidence: the UN Gender Rapid Assessment, gender disaggregated results of U-report polls and phone-based interviews with programme beneficiaries. Preliminary analysis for development of the new Country Programme has been guided by the Country Programme Evaluation, Situation Analysis of Children, the Common Country Assessment and Gender Scorecard, all with gender components.

On the International Day of the Girl, in collaboration with UNFPA, UN Women and civil society, the CO launched a one-year call to encourage boys and girls, men and women, to 'Write a letter to a girl'.

Early childhood

With partners UNICEF developed a training programme to support 700 pre-school teachers to learn about inclusive, child-centred methodology and drafted standards of Guidelines for Curricula. The #LearningAtHome campaign reached more than 50,000 people through social media TV, using celebrities and influencers with targeted messages on young children's development and wellbeing during lockdown. The new strategy of education supported through UNICEF technical assistance was drafted and contains a focus on preschool quality and inclusion. Efforts to mainstream preschool in the national platform Akademi.al have also been supported with the first play-based lessons included in the platform. As a direct result of UNICEF advocacy, MOE has approved for the first time the 0-3 standards for childcare developed in a cross sectoral way.

Adolescents

UNICEF started developing an integrated agenda for adolescents, focusing on 21st Century skills (media literacy skills, teamwork, entrepreneurship, communication) and systematically engaging them in policy and programme design. In five municipalities UPSHIFT, Ponder and a programme on public speaking were launched, benefitting 100 adolescents (55 girls), and 105,000 young people were reached through social media, while 800 adolescents were engaged through nine polls of the U-report and have regularly shared their views on important matters such as national education strategy, environment, child rights and services for children and young people. Meanwhile, U-report has been used to gain understanding of what young people are feeling and living through during the pandemic, and for important programme decisions.

Advocacy and communication

UNICEF revised its Advocacy Strategy to address COVID-19 impacts. On the International Day of the Girl a youth blog Voices of Youth was published on the Regional Office platform. On World Children's Day, UNICEF Albania, with the EU Delegation, Save the Children, World Vision and *Terre des Hommes*, through a joint statement, called on government to explore new ways of engagement to build a political space for children. The website, with more than 168,000 page views, (annual increase of 150%) emerged for government, stakeholders, academia and other individuals as a source of timely, reliable and updated information. UNICEF launched, jointly with mayors from eight regions, a major national awareness campaign, #TeBesoj (TrustMe), to increase disclosure and timely reporting of sexual violence against children and women.

Disability

Disability has been systematically mainstreamed into programming interventions, including policy design as well as direct support for addressing concerns of around COVID-19 pandemic. The National Strategy of Education is being drafted with a strong focus on inclusive education. The online platform includes accessible modules, so that children with disabilities can equally benefit. Some 300 (120 girls) children with hearing impairment, drastically affected by COVID-19-caused confinement and isolation, their parents and caregivers, were supported with sign language, adapting twelve videos with information on seeking help, reporting abuse and violence, and addressing stigma.

Human Rights Treaties and Human Rights Mechanisms

The CO commenced drafting a Situation Analysis of Children and Adolescents in Albania, a human-rights-based, equity-focused analysis on the realisation of children's and adolescents' rights. It informed the Programme Strategy Notes and draft CPD 2022–2026 and contributed to the Common Country Assessment 2020.

UNICEF Albania has supported the National Human Rights Institutions (People's Advocate and Child Rights and Promotion Commissioner). The Ombudsperson's monitoring of the conditions and treatment of children deprived of liberty, along with awareness activities in schools, directly brought about a 30 percent increase in the number of child rights violations cases handled by this NHRI. This is the second year in a row that the People's Advocate has received complaints directly from children. The Institute of Statistics (INSTAT) published Children, Adolescents and Youth-Focused Wellbeing Indicators, is based upon an internationally agreed methodology. As part of the National Official Statistics Plan, the publication will be annually produced, and represents the starting point to improve the official statistics around children, adolescents and youth in Albania, including reporting on progress with SDG indicators, and will be used to inform monitoring of implementation of policies targeting children and adolescents, and to compare the situation of realisation of their rights in different countries.

UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships

The United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) Outcome and Output Working Groups, Theme-specific Results, Coordination Groups and Steering Committees have been used as instruments to support collaborative arrangements among national stakeholders, UN agencies and development partners. UNICEF Albania was engaged through the bi-annual Joint Work Plans to deliver on results defined in UNDAF and signed UN to UN agreements with ILO, UNDP and UN Women.

In Education, for responding to the post-earthquake and COVID response UNICEF co-led with Save the Children, facilitated the development of a coordination platform with development partners. UNICEF also found allies in Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), private sector (Vodafone for free Internet and STEM training), development partners, academia, media and communities. UNICEF has closely collaborated and liaised with Government and Islamic Development Bank for a post COVID support to education sector with a focus on inclusion and digital education. Development of multifaceted partnerships, including coalitions with CSOs, allowed building upon comparative advantages, co-creation of programmes and increase of impact. In the area of child protection, UNICEF co-managed with World Vision the earthquake emergency response group convening more than 20 organisations, including organisation representing minority groups, people with disability, women's rights organisations. UNICEF led the key government institutions, civil society and private sector to work towards children and their online safety.

