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# Child Protection System "Under Construction"

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**Four Stories of Children in Need of Protection in Albania**

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<sup>1</sup> This briefing was researched and written for Terre des hommes (Tdh) Mission in Albania by Fotis Filippou (external consultant) in collaboration with Tdh staff. Thanks go to Tdh staff, who assisted during the research, production and finalization of the briefing, as to all NGO, national and local institutions' representatives interviewed as part of the research.

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Children in Albania, who experience neglect, violence, sexual abuse, forced labour, children in street situation or in conflict with the law, find themselves in a precarious position. Albania does not yet have an effective system in place to protect them from such phenomena, effectively denying these children their human rights and condemning them to a life of marginalization and a continuing cycle of abuse.

This briefing is centred on four stories of children who have experienced abuse, exploitation and violence, and who have come into contact with child protection and care services in Albania. Through their stories, the briefing aims to highlight positive elements and progress within the existing system, as well as draw attention to the many remaining gaps. Thanks to all the children for sharing their story and personal experience for this briefing.<sup>2</sup>

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), to which Albania is a party since 1992, spells out the government's responsibility under international law to protect the whole range of children's rights.<sup>3</sup> The CRC requires that all actors working on behalf of the state take all "legislative, administrative, social, and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has care of the child."<sup>4</sup> The right to be protected from abuse and exploitation is not isolated, as its enjoyment depends and impacts on the enjoyment of a range of other rights, such as the rights to health, education, an adequate standard of living, access to justice and other rights. The CRC also stipulates that "in all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration."<sup>5</sup>

Following the end of communist rule in 1991, and as a result of its previous isolation, Albania was starting from a low base in the development of an infrastructure for social services<sup>6</sup> which were required to meet the increasing social protection needs of many families.<sup>7</sup> The concept of a child protection system and nascent elements of one have only emerged fairly recently, and as the Head of the State Agency for the Protection of Children's Rights (hereafter State Agency) noted: "There is still no clear understanding what we mean by child protection, no specific long-term vision or strategy. We have positive things, but so far fragmented."

In the last few years, Albania has undertaken a number of initiatives to address the need for protection of children from trafficking, of children in street situation, and the prevention of institutionalization. However, as the Director of NGO ARSIS Albania pointed out, "most of the interventions have so far been project-based" with a longer-term plan largely missing.

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2 Note on the methodology: Field research and interviews with the children and their families, representatives of government institutions and NGOs took place in April and May 2015. For the interviews with children, participatory and child-sensitive tools were used to reconstruct their experience of the care and protection services. The field research was complemented with desk research of available studies by government institutions, IGOs and NGOs working on the protection of children's rights.

3 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), adopted November 20, 1989, G.A. Res. 44/25, annex, 44 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No. 49) at 167, U.N. Doc. A/44/49 (1989), available at: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CRC.aspx>

4 CRC, Art. 19

5 CRC, Art. 3

6 Rachel A Harris and Ian Milligan, for Terre des hommes Mission in Albania, A shared vision for systemic child protection: Good practices from Albania, May 2014, p. 12 (internal report)

7 Gary Westwater and Vladan Jovanović, for the Austrian Development Cooperation and UNICEF Albania, Evaluation of Child Protection Unit intervention within the framework of social welfare system reform and decentralisation of social service processes in Albania, September 2009, p. 12

Protective care services, until recently, were limited to the existence of a few residential institutions. Positive steps have been taken towards establishing new structures and approaches aimed at fulfilling the protection needs of children. These include, most notably, the establishment of Child Protection Units (CPUs) – the only specialized structure with a referral mechanism at the local level – and an increasing commitment to the use of a multi-disciplinary approach to case management and intervention, based on a “Working Protocol for Child Protection Workers”.

However, there is wide agreement by both NGOs and state authorities’ representatives that the existing services do not necessarily constitute a child protection ‘system’, as such, but rather a ‘patchwork’ of services. The Head of the State Agency noted: “the idea of a ‘child protection system’ does not yet exist. We haven’t managed to make it part of the mind-set of the various institutions.” In addition, while the adoption of the Law on the Protection of the Rights of the Child in 2010 has been a welcome step, a comprehensive legal framework specifically addressing child protection is still missing in Albania. Such legislation would be key to setting out all the elements of a child protection system and defining the roles and responsibilities of all actors, forming part of the protection and intersecting systems, such as the educational, health and justice systems.



