



**CHILD PROTECTION HUB
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Baseline Study to Map Child Protection Practices and Related Workforce Needs in Albania



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I. INTRODUCTION

This baseline study, mapping Child Protection Practices and Related Workforce Needs, focuses on Albania. In the last decades Albania, a small country situated in the Western Balkan region in Europe, has been struggling to catch up with the development pace of other countries in Europe after emerging as a new democracy and market economy in 1990, following the downfall of one of the harshest communist dictatorial regimes¹. The economic progress during the transition period has helped in moving the country from a low-income one to an upper middle-income country (World Bank, 2015). However, issues of poverty (Albania is the third poorest country in the region) and socio-economic inequalities persist, leading to an assembly of problems and social needs across a variety of vulnerable groups (Cabiri et al, 2015)².

Continuous reforming processes in the economic sector, education, health care and social protection have not been sufficient to boost the ability of the government to adequately respond to the needs of vulnerable groups, including children, who make up more than 35% of the Albanian young population. Over 20% of children live in absolute poverty (21.4% in rural areas), 49.6% of families with more than four children are poor, and 22% of children 0-4 years old live in poverty (MoSWY, 2014; Gedeshi & Jorgoni, 2012). In this context, children at risk are one of the vulnerable populations identified and targeted by the National Strategy for Social Inclusion (NSSI) (MoSWY, 2015). Despite this policy level prioritisation, for more than three decades (since 1993) the cash assistance (*Ndihma Ekonomike*) program remains the main poverty reduction scheme, covering only around 23% of extremely poor households (MoSWY, 2015). In addition, 90% of services are found in urban areas (MoSWY, 2015) while in terms of community-based services Albania continues to rely heavily on non-governmental organizations (NGO) (National Center for Social Studies, 2013) whose social service capacity in turn is diminishing as the donors' funds are shrinking.

As a result, not all children and families in need are covered and fully protected. On the contrary, several categories of children are at risk for their safety and healthy development (such as children on the move, children without birth registration, children with disabilities, children separated from their parents, and children from minority groups, just to mention several of them). The new National Intersectorial Strategy on Decentralization and Local Governance 2014-2020 is creating new opportunities for the development of locally tailored interventions and services, closer to the need of the groups of interests as well as examining challenges on how this will be materialized after a long history of failed attempts for decentralization reform in the past (Minister of State for Local Government, 2014).

On the other hand, the global trend of increased recognition of the need to protect children from abuse, exploitation, violence, and neglect and to support families through a more integrated and systemic approach (Canavera, Akesson, & Landis, 2014) has been affecting local developments in Albania too (Maestral, 2015)³. The shift towards a more holistic approach implies a greater degree of inclusiveness and proactive role of a variety of actors and stakeholders leading to new levels of concerns regarding the clarity of the multitude of roles and the capacities of human resources involved.

In a context where opportunities and challenges of the decentralization processes and a new systemic approach in child protection services (and social services at large) overlap, the gravitational centre is shifted more and more towards the social service workforce development and readiness to respond to these new changes. The new approaches and reforms will be put into action by numerous professionals from different disciplines and sectors. As the approach to planning and implementation of services becomes increasingly systems-based and decentralized, staff across government departments and levels, and staff of non-governmental agencies will require more clearly defined roles and responsibilities, as well as skills and capacities necessary to carry out their functions.

1 Sometimes Albania's communist regime is referred to as the North Korea of the time. <http://www.newyorker.com/news/sporting-scene/a-soccer-comeback-for-a-long-struggling-country>

2 This report has not been published yet

3 This report has not been published yet

The child protection services in Albania, as elsewhere, bring together social workers along with medical, psychological and law enforcement personnel. However, it is the professional social workers who are specialized to identify and respond to child protection concerns according to policy, procedure, and care standards, making them core to the system's functioning. Social workers must therefore have a clear description and understanding of their role and, most importantly, the practical skills to undertake it.

The core functions of this study are to understand and provide a general baseline of the child protection practices and the social service workforce skills, knowledge, and interests in child protection in order for it to serve as a foundation for strategies and interventions aiming to improve overall child protection mechanisms and services in Albania. More specifically, findings from the study aim to:

- provide a basic overview of the education and training context in which child protection practices are delivered (i.e., systems in place for delivery of child protection services, related policies and frameworks, child protection education, and resource management)
- identify needs and opportunities for further professional development, training, and/or capacity building to strengthen the child protection workforce in the country.

In this light, the following report includes a comprehensive mapping of the social protection system and the professional and educational backgrounds of the social service workforce engaged in child protection activities.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Social protection in Albania – an overview

The establishment of a new social protection system in Albania was one of the drastic changes that took place in the aftermath of the abolition of one of the most severe communist dictatorships in the world. The foundations of the new social protection system were established in the new Albanian Constitution, which stated in its main provision that: “... *social justice and social assistance are the foundations of this state...*” (The Constitution of the Republic of Albania, 1991: Article 2). The initial strategic objectives of the new social protection system aimed, first, to prevent any further degradation of the social security in the country (resulting from the abrupt socio-political changes) and, second, to establish a new, efficient social protection system that would not only address the current emergent problems but would also continue to serve future generations (Tomes, 1997).

Upon a more consolidated policy and legal framework (including the adoption of Law No. 7703, dated 11.05.1993 “On Social Insurance in the Republic of Albania” and Law No. 7710, dated 18.5.1993, “On social assistance and care”), the Ministry of Labour, Emigration, Social Support and Politically Persecuted Persons⁴ and the General Administration of Social Assistance and Services (GASAS)⁵ responsible for implementing the social care system in the country were established.⁶ The State Social Services established in 1996 was intended to address social needs by covering through its activity the following areas:

- *Economic assistance*: activating the economic assistance scheme and a pilot programme in engaging families in community service; hence, use of the economic assistance (EA) scheme programme funds not only as a passive scheme with EA payments for the families in need but also by involving the heads of families in need (part of EA) in community work;
- *Disability*: tracking the dynamics of the cash payment scheme for disabled persons, filtering

proposals from local units and their forecast for the state budget and submitting this budget for approval to the ministry;

- *Expansion of services*: for example the legal basis for temporary foster care services for children without parental care was established and approved and the de-institutionalization process in the framework of social services reform was started;
- *Standardization of social services*: standards for the fundamental social services provided by the state in social care institutions (PISC) for children, people with disabilities and elderly have been approved, along with provisions on how to implement them;
- *Administration and budgeting* of social services for categories in need;
- *Institutional improvements*: one of the innovations was the establishment and functioning of the SSS Directorate for training and projects, the purpose of which was to standardize and provide training for structures providing social services.
- *Inspections of social services*: the inspection of social care services in the SSS, which was delegated to the regional level, was a task of the SSS until 2012. The inspectorate performed inspections in accordance with the methodology of inspection of social services provided by public and private operators, set forth by Decision of the Council of Ministers.⁷
- *Licensing of non-profit organizations*: a special SSS structure identified and licensed the NGOs operating in the social services field. For 11 years (1998-2009) the state – civil society relations were initially conducted in a contractual form, and later the SSS realized the full licensing process⁸.

These new arrangements and particularly the blossoming of a totally new sector - the NGO sector - created a new demand for professionals who would

4 Currently Ministry of Social Welfare and Youth (MSWY)

5 Currently State Social Services (SSS)

6 Article 31 of the Law No. 7710, dated 18.5.1993, “On the social assistance and care”

7 The methodology has been adopted by DoCM No. 512, dated 31.05.2006.

8 Instruction 1321/10, dated 3.12.2003 “On the licensing of judicial, private persons, including NGOs, in providing the Social Care services”

respond to these new duties and job positions. The Faculty of Social Work at the University of Tirana (today the Faculty of Social Sciences, including a department of social work) was the first school in the country to train social workers, and its establishment in 1992 preceded the above developments. Nonetheless, the consolidation and integration of this new profession in the Albanian society would go a long way.

Later developments, and particularly those following the process of decentralization of social services that has been on-going since 2001,⁹ led to a series of issues and problems including the inability of local government units to plan funds or to perform needs assessments in their territory, and a lack of a clear vision in providing the new types of services or a new philosophy of reformatting residential centres into community ones (Children Today Center Tirana, 2013). In this context, the Albanian government, with the support of UNICEF, initiated in 2013 a radical reforming process of the SSS with the primary aims being improvement of both the efficiency of the social protection system and the quality of social services for vulnerable groups, including children (SSS & UNICEF, 2014).

The on-going reform and decentralisation of service provision in key sectors including health services, day care provision and social assistance payments provides an opportunity to shape the future of social services for Albania in a holistic and integrated manner. The reforming of the SSS from being heavily focused on cash provisions (such as economic aid - *Ndihma Ekonomike*) and other entitlements would require the reforms to be coupled with important restructuring of the human resources. The social workers/social administrators (around 500 social administrators were employed all over the country in 2013) who to date have been primarily administering cash benefits will be required to shift towards case management as part of a general systemic approach (Tahsini, Lopari, Lasku & Voko, 2013). It is in the light of these new developments that the education and continuous education opportunities are being examined in the following sections of this document.

9 Started with the adoption of Law No. 8743, dated 22.02.2001 "On the State properties" and amended by Law No. 8744, dated 22.02.2001 "On the transfer of public properties to the Local Government Units and the adoption of Law No. 9355 dated 10.03.2005 "On social assistance and services".

Child protection framework

Since 1992, Albania has ratified the UN Convention on Child Rights. A number of additional other documents in the area of child rights have followed this ratification including the Optional Protocol on Child Rights "On the Communication Procedure" and the Council of Europe Convention on the "Prevention and fight against gender based violence and domestic violence". With the ratification of the third optional convention on child rights on "Communication Procedure", Albania has committed to guaranteeing children full rights also at the international level if they are not properly addressed locally (MoSWY, 2015).

More recently, in 2013 with the decision No.63 date 26.11.2013, the Albanian Parliament has adopted the resolution "On the protection and respect of child rights in Albania". The international and national commitments have led to several essential amendments in the Albanian Penal Code (adopted by Law no. 144/2013, date. 20.5.2013) aiming at reinforcing the guarantees for adequate child protection from sex crime and economic abuse. Finally, in 2014 the approval of Law No.155/2014 gave way to the establishment of the Ombudsman section for minors in the country.

Although the legal and regulatory framework seem to have grown and consolidated well in the last two decades of transition, the results have not been as satisfactory. Several monitoring and evaluation reports have highlighted the lack of a defined model or approach to child protection in the country (World Vision, 2013; BKTF, 2011; Save the Children, 2012), and these reports have underlined the necessity of shifting towards a comprehensive child protection system which includes the identification, prevention and management of all cases, regardless of their complexity (Voko & Tahsini, 2014).

Efforts are being made to move towards an integrated approach, which has resulted, among other consequences, in the establishment of new mechanisms falling under two main categories: child protection mechanisms and referral mechanisms. Both mechanisms are intended to operate under a new, integrated approach based on principles of multidisciplinary and multiagency collaboration, case management and local level intervention (MoSWY,

2015). Law 10347 dated 4.11.2010 “On the Protection of Children’s Rights” defines the institutional mechanisms for the protection of children’s rights at central and local level as presented in Table 2.1.

Under the child protection law in Albania, the primary responsibility for child protection in the country falls with the Child Protection Units (CPUs), which should be established at each municipality/commune. Since the first CPU opened in 2006, the CPU has become a key structure of the child protection system at the local level. However, the legal framework also states that all actors and stakeholders have a statutory duty to protect children, and in particular to support the work of the CPUs (Children Today Center, 2013). Although 12 CPUs have been established at each district and 196 CPUs have been established and are functioning in 196 local government units, still only 51% of the country is covered (MoSWY, 2015).

Currently child protection services face several challenges, among which, possibly the most important is for the human capacities to deliver services at the standards required from this new integrated approach. Hence, the legitimate question would be who is protecting or expected to protect children in Albania?

