

Albania

Update on the context and situation of children

In Albania, the year 2021 was characterised by the continued recovery from the 2019 earthquake and the intensified response to the health and socio-economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Children and their families were still under a huge amount of strain, identified risks persisted, inequities broadened, and child and adolescent well-being was negatively affected by multiple factors, including learning loss, confinement, reduced household incomes and exacerbated non-monetary deprivations. Women and girls faced greater risks of gender-based violence, economic hardship, increased caregiving, worsened emotional health and well-being, and decreased access to health services. Especially affected were people from rural areas, Roma and Egyptian communities, and those living with disabilities.

a. Poverty

Albania remains one of the poorest countries in Europe, with a child population size of 615,000. The 2020 Income and Living Conditions Survey found that more than one-fifth of Albanians (21.8%) were at risk of poverty, against a European Union (EU) average of 17.1 percent. More than one-quarter of those at risk were children (28.4%).^[1] Yet, the social protection system articulated in policy has been inadequately implemented. Spending on cash benefits for families and children was low, even lower for social care services. Yet, the end of 2021 brought a positive development: government doubled the benefit amount for families with three children, a decision that became effective from 1 January 2022.

b. Impacted learning outcomes

Education disruption impacted the learning and mental health of children and young people, as schools could not play their full role as places for academic learning, social and emotional learning, social interaction and social and psychological support. The most marginalised children were the most impacted: Roma and Egyptian, refugee and migrant children, children with disabilities, and the poorest. Referrals to basic health and social services were disrupted, as was the provision of specialised services to children and families, particularly children with disabilities. Schools could not act as hubs where parents could receive information on available national and local socio-economic support, and schools were prevented from acting as community hubs for cultural and educational events that contribute to social cohesion.

c. Impacted health service delivery

Following a strict lockdown at the onset of the pandemic, successive waves of infection were managed with medium-level restrictions. By mid-December 2021, there had been 204,928 confirmed cases of Covid-19, with 3,156 deaths, and 40 percent of the target population of 2.2 million had received two doses. Maternal and child health (MCH) service delivery suffered in selected regions due to temporary shortages of health personnel due the Covid-19-related morbidity. The Ministry of Health and Social Protection (MoHSP) has been undergoing restructuring, including re-establishment of a dedicated unit for MCH services, while the new health strategy is being finalised, maintaining emphasis on MCH services.

d. Increased violence, abuse and neglect

Covid-19-related socio-economic shocks and the impacts of the pandemic significantly increased the risk of online grooming and sexual abuse and Internet-facilitated trafficking, resulting in higher levels of child labour and exploitation. Children and adolescents from the most vulnerable strata were further affected by the lack of access to critical services, including protection. Parents, caregivers and teachers found themselves largely unprepared to access e-Services that were previously available in person and help children to navigate the Internet safely. UNICEF partners confirmed that significant challenges inherited from 2020 have not been mitigated. Of particular concern were the cases identified requiring mental health interventions and the almost complete absence of specialised local public services or institutions. The psycho-social counselling provided by UNICEF supported programmes tripled in demand over one year.

Lack of necessary work experience and academic background, social care services, professional supervision and logistics, especially during Covid-19, critically challenged statutory child protection workers.

e. Migration

Albania continued to experience the arrival of irregular migrants. From data available from our partners, 10,096 individuals were intercepted in 2021. Reports indicate that an assessment of international protection needs and willingness to enjoy protection in Albania may not have been taking place in all cases. The majority of arrivals were self-reportedly from countries with high protection recognition rates (51% from Syria, 15% from Afghanistan). Women and children constituted 20 percent of arrivals, including 199 self-declared unaccompanied or separated children, among which only one was referred for asylum. In August 2021, the Albanian government announced its readiness to host approximately 4,000 evacuees from Afghanistan, and as of December, more than 2,000 Afghans, including adults and children, had arrived in Albania.

f. Unemployment and transition from school to work

Albania has the highest proportion of youth neither in employment nor in education or training (NEET) of any countries in the region (except for Kosovo*). At 33 percent the level is almost double that of the Western Balkans (18%) and more than three times as high as the EU28 rate (ILO, 2019). There is a very challenging labour market transition for young people, and highlights the potential need for additional actions to channel the increasingly skilled young workforce into entrepreneurship and social economy and up-scaling of the provision of quality education.