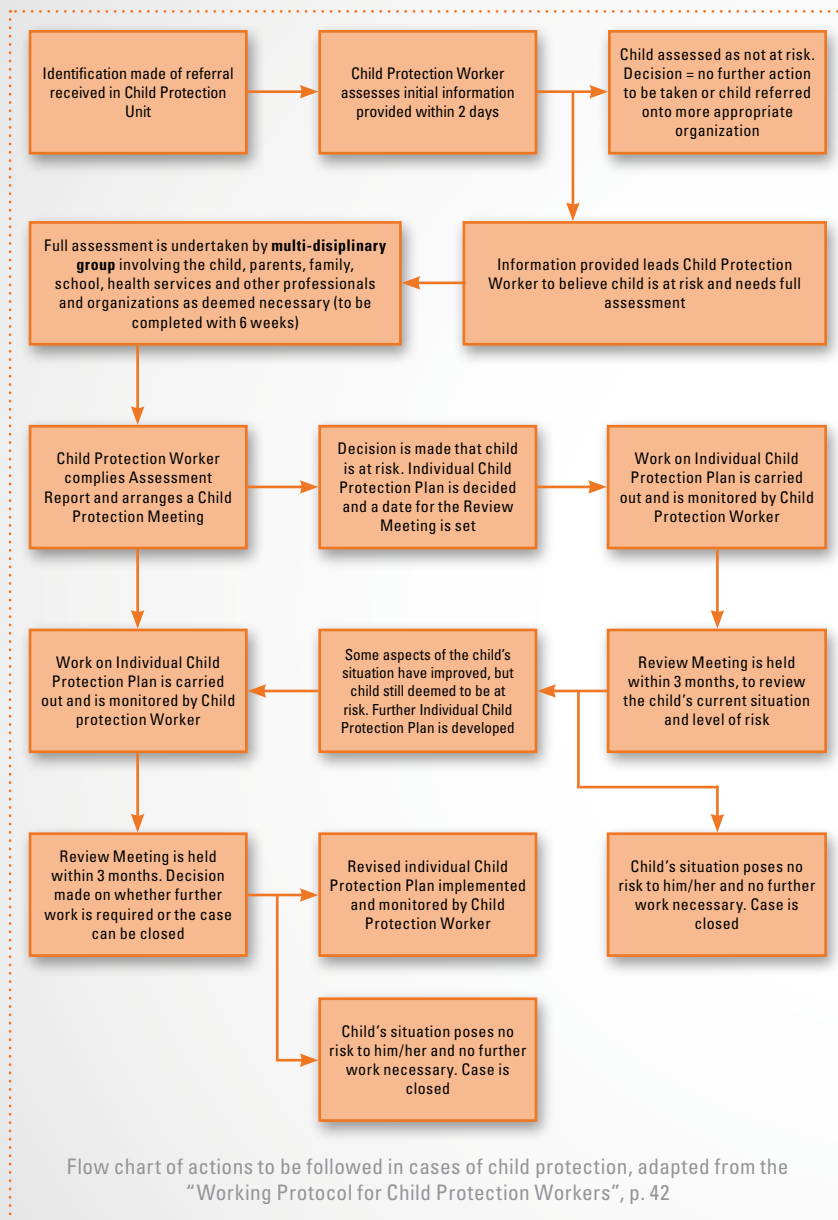
# Child Protection at the Local Level: The Reality on the Ground

In order for an effective system to be in place multi-agency contributions are vital – the responsibility of taking care of children, guaranteeing their well-being and protecting their rights lies with several actors. These include, aside from parents and members of the wider community, a number of institutions and professionals directly or indirectly involved in protection and care (social security, health care, education, police, justice, media, etc.). The law foresees the establishment of a CPU within the structure of every administrative unit (municipality or commune) in Albania to coordinate the protection, referral and analysis of cases in its territory. This would be implemented in collaboration with all these other actors through a multi-disciplinary approach to case management and intervention (see Flow Chart on case management process<sup>8</sup>). All actors should have an understanding of and sensitivity to child protection issues and how to address them in a multi-agency approach.