Who is protecting children in Albania? - The social work profession

The State Social Service remains accountable for the staff of social care service institutions providing services at the national level and is intended to remain under its auspices and administration also in the post-reforming arrangements. Supported by the state budget, the agency has been enhancing its efforts to ensure increased support from different donors, too¹⁰. The previously cited data on the level of SSS coverage across the country means that NGOs are left to cover the rest while also supporting the relatively weak SSS where they do exist. In an analysis of State Social Service activity and capacities in the last four years the problems identified can be summarised under two main categories: a. irrelevance of human capacities and expertise in the job position/description, and b. instability and limited

experience due to high turnovers rates (Children Today Center, 2013).

In Albania, public administration at large has been characterised by high turnover rates and instability in human resources (Dhembo, 2014). Data from SSS (Children Today Center, 2013) shows that in a period of only four years (2009-2013), due to the continuous restructuring of the system and the shifting of personnel carried out by newly appointed General Directors, 150 specialists at the central level¹¹ and subordinate institutions have been dismissed. The SSS staff recruitment is regulated by the social services law and by-laws, with the Labour Code remaining the main legal document. Because this legal basis gives too much freedom to the recruitment process, the continuation and termination of work relations, the sustainability of the human resources, their career advancement, and their professionalism have all been impacted¹².

Therefore, not only does almost half of the staff possess no previous experience in SSS¹³, many also have a troublesome variety of professional backgrounds that are irrelevant to the job position and (when existent) job description. Table 2.2 shows that in each job position (director, sector chief and specialist) there is a variety of professions. Although hundreds of social work graduates have been in the labour market starting from the 1990s, more than 15 years later these graduates continue to be a minority of employees due to issues of employment procedures and a yet fragile positioning of the social work professions among other professions in the country.

Because of the problematic recruitment policies and procedures of the SSS staff in recent years, the demand-offer equilibrium between social sciences and particularly social work educated professionals and the available jobs has been seriously jeopardised. On the other hand, the large body of the paraprofessionals or “front-line workers” who do not fit into the strict educational criteria set out for professional social workers should be receiving

10 For more details on the variety and involvement of donors visit <http://www.sherbimisocial.gov.al/donatore/>

11 SSS Administration, inspectors of the Regional Offices and SCI staff
12 Institutional Analysis of State Social Services Role, duties and responsibilities in the framework of the Social Care Services Reform, Children Today Center Tirana, June 2013
13 See for details Table 4 in Institutional Analysis of State Social Services Role, duties and responsibilities in the framework of the Social Care Services Reform, Children Today Center Tirana, June 2013

Table 2.1. Child protection mechanisms in Albania

Central level	Local level
<p>1. The National Council for the Protection of Children's Rights</p> <p>Its mission is to coordinate at the national level, across sectors, with state and non-state actors to ensure child rights are respected in the country</p>	<p>1. Child Rights Units (CRU) district level</p> <p>Locally known as NJDF, the CRUs are structures established at the local level to coordination among local actors for the implementation of child protection practices.</p>
<p>2. The Minister of Social Welfare and Youth (national coordinator of child rights & protection issues)</p> <p>Is the main policymaking actor in the area of child protection, drafting and proposing policy intervention to the council of ministers.</p>	<p>2. Child Protection Units (CPU) in the municipality/ commune</p> <p>These units locally referred to as NJMF are established at the municipality level and function within the administrative structure of the municipality as a specialised unit dealing with social issues. This is the responsible unit for case management of children at risk. At least one of its employees should be a professional social worker.</p>
<p>3. The State Agency for the Protection of Children's Rights</p> <p>The key monitoring institution whose main role is to monitor the implementation of the relevant legal framework as well as the coordination of actions among different implementing actors.</p>	

Source: Law 10347 dated 4.11.2010 "On the Protection of Children's Rights"

particular attention in the new social services reform as they, too, must be accommodated by the new changes following the Social Worker Order, and they, too, need to understand their role, powers, and duties within the system. They must also be trained in the specific skills required to fulfil that role (Tahsini, Lopari, Lasku, & Voko, 2013).

In response to this situation, with the support of UNICEF and the commitment of the Ministry of Social Welfare and Youth and that of the Department of Social Work and Social Policy, University of Tirana, a new law was designed and later adopted by the parliament in 2014, on the "Order of social workers in the Republic of Albania" aiming to regulate social work professions in the country. Including social work in the list of regulated professions in the country is of particular importance, not only with regard to the proliferation of professionals covering areas currently not overseen by social workers, but also with regard to the proliferation of areas and profiles where social work practice has been expanding, such as care

services for vulnerable groups; women's, children, mental health services, services for children and families, probation service, psycho-social services in schools, areas of reproductive health, etc. (Tahsini, Lopari, Lasku, & Voko, 2013). This law comes in a time when social workers are playing a pivotal role in the newly reformed and integrated social services approach in the country, where they are charged with the responsibility of integrating the case management model of social work in social services (Tahsini, Lopari, Lasku, & Voko, 2013:5). The general expectations are for it to have a positive impact in regulating the profession, strengthening its profile and ensuring more efficiency and professionalism in social service delivery.

Social work education in Albania

Background of social work education

In Albania, the main source of social work graduates are the three schools of social work established

Table 2.2 Professional background of SSS staff

Positions	Professions						
	Economics	Law/ international relations	Social work/ psychology/ philosophy	Teacher	Foreign languages	Medicine	Others (agriculture, natural sciences etc.)
Director	53%	13%	7%	27%			
Inspector	100%						
Sector Chief	50%	7%	14%	14%		7%	7%
Specialist	31%	18%	22%	10%	4%	5%	9%
Total	53%	15%	18%	12%	3%	5%	8%

Source: SSS as presented in *Institutional Analysis of State Social Services Role, duties and responsibilities in the framework of the Social Care Services Reform, Children Today Center Tirana, June 2013*

within three main state universities in the country: University of Tirana, in the capital of Albania, University of Shkoder “Luigj Gurakuqi” and University of Elbasan “Aleksander Xhuvani”. In the early 1990s, social work was a brand new profession to the public, to the education system, and to the labour market in Albania. In the early 90s Albania was not only lacking a history of social work professions but also inherited a poor tradition of charity work until 1945 due to a series of socio-economic and historic factors (see Hoxha, 2011) and an absolute domination of the socialist ideology for more than 50 years (1945–1990), where party structures regulated social behaviour/ issues and “volunteer” work was actually obligatory¹⁴.

In 1992, the Grand Valley University, Michigan, and Bethany Social Services in Albania supported the initiative of a core group of intellectuals and the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (today MoSWY) to start the first social work school in the country, namely the Faculty of Social Work, University of Tirana. From 1992 to 1995, three one-year social work courses created the first local capacities in the area while the first graduates of a four-years bachelor’s degree in social work graduated in 1996.

No statistical data are available to report on the number of graduates from all social work schools in the country and/or for those returning from social work studies abroad (if any)¹⁵. However, more than

1500 social workers have been graduates in more than 20 years from the University of Tirana’s full-time programme alone. Although thorough investigations are missing, partial research shows that the NGO/ non-profit sector remains their main employer, and the rest of social work graduates work in both public and non-public institutions, in positions related to working with people, such as public relations, human resources, customer services, etc. (Hoxha et al, 2012).

Social Work Curriculum

The first social work bachelor’s programme in Albania started in 1992 and introduced in the country one of the most advanced curricula at the time, with the assistance of Grand Valley University in the United States. This gave social work education in Albania an advantage, compared to other social work schools in the region because it was a distinct university diploma from the beginning. At the time, social work was not yet a university degree in many other states such as Italy and Greece, where it was instead primarily a higher education qualification.

Two more programmes followed that of the University of Tirana: one in Shkoder (in 2005) and one in Elbasan (in 2004). Their programmes have developed in the recent years and are accredited by the Public Agency of Accreditation of Higher Education in the country (<http://www.aaal.edu.al/sq/>). Besides full-time bachelor’s programmes, the University of Tirana and the University “Akesander Xhuvani” in Elbasan offer also part-time bachelor’s programmes which last longer than three years. Unlike other academic disciplines, social work has not benefitted from the

¹⁴ During communism all population was forced to involve in ‘volunteer work’ as a contribution to the building of the socialist society.

¹⁵ Although data could be collected by contacting relevant authorities one by one, no aggregated data are publicly available. The Social Work Order is expected to also contribute in setting a database of all social work graduates who would apply for licensing.

boom of private universities in the country that has occurred in recent years; while other social sciences, such as political science, psychology and sociology have seen new programmes developed in the new private universities, this has not been the case for social work. It seems to have not been as attractive to the private sector, perhaps because there is a lack of opportunities within the labour market and because of a low level of public awareness and information on the profession.

After more than one decade of granting bachelor's degrees in social work, the initial four-year bachelor's programme was significantly impacted by necessary programme reforms under the tuning process of the Bologna Chart. Since 2005, social work schools in the country comply with the Bologna Chart of higher education standards for Europe, hence, social

work programmes in the country shifted from a 4+1 system to a new 3 (undergraduate) +2 (post-graduate) system. In the light of these developments and new challenges and arising opportunities, with the support of UNESCO, the Department of Social Work at the University of Tirana led a one-year programme (in collaboration with the two other social work schools in Elbasan and Shkodra) in comparing and tuning the curriculum of social work profession at the national level (Department of Social Work, UT, 2009).

In a comparative analysis of the curricula of the three social work schools, it was found that the curricula of both Shkodra and Elbasan universities were heavily based on the curricula of the first social work school, that of the University of Tirana, which itself followed primarily an ecological theory and a generalist

Table 2.3 Social Work Programmes in Albania

Social Work Schools	University of Tirana	University of Shkodra "Luigj Gurakuqi"	University of Elbasan "Aleksander Xhuvani"
BACHELOR'S PROGRAMMES			
Full-time Bachelor's Programmes (3 years)			
Ba. in Social Work	x	x	x
Ba. in Social Administration	x		
Part-Time Bachelor's Programmes (5 years)			
Ba. in social work	x		x
MASTER'S PROGRAMMES			
Master of Science Programmes (2years)			
MSc. in Social Work	x		
MSc. in Communication for social and behavioural change	x		
MSc. in Social Administration	x		
MSc. Social Work with children and Families	x		
MSc. in Gender and Development	x		
MSc. In Social Services in Penal Justice	x		
MSc. in Social Services			x
Professional Master's Programmes (1 year)			
Ma. Analyst of Social Policies	x		
Ma. Social work	x		
Ma. Social worker with children and families			x
Ma. Social Services in Penal Justice			x
Accredited courses			
Child Protection Issues	x		
PHD PROGRAMMES			
Doctor of science in Social Work (3-5 years)	x		

approach. However, some essential limitations were found in both these programmes stemming primarily from limitations in human resources (for example, one of the fundamental courses in social work education, Human Behaviour and Social Environment, was not offered in either of the other two schools) (Tahsini, Duci, & Ajdini, 2009).

Since then, the curricula of the three social work schools in the country is likely to have grown closer as a result of close collaboration among the three schools, the further qualifications of the local staff, and the common efforts of the academic staff of the three schools to develop relevant literature in local language. The upgrading of the social work programmes in the country has aimed, among other goals, to reflect local developments at the policy level, legal level and employability of the social worker in Albania. Of particular interest has been enhancing social work theory and practice related to the areas where policymakers have created demand for social workers such as mental health (with the creation of multidisciplinary teams planned for in the laws on mental health in 1996 and 2012), child protection (the law passed in 2010 on child protection states clearly that CPU staff should be a social work graduate), education (the law of 2012 on psycho-social services in schools) and child welfare (with the establishment of the residential institutions of care for children and residential shelters for abused women and victims of trafficking). However, this demand for trained professionals does not play out appropriately in practice due to issues of employment practices as addressed earlier in this document.

Regardless of the unequal demand-offer ratio, it remains true that the social work bachelor's programmes continue to follow a generalist approach in preparing and graduating social workers who are:

1. Professionals who have the necessary knowledge and skills to practice social work with individuals, groups and communities.
2. Researchers who can conduct research in their practice and contribute to theory and evidence development;
3. Leaders and advocates of social protection in the country.