Political and economic situation

On 25 April 2021, Albania held parliamentary elections. The new Parliament convened in September 2021, following the certification of election results and the swearing-in of new members. The Socialist Party was confirmed for a third consecutive mandate from the election results, with a focus on recovery and reconstruction. Women took 48 seats (34%) in the new Parliament and the new cabinet comprised twelve women (from 17 members), including, for the first time, a State Minister for Youth and Children.

Overall Albania continued to show commitment to EU-oriented reforms and delivered tangible and sustainable results. It has fulfilled all the conditions set out in the Council Conclusions of March 2020 for the first Inter-governmental Conference. Albania's economy is recovering faster than expected and GDP growth is projected to reach 7.2 percent in 2021 (highest among Western Balkans countries).[2]

[1] The estimated 2021 population of Albania is 2.83 million, including approximately 300,000 girls and 315,000 boys

[2] World Bank (2021) Western Balkans Regular Economic Report, Greening the Recovery.

Major contributions and drivers of results

UNICEF Albania's new country programme (2022–2026) and the new UN Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) were approved in 2021, and UNICEF contributed to major policy documents, opening the way to strengthened investments in child and adolescent well-being: the National Agenda on Child's Rights 2021–2026, the National Strategy on Gender Equality 2021–2030 and the National Strategy of Education 2021–2026. UNICEF's investments focus on supporting the government's Covid response and the continuation of service provisions for the most vulnerable.

Every child survives

The health programming was focused on ensuring the continuity of Maternal, Newborn, Child Health and Nutrition services in the context of Covid-19, supporting the country's efforts in vaccine procurement, including of the Covid-19 vaccine through the COVAX mechanism, contributing to key strategic normative and policy pieces, such as the draft Health Strategy, Non-Communicable Diseases

Action Plan, Reproductive Health Action Plan, by-laws on iodine salt analysis procedures and salt traceability, and two joint orders on standards of food offered in an upper secondary school setting, as well as marketing of unhealthy food in educational institutions.

UNICEF, in partnership with WHO, contributed to the National Plan for Covid-19 Vaccine Deployment, capacity building of health professionals for micro-planning, vaccine administration and communication for vaccine uptake. More than 1,900 health professionals in 370 health centres and nine maternity hospitals benefitted from support to prevent the spread of infection through strengthening Infection Prevention and Control capacities, provision of supplies and equipment, development of protocols, design and implementation of monitoring tools and more than 13,000 health-care workers benefitted from Personal Protective Equipment. Through local governments, UNICEF reached 8,599 adults and 9,711 children (105 of which with disabilities) with personal and family hygiene supplies. In partnership with the education sector, in seven cities of Albania, the #TheCareProtects of social and behavioural change programme was implemented to promote hygiene practices.

UNICEF, through its support to MCH services in four regions and with the engagement of 165 health personnel, reached 1,425 families with the Universal Progressive Home Visiting programme that creates an integrated opportunity to assess and address childcare, parental well-being, protection of children from abuse and neglect, children with different abilities and gender dynamics in the family through cross-sectoral cooperation. A total of 24,000 parents (22,900 women and 1,100 men) were reached with messages on infant and young child feeding.

Health professionals discussed with child protection unit representatives during the trainings for UPHV on gender socialisation and gender dynamics in the families, and standard checklists were provided after the training to use during home visits and help identify any vulnerabilities, including domestic violence.

UNICEF worked with the Institute of Public Health and the Albanian Institute for Health and Development to develop a series of communication materials (posters, infographics, videos, leaflets) focusing on the importance of Covid-19 vaccination. Some 41,406 people were reached through mass and social media with RCCE messaging: 30,650 on Facebook, 3,686 on Instagram and 7,070 on Twitter. A KAP survey was conducted to explore key drivers and barriers to Covid-19 vaccination.

Every child learns

While addressing the multiple impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, securing safe, continuous, quality and inclusive learning opportunities for every child in Albania, UNICEF has been addressing the post-earthquake challenges and secured technical and financial support to government for the development of a comprehensive National Strategy of Education 2021–2026. The strategy covers pre-school to higher education, builds on principles of inclusion and equity, quality education, lifelong learning, starting from the early years, teacher professional development and digitalisation of education.