In order to effectively coordinate child protection across all actors, the CPU should be composed by at least one employee – a Child Protection Worker (CPW) – with qualifications in social work. Tdh and other organizations working in the field of child protection are concerned that in practice CPUs often lack the capacity, qualifications, skills and budget to effectively perform their role. At the moment, CPUs are established in 196 – only half – of the administrative units in Albania and are particularly missing from rural areas. In addition, only in a small number of CPUs is there a dedicated CPW appointed; in the majority of cases the role is assigned to a social assistance administrator. While there are a number of very skilled and dedicated CPWs, others are not qualified social workers and many are politically appointed.

Lack of capacity and budget are some of the biggest challenges CPWs face for the effective identification and management of cases. This is combined with lack of services, including specialized services, for children at the local level, and is particularly serious in the context of emergency situations. There are currently, for example, only two emergency shelters in Albania, both in Tirana. Referral services are not available on a 24-hour basis, beyond the working hours of the CPW. Another concern is that, often, intervention stops at the immediate and urgent actions, but a longer-term plan to ensure the child is not going to re-enter a risk situation is rarely devised.

<sup>8</sup> Albanian Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, Terre des hommes Mission in Albania, UNICEF in Albania, “Working Protocol for Child Protection Workers”, 2010, p. 42, <http://childhub.org/child-protection-online-library/working-protocol-child-protection-workers>



The effective case management by a multi-disciplinary group of local actors across institutions is another major challenge. While there is an increasingly better collaboration among various agencies at the local level, especially where there is a strong CPU playing a good coordinating role, awareness about its role and services is still low among other relevant actors, such as educational and health professionals. Most importantly, an understanding of and commitment to child protection as everyone's responsibility is often missing among several local-level actors, such as school psychologists and teachers, health workers, and police. This limits efforts to prevention and also means that cases of children at risk may never be referred to a multi-disciplinary group for intervention or that relevant actors do not attend case-management meetings. The possibility for children themselves or other citizens to directly seek help or refer cases to the CPW or other institutions is limited.

Decentralizing responsibility for child protection to the local level was not combined with the development of a monitoring framework and accountability mechanism. This is a huge gap and problem, indicative of a 'patchwork' rather than a 'system' approach to child protection.

The Albanian government is currently undertaking the reform of social services and a territorial and administrative reform. Tdh and other organizations are concerned at the lack of clarity on the services, structure and resources that will be available for child protection in the new administrative units following the local elections in June 2015.



## Children in street situation

Children in street situation, involved in activities such as begging, selling things, recycling, or even living on the street, represent one of the most vulnerable groups of children in Albania; According to a 2014 study on children in street situation in Albania by UNICEF and Save the Children they normally come from a disadvantaged socio-economic background, have little access to social services and are extremely marginalized. Many of them are at risk of trafficking. As a result, their health and physical integrity is at risk, they cannot enjoy their right to education and their personal development is restricted. According to the study nearly 75 per cent of the children surveyed, belonged to the Roma and Egyptian ethnicity<sup>9</sup> – their representation among children in street situation being disproportionately high considering Roma and Egyptians represent less than 3.5 per cent of the total population in Albania.<sup>10</sup>

The government of Albania started a pilot Plan of Action for Children in Street Situation in 2014 aiming at identifying children in street situation alone or with their families and intervening to restore their participation in society. 11 field teams were established in Tirana, one in each administrative unit, comprised by two or three people: the CPW of the local unit, an NGO social worker and, when needed, a social worker from the Task Force Secretariat established at the State Agency to coordinate and support the field teams, and counting also on support by the police when necessary. Following the initial identification by the field team, the cases are supposed to be dealt with by a multi-disciplinary group. Organizations such as Tdh and ARSIS have supported this pilot initiative with both expertise and financial resources. While NGOs are concerned about weaknesses in terms of skills and capacity of the field teams, as the Director of ARSIS Albania welcomed “this is the first time the state does any kind of outreach in social work.”