The generalist approach has been adopted as a best fit to the Albanian context due to the yet undefined labour market for social workers and particularly because of the opportunities to further specialize in post-graduate studies. Currently the Department of Social Work and Social Policy, University of Tirana (the main unit of postgraduate social work studies in the country including PhD studies) offers a variety of 5 Master of Science degrees and 2 professional master's degrees (Ma.) ranging from advanced social work to social work in the justice system and communication for behavioural change. The logic behind the generalist social work programme is that of a holistic approach which is in line with the new approach embraced in the reformation of State Social Services.

The master's programmes, on the other hand, have followed the way the labour market has been unfolding for social workers in Albania and have tried to respond to the created needs for certain specialties. As a result, their curricula are tailored to help specialize social work practitioners for different work profiles related to social work practice with individuals, groups and communities.

PhD studies are offered only at the University of Tirana School of Social Work. The programme enrolls students from Albania and the region, mainly Kosovo and Macedonia. Among the first graduates have been fellows of the three social work schools of the country.

Research

Research is a key component of the social work programmes in Albania. However, differences can be identified between the University of Tirana and the other two schools in the country. In social work bachelor's programme at the University of Tirana, research methods are taught in the 1st and 2nd years in three semesters, including introduction to statistics, quantitative research methods, and qualitative research methods courses. Only 1/3 of this specific weight is given to research in the other two schools through the Introduction to Research Methods course.

Besides studying research methods, social work students are familiarized throughout their studies with the importance of research outputs, evidence and their relevance to programme evaluation,

advocacy, social policymaking, etc. Yet, Dauti and Bejko (2015), while assessing the situation of evidence-based policymaking in the country, found that a comprehensive scientific evidence-based studies approach is lacking also at the university level programmes of social work. Local research and evidence is limited, leading to a relatively small number of meta analysis-based studies while the main focus of the programme is to teach students to become researchers of primary gathered data studies (pp. 22-23). A larger focus on evidence-based social policy and evaluation of social programmes is placed in the advanced Master of Science programmes and PhD studies.

Still, the biggest challenge for social work students and future practitioners remains that of gaining skills and practicing research. Course assignments are the main tool of involving them in research practice. Nonetheless, the lack of infrastructure and resources for labs and field works, as well as the very limited access to secondary data resources, leads social work students towards graduation with an unbalanced ratio of theory and practice in social work research. This problem is particularly serious for the part-time programmes in the country, where practice is even more limited, as their in-class work is reduced.

In this context, it would not be realistic to claim that social work professionals (let alone paraprofessional, and community-level child protection workers) are well equipped with basic knowledge of research methods in order to conduct their own research and/or evaluations on child protection issues and programmes. This is one of the areas where capacities need to be built and strengthened in line with the reforming of social services in the country.

Policy

Child wellbeing, child protection and social work with children are all core areas covered in the social work programmes in the country. Child protection legislation (including international and national framework) and child rights and child protection issues are an integral part of several courses in the programme including: Social Work with Children, Social Work in the Judiciary System, Ethics of Social Work, Social Problems, Social Policy, etc. Social work students are not only taught about child rights

and child protection issues but also on how they can engage and impact such issues in the country through advocacy and engagement in policymaking processes. As such, advocacy, social policy and community work are also important and integral parts of the programme at large and specific courses in particular. However, no assessments have been conducted to evaluate the readiness of social work graduates and the effectiveness of social work professionals (including paraprofessionals and/or and community-level child protection workers) in engaging and influencing child related policies in the country.

Practice

Social work education in Albania had a very good start in terms of integrating practice into the curricula. For more than one decade of the four-year bachelor's programme, the social work curricula included practice courses for social work students starting as early as the second year, intensifying through the rest of the programme, and peaking with a full semester of placement and practice in social service/social care institutions or organizations in the country. With the shift toward a 3 (undergraduate) +2 (post-graduate) model following the Bologna process, practice was the most severely affected component of the bachelor's programme. The practice component was shrunk from being spread throughout three of the four years of the first programme, during which the last semester of the fourth year was entirely spent in practice placement, to a total of 160 hours in the new three-year programme. A drastic reduction of the practice load in the social work bachelor's programme has distanced the schools from the most advanced social work education models in the world (e.g. with social work schools in the UK, in the US and in the Nordic countries) where practice occupies at least 1/3 of the social work programme.

The limited practice is one of the main challenges in the way of cultivating skills among social work graduates. However, even with the existing opportunities, additional issues arise when referring to the placement process, monitoring and evaluation of social work students practice. Yet, practice internships have been documented as key not only in acquiring skills and experience but also in bridging between academic institutions and social work students, on one hand, and employment

opportunities in the public and private sector, on the other (Haxhiymeri & Dhembo, 2010). It is in this light that the Department of Social Work and Social Policy at the University of Tirana, in collaboration with MoSWY and UNICEF Albania, intend to engage in a new curricula development process, in line with the new requirement deriving from the reformation of SSS, with a particular focus on boosting the practice component. As the Department of Social Work and Social Policy, UT in the last few years has become part of important international and European social work schools associations (such as the International Association of Schools of Social Work -IASSW and the European Association of Schools of Social Work - EASSW), international standards will be reflected in also tuning the programme to international trends and developments.

Continuous education and capacity building of child protection services staff

The law on the "Order of social workers in the Republic of Albania" includes, among other provisions, a basic framework for continuous education in social work in the country (to be followed by specific bylaws). However, thus far, social work continuous education in the country has been sporadic, unstructured and rarely mapped and assessed. The credit for the existing records of the capacity building activities goes to the support of various international organizations such UNICEF, TdH, Save the Children, World Vision etc. and the only local social work association in the country, the National Association of Social Workers Albania.

With particular focus on child rights and child protection, the Albanian Agency on Child Rights Protection (ASHMDF, in Albanian), in collaboration with different partners, has been involved in strengthening the capacities of human resources at the local level on child protection issues. Their efforts have extended to other professionals such as police, judges, NGO staff etc. who are involved

in the network of child protection actors under a multi-sectorial approach. According to the official data of the MoSWY, during only the period of 2013-2014, a total of 250 professionals have been trained (MoSWY, 2015).

The NGO sector has also played an important role over the years in strengthening the capacities of child protection staff. The most important contribution is the realization for the first time of a formalized and course on child protection issues titled "In service training programme". Resulting from a fruitful collaboration of MSWY, Department of Social Work, the University of Tirana and a number of NGOs led by TdH Albania, the main objective was to provide the Child Protection Workers and Child Welfare Professionals with a set of core skills and fundamental knowledge to ensure minimum service standards for child protective services. The course was provided for the first time in the academic year 2014-2015 to 30 child protection workers from around the country (MoSWY, 2015).

The course on child protection issues is only a first step on the long way to building and consolidating continuous education in social work in general and child protection in particular. The developments at policy level, including the reforming of social services and the regulation of social work professions provide a momentum that must be exploited to the maximum extent possible in this respect.

This literature review offers a comprehensive overview of the Albanian social service panorama and the education framework of the social service workforce; however, little could be learned from the literature review on how the issues of functionality, quantity and quality of social services and the respective workforce turnout in practice. This gap in literature is intended to be filled from the field research data and their analysis which are presented in the following sections of this report.

III. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to understand and provide a general baseline of the child protection practices and the social service workforce skills, knowledge, and interests in child protection in order for it to serve as a foundation for strategies and interventions aiming to improve overall child protection mechanisms and services in Albania. More specifically, findings from the study aim to:

- provide a basic overview of the education and training context in which child protection practices are delivered (i.e., systems in place for delivery of child protection services, related policies and frameworks, child protection education, and resource management);
- identify needs and opportunities for further professional development, training, and/or capacity building to strengthen the child protection workforce in the country.

In light of these issues, the extensive literature review of relevant documents is paired with primary data collected through qualitative research methods ensuring a deeper understanding of the system, as it functions in practice, and of the needs and opportunities for future developments, as envisioned by the relevant stakeholders and actors included in the study through a maximum variation sampling strategy.

Desk review – Relevant and accessible documents produced by governmental, non-governmental and academic bodies in the country were collected and reviewed to provide a solid base for the initial mapping exercise as well as for the development of the qualitative component. Consultations with key informants in the area helped in the identification of the recourses.

Field research – The fieldwork was conducted from June to September 2015. Originally planned for a shorter period the field work was extended due to implications following the local elections in the country (June 2015) and summer break of the academic institution (mid-July – August 2015).

To grasp the necessary depth and width of perspectives on the explored topic, a combination of qualitative data collection tools was employed;

semi-structured interviews, case stories and focus group discussions including a consensus-building exercise were applied to three main categories of respondents: a. practitioners (including students), b. educators, and c. managers. The sample, not a randomized or representative sample of the Albanian social services workforce, included a total of 62 respondents covering three main regions of the country: central (Tirana), north (Shkodra) and south (Vlora and Fier) Albania¹⁶. In addition, a combination of selection criteria was applied to ensure maximum variation of respondents and inputs for analysis.

Table 3.1 presents in a summarized way the matrix of the data collection tools, categories and numbers of respondents, criteria for selection, geographical areas covered, time and human resources involved in the data collection process.

Data analysis – All data collected through semi-structured interviews, focus-group discussions and case stories were transcribed and prepared for analysis by combining notes and audio-recorded materials. Ultimately the data were analysed thematically and used to understand more on the child protection system, processes, professionalism, challenges and interests. Two levels of coding were used. The first one was conducted using key words deriving from the themes of interest:

- Social service workers panorama
- Education and human resources management
- Skills, knowledge, and interests

In the second phase, the analysis was focused on exploring differences and communalities among the different categories of respondents such as between professional and nonprofessional social service workforce participants, different geographical and education backgrounds, state and non-state actors etc.

Ethics – Ethical considerations were addressed throughout the study process. Regular consultations were held between the researcher and the local Tdh Hub associate in Tirana. Each potential participant was contacted in advance via telephone or email and

¹⁶ Note: students come from various other regions.

Table 3.1. Sampling strategy matrix

Tools	Category of respondents	Main selection criteria	No. of units conducted	No. of participants per unit	Geographical coverage	Time-line	Human resources
Semi-structured Interview (SSI)	Educators	At least one SSI per each social work school in the country	4	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> University of Tirana (2 interviewees; one teaching also at University of Elbasan) University Luigj Girakuqi (Shkoder; 2) 	Jun. (2); Sep. (2)	Researcher
	Practitioners	Representing practice experiences from Tirana (the capital); one other urban area and one with experience covering rural and remote areas	4	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tirana (1) Vlora (2) (Note: one of interviewees in Vlore referrer to her experience with rural areas). Fier (1) 	May - June	Researcher
	Managers	At least one per each managerial level (central gov.; CRUs; NGO/CPU)	3	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tirana Vlore Tirana 	June	Researcher
	SSI Total			11			
Case Story	Practitioners	At least one per each per each category: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> professional social worker other education background CP worker NGO 	4	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> CPU (Tirana) CPU (Vlora) NGO (Tirana) 	June	Researcher
	CS Total			4			
Focus-group Discussions and CB Exercise	Edu. & managers	Educators (Universities and NGOs)	1	6	Tirana	June	Researcher and note keeper
		Multidisciplinary group	1	5	Tirana		
	Practitioners	Child Protection Units	1	5	Tirana	May	Researcher and note keeper
		NGOs and Child Protection Units	1	8	Elbasan		
	Students	Bachelor's level	1	8	Tirana	June	Researcher and note keeper
		Master's level	1	7	Tirana		
Professional Master's but with Bachelor's studies in Shkodra and Elbasan		1	8	Shkodra			
	FGD Total			47			

informed on the study being conducted and their potential role within it. In addition, at the beginning of each interview, focus-group discussion or case study interview, each participant was thoroughly informed and asked to voluntarily consent to take part in the research. A copy of the letter of the

informed consent can be found in the appendixes of this report. Among others, confidentiality was promised to all participants, thus details that might give away the identity of participants in the research are not included in the report.