UNICEF continued to support the online platform Akademi.al, increased the number of video lessons to 20,127, of which 1,000 were for children with hearing and visual impairment, and further expanded the platform with pre-school content. Furthermore, aiming to ensure that schools, teachers and students, with a particular focus on girls, are fully benefitting from the technological solutions, UNICEF contributed to the setting up of 22 Techhubs, benefitting 8,000 children, the development of methodologies for teacher training in ICT, and of ICT standards for teachers. With UNICEF support, 2,362 teachers were trained and 14,000 benefitted from peer learning. A STEM programme with a focus on girls is being coordinated in the same schools with Vodafone Albania. UNICEF sustained its investments in strengthening school-based systems for early warning to prevent early drop-out, gender responsiveness, inclusive education and disaster risk reduction. A total of 950 teachers and staff from 465 schools were trained through teacher professional networks and 530 students identified as at-risk of drop-out in schools affected by the earthquake benefitted from foundational skills and after-class

remedial learning lessons and socio-emotional skills to ensure their continuation in school. UNICEF further strengthened the gender responsiveness of school practices by developing and delivering targeted training packages for school psychologists and school council students and welcomed the appointment of 458 school psychologists as gender focal points. Staff from 23 schools benefitted from teacher training, peer support and small grants to better prepare for disasters. Some 582 pre-school teachers and 891 primary and upper secondary teachers were reached through a UNICEF-supported and designed professional development programme. The agency has been vocal in advocating for the importance of awareness raising for parents and the community on the importance of pre-school education. It developed standards for pre-school directors and advocacy briefs for securing fiscal space for education. To address the need of the Afghan community evacuated to Albania, UNICEF conducted an education assessment to design an informal learning programme for the children.

Every child is protected from violence and exploitation

UNICEF Albania, applying system strengthening, capacity building, evidence generation and social and behavioural change approaches, increased its attention on deteriorating domestic violence, risks of child exploitation and overall mental health and psychological well-being of children and adults and further advanced the implementation of major national policies, including the National De-Institutionalisation (DI) Action Plan, and contributed to the development of the National Action Plan on Anti-Trafficking 2021–2023. The country's child protection system is not yet ready to respond to any foreseeable abuse of children in the emergency context, be it natural disaster, pandemic or migration. In the absence of a systemic response the heaviest load sits with the ability of development partners to mobilise funds and the ability of NGOs to provide services. This situation urged UNICEF to invest in a contingency plan together with the core state institutions and through mobilisation of the non-state actors. The child protection in emergencies mitigation draft plan was developed in 2021 with the leadership of the State Agency for Child Right and Protection, and includes gender-related issues, especially mitigation measures and response services related to gender-based violence and sexual violence.

In 2021, UNICEF contributed to the provision of child protection services for 5,080 most vulnerable children and caregivers. Some 1,576 caregivers (1,081 females) received support through parenting programmes, 4,108 (2,057 females) accessed quality mental health and psycho-social support services and UNICEF-supported programmes prevented 113 children and 59 families from unnecessary separation, while rescuing 539 victims and potential victims of trafficking. Furthermore, UNICEF trained more than 400 child protection workers through a range of interventions.

Partnerships with business and local government enabled 6,300 children and adults to benefit from digital safety skills, while the Friendly Wi-Fi system managed to block around 560,200 attempts to access blacklisted websites.

UNICEF consolidated its support to the National DI Action Plan 2020–22, leveraged governmental funding. The three proposed models (i) for child and family support hub, (ii) guidelines for child-family reunification, and (iii) alternative professional foster care service, were approved by the national DI steering committee and piloted in the municipalities of Korca and Vlora.

UNICEF fully furnished and equipped the child-friendly interview units of seven police departments and trained more than 250 professional handling cases of children in contact or conflict with the law in Berat and Gjirokaster.

The campaign *Të Besoj*, addressing child sexual abuse, travelled to eleven main cities in Albania, reaching an estimated one million people.