9 UNICEF and Save the Children, National Study on children in street situation in Albania, p. 35, available at: [http://www.unicef.org/albania/NationalStudy-children\\_in\\_street\\_situation-June2014.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/albania/NationalStudy-children_in_street_situation-June2014.pdf)

10 An estimated 120,000 Roma and Egyptians live in Albania, in a total population of 3.4 million. See European Roma Rights Centre, “Basic facts on Roma – Albania”, August 2010, <http://www.errc.org/article/basic-facts-on-roma--albania/3622>





Zemira, Lindita and Gezim at their home, where they live in inadequate conditions, drawing beautiful and colorful houses they would rather live in. Tirana, Albania. April 2015

## Zamira, Lindita, Nexhat, Arjana and Gezim<sup>11</sup>

Fatime is 25 years old and a mother of five. She was born in Elbasan and moved to Tirana 20 years ago. Since she was four, Fatime has begged on the streets. Her partner makes some money through recycling from the garbage dump. Her children, Zamira 10 years old, Lindita seven, Nexhat six, Arjana four, and Gezim one and a half, have begged with Fatime on the streets since birth. The family – of Egyptian ethnicity – has been in a very difficult socio-economic situation, but with all members involved in informal income-generating activities they were able to secure an income. “The children helped me a lot. We were making money. We bought clothes, we were able to buy food, and we could pay rent.”

For the last eight years the family have lived on rent – 7,000 Lek per month – in an apartment in the Kombinat area of Tirana. Living in one room separated by a curtain, and without access to water inside the apartment, their conditions are dire. Sanitation, consisting of a shared toilet outside the flat, is also inadequate. Since 2005, ARSIS has been providing the family with support including food, clothes and medical support, as well as help with the rent and registering the family with the financial aid scheme. They receive financial assistance of 5,000 Lek per month.

In November 2013, ARSIS referred the case to CPU No 9; jointly they provided the family with some immediate material assistance. At the time, CPU No 9 was one of the few Child Protection Units in Tirana and their capacity to monitor and manage cases effectively was limited. With the increase of CPUs in Tirana in January 2014, and the rolling out in April 2014 of the Plan of Action for Children in Street Situation, the identification and follow up of cases somewhat improved. In May 2014, a street team identified the children again begging with the mother in the Laprakë neighbourhood of Tirana. The Task Force representative referred the case to CPU No 9, based on the family’s civil registration. But as they were living in the Kombinat area, which is in a different administrative unit in Tirana, the case was transferred to CPU No 6.

Following a family visit and initial assessment in September 2014, the CPW called for a multi-disciplinary group to develop an Action Plan of intervention. According to the CPW, Fatime was very cooperative from the beginning and removed the children from the street immediately. In collaboration with ARSIS, the CPW helped register the children in municipality No 6 and assisted the mother to enrol the two older girls in the local primary school for the first time. Nexhat, also of primary school age, started attending the ARSIS daily centre and will begin primary school in September 2015.

Once the children stopped begging, Fatime said that the family income dropped considerably. ARSIS and the municipality supported the family with food packages. Getting Fatime into regular employment was the second objective of the action plan devised by the multi-disciplinary group and they referred her to the employment office to be registered as a job seeker. But as her two younger children were now at home, it was difficult for Fatime to look for a job and Zamira, the eldest daughter, often had to skip school in order to stay back and take care of her younger siblings. “With this in mind we decided to call

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<sup>11</sup> All names of individuals in this briefing have been changed to protect their identity and privacy.



Fatime's children leaving their home, where they live in inadequate conditions. Tirana, Albania.  
May 2015

another multidisciplinary group in order to enable the registration of the younger children in the kindergarten,” said the CPW. She explained that finding a place in the kindergarten is normally a huge challenge in getting children off the street, as there are limited places and directors are reluctant to accept these children. In this case, however, with support from ARSIS, who would cover the fees, she managed to secure a place for Arjana in the kindergarten and Gezim in a nursery within a few weeks.

The living conditions of the family were another issue the multi-disciplinary group tried to address. Due to the family's limited income and financial insecurity, Fatime struggled to pay rent. With initial support for the rent from NGOs, the multi-disciplinary group later referred Fatime to the municipality requesting rent assistance given to homeless people, which would cover 50 per cent of the rent. Assisted by ARSIS, Fatime has already applied for social housing in April 2014, but according to the organization's social worker, the chances of her getting it are small, due to the very strict criteria.