IV. RESULTS

This section presents findings resulting from the qualitative analysis of the primary data. The core function of the analysis and the findings presented below are to serve as an inclusive baseline of the perceptions and understandings of who does what and how in terms of social work and child protections in the country; human resources-related issues of qualifications and organizational environment; social work education curriculum, research, policy and practice; and skills, knowledge and interests for future capacity building in the explored sector. These issues of interest serve also to break the presentation of the findings into sections aiming to add clarity to the report and make it reader-friendly.

Social service worker panorama: perceptions and understanding of social work and child protection in Albania

Perception and understanding of social work

Social work professions and social services have a relatively young history in Albania. This is coupled with several other factors to result in a general public that is not well informed and has limited understanding of social work professions and social service work. Opinions shared from social work practitioners, educators and managers, and students on the perceptions of the general public overlap, resulting in a common denominator rating the general public as understanding little of the social work and social services.

Among factors claimed to have contributed to the poor understanding of social work by the general public is the poor welfare system in the country. Because the “*Ndihma ekonomike*” (Economic Assistance) scheme has been for the post-communist era the core poverty reduction scheme and often the sole ‘service’ provided to families in need, it has reduced the concept of social service and social servant to the “*municipality employee that assigns ‘ndihma ekonomike’ to poor people*” (NGO, Manager, Tirana). This makes common people be more familiar with the notion of a social administrator rather than with that of a social worker.

By default, the variety of professions who have engaged and delivered social services in the country

is not clearly understood either. In fact, both social workers and psychologists complain that they still see little recognition of their professions and very little understanding of the different missions their professions represent. In particular, social workers see slower progress among the general public with regards to their profession.

“Generally they would say: ‘Oh, you’re a social worker, it is something similar to the psychologist, no?’” (Social work student, NGO Intern, Tirana)

In their rationale, participants in the study would also identify as a contributing factor to this situation the delayed entry and recognition of social work in the public social services workforce. Even though, in Albania, graduate social workers in the social work branch start earlier than in psychology (or other social sciences in the country), no exclusive attention was given to these graduates until very recently. Legal provisions clearly stating for certain working positions to be taken by social work graduates are only few years old (starting to be voiced with the social services reform of 2013). New social workers (with a few months of working experience) and students participating in this research share the feeling of being treated unfairly.

“How would one pretend that the general public is informed and understand social work when starting from here, within the walls of this faculty we’ve had professors from economic and law faculties pitting us for the wrong choice of profession we apparently had done by choosing to become social workers when there will never be enough job opportunities for us, even within state social services, as they are already well taken care by economists and lawyers”. (Social work student, Tirana)

Nonetheless, things seem to be moving slowly but in the right direction for social work recognition. This is confirmed by the more experienced social workers who have been witnessing and experiencing the developments unfolding in the last two decades. One of the first graduates of social work in the country describes it this way:

“I’m among the first generations of social workers in the county and I can tell the difference. When I

signed for the social work branch most people would have not a single clue and some would only wrongly guess it had to deal with 'social food', a concept remaining from the communist past. And now, it's almost 20 years that social workers are in the market and things have changed drastically." (Social Worker, International Organization)

Within the general public's perceptions and levels of understanding, there is variation across different subgroups, two of which are described by the participants as bordering the higher and lower levels of the range. The civil society community is associated with the higher levels of understanding and acceptance of social workers, and beneficiaries are identified as the least informed and sensitized ones.

Apparent reasons for this difference are that civil society organizations are not only on average better educated and more informed, but they also have been the first 'home' for social work graduates. CS has been the main medium where alternative, "modernized" social services have emerged after the '90s and have been the main employer of social work graduates (particularly in the 1st decade following the drastic changes). CSOs have been the early birds of openness to social work as several international CSOs branches brought with them their working culture and their social workers incorporated in their organizations to serve as role models, while also hiring more local social workers. Of particular impact was the historic event of the Kosovar refugee crisis back in 1998-1999, which saw the largest wave of local professional social workers being hired or volunteering granting to the newly established profession of social work more visibility.

On the other hand, beneficiaries are claimed to be on the other edge of the clarity of understanding spectrum. Reasons for their low level of understanding social work and social services include their average low level of education, lack of information, and vulnerability.

"Our beneficiaries come mainly from very vulnerable groups. They hardly know about office work, social services, or professionalism. Usually who comes to look for me or the service I offer at my workplace has no clue what the position I have is or what is my profession. When they come looking for help, they

have just one simple question: "Where is the lady that helps with x or y?" (CPU worker, South Albania)

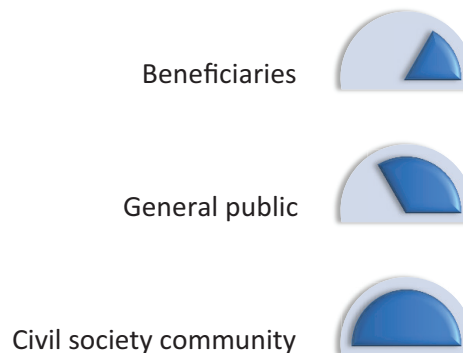


Fig. 4.1 Claimed levels of understanding social work profession in Albania

Even though, as visualized in Figure 4.1 the general public and especially beneficiaries have yet to boost their understanding of social work, the forecast for future development is an optimistic one. The new law No. 163/2014 on "Social Workers Order in the Republic of Albania" in force from December 2014¹⁷ is being followed with particular attention by social work practitioners and those aspiring to become social workers. They believe that the new regulations of the profession and its inclusion among other regulated professions such as medicine, pharmacy, dentistry, engineering etc. will add clarity, visibility and value to social work profession at the national level.

"I believe things are working on our side. The law regulating social workers will bring new developments for us. Even if that turns into a "dead" paper in the drawer of someone, the mere fact that the parliament discussed a whole session on TV, live broadcasting on several channels, on social workers role in the society and the importance of it being regulated was all worth." (Social Work Student, University of Shkodra)

Other factors that are also increasing social work visibility include the increasing numbers of social workers practicing their profession as well as becoming role models or important personalities in various sectors of public life in Albania. In the last decade, social workers have entered the Albanian parliament and have been part of government

¹⁷ For more details on the full law, see http://www.parliament.al/web/pub/ligj_nr_163_dt_4_12_2014_20659_1.pdf

cabinets as ministers. The accumulated experience of social work practice and the growing contribution in different sectors is also reaping positive results, pushing the boundaries of resistance to acceptance and making social work respected as equal among other professions. One participant provides the example of social work in schools to illustrate this effect.

"I recall when we first approached schools some good years ago. The teachers were so resistant. They would question everything: Why are you here? Why are you trying to take our jobs? We've been caring for children like from always and don't need social workers; aren't we social workers enough? But now, after years of assistance from social workers they have seen the worthiness of the profession. Now it is them who call us and ask for help when they are faced with issues that are not exclusively related to teaching and learning process." (Social worker, NGO)

Concepts of social work and social services are not the only ones that need to be better understood. Child protection is another key concept that we explored to see how it is understood and addressed by the general public and by professionals charged with tasks and responsibilities in ensuring child protection functions in Albania.

Perception and understanding of child protection

The child protection concept and services are new to the Albanian general public. The understanding of the concept is reported to be a narrow one entailing the intervention of state social services, police and health care personnel when a child is at risk - a threat resulting either from poverty or poor health, or from outside of the (extended) family. CPU workers and NGO social workers in this study reported to be often faced with resistance when the problem they identify is not in line with beneficiaries' expectations, such as violence, sexual exploitation, neglect etc.

This narrow understanding of child protection does not end with beneficiaries. The general, traditional mentality that a child is safe with his/her parents and that private life should not be interfered with by state services seems to shadow the work of social workers when collaborating also with other professions. While the concept of child protection was pretty clear among the practitioners involved in this research,

they reported inconsistency in the understanding of the concept among other personnel they had to work with while managing a case.

"I think child protection is about the protection of the right of the child to be safe from abuse, violence, exploitation, neglect and other practices that can put his/her development and future at risk. And every one of us would cite this to you by heart, but when it comes to practice we face difficulties even in having the same understanding on what a child is. Once I was managing the case of a 16 years old girl who was being sexually exploited. I needed the police to be on board in dealing with that case but what I got as a response from the police officer was insane. He told me: "Come on, leave her enjoy life. We can't blame anyone; can't ask people to have sex with an ID in their hand". (Social worker, NGO)

In addition to confirming the same problems, different NGOs, which have been supporting state mechanisms in the setup and building of personnel capacities, claim to have been working also to broaden the perception of social service workers. In their understanding and their actions they are working for child protection to focus also on more child-friendly mechanisms of reporting and referral, making the service more ethical, and dealing with issues of trust-building and confidentiality, which they argue are essential in a small country and small communities such as the ones in Albania.

The child protection system, on the other hand, is understood by educators, managers and practitioners as a set of coordinated actions, measurements and efforts of various actors/institutions to ensure prevention, protection and reintegration of children at risk. The shared perception of the clarity of the concept of child protection system (CPS) is not necessarily accompanied with clarity of the system setup and functionality as it is described under the following section on human resources management.

Human resources management: qualifications & organizational environment

Participants in this study list the following as the core structures and positions with direct responsibilities on child protection:

- a.) Child Protection Units (CPUs) at the local government;
- b.) The gender focal points/ coordinators for domestic violence, also at the local level;
- c.) The social workers at shelters/residential care/ civil society daily centres.

Their main role and responsibility is defined to be one that includes conducting the identification, assessment, and coordination of interventions based on an action plan that involves the child and the family. The next most important professionals are considered to be the police officers for minors, present at each police station; they are responsible for identification, interviewing, intervention and prevention of abuse, also in close collaboration with other professionals. Of a similar role are psychologists/ social workers, which are part of public health directorates at regional level, dealing with identification, assessment, intervention and coordination with other professionals.

While these positions are settled and are currently being consolidated, issues of incompatibility and unsustainability of the personnel persist. In particular, positions tailored for professional social workers are often taken by other professions. Although national data are missing for a clear picture of who does what, and there is variation from one region to another, none of the regions are excluded from this phenomenon. Starting with Tirana, where regardless of the legal provision of the Law no.10347, date 4.11.2010 on the "Protection of Child's Rights" article 39 requiring at least one professional social worker per each child protection unit to be established, this mandatory requirement is met only in 2 out of 11 CPUs in Tirana (as for June 2015).

"Well, there are provisions and more social workers are being included in the system however we remain a minority even within child protection service; look at the CPUs of Tirana, out of 11 only two are social workers by profession. What would you expect the situation to be in other CPUs across the country?" (CPU Social Worker, Tirana).

It is only in NGOs where most of the staff involved in offering social services is either social workers or psychologists. Participants see the lack of appropriate education and skills as a huge cost that

the still fragile and growing image of social workers has to pay.

"It's very positive that more room is being given to social work but if this is not taken by social workers there are little chances that the performance will be good and contribute to a better image and reputation of the profession" (Educator, Tirana)

Furthermore, not only are most of CPU personnel not appropriately qualified, but the monitoring and supervision mechanisms also do not function well¹⁸. In focus group discussions, professional social workers and other social service staff (mainly lawyers and economists) would argue about monitoring mechanisms existence and functioning; however, they all would agree that there is a total absence of professional supervision. One social worker strongly pointed out that an immense need that is not at all talked about is professional social work supervision; it was an unknown concept for the rest of other professionals working in child protection.

All CPU social workers would agree on another common limitation of their work: bringing together and coordinating with other actors, which by law are required to be part of the ad hoc multidisciplinary groups coordinated by the CPU social worker.

"The law charges us with the task of setting and coordinating the multidisciplinary group to address cases of children at risk but we feel powerless. There is no mechanism forcing the different actors to sit together when we need them and this takes so much time and energy from our daily work." (CPU worker, Tirana)

Among the actors required to collaborate, participants distinguish the police as more responsive and the schools and education directorates as the least responsive ones. They find it difficult to find sound reasons on this variation of responsiveness and responsibility among different partner institutions. However, some conclude that this might also be depending on the individual persona and their willingness to take their work seriously.

¹⁸ There exist a set of standards to be met and monitored in the activity of state social services which include also the category of children. However, these set of standards refers in particular to the children in residential institutions. (See State Social Services site at <http://www.sherbimisocial.gov.al/standardet-per-sherbimet-shoqerore/>).