With contributions from UNICEF, the government established a Centre for Juvenile Criminality

Prevention. UNICEF further consolidated the Integrated Data System on Criminal Justice for Children and the National Institute of Statistics finalised the mapping of Albania's legislation against the International Classification of Crime Statistics as a first step towards producing age- and sex-disaggregated statistics in the field.

A critical piece of evidence on young people's Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices with Regard to Human Trafficking was also accomplished while UNICEF kicked off the conceptualisation phase for a major KAP survey on violence against children that will be reflective of gender issues.

UNICEF provided support to 18 children (15 girls and 3 boys) and their mothers (6) who were repatriated by the Albanian government from Syria refugee camps. The agency provided legal support, food, drinking water, hygiene packages, clothing, psychological counselling and day-to-day psycho-social and educational activities.

Every child has an equitable chance in life

UNICEF Albania built national capacities to develop and test indicators for multi-deprivation analysis and a road map to develop an EU child deprivation index. UNICEF led national discussions and a sub-regional workshop to build consensus supporting regular analysis and reporting of multi-dimensional child poverty. Data on the phenomenon led policy discussions and contributed to reforming the cash assistance in Albania: government decided to double the benefit amount for families with three children in receipt of cash assistance, given the evidence that those families are more likely to be in poverty.

In 2021, an annual child deprivation index was developed for the first time and published. UNICEF with its local partner reached 600 families with a new cash plus intervention (cash and information on and referral to social services) in three municipalities: Berat, Durrës and Lezha.

Eleven municipalities were supported to develop three-year social care plans, fully costed, engendered and with clear targets to reach at least 60 percent of all children in poverty or in a vulnerable situation, including clear gender policy objectives. All eleven municipalities developed budget briefs that informed the decision making on the planning of expenditures for the financing of social care plan and social care services.

UNICEF stepped up its support to social welfare workforce strengthening and, in partnership with the Faculty of Social Sciences, improved the bachelor curricula of social work and set up www.sociale.al, an innovative knowledge hub that serves as an information source and provides professional support for social workers through online training and supervision. Furthermore, UNICEF Albania supported the first ever national Assembly of Social Workers, which established the order of Social Workers with more than 1,000 professionals.

For the first time in Albania, UNICEF developed budget briefs to generate evidence, improve understanding around trends in planning and execute the budget in three sectors: education, social assistance and health. The budget briefs highlighted the lack of budget transparency, the lack of clear links between the Mid-Term Budgetary Framework, a results-based planning document, and annual budget allocations and expenditure that follow the economic classification, and confirmed the need to build capacities and public financing for children literacy at the central and local level. Findings and recommendations from the budget briefs were used to advocate for increased social spending in the annual parliamentary hearings on the draft 2022 budget law.

Gender

The Country Office (CO) engaged in developing a situation analysis and CPD that is gender responsive, integrated a stronger gender lens into emergency preparedness and supported the development of the National Strategy on Gender Equality 2021–2030. UNICEF Albania marked the

International Day of the Girl with the publication of two open letters to girls. In keeping with this year's theme of encouraging girls to embrace science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), two Albanian women engineers successfully building a career in Canada wrote open letters to Albanian girls about to make educational or career choices. The two letters concluded a one-year campaign (Write a letter to a girl), initiated in October 2020 by UNICEF and UNFPA Albania, with a view to showing messages of support and encouragement to Albanian girls towards self-fulfilment and away from child marriage and early union.

Disability

UNICEF Albania supported the conceptualisation of the National Strategy of Education 2021–2026. Dedicated consultations were held with Civil Society Organisations for Children with Disabilities, particularly on the issues and challenges of offering a comprehensive set of services within mainstream schools for children with disabilities, as well as on the challenges faced by children with visual and hearing impairments. The CO provided accessible learning content through the online platform Akademi.al, where 1,000 videos for children with visual and hearing impairments were introduced this year. Additionally improved access to communication and protection for children with hearing impairments was provided through the CO partnership with the Albanian National Association of the Deaf. The office actively engaged stakeholders in webinars, regional conferences and global summits on disability to ensure Albanian professionals profited from knowledge, best models and experience sharing, as well as new standards and successful strategies in working with children with disabilities.