### School integration

In September 2014, both Zamira and Lindita were placed in the first grade. Their teachers said they were smart, but complained about an alleged lack of interest by the parents in the girls' education and stated that they had not been attending school regularly and had difficulties taking in the lessons. Fatime confirmed the girls normally attended school two or three times a week. The school director and teachers insisted that the girls faced no discrimination as a result of their ethnicity or challenges linked to their previous street situation. However, their general remarks about Egyptian and Roma children in the school showed they had little understanding and sensitivity for the socio-economic background and personal history of the girls, which could be reflected in an attitude not conducive to their integration: “Their hygiene is a challenge. They have lice and smell because they are not washed. Other parents complain and they do not tolerate them sitting at the same desk with their children.”

When Tdh met them in April 2015, the girls said that they were happy in the school and with their teachers, particularly Zamira. But they said homework was difficult and they never had activities, such as drawing. While Zamira appeared to be more integrated, Lindita seemed to be struggling to socialize at school. However, both girls said they liked the school much more than begging. “It was hard to be on the street, especially when it was very hot,” said Zamira and Lindita agreed, “it was very bad.” Fatime told Tdh that the girls had never complained to her about the school or the teachers – “It is always the school and the teachers that complain about them.”

Romani and Egyptian children abandon school at a relatively young age as a result of discrimination, poverty, early marriages especially affecting girls, or traditional beliefs that some parents may have. According to UNDP “the latter is due to a patriarchal upbringing according to which girls should not associate with boys when they reach their early teenage years.”<sup>12</sup> Authorities may accept these practices as a given, and often fail to apply legal protections when Romani girls are subjected to such human rights violations.<sup>13</sup> Early school dropouts and early marriage prevent many Romani and Egyptian girls from reaching their fullest potential and full participation in the social, economic and political life of their community.

Fatime told Tdh she was convinced not to have the children in the street anymore: “It doesn’t even cross my mind to take them out begging again. I’d rather die. Children shouldn’t suffer in the heat and the cold. I didn’t give birth to them to make them suffer.” The CPW explained that a lot of work had been done with the mother to sensitize and support her: “The fact that it is now almost a year that she has not taken the children out in the street is very good. However, the risk is still there.” Indeed, the case of Fatime’s children can be considered successful insofar as the children were taken off the street and enrolled at school. However, empowering the family by getting Fatime into sustainable employment, and addressing hurdles her children are facing in school as a result of their ethnicity and socio-economic background, remains a challenge. The CPW noted that for such difficult cases the family needs long-term and persistent follow up for at least two or three years, until they are empowered enough to stand on their feet. It is vital that work is done with the school staff and other local actors to ensure the children’s successful integration into life away from the streets, and other exploitation and abuse.

<sup>12</sup> UNDP, At risk: The social vulnerability of Roma in Albania, p. 26, [http://europeandcis.undp.org/uploads/public/File/rbec\\_web/vgr/Albanian\\_Roma\\_Report\\_english\\_reduced.pdf](http://europeandcis.undp.org/uploads/public/File/rbec_web/vgr/Albanian_Roma_Report_english_reduced.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> European Roma Rights Centre, ERRC Submission to the Joint CEDAW-CRC General Recommendation / Comment on Harmful Practices: Child Marriages among Roma, September 2011, p. 3, <http://www.errc.org/cms/upload/file/cedaw-crc-child-marriages-submission-9-sept-2011.pdf>

*Lindita at her home, where she and her family live in inadequate conditions, drawing a beautiful and colorful house. Tirana, Albania. April 2015*



## Leonora

Leonora is a 16 year-old Roma girl from Elbasan, a city in central Albania. She has a younger brother, currently 13 years old, and two older siblings, a brother and sister, who are married and have their own families. She lives with her grandparents and her uncle's family in an overcrowded two-room house, which they were expanding at the time of the research, thus the extended family was sleeping outside.

When Leonora was a baby, her parents took her and her siblings to Greece where they lived on and off for years, and where the children were being forced to beg and recycle in the streets. In 2004 her parents got separated, and came back to Albania with their children. When Tdh met her in April 2015, Leonora spoke about Greece and the separation of her parents as one of the things that had hurt her most: "I was begging there, and mom was taking us to the garbage bins. It was torture. Then, mom and dad brought us back here. I don't want to ever go back. I don't even want to remember that place."