Partnership with sub-national governments, in the framework of Child-Friendly Cities Initiatives, contributed to the preparation of the Situation Analysis of Children and Adolescents of Korca city and the drafting of the Child Friendly Action Plan. Furthermore, with the successful roll out of the awareness-raising national campaign on child sexual abuse #TeBesoj (trust me) UNICEF is creating global awareness and advocacy for more engagement of sub-national actors and the private sector in addressing nationwide challenges.

Albania's Parliament continued to act as an important partner in strengthening of governance and oversight for children and monitored government measures to address online sexual and domestic violence against women and children and provision of continued access to health, education and social protection services. With UNICEF advocacy, Parliament adopted the USI law, despite strong lobbying from the food processing industry.

UNICEF led the UN agencies to develop and finalise Pillar 2 of the UN Albania COVID-19 Socio-Economic and Recovery plan and continued bringing UN agencies together and developing strategies and approaches with continuous and regular dialogue with the EU and WB. UNICEF, jointly with UNDP, successfully led the process of developing a second joint programme 'Financing for SDGs in Albania'.

The UN Country Team (UNCT) took on an active role in evaluation of the current UNDAF. Among other components, UNICEF supported UNCT in its management of the evaluation through external quality review of deliverables to ensure adherence to highest quality standards.

UNICEF Albania as part of a regional initiative in the Western Balkans on engagement of young people in climate change and air quality, is working with young people, stakeholders Swedish Agency for Environmental Protection and SIDA to design a long term project in the area of air quality.

Lessons Learned and Innovations

The complex programming environment triggered flexible, innovative and adaptable programming in Albania. Measures that restricted movement and gatherings to contain the spread of the COVID-19 virus presented new challenges, as well as opportunities for programming.

Adapting safe outreach methods. UNICEF supported the government and partners with the introduction of mobile and rapid response child protection teams to reach the most vulnerable groups who were stuck at home. PPE was secured for teachers, health workers, and social and child protection workers to support continuation of service provision in a safe environment. Additional support provided to shelters for survivors of violence allowed for broader accommodation of survivors and the introduction of extra-hours of childcare helped Mothers with more flexible time arrangement at work. Child helplines and online counselling services became central as the need for such services rapidly increased and addressed movement restrictions and safety of helpline staff. UNICEF increased its support to the online professional MHPSS service, allowing more people to work in shifts. The number of beneficiaries tripled within 5–6 months.

Use of technology was applied in numerous ways. UNICEF supported key government partners at national and sub-national levels by facilitating access to and use of new technologies for coaching, communicating, organising online exchange sessions (including on breastfeeding, IPC and hygiene promotion), and online parliamentary sessions on the socio-impact of COVID-19 on children. UNICEF increased the use of the U-report platform to ensure engagement of adolescents in important processes and introduced telephone interviews. With the development and scaled-up digital, disability friendly, interactive learning platform (akademi.al) UNICEF secured the continued learning of more than half a million children.

Pioneering new approaches is another significant lesson learned. UNICEF championed the work programmatically in a barren and unexplored area of online child abuse. Having little overall in-depth experience, lack of reliable examples from other parts of the world and almost non-existent political buy-in nationally, UNICEF, by galvanising this particular area of child protection, worked and consistently invested in its exploration, gaining first-hand direct experience of the subject matter, gathering evidence previously explored, and as a result established itself as a knowledge broker and thematic lead nationally and regionally. Noteworthy that gender gap when exploring children's online wellbeing, with girls being subject to more restrictive parenting than boys. UNICEF and the Municipality of Tirana introduced Bibliotech Talks to inspire girls and women in Tech. UNICEF's thematic reports and expert feedback on Internet safety for children are fed into the analysis of the EU and the US and UK governments.

Continued focus on evidence generation and consistent use. Aligned with corporate policy requirements, the Evaluation of the UNICEF in Albania Programme 2016–2021 assessed UNICEF's performance and contribution towards national development goals, including a thorough engagement of national stakeholders to contribute towards its completion. The strategic decision to keep it focused, targeting the most significant and outstanding issues under evaluation, helped to finalise the evaluation in time and for it to be used to inform the design of the Programme Strategic Notes and draft a new CPD.

UNICEF in Albania concluded the Evaluation of UNICEF's contribution to the normative framework of social care services reform during 2013–2019. The evaluation process managed to trigger constructive discussion among various stakeholders working in the field. This was made possible also through the strategic composition of the Evaluation Reference group as diverse and extended, to include representatives of national and local governmental stakeholders (various sectors), EU and UN agencies. The interactions and discussions led to government consent for the revised UN Joint Workplan 2020–2021, where most of the evaluation recommendations are integrated. Following Corporate Guidelines, the Management Response Plan was compiled in coordination with relevant staff members, and its implementation closely monitored by CO management.

Partnering with the State Agency for Child Rights and Protection to finalise the Visualisation Platform for 58 child-specific Statistics, UNICEF transformed entirely the modality of how institutional (administrative) data are assembled, accessed and presented. The platform constitutes an innovation,

considering that few Albanian authorities have invested so far in such tools. The platform and the stretched process for its development was converted by UNICEF and the State Agency into a journey of improving the quality of data reported.