Adolescents

UNICEF has been contributing to the development of a national youth strategy and to the development of an action plan for adolescents' engagement and empowerment, in cooperation with the Prime Minister's Office, Ministry of Youth and Children, and six line ministries. UNICEF engaged in six cohorts of UPSHIFT, reaching 10,000 young people indirectly and 300 youth directly, who benefitted from new skills and knowledge in personal empowerment, business start-ups, employability skills and technological innovations. Some 1,000 young people (60% girls) in 100 high schools and 61 municipalities across Albania actively participated in the Re-debate initiative, supported by UNICEF to help young debaters develop communication skills and critical thinking, encourage tolerance, gender equity and respect for different ideas. U-Report continues to be the key platform used by UNICEF Albania and other national partners to collect and understand the views of young people in real time. In 2021, about 1,600 young boys and girls regularly shared their views on social inclusion, green economy and the country's development. Each poll was initially pre-tested with U-Report young ambassadors and the results regularly discussed with groups of young people, thus creating a feedback mechanism, very important to keep young people engaged. U-Report polls informed several important processes during 2021, such as scoping of the National Youth Strategies and the local strategy of Tirana Municipality on volunteerism. A key engagement strategy to promote U-Report was undertaken through digital marketing and door-to-door outreach through a network of 175 young persons who are the U-Report ambassadors across Albania.

Evidence generation, advocacy and communication

UNICEF positioned itself as a knowledge hub on the situation of children through new knowledge and evidence, through the Situation Analysis of Children and Adolescents in Albania, Survey on Knowledge, Attitude and Practices of Young People regarding Human trafficking, Knowledge, Attitude and Practices of General Population around Covid-19 and Budgetary Briefs. Public advocacy for child rights was strengthened through digital communication, media relations and strategic events organisation. Social media followers grew by 8.6 percent. From 2020 to 2021, the number of website viewers increased from 168,361 to 205,345.

UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships

In 2021, UNICEF actively participated in the development of the new UN Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF 2022–2026), leading several discussions and providing analytical and programmatic contributions.

Intensive discussion and exchanges with the EU working for implementation of IPA II budget support for social inclusion placed UNICEF as one of the leading agents in the areas of social protection, social care services and child poverty. UNDP and UNICEF undertook an assessment to document the extent to which Covid-19 has challenged and impacted the rights of families and children to social inclusion and social protection. UNICEF continued to work closely with UN Women, ILO and UNDP to ensure that social protection policies are sound and well financed, aiming at heading towards a national definition and framework for social protection floor.

Working strategically with local governments and the private sector resulted in an expansion of the Friendly Wi-Fi scheme and the BiblioTech initiative in two more cities of Albania: Korca and Shkodra. Friendly Wi-Fi allows users to access free public Internet filtered against child abuse, pornography and illegal content. It sets the new ethical standard for businesses and the public sector with minimal cost and effort, and yet generates a high level of appreciation from the general public. BiblioTech is a technology-oriented and public library-based model for digital literacy and online protection. Also, after capital investment (mostly IT equipment), BiblioTech is able to be highly cost-effective as it thrives in the already existing public spaces, funded by the local authorities and private sector. The uniqueness of the model is its ability to serve multiple purposes for the wide variety of learning, and serves all age groups at the same time.

In strengthening its focus towards increased adolescent engagement, linking education and skills to the job market, UNICEF was invited by the Prime Minister's Office to support the development of a comprehensive programme for adolescent engagement that will cover innovation, agriculture, arts and crafts and sports. UNICEF will leverage equity and safeguarding and investments in youth. Moreover, UNICEF is entering into new partnerships with youth organisations, new government partners, CSOs and development partners. It secured a major contribution from Italy and a breakthrough agreement with GIZ around innovation and entrepreneurial skills for young people in the framework of the EU for Innovation programme. Private businesses have also joined forces with in-kind or small financial support around social entrepreneurship programmes such as UPSHIFT or PONDER.

Lessons Learned and Innovations

Flexible programming and setting of clear priorities

The on-going Covid-19 pandemic continued to bring to surface deep-rooted bottlenecks in the governance and service provision, requiring urgent and targeted support. Applying flexible programming and an approach to implementing partners to continuously adapt their programming, regularly checking and readjusting priorities, ensured that UNICEF seized the opportunity to bring into the government agenda the introduction of new mechanisms of service delivery, such as cash contribution, blended learning, the use of technology and the burning need of continued investment in human capital.