When they came back to Elbasan they moved in with Leonora's paternal grandparents. Her father had gone to Greece again. Shortly afterwards, her mother also abandoned them and moved to Italy. "When we came back to Albania it was worse. Mom didn't know how to make money and we were living without food. We didn't know the relatives of the father and we didn't feel very good there. Mom left us there, and they didn't care so much about us, we were left in a cold room with one blanket for the four of us. The grandparents fed us only once a day and forced us to go to collect cans."

Later Leonora's maternal grandparents decided to take the children into their own home. The conditions at the grandfather's house were not good, and the children again had to work with the rest of the family who were making an income by selling second-hand clothes. The children were attending the

Leonora looking outside the window of the Roma Community Centre in Elbasan, Albania

Roma Community Centre in 2006 when Tdh staff first met them during a summer camp in Elbasan. According to a Tdh staffer who had worked on their case, “when they were identified the children appeared to be neglected, their emotional and their wellbeing needs were not being met by the family. They had scratch marks on their hands and faces as a result of street work.”

When the CPU in Elbasan first opened in 2006 Tdh referred the case there. The CPW said she had focused on providing the necessary security and safeguards so that the children do not fall at risk of being trafficked or in street situation again. Working with other actors in the municipality and Tdh, they devised a plan aiming at the school integration of the children – they enrolled them in school, registered them in activities at the Roma Community Centre, and supported Leonora’s grandparents with income-generating activities.

The work they had done with the grandparents helped improve the environment at home and Leonora and her siblings were safe there. They were regularly attending school and activities at the Roma Community Centre. “Everything seemed so nice. We were going to the centre and learning, but also in the school,” explained Leonora. But in the summer of 2013 she failed the sixth grade. When the new school year was starting in September, Leonora, who was 13 years old at the time, had decided to drop out of school: “I didn’t feel good to continue, I had to repeat the same grade.” Leonora was going to be older than the other children and was ashamed to continue. In addition, the CPW suggested that according to the mentality within the Roma community she was already “old” for school and she could have felt uncomfortable among her peers due to this.

In October 2013, Leonora and her younger brother followed her uncle and his family to Lazarat, a village in southern Albania, where thousands of seasonal laborers – including many poor Roma – were working in the harvesting, trimming and compacting of cannabis. A study by UNICEF and Save the Children revealed that 2,359 children had been identified as working in cannabis cultivation in Lazarat around the same time.<sup>14</sup> According to the CPW, approximately 20 children from Elbasan, including Leonora’s younger brother, had dropped out of school to go and work in Lazarat. Alerted by this situation, the CPW gathered a multi-disciplinary group to devise an action plan for these children. They immediately alerted the police, as this was an emergency situation, potentially putting children at risk of trafficking. They also involved the educational department of the municipality to ensure that when children were back they would be able to return to school. The municipality of Elbasan reportedly sent a letter to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Ministry of Social Welfare and Youth (MSWY) to inform them. However, according to the CPW, no action had been taken by central government authorities to get the children out of this high-risk situation and children with their families only came back in November, when the season was over.

“I had no idea it was going to be so bad working there. When I got there I was speechless. The conditions were very bad; we were staying in shacks. There was hashish and we had to clean the plants, and we would get 1,000 Lek per kilo,” explained Leonora. “We would wake up at three in the morning and come back at eight at night, and people went straight to sleep, they wouldn’t even wash. Very often we were so tired that we would fall asleep. The owners were shouting ‘wake up, don’t sleep, otherwise I don’t pay you.’ There were many children my age there; their parents were using them to make money. The most difficult thing was the smell; we were like drunk, like stupid; we were laughing, singing... We were getting drugged from the smell. And I was getting headaches. “National and international media covered the situation and working conditions in Lazarat, when hundreds of people had fallen ill allegedly from working in the cannabis fields.<sup>15</sup>

14 UNICEF and Save the Children, National Study on children in street situation in Albania, p. 45

15 Reuters, “Hundreds of cannabis workers fall ill in Albanian village”, 1 November 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/11/01/us-albania-cannabis-idUSBRE9A00KQ20131101>