"Working with the education institutions is a nightmare. They rarely show up in our multidisciplinary groups. Even when they do they just sit there and say nothing. I still don't know what is this refusal or just incapability to contribute." (Social worker, Vlore)

Most social workers use their own networks to make work go more smoothly. But this, too, is an unsustainable strategy. The high turnover rates of staff in state institutions do not permit the building and nurturing of relations across different actors. Moreover, this negatively impacts the level of knowledge, awareness and readiness for responsiveness from the personnel of other institutions.

"Employment in social services is used as a carrot for political parties' militants when their party takes office. This leads to inconsistent staffs and low capacities in service. Once I spend so much time working with the police officer for minors in my district. When I finally got him to have a better understanding of his role and commit to contribute, he was moved to some other police unit. I had to start all over again with the new officer but this destroyed my work in managing the case." (NGO social worker, Tirana)

Last but not least, delivering social services at large, and child protection services in particular, is hindered by the limited resources and poor infrastructure. Several CPU workers reported not having a proper workplace, sharing an office with other programmes such as "Ndihma ekonomike", not having computer or internet access and having to pay from their own personal income transportation and field work costs.

"We work in extremely difficult conditions. I share office with ndihma ekonomike officer. For at least 10 days of the month I have no room even to stand in my office as it is overwhelmed by people filing for the assistance. Let alone that I don't have a proper work desk, no computer, I use my personal one, and no shelves for the files. Luckily I own a car and the back of my car is turned into my archive. This is not effective and even not professional. When the office is busy I have no other choice but meeting clients outside in hot and cold days. This looks very unprofessional too!" (CPU, Tirana)

While for Tirana CPUs it is the flourishing NGO sector in the capital that has been covering for many of the shortcomings resulting from the poor infrastructure and limited resources, the situation outside Tirana is even worse.

"Here in Vloja I have to cover cases from rural areas too. But I have no means of transportation. Sometimes I take a taxi but I cannot afford it all the time. Most of the cases I have to postpone and wait for one of the organizations in Tirana to have a field visit here so I can make use of their resources." (Social worker, Vloja)

The operational difficulties are on top of the low financial incentives that child protection workers receive. It is reported that their monthly salary is only slightly higher than that of maintenance staff of their respective institutions. The combination of both mean the position is seen as temporary, particularly for lawyers and economists that report that they are doing this job because of difficulties in finding a job in their own professions and are looking continuously to change careers at the first opportunity.

Education: curriculum, research, policy, practice

Curriculum

Professional social workers are formally trained in the three state universities that offer a variety of bachelor's and master's programmes of both professional and scientific levels (more details of the programmes are provided under the literature review section of this report). However, as underlined when discussing issues of human resources in social services in the preceding section, qualified social workers, although rapidly increasing in numbers within the social service system, remain a minority as compared to nonprofessional ones. The professional or non-professional social workers, once within the system, are often subject to continuous education and capacity building activities organized by the state institution in collaboration with universities and NGOs. However, the only formal one to date is the course on Child Protection Issues, a programme developed by MoSWY, University of Tirana and a group of NGOs (including Terre des hommes, World Vision Albania, Save the Children, and UNICEF).

Participants in this research were asked to share their experiences and perceptions on the curriculum of these educational opportunities for social workers in Albania.

First generations of social work graduates pointed out at the very solid curricula “imported from the US” that they were offered. They rated the first social work curriculum as comprehensive and reflecting the best of the state of art in their discipline. However, this came as a full package with limitations due to few literature sources in local language and illustrations and examples that did not resonate with the local environment. With the passing years the body of social work literature has been growing, but issues of distance between theory and Albanian context is reported to persist.

“When I signed two years ago for one of the master’s programmes I was hoping to find answers to dilemmas I had often faced in my practice as social worker in Albania. But I was disappointed to see that not much had changed from my bachelor’s days. Still examples referring to the US or the UK and a lot of repetition of the theoretical frameworks and concepts which are included in every course I’ve ever attended. What was more interesting was that the course was taught by someone who never practiced a single day”. (NGO social worker, master’s programme student)

Yet the social work curricula seem to top the list of other professions regarding the thoroughness of knowledge, skills and capacities it builds in its graduates. Our respondents argue that with all its limitations, social work programmes still equip social work students with the best set of knowledge and skills to deal with social services and child protection issues.

“I work with colleagues from different disciplines and even psychologists that come closest to our education background would often ‘envy’ us for the more skilful and practical preparation we have before starting work”. (NGO social worker, Tirana)

This difference can be noticed when professional and nonprofessional social workers serving as child protection specialists manage their cases. A case story tool was used to better understand how practicing social workers were using their training and education in real life examples and Case story

1 and Case story 2 present two different practicing experiences.

Focus-group discussions with social work students contributed to a better understanding of the differences in curricula across social sciences but also within social work discipline. Bachelor’s programmes in Shkoder and Elbasan were both preceded by the one in Tirana. As a result, Tirana’s social work bachelor’s programme has served as good bases for them, too; however, students point out some of the core differences they have perceived while doing bachelor’s degrees in one and master’s studies in another university.

“In Shkodra, we had a solid curriculum too but it was mostly psychology. There is a heavy influence of psychology unit in social work. I don’t know the reasons and dynamics but this was the outcome” (MA Student, Ba in Shkoder and Ma in Tirana)

Similarly, the programme in Elbasan is also influenced more by psychology and education sciences scholars.

In terms of content of the curriculum, as regards to child rights and child protection issues, the interviewees are able to identify and list a series of courses with a focus on children and social work practice within them including “Social environment and human behaviour” “Social work skills” “Social work with children and families” “Social work in schools” “Social policy” etc. Nevertheless, their perceptions on the centrality of child issues and wellbeing is that, although defined in several of the courses, children’s issues are handled with a philosophy that sees the child as part of the family, and very little attention is exclusively dedicated to children per se. While this prepares social work students to be ready to work with children as part of a system, starting with the family, it does not come handy to them when they are faced with child protection cases where the family is the problem.

Research

A common perception among participants in this research was that they lacked important research knowledge and skills for social scientists in general and social worker in particular, including those working with and for children. Referring to their education experiences they reported not being

Case Story #1. Nonprofessional social worker child protection practicing experience

She is the child protection unit (CPU) specialist in one of the districts of Tirana (although local government structures are currently under reformation). She is in her 50s and won't share much of her demographic or education information and refuses to be recorded explaining that she has been in this duty for a few months and would not like to risk her employment in any way (meaning that *"the recording might be used in some way against me if by any chance it would fall in the hands of someone looking for reasons to replace me with some kind of militant; notes are ok, I can trust you taking notes only."*). She generalizes by stating she is new to the social work practice as she is an economist by profession. However, being thoroughly informed on the purpose of the study and the case story tool she underlines *"but even though I'm not a social worker by profession, I'm a social worker by heart and practice."*

She chooses to take me through a case she says has been identified in one of her field "inspections". *"It's when I go out of office that I identify cases. That was the case also with the one I'm going to describe."* The case referred to a mother and her 9 children spending much of their time in the garbage bins close to the area where her office is situated. *"Although the guidelines on street children situations were not yet issues at the time, I decided to deal with this family as I believed the children were in a situation of being*

street children." After contacting the mother immediately at the place where they were looking for things to recycle, she learned about their difficult housing conditions and family income and decided to conduct a visit to their shack. She claims the decision to conduct a field visit was for them *"not to fool"* her by pretending to be worse than they actually were. Upon verification she decided that the family was in need and that the children needed protection. The multidisciplinary group was called to gather, discuss and agree on an intervention plan.

The multidisciplinary group meeting decided to have another family visit and establish specific tasks for each institution, which she has difficulties remembering specifically. The following steps and decisions she took in managing the case and implementing the intervention plan are often shaped by prejudice. *"I followed their case closely. They had an alcoholic father that could not provide anything so we signed the family for ndihma ekonomike. I asked the mother to bring at least one child when picking the aid every month so I could check on how the children were doing. That was a kind of monitoring because I could judge by their looks that they were doing better, they were clean and better dressed and fed."*

In further exploring the situation with specific question on the 9 children, she admits to not have dealt with the specific needs of each of them. *"I didn't do any individual assessment for each child. There were boys and girls. The boys were made possible to return to school, while the girls they preferred to keep them*

home. They wanted to stay home, and they seemed to be ok with that."

Referring to the issue of potential violence in the household, she is contradictory in her statements. She believed that there was no chance for the father to be violent with the children as *"he was so weak and powerless one would wonder if the kids were his own at all."* However, concluding the case she admits to have seen signs of physical violence on their mother. *"Now I don't have any information. They moved to Shkodra. Probably they might be exploited there, I need to check with the office in Shkodra one day..."*

Asked why she has not done that yet although there are months when she has not seen the mother coming to collect ndihma ekonomike, she mentions the lack of a proper working station and resources as strong limitations *"you are right to ask me that question, but it is difficult to follow on everything; what can one do with no proper office and working station, no pc, no internet, no budget for travel..."*

Regardless of her doubt on what might be happening now with that family and their children, she considers this a successful case for as long as she had managed it, as *"the purpose was met to remove the kids from the street"*.

She finds it difficult to relate her education to the case and underlines that communication is the key and that several trainings have helped her strengthen the necessary capacities and skills to serve well as a child protection worker.

completely confident about research knowledge and skills due to a set of factors.

First, not all social work programmes in the country put enough emphasis on research methods and research outputs. While bachelor's students of the social work department at the University of Tirana are exposed to methods of social research early on and

later revisit research methods, both quantitative and qualitative methods, in all other levels of study (such as master's programmes), students who graduated from other social work schools in the country report having been exposed to only introductory courses on methods.

Case story #2. Professional social worker - NGO child protection practicing

This case story is narrated by a professional social worker working for an NGO in Tirana. She is 29 and has completed both bachelor's and master's studies in social work. She has several years of practice and takes a while to decide which case to share with me. She finally decides to take me through a case she managed that she considered "difficult".

"This is the case of a runaway teenager who had been a victim of sexual abuse by her cousin - a fact she explained her mother would refuse to believe not wanting to ruin the "good" relations with her brother, the father of the abuser. Both families were living close to each other and the mother counted a lot on the financial and moral support of her brother while her own husband, the father of the victim was in emigration."

The social worker recalls and organizes the telling of the story by phases. She clearly states all the steps taken and when asked for the rationale and what has shaped the decision-making processes, she combines her education, experience and circumstance constraints.

Phase 1 - Case referral

A call from police was made to the NGO I work for. Although it was the middle of the night, I went to assist the police as they did not have any specialized staff to interview minors, especially victims of trafficking, sexual abuse etc. The case was filed and my NGO was asked to shelter her until a plan was developed. Based on the story she shared, it was decided that turning home where she had been a victim of a sexual abuse and from where she run away was not a safe place.

Phase II - Case evaluation

In the centre - when in the centre of the NGO I work for, I decided to start immediately with the case evaluation. That was a difficult mission as the girl did not trust

anyway and would deny of being vulnerable to exploitation by strangers while on the run. Building trust was the first thing I focused on. In the meantime, I tried to explain her the risks and how it was possible that at that age and running away from the family, a child could easily fall victim of trafficking or abuse.

Reiterating that we were all there to help her guided by her best interest, I underlined that she was the one to decide if she thought that turning back to the family was the best option. She decided to confront the parent and make them report the case, otherwise would not turn back to her family.

Phase III - Confronting the parent

Following the case evaluation and her decision to confront the family, a visit in the family was organized the following morning. Confronting her parents (her father had returned from Greece upon her runaway) and asking them to report, she disclosed other information that her cousin had not only abused her, but had tried to do the same with her little brother. That was the turning point according to her, when she decided this could not be taken any more and run away.

Phase IV: Reporting the abuse

The family agreed and was assisted to put on charges against the abuser. Medical examinations took place following the reporting and confirming the abuse had happened.

Phase V: Reunite with the family

After the confirmation of the abuse and the reporting of the abuser she reconciled with the parents and decided to go back home.