The development of the country programme document was challenged by the Covid-19 context and its implications. However, through careful planning and on-going communication with partners, the realisation of a robust, evidence-informed and comprehensive framework to leverage resources for children and advance the agenda for children in the country was made possible.

Turning crises into opportunities

The country's Child Protection System is not ready to respond to any foreseeable abuse of children in the emergency context, whether natural disaster, pandemic or migration. In the absence of the systemic response the heaviest load sits with development partners' abilities to mobilise funds and the ability of NGOs to provide services. In this situation many children in a situation risky to their health and well-being are not accounted for. This situation urged UNICEF to invest in a contingency plan together with the core state institutions and through mobilisation of non-state actors. The child protection in emergencies mitigation draft plan has been developed with the leadership of the State Agency for Child Right and Protection.

Using technology for development

UNICEF is continuing to work with **Akademi.al**, the national e-Learning platform, to provide free educational content to 402,849 children in Albania. The website has grown to include 20,127 video lessons in Albanian, of which 1,000 are videos for children with disabilities. The platform, which consists of the latest cloud technologies, and includes interactive features, is moving towards open-source solutions, and has won several awards in 2021 including the following:

Social Impact Fund (Harvard University)

European Young Innovators of World Summit Awards

Europeans Making a Difference (EC)

Start-up of the Year (ICT Awards)

In 2020 and 2021, UNICEF supported the University of Tirana, to set up a platform for Social Protection and Services in Albania (www.sociale.al), a virtual space created for academics, decision makers and practitioners of social care services to share information and good practices. Through this platform the capacities of social workers working in the social care field are intended to increase, by improving the university curricula and providing on-the-job training. The platform serves as an updated information source, provides professional support for social workers through online training and supervision, serves as a meeting point for the professional community, promotes good practice in the Albanian context, brings together institutions, service providers and professionals in the public and private sectors of social services, enriches students' education in social work and connects students to social work practice, provides continuous collaboration between social services and university, and internationalises knowledge and social work practice in Albania through the activity of international organisations in the field.

The National Child Helpline ALO 116 was supported with the introduction of the *Raporto Tani* web-based reporting platform and mobile application in addition to the traditional phone line to allow anonymous forms of reporting cases of violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation while ensuring anonymity and confidentiality, including for children with disabilities.

Knowledge management

Albania CO, with support from UNICEF Europe & Central Asia led the first day of a 5-day Public Finance for Children Sub-regional course for UNICEF staff in the Western Balkans. Participants across all sectors from Albania, Greece, Kosovo, Montenegro and North Macedonia acquired skills, learned how policies are translated into sector plans and budget allocations, and how this relates to outcomes for children. They also learned how to use #PF4C documents for advocacy purposes and to engage with public institutions for financing project for children and young people and effective leveraging and influencing, and create peer support network and acquire knowledge and exchange ideas. This is especially important at this time of fiscal contraction and with spending on children at #risk. The course is adapted for replication in other sub-regions in Europe and Central Asia.

Opportunities

UNICEF Albania responding to one of the key recommendations of the previous Country Programme Evaluation, and developed an office strategy to engage more systematically with the decentralisation processes. In 2021, CO started work to (i) compile a compendium of office practices to document

strategies and approaches used on engaging with local and subnational authorities, and (ii) a review of decentralisation processes and intergovernmental arrangements, a mapping of functional assignments in the social sectors affecting children outcomes. The work will be finalised in the first quarter of 2022 and will help CO gain clarity on the situation of (i) local and sub-national mandates, (ii) fiscal and human resources to manage and deliver on those mandates, (iii) scope for local discretion in using resources, and (iv) accountability mechanisms at the local level. The ultimate result is to operationalise the vision put forward in the UNICEF CPD 2022–2027, which is to strengthen partnerships with local and sub-national actors to leverage political will, institutional commitments and resources to contribute to policies and interventions that accelerate and maximise results for children.

Negative stereotypes, norms and barriers are considered to be the underlying causes of child deprivations in Albania. In order to strengthen the programmatic response, Albania CO successfully partnered with UNV for a national post on social and behavioural change and will intensify its fundraising efforts.