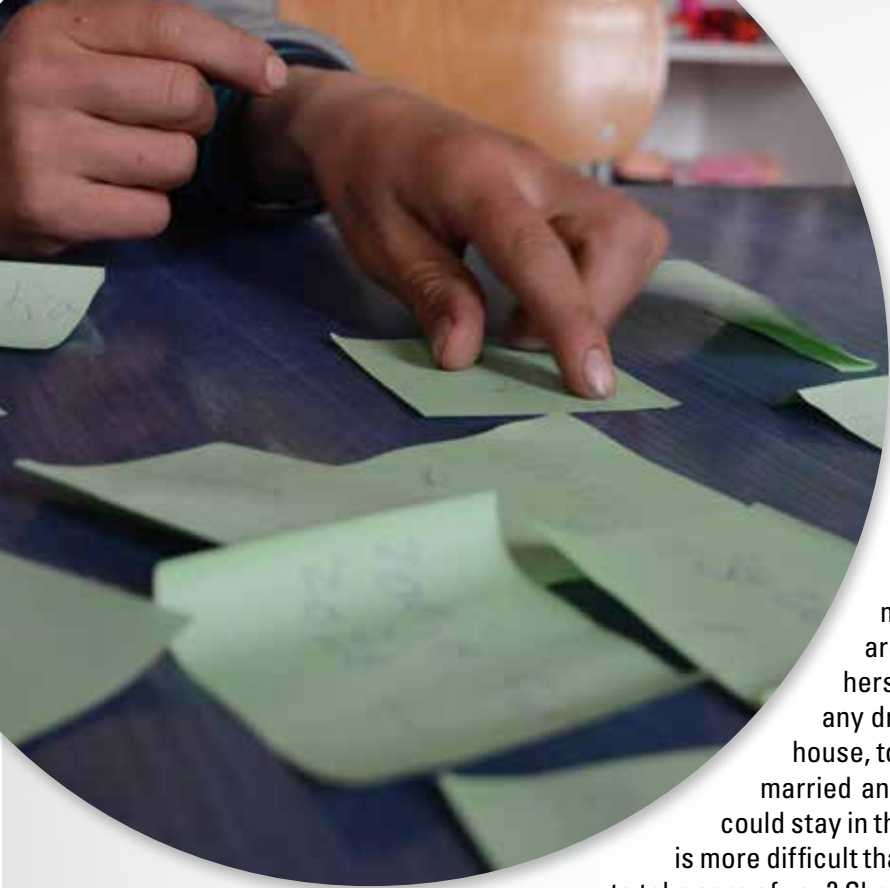
### Child labour

Child labour refers to “children who perform hazardous work as well as other children who, due to their age or working hours, are considered to be facing various risks to their physical, social, psychological or educational development that stem from their employment”<sup>16</sup> Article 32 of the CRC requires states to recognize the right of children to protection from economic exploitation and hazardous labour, but also labour, which would interfere with a child’s education.

According to a study by the Albanian Institute of Statistics (INSTAT) and the International Labour Organization (ILO), an estimated 54,000 children, 7.7 per cent of all children in Albania between the ages of 5 to 17 worked in 2010, often beyond their capabilities. Children work in the fields of agriculture, including harvesting cannabis, but are also involved in various other work such as in mining, domestic work or street-related activities, including begging. In 2010, an estimated 35,500 children in Albania were considered to be child labourers.<sup>17</sup>

16 International Labour Organization (ILO) and Institute of Statistics (INSTAT) of the Republic of Albania, Working children in the Republic of Albania: The results of the 2010 national child labor survey, July 2012 p. 26 <http://www.dol.gov/ilab/reports/pdf/GLO%2008%20Albania%20NCLS%202012.pdf>

17 ILO and INSTAT, 2012, p. 10



When they came back to Elbasan, Leonora's younger brother returned to school, but Leonora did not want to go back. According to the CPW, the Roma Community Centre had made a huge effort to get her back to school, but they did not succeed. "When they were pushing her to attend school again, Leonora was not even attending the Roma Community Centre. Once they stopped, she returned at least to the Centre's activities." Leonora is very active there and is mentoring other children as well. When asked whether anyone had helped her after she returned from Lazarat, Leonora responded: "No. But I have helped other children. I was in the peer-to-peer training, for children who had gone to Greece and came back. I have helped just a few other children, not many."