Phase VI: Follow-up

From that time she ran away several other times and similar procedures were followed but the police was no more cooperating. They said they won't be dealing with her all the time. Nonetheless, my NGO's and my efforts continued until she was placed in a shelter for women at risk of trafficking and domestic violence.

There the case was taken over by the social worker of the shelter. I kept being informed and learned that her relation with the family was not stable due to the fact (that probably under pressure) they had withdrawn the charges on the abusive cousin. Going back and forth from the shelter to the family she had fallen in love with a young man from the neighbourhood. Last time I met her she came to our offices to thank me for the support I had given to her and to show me that she now was doing well and was expecting a baby.

Reflecting on the case the social worker is not happy with how it all went. *"She never got back to school and got married at an early age. Although I'm happy for her expecting a baby, I think with a better coordination of all actors she could have had a second chance with schooling and a healthier relation with the family. The police failed to deal with her case whenever it was needed, the judiciary failed letting the parents withdraw the charges although the medical report confirmed the abuse, the parents failed her not trusting her story and not supporting her... Could I have done more? Maybe, but at the time, I used all the knowledge, skills and resources I could. Sometimes I just wished to have been a lawyer and a police too...just a wish"*

The whole process she had followed and the decisions taken were based on the knowledge and skills she had collected in her social work studies among which she mentions:

- Interviewing
- Social work practice with families and children
- Case studies
- Ethics in social work

In practicing her social work knowledge and skills she finds that all could be improved by more professional supervision. Supervision is missing or is very rare. In addition, legislative knowledge is another weak point.

Regardless of the advantage in Tirana's social work school programme that students and graduates report, the differences between programmes become narrower when referring to skills and ability to design and conduct research. In all cases, a larger emphasis on the practical component of research need to be strengthened across all social work programmes.

"We can't complain when it comes to research. It has been a core component of our curricula; however, I can't say I'm confident enough as we did not have much chance to practice. At the time, and I think the situation has not changed much, there were no computer labs and no programmes of data analysis. All in all, there was an assignment that most of us were not that good at." (Social worker, Tirana)

On another dimension, research output, particularly locally produced ones, are only sporadically included in the teaching process. Respondents explain that this is a result of the combination of a not so proactive role of the teaching staff to explore and provide examples from Albania, the relatively small amount of research outputs that are produced and accessible, as well as the poor scientific quality of most of them. This is what an educator's attitude with regards to local research looks like:

"Yes, I try to refer to local literature and research as much as possible but sound scientific research is not that common among Albanian authors. Particularly when it comes to issues of child rights, child wellbeing and child protection, most local reports (usually produced by NGOs) are action research, some with very small methods chapter that little can be understood and replicated or with serious ethical issues. This is not to say they are not worth, on the contrary, thanks god for NGOs that have narrowed the gap of local research but when it comes to the subjects I teach methods are core, I need good samples to present students with. I make them read peer reviewed research. I once tried to engage them in reviewing pieces form Albanian authors. Did not really work as they started to focus on the author and once a student told me "how dare you criticize the work of X he is a distinguished professor!" (Educator, Tirana)

On the other hand, managers and policymakers point to the growing body of 'local' research which

needs to find more consideration in the social work teaching in the country. What is intended is that there be more references to local research outputs so that what is learned at school is closer to the reality graduates will, sooner or later, face when employed.

"Research is very important and more should be done to have it included not only in bachelor's and master's programmes but also in the set of trainings provided to the social services workforce. In particular for those involved with evaluation, it is a must." (Educator and manager, Tirana)

This analysis is relevant for social work graduates. Considering that social services are often offered by non-social workers, there is an enormous need to train the existing workforce with programmes that have a balance of theory, skills and practice. This is valid not only for state social service providers but also for NGOs and social businesses (which are only recently starting to exist).

"I think research knowledge and skills are becoming more important by the day. Even in our work we have to prove we're being efficient, we need evidences to claim more support in one or another direction. Funds of donors are shrinking and we need more sound and reliable evidence to claim funds in support of our services." (NGO social worker and manager, Tirana)

Policy

Individuals working in child protection learn about relevant policies and legislation in three main ways. One is exclusive to those with a background in social sciences and particularly social work as part of their curricula. The other two ways are related to the workplace. Trainings and other capacity building activities, such as seminars and workshops, along with informative documents circulating (though official gazettes, orders of ministers etc.) on new pieces of passed legislation or drafted policies intend to keep them informed. However, it cannot be said if this intention is realized.

Focusing on curricula and education, social policy and legislation is reported to take up an important space in all social work programmes. Within the social work curricula, future graduates learn about social policy as a discipline and a process; they are familiarized

with legislative frameworks at the national and international level. Parts of these policies are also on issues related to children. Social workers learn about up-to-date policies addressing child wellbeing and are familiarized with child rights and child protection legal framework. Yet, there is room for improvement even when it comes to policy within the social work curricula. Students and alumni agree that although policy and legislation occupied much of their programme, most of the knowledge gained was only temporary. Skills on where and how to look for new policies and legislations were not gained.

"In our programme we had several social policy and legislation courses and learned about different policies and pieces of legislation that concerned children too. I can recall we learned about different conventions on child rights and child protection, different codes, strategies and policies but the information was relevant for that time. Now many things have changed and what I learned by heart at the time serves me nothing for the work I'm doing now." (Social worker, Fier)

In addition, from the perspective of educators and managers, the depth and width with which child policy and legislation is dealt in any social work bachelor's programme is sufficient as a basis for a generalist social worker but not satisfactory for social workers planning to engage in child protection services. Several of them would recommend further and specialized studies to prepare them for practice.

Practice

Core skills and competencies for child protection practices are exclusively taught in social work programmes. They range from interviewing skills (including active listening, being empathic etc.) to basic counselling skills, case assessment, evaluation and management skills, skills and competences in working with families and children and so on. Theory is often combined with in-class practicing activities such as role-plays. However, practice and practicum hours are essential to enable social work graduates to properly practice the learned skills and competences.

For educators the main problem concerning practice is its length. For them, the new three-year bachelor's programme significantly reduced the amount

of practice that students do before graduating as preparation for employment. For social work student and graduates, the amount of practice is less problematic than its quality. They claim to be faced with a series of issues concerning practice which include:

a.) Difficulties in identifying and settling with one social service provider (state institution, NGO or other).

"Very often we look for a placement ourselves. You need to know people, have connections so you can find a place where you can at least see some practice going on, let alone practice ourselves" (student)

b.) Lack of (good) supervision. A student claimed to be neglected during their field placement by both the university supervisor and placement mentor. Lack of professional supervision persists also upon graduation, when in employment, as pointed out also under issues related to human resources earlier in this report.

"It's pretty formal. None of them cares; the university supervisor just looks at our papers and reports and gives us a grade, while the mentors at the respective institution, having no financial incentives look at us as a burden. In addition, particularly in state institution, they are often non-professional social workers and see us as a threat. They try to avoid us by playing the good and saying we don't need to show up every day or stay all the foreseen hours there." (Student, Tirana)

c.) Poor institutional coordination. There is no mechanism to regulate institutional relations between universities and social service providers. As a result, practice is based on sporadic bilateral agreements that have to be negotiated every year. However, both educators and managers are hopeful that with the new legal developments and social work becoming a regulated profession, practice will be soon better regulated. Educators also confirm that they are currently working on increasing the practice workload within the social work programme at the University of Tirana.

d.) Narrow spectrum of practice. Even when everything about practice runs smoothly, it is a problem that it is only partially benefiting the

skills and competencies of a future generalist social worker. Being placed with only one or two social service providers, students often get to know the work practice with only one category of beneficiaries, which would not necessarily match their future employment. This makes most of them rely on a “learning by going” approach and on sporadic continuous education opportunities that might emerge once employed.

Continues education is praised for helping to bridge the gap between the education background of the workforce and the knowledge and skills needed for good social work and child protection services. Case story number 3 shared from a NGO social worker only partially educated in social work, with a first profession other from social work, helps explain how her practicing has improved because of continuous education opportunities such as master’s degrees courses and trainings.

Skills, knowledge, and interests on child protection practice

In Albania, children have not been targeted as a separate category of social service for years. The welfare system in post-communist Albania was based on a model whose main unit of reference was the family and not the individual (Tomes, 1997). With the advocacy of children CSOs, attention has been growing which would probably lead to more interest also in education around child protection issues. In addition, further education, particularly master’s studies, has become a must for the Albanian context following the Bologna process. Entry into the labour market by an individual in any profession, including that of social work, is conditioned by the completion of the full 3+2 Bologna scheme. This has led to an overall increased demand for further studies and qualifications. Regardless of the growing opportunities and access to further qualifications, consolidated practice, experience and expertise in child protection are yet to be built and accumulated to properly serve and meet child protection practice requirements for knowledge and skills. Conducting consensus-building exercises with the focus-groups in this study, a list of needs and interests for further capacity development is identified and listed according to the consensual priorities participants gave to them.

These priorities could serve the updating of the university curricula, the consolidation of the specialized course on child protection as well as guide continuous education future initiatives in the area. A widely shared concern about these priorities was that they need to be addressed with caution, keeping in mind that each programme that would be designed needs to conduct a specific needs assessment related to the targeted beneficiaries of the activity.

“We’ve received endless trainings, but what has been missing is a good planning to match the offer with the needs. I really hope for this to change in the future. I don’t need for each training to start from scratch, definition and forms of violence. I have other needs, but no one has asked me before tailoring the programme. The education plan should meet my career development” (CPU social worker, Tirana)

List of priority training needs:

1. Social work skills in general and social work skills in working with children in particular.
2. Solid knowledge of child protection policy and legal framework.
3. Research methods (skills on designing and conducting research)
4. Methods of evaluation
5. Organizational and managerial skills
6. Social work supervision and mechanisms against professional burnout.
7. Skills to work in team and multi-disciplinary groups.
8. Use of technology in delivering child protection services.
9. Advocacy
10. Conflict resolution and negotiation skills

Case story #3. NGO Social worker – partially educated in social work

In the below case story, a Tirana NGO social worker (partially educated in social work – only master's level studies) explains how she managed a recent child protection case and how her decision-making processes were linked and shaped by her initial and her on-going training.

Talking the interviewer through a case she recently managed, she tells the case of a family with two young children whom she refers to as “a well known case among social services”. The case was referred to the NGO she works for by the CPU unit of Tirana's district where the family lives in a shelter of poor conditions. She recalls to have first been presented to the case “as a problematic case that has moved around”. This introductory information alerted her to expect a very complicated case. However, aware of her tasks and responsibilities she decided that the first thing to do was a preliminary assessment of the case to conclude if children were at risk and if intervention was needed. “The case was well known but I had to do a preliminary assessment as the protocol for child protection requires”. The preliminary assessment concluded that the children of this specific case were at risk of abuse and neglect. She briefly summarizes the case as the story of “A father that is 78 years old, with mental health issues, doing heavy work to provide extremely little for a family of four; his wife – much younger than him but also with mental health problems, and the two daughters of 8 and 2. Because of the economic and health status of the

parents the two children were often subjects of neglect and abuse by the respective parents and strangers”.

She further explains that the case had a prior history of being reported but not addressed successfully. Prior to arriving at her organization, the case had been addressed and the mother and children were offered shelter in a battered women's shelter. The reason was that the mother had been a victim of sexual abuse, gang raped by 10 teenagers of the neighbourhood. Following the rape, the mother had suffered post-traumatic stress and experienced mental health problems leading to the neglect and abuse of the two daughters. Because of this neglect and the mental health of both parents, the older girl had fallen victim to sexual abuse by strangers. “I found this information during the assessment process. The social worker, who first encountered the case and then referred it to us, had interviewed the older child. During the interview she had admitted to have been sexually molested by a stranger, around 60 years old. He had approached her and had asked to touch her private parts in exchange of food”.

When asked to show how she then managed the case, she lists steps taken by her or other professionals involved with the case.

“First, a social worker of an organization that is located in the area where the family lives was asked to conduct a family visit as a fact confirming mission regarding the issues of neglect and abuse from parents. Then, the social worker and his/her line manager discussed and called me to consult on the decision to

be taken. Both they and I (on behalf of the organization) decided to refer the case back to the CPU of that district because only the CPU can call for the meeting of the multidisciplinary group to address the case thoroughly. In fact, the preliminary assessment and the visits were to assist the CPU social worker. She asks for our assistance in assessing the cases as her capacities are limited; she is an economist if I'm not mistaken.”

The CPU social worker was moved there only recently after her previous post was cut due to restructuring. She also agreed that the children were at high risk, and within the same day, the decision to call for the meeting of the multidisciplinary team was taken. “In the multidisciplinary meeting where we all took part, everything was discussed once more for the rest of the groups to be informed and the relevant institutions to act upon.”

Reflecting on her education and training she finds more relevance of the knowledge and practical skills she had gained from trainings she had attended on sexual abuse of children and interviewing. “The assessment of the case, its evaluation and the decision-making process was based on what I have learned from training and also in my practice of more than 8 years. There I have learned all the necessary steps to be taken to address such a case. In addition, a training I attended on interviewing by FBI particularly helped me with the interviewing skills assessment, child friendly interventions, child's best interest, participatory approach and decision-making in team.”



Participants were asked to also share their opinions on the ways of learning they considered more efficient and productive to them. Particular attention was paid to exploring their attitudes on the use of technology and online learning. For the vast majority of the respondents, traditional, in-class, learning methods were more popular and user-friendly to them. Although technology is widely spread among youth (particularly students), most of them were familiar only with social media, such as Facebook and Instagram, and found it difficult to picture online learning processes.

The financial costs of bachelor's students in Albania continue to be covered by parents. Master's students are found often to be working to match the financial aid their families provide. However, both categories were reluctant to support the idea of paid online learning. The readiness was low also among practitioners. In their view, online learning, and certificates and diplomas retain no good reputation. If paid, they would expect for the education programme to be a face-to-face and intensive learning process, criteria they believed were not met by online learning opportunities.

V. CONCLUSIONS

This study presents a general baseline of the child protection practices and the social service workforce skills, knowledge, and interests in child protection in Albania. This final chapter draws conclusions and offers recommendations around the three main issues addressed in this study: the social services and child protection system in the county, the social service workforce and social education related issues, and interests and potentials for future developments in the area.

The various data sources taken into consideration in this study portray several strengths and challenges with social services provision, child protection and the related workforce. The existence of a state social services system and the child protection services within it, an extended civil society sector offering alternative social services and showing openness, "hosting" and strengthening the profession of social workers in the country, as well as consolidated schools of social work across the country are all good premises for solid foundations on which child protection services can further develop and consolidate.

Against these strengths a series of problems and challenges are identified from the findings of this study and presented below followed by recommendation on how to best address and turn them into additional strengths for a better functioning social service, child protection services, and an adequately qualified workforce.

Social services, child protection and the related workforce

The functioning of the social services and child protection services in Albania is challenged by issues of professionalism, poor coordination among relevant actors and limited resources and capacities in the support of the workforce delivering the respective services. Regardless of legal provisions, the social services work force, including child protection services, continues to be dominated by non-professional social workers in a context where there is no shortage of such human resources in the market. This is often combined with poor coordination and responsiveness from other actors with statutory duties to contribute in the

management of child protection cases. Capacities built within the social services system or among other actors, as well as the networks established among them, are difficult to sustain due to high turnover rates of employees. Added to the list of constraints to a functioning system are the issues of a lack or limitation in resources (human and infrastructural ones) and the poor incentives (including financial ones) for the existing workforce.

Recommendations:

In addressing these challenges, the work needs to start by respecting and implementing the legal framework. New mechanisms need to be developed to ensure that the system employs the most relevant and qualified workforce as well as empowers them to effectively coordinate with other relevant actors.

On the other hand, the legal framework needs to be enriched with further specifications of responsibilities and duties of other actors, particularly of those required to participate and contribute in the multidisciplinary working groups on child protection case management.

Finally, even when all is settled with the legal framework and mechanisms, not much could be expected in a context with a lack of resources and incentives. Social services workforce, including child protection workers must be equipped with the necessary physical infrastructure and recourses as well as incentivized and motivated at the work place with decent salaries, long-term contracts and other financial and nonfinancial incentives, thus far missing.

Social work education and social workforce needs.

Social work education has been growing fast in Albania with three schools of social work at the university level offering all three levels of studies. As these opportunities have developed, several problems and challenges have also grown. Particularly in relation to social work practice and child protection issues, there are several weaknesses that social work education reflects in how it occurs in practice. Overall there

is a poor connection between academia and social work practice and there is not enough exchange between academic staff and practice specialist to feed the curricula with context relevant evidence and cases. On the other hand, social work supervision knowledge and skills are weak, and professional supervision is not yet introduced in social work practice. Finally, pre-graduation practice is limited in time and in the diversity of experiences, target-groups and skills to which students are exposed.

Recommendations:

- # Social work education human capacities and social work practitioners should intensify their exchange of knowledge and skills through common research projects, designing curricula and lectures and social work practice placement activities.
- # Social work practice placement should be revised with the intention of boosting not only the load but especially the quality of practice students will conduct. This might include a revision of the relation between universities and institutions/ agencies offering placement opportunities, a revision and clarification of the monitoring, supervision and evaluation of the practice and the skills gained, as well as a common agenda between the two sets of actors in identifying and planning practice placement so that it matches the needs and opportunities of all groups of interest.
- # Social work professional supervision should become part of social work practice in Albania too. This will impact the professionalism of the existing workforce and will create more job opportunities and a more enabling environment for quality social work practice for social work students.

• **Interests and potentials for future developments**

Data from all sources confirm strong interest and potential for the consolidation and further development of social services, child protection

services and social work in the country. The identified interest and potentials are underlined in this last section as recommendations to be taken by relevant actors.

Recommendations:

- # The relation between career development prospects of the workforce and the capacity building opportunities needs to be strengthened so that capacities built through continuous education activities are not only currently relevant to the workplace and its practice but also will endure over time.
- # Initiatives from state institution, academia and/ or NGOs to identify development interest and design projects to further build capacities among social service workforce need to better coordinate and avoid repetition and overlapping as well as ensure equal opportunities for participants from all over the country. To this purpose, a database of records of the workforce education and continuous education could help to keep track as well as provide evidence to inform future planning in the area. The identified and prioritized areas of interest as listed in the findings of this study can serve as a good basis to guide the planning process in this respect.
- # Last, but not least, learning preferences and opportunities of the workforce need to be considered when designing and delivering capacity building activities. Innovative methods need preparatory work to be understood, accepted and efficiently used by beneficiaries. Given the financial limitations among student and social work professionals, costs for continuous education should be kept low for better levels of access and equal opportunities. Exchange visits, working groups and case studies are among the most appreciated learning tools that students and practitioners of social work in Albania would like to be more intensively coming their way.

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VII. APPENDICES

1. Informed consent form

Informed Consent

Introduction and Study Purpose

My name is [name]. I am working on behalf of the Child Protection Hub (www.childhub.org), a multi-partner regional initiative to support child protection professionals across Southeast Europe. I am part of a team who is mapping social service workforce needs in eight countries in southeast Europe: Albania, Bosnia in Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, Moldova, Romania, and Serbia. The study is supported by the EU, the Oak Foundation, and the Austrian Development Cooperation. The research will provide us with valuable information regarding a general overview of professional, paraprofessional, and community-level child protection practice in the region, as well as the social service workforce skills, knowledge and interests in order to strengthen the child protection workforce and improve the overall child protection mechanisms.

Material Benefits

The study findings will directly inform the Child Protection Hub overall strategy to support the strengthening of child protection systems in the region. There are no direct material benefits to individuals participating in the research.

Types of Questions

I will ask you questions about child protection practice in [country], specifically addressing how individuals who practice child protection are initially trained and how they continue to learn while practicing.

Skipping Questions or Ending Participation

You can decide not to participate in the interview, or you can tell me that you prefer not to answer a specific question, and I will skip the question. There is no need to answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable. If you like, you can end the interview at any time and this will not affect your relationship with the Child Protection Hub or the project funders.

Confidentiality

All of your answers will be kept private and confidential, and the only people who will have access to this information are the researchers for the study. When we write up the results of the study, we will not connect your name to anything that you said.

Contact

If you have any questions about the research, or if problems arise, you may contact: [please insert the contact name and details (telephone, email) of each country associate]

Are you willing to participate in this study? **Yes / No**

If **no**, explain why: _____

If **yes**, the interviewer should sign below and continue with the interview.

I confirm that I have given all the above information to the participant, and s/he has agreed to participate.

Researcher's Signature: _____

Date: _____

2. Semi-structured interview guide

Semi-Structured Individual Interview Guide: Academics & Managers

Informed Consent

Review informed consent form (pages 5-6), then proceed with the interview.

Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research. I am very interested to hear your opinion about the social service workforce and how it relates to child protection in [country].

Demographics

Review demographics questions (page 7), then proceed.

General

- What does the general public think about social work in [country]? What does civil society think about social work in [country]? What do beneficiaries think about social work in [country]?
- Tell me about your understanding of child protection in [country].
- Who does child protection in [country]?
- What are the official names and roles of the different kinds of child protection practitioners (e.g., social service workers, social workers, paraprofessionals, community workers, etc.)?
- In what kinds of agencies do they work (e.g., NGO, government agencies, etc.)?
- What areas/regions of [country] do they work (i.e. are some areas served better than others)?
- How many are trained each year? If possible, please provide numbers for how many are trained each year for the past five years.

Curriculum

How are individuals who work in child protection trained (formally and non-formally)?

- What kind of training do they receive before starting their professional work (e.g., diploma programme, academic training such as a BSW/MSW, CBO/NGO training, etc.)? Please describe these programmes (e.g., who provides the training, programme and degrees available, length, etc.). What are the strengths and challenges of these training programmes?

- What kind of in-service and/or continuing education do they receive after they have completed their initial training? Please describe these programmes (e.g., who provides the training, programme and degrees available, length, etc.). What are the strengths and challenges of these training programmes?

Research

Do you think basic knowledge of research methods (e.g., baseline studies, programme evaluation) is important for child protection practitioners in [country]?

- If yes, do you think that individuals working in child protection are equipped with basic knowledge of research methods in order to conduct their own research on child protection issues and programmes? Please explain.

Is research - such as research studies and other research publications on current child protection issues - integrated into initial and/or in-service/continuing education training programmes?

- If yes, please explain how.
- If no, please explain why not.

Policy

How do individuals working in child protection learn about child protection policies and legislation?

What types of policies/legislation are included in training programmes?

Do training programmes - both prior to starting professional work and through in-service/continuing education - prepare these individuals to engage with and/or influence policy/legislation?

- If yes, please describe an example of this.

Do training programmes - both prior to starting professional work and through in-service/continuing education - prepare these individuals to implement and/or enact policy/legislation?

- If yes, please describe an example of this.

Practice

What types of skills and core practice competencies for child protection practice are identified in existing training curricula and programmes?

Is child protection practice through internships or practicums integrated into training programmes—both prior to starting professional work and through in-service/continuing education?

- If yes, please describe where these activities take place (e.g., within [country]’s borders) and how these activities are structured.

Explain how the current training programmes are or are not relevant and/or applicable to the daily work of individuals working in child protection in [country].

Once they complete their training, how do individuals engaged in child protection keep their skills updated?

Conclusion

Is there anything you would like to add that we haven’t already spoken about today?

Do you have any questions for me?

Semi-Structured Individual Interview Guide: Practitioners

Informed Consent

Review informed consent form (pages 5-6), then proceed with the interview.

Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research. I am very interested to hear your opinion about the social service workforce and how it relates to child protection in [country].

Demographics

Review demographics questions (page 7), then proceed.

General

What does the general public think about social work in [country]? What does civil society think about social work in [country]? What do beneficiaries think about social work in [country]?

Tell me about *your* understanding of child protection in [country].

Who does child protection in [country]?

- What are the official names and roles of the different kinds of child protection practitioners (e.g., social service workers, social workers, paraprofessionals, community workers, etc.)?
- In what kinds of agencies do they work (e.g., NGO, government agencies, etc.)?
- What areas/regions of [country] do they work (i.e. are some areas served better than others)?

Curriculum

How were you trained (formally and non-formally) in child protection?

- What kind of training did they receive before starting your professional work (e.g., diploma programme, academic training such as a BSW/MSW, CBO/NGO training, etc.)? Please describe these programmes (e.g., who provides the training, programme and degrees available, length, etc.). What are the strengths and challenges of these training programmes?
- What kind of in-service and/or continuing education do you participate in? Please describe these programmes (e.g., who provides the training, programme and degrees available, length, etc.). What are the strengths and challenges of these training programmes?

Research

Do you think basic knowledge of research methods (e.g., baseline studies, programme evaluation) is important for child protection practitioners in [country]?

- If yes, do you feel equipped with basic knowledge of research methods in order to conduct their own research on child protection issues and programmes? Please explain.

Was research—such as research studies and other research publications on current child protection issues—integrated into any of your training?

- If yes, please explain how.
- If no, please explain why not.

Policy

Were child protection policies and legislation included in your training?

- If yes, please describe how you learned about these child protection policies and legislation.

What types of policies/legislation were included in your training programmes?

Do you feel that your training—both prior to starting professional work and through in-service/continuing education—prepared you to engage with and/or influence policy/legislation?

- If yes, please describe an example of this.

Did your training—both prior to starting professional work and through in-service/continuing education—prepare you to implement and/or enact policy/legislation?

- If yes, please describe an example of this.

Practice

What types of skills and core practice competencies for child protection practice did you learn in your training—both prior to starting professional work and/or through in-service/continuing education?

Was child protection practice through internships or practicums integrated into your training programme—both prior to starting professional work and/or through in-service/continuing education?

- If yes, please describe where these activities took place (e.g., within [country]’s borders) and how these activities were structured.

Explain how your training was or was not relevant and/or applicable to your daily work in child protection in [country].

Have you or do you intend to update your skills through in-service/continuing education?

- If yes, please explain how you will do this.
- If no, why not?

Conclusion

Is there anything you would like to add that we haven’t already spoken about today?

Do you have any questions for me?

Case Story Interview Guide: Practitioners

(Adapted from Child Frontiers, 2010)

Case Story

Without naming any names, please describe step-by-step a recent child protection case that you managed.

At this point, the researcher should co-create (with the practitioner) a step-by-step outline of the case management process.

For each step of the case management process, ask the following questions:

- Who decided that this would be the action taken? Were there other options available? If so, why was this specific option chosen?
- Do you remember any part of your training—both prior to starting professional work and through in-service/continuing education—that prepared you to make this decision?
- Do you think that the child and/or family was satisfied or dissatisfied with the action taken at this point? If so, how do you know?

Ensure that the practitioner includes the following details:

- How the practitioner came into contact with the child and/or family;
- The people or services to whom the practitioner referred the child and/or family;
- Where the child is today and whether or not the respondent is still in contact.

When the practitioner has finished the story, repeat the story back to him/her to ensure that you have not missed any details and that you have captured all of the steps.

Closing Questions

Is there anything else you would like to add?
Do you have any questions for me?

3. Focus group interview guide

Focus Group Discussion Guide: Educators

Informed Consent

Review informed consent form (pages 5-6), then proceed with the interview.

Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research. I am very interested to hear your opinion about the social service workforce and how it relates to child protection in [country].

Demographics

Review demographics questions (page 7), then proceed.

General

What is the general public's perception of social work in [country]? What do beneficiaries think about social work in [country]?

Tell me about your understanding of child protection in [country].

Who does child protection in [country]?

- What are the official names and roles of the different kinds of child protection practitioners (e.g., social service workers, social workers, paraprofessionals, community workers, etc.)?
- In what kinds of agencies do they work (e.g., NGO, government agencies, etc.)?
- What areas/regions of [country] do they work (i.e. are some areas served better than others)?
- How many are trained each year? If possible, please provide numbers for how many are trained each year for the past five years.

Curriculum

How are individuals who work in child protection trained (formally and non-formally)?

- What kind of training do they receive before starting their professional work (e.g., diploma programme, academic training such as a BSW/MSW, CBO/NGO training, etc.)? Please describe these programmes (e.g., who provides the training, programme and degrees available, length, etc.). What are the strengths and challenges of these training programmes?
- What kind of in-service and/or continuing education do they receive after they have completed their initial training? Please describe these programmes (e.g., who provides the training, programme and degrees available, length, etc.). What are the strengths and challenges of these training programmes?

What is your role in the training process?

Research

Do you think basic knowledge of research methods (e.g., baseline studies, programme evaluation) is important for child protection practitioners in [country]?

- If yes, do you think that individuals working in child protection are equipped with basic knowledge of research methods in order to conduct their own research on child protection issues and programmes? Please explain. Is research—such as research studies and other research publications on current child protection issues—integrated into initial and/or in-service/continuing education training programmes?
- If yes, please explain how.
- If no, please explain why not.

Policy

How do individuals working in child protection learn about child protection policies and legislation?

What types of policies/legislation are included in training programmes?

Do training programmes—both prior to starting professional work and through in-service/continuing education—prepare these individuals to engage with and/or influence policy/legislation?

- If yes, please describe an example of this.

Do training programmes-both prior to starting professional work and through in-service/continuing education-prepare these individuals to implement and/or enact policy/legislation?

- If yes, please describe an example of this.

Practice

Conduct Consensus Building Exercise (see page 27)

What types of skills and core practice competencies for child protection practice are identified in existing training curricula and programmes?

Is child protection practice through internships or practicums integrated into training programmes—

both prior to starting professional work and through in-service/continuing education?

- If yes, please describe where these activities take place (e.g., within [country]'s borders) and how these activities are structured.

Explain how the current training programmes are or are not relevant and/or applicable to the daily work of individuals working in child protection in [country].

Once they complete their training, how do individuals engaged in child protection keep their skills updated?

Conclusion

Is there anything you would like to add that we haven't already spoken about today?

Do you have any questions for me?

Focus Group Discussion Guide: Practitioners

Informed Consent

Review informed consent form (pages 5-6), then proceed with the interview.

Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research. I am very interested to hear your opinion about the social service workforce and how it relates to child protection in [country].

Demographics

Review demographics questions (page 7), then proceed.

General

What is the general public's perception of social work in [country]? What do beneficiaries think about social work in [country]?

Tell me about your understanding of child protection in [country].

Who does child protection in [country]?

- What are the official names and roles of the different kinds of child protection practitioners (e.g., social service workers, social workers, paraprofessionals, community workers, etc.)?

- In what kinds of agencies do they work (e.g., NGO, government agencies, etc.)?

What areas/regions of [country] do they work (i.e. are some areas served better than others)?

What other actors do you collaborate with in your daily practice? How do you think that this impacts your work?

Curriculum

How were you trained (formally and non-formally) in child protection?

- What kind of training did they receive before starting your professional work (e.g., diploma programme, academic training such as a BSW/MSW, CBO/NGO training, etc.)? Please describe these programmes (e.g., who provides the training, programme and degrees available, length, etc.). What are the strengths and challenges of these training programmes?
- What kind of in-service and/or continuing education do you participate in? Please describe these programmes (e.g., who provides the training, programme and degrees available, length, etc.). What are the strengths and challenges of these training programmes?

Research

Do you think basic knowledge of research methods (e.g., baseline studies, programme evaluation) is important for child protection practitioners in [country]?

- If yes, do you think that individuals working in child protection are equipped with basic knowledge of research methods in order to conduct their own research on child protection issues and programmes? Please explain.
Is research—such as research studies and other research publications on current child protection issues—integrated into initial and/or in-service/continuing education training programmes?
- Please explain

Policy

Were child protection policies and legislation included in your training?

- If yes, please describe how you learned about these child protection policies and legislation.

What types of policies/legislation were included in your training programmes?

Do you feel that your training—both prior to starting professional work and through in-service/continuing education—prepared you to engage with and/or influence policy/legislation?

- If yes, please describe an example of this.

Did your training—both prior to starting professional work and through in-service/continuing education—prepare you to implement and/or enact policy/legislation?

- If yes, please describe an example of this.

Practice

Conduct Consensus Building Exercise (see page 27)

What types of skills and core practice competencies for child protection practice did you learn in your training—both prior to starting professional work and/or through in-service/continuing education?

Was child protection practice through internships or practicums integrated into your training programme—both prior to starting professional work and/or through in-service/continuing education?

- If yes, please describe where these activities took place (e.g., within [country]'s borders) and how these activities were structured.

Explain how your training was or was not relevant and/or applicable to your daily work in child protection in [country].

Please describe what kind of supervision you receive in your current position.

- Do you think that this supervision is enough for you to be an effective worker?

Once you completed their training, have you or do you intend to update your skills through in-service/continuing education?

- If yes, please explain how you will do this.
- If no, why not?

Conclusion

Is there anything you would like to add that we haven't already spoken about today?

Do you have any questions for me?

Focus Group Discussion Guide: Students

Informed Consent

Review informed consent form (pages 5-6), then proceed with the interview.

Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research. I am very interested to hear your opinion about the social service workforce and how it relates to child protection in [country].

Demographics

Review demographics questions (page 7), then proceed.

General

What is the general public's perception of social work in [country]? What do beneficiaries think about social work in [country]?

Tell me about your understanding of child protection in [country].

Please describe your motivation for studying social work in [country].

How do you pay for your studies?

What job would you like to have upon completion of your studies?

Curriculum

How are you trained (formally and non-formally) in child protection?

- What kind of training do you currently receive (e.g., diploma programme, academic training such as a BSW/MSW, CBO/NGO training, etc.)? Please describe these programmes (e.g., who provides the training, programme and degrees available, length, etc.). What are the strengths and challenges of these training programmes?
- Do you know of any in-service and/or continuing education programmes that you can participate

in after you have completed your initial training? Please describe these programmes (e.g., who provides the training, programme and degrees available, length, etc.). What are the strengths and challenges of these training programmes? Do you think you will participate in these programmes once you complete your current training? Do you see any barriers to you accessing these training programmes in the future?

Research

Is research—such as research studies and other research publications on current child protection issues—integrated your current training programme?

- If yes, please give an example.

Do you feel equipped with basic knowledge of research methods (e.g., baseline studies, programme evaluation) in order to conduct your own research on child protection issues and programmes once you are a practitioner?

- If yes, please give an example.
- If no, please discuss why not.

Policy

Are child protection policies and legislation included in your training?

- If yes, please describe how you learned about these child protection policies and legislation. What types of policies/legislation are included in your training programmes?

Do you feel as if your training is preparing you to engage with and/or influence policy/legislation?

- If yes, please discuss.

Do you feel as if your training is preparing you to implement and/or enact policy/legislation?

- If yes, please discuss.

Practice

Conduct Consensus Building Exercise (see page 27)

What types of skills and core practice competencies for child protection practice are included in your training programme?

Is child protection practice through internships or practicums integrated into your training programme? If so, do these activities take place within [country's] borders or outside [country's] borders? Do you plan on participating in these internships or practicums?

Do you believe that your current training programme is relevant and/or applicable to the daily work of individuals working in child protection in [country].

Conclusion

Is there anything you would like to add that we haven't already spoken about today?

Do you have any questions for me?

4. Consensus building exercise

Consensus Building Exercise

Ask participants to list potential answers to the following question: What are the skills, knowledge, and learning needs of the social service workforce in [country]?

Using these answers, guide the group in eliciting, refining, reviewing, and confirming the answers into piles. Make sure that you repeat the refining process of sorting and negotiating until there is consensus among the group members.

Use the following form to record your answers.

Key Skill, Knowledge, and Learning Needs Identified:

Free list:	Rank Order:
_____	1. _____
_____	2. _____
_____	3. _____
_____	4. _____
_____	5. _____
_____	6. _____
_____	7. _____
_____	8. _____
_____	9. _____
_____	10. _____