Her return from Lazarat was a tough time for her, as she explained: "While working there I was busy and I had forgotten everything from my life, what I had been through. Then I came back here and my troubles are back. Now I take care of my brother; I get him ready to go to school and I do chores around the house." Leonora explained that she doesn't worry about herself as much as she does about her siblings: "I haven't got any dreams for myself, only for my brother; for him to have a house, to have a job and not to work in the streets. Girls get married and move in with their husbands, but my brother could stay in the street." Leonora admitted that life for girls is more difficult than for boys: "If they rape you, who is going to take care of you? She said there were many cases of girls that have been raped, but there was no one to take care of them. "I know

where I can go to find help, but even if I do, what will happen then? I will do that, but they will not listen... There are people working to protect children here, but parents don't want it. [At first] they will listen, but then they go back to the same ways. It's the mentality."

While some actions have been taken by institutions and NGOs in Elbasan to protect Leonora, these have been limited to getting her out of a street situation. Abandoned by her parents she has been in kinship care that appears to have put her at risk several times; whatever actions were taken by the authorities have neither protected her from exploitation, nor have they guaranteed she, a very smart and active girl, could develop to her fullest potential by continuing her education. While she has huge potential, the only chance for personal development appears to be limited to activities within the Roma Community Centre, which is maybe more than other girls in a similar situation can enjoy. But in an environment far from protective, and out of school, Leonora may have even become more vulnerable.



*Leonora sharing her experience of care and protection services, during meeting at the Roma Community Centre in Elbasan, Albania. April 2015*



A photograph of a young boy, Ardi, seen from behind. He is standing in a garden or yard, looking towards a fence and some trees. He is wearing a grey hoodie with blue and orange stripes on the sleeves and light-colored trousers. The background shows a rural setting with some buildings and vegetation. The image is framed by orange geometric shapes on the left and bottom edges.

## Ardi

Ardi is a 16 year-old boy, from a poor, ethnic-Albanian family in S., a small village in the southeast of the country. He is the second youngest of five siblings. Ardi lost his father when he was two. Shortly afterwards, his mother, Marsela, admitted him into a residential institution, as he had developmental delays and needed support that he could not receive at home. After her husband's passing, Marsela was facing financial difficulties, and moved in with another man in B., a nearby village. Her new partner's pension helped her provide for her children. She took Ardi back into their home in B. when he was eight.

Towards the end of 2010, an older boy in the village with ties to the family, began to sexually abuse 12-year-old Ardi. When Tdh met him, Ardi said he only told his mother about the abuse after it had happened for the third time: "I didn't tell her initially, because she would have felt very bad." Marsela intervened by talking to the other boy's mother, as there was a relationship between the families and she was worried no one would have believed her if she had gone to the police. Unfortunately, things did not change for Ardi. The boy and a friend of his sexually abused him again. When Marsela found Ardi crying and in pain and heard that he had been raped again, she decided to go to the police.

The local police immediately took action, interviewed Ardi and his mother in the presence of a school psychologist and sent Ardi to the forensic expert for an examination. When Tdh interviewed him in April 2015, Ardi, recalled the police officer telling him: "Why did he [the abuser] come to you? Weren't there any girls?" According to Ardi and his mother, the forensic doctor performed the examination and gave him some medicine, but did not treat his wounds. The case received media coverage exposing also Ardi's personal information, but brought the case to the attention of NGOs and triggered follow-up action.

As there was no CPU in the region at the time Tdh alerted the office of the Regional State Social Services, which, jointly with Tdh and a Police Inspector, conducted a family visit to assess the boy's situation. Ardi had bruises and wounds on his body, and the state of his health and psychological condition was very poor. In the absence of an emergency shelter, Ardi was still in the village; he was terrified and would not leave the house. His family was reportedly under a lot of pressure by

Ardi in his house in village S., southeastern Albania. April 2015

the suspects' families to drop the complaint. His entire family felt exposed, stigmatized and under pressure within the small community in the village. Ardi and his mother requested that he was moved away from the village as a matter of urgency. Through Tdh, the Elbasan-based NGO "Another Vision" (*Tjëter Vizion*), which had experience in providing support to children that had suffered sexual abuse, offered Ardi a place, and the Regional State Social Services made all the official logistical arrangements for his placement there.

When Ardi first moved to Elbasan he was still very traumatized. A social worker at *Tjëter Vizion* recalled that "he could not sleep, he was having nightmares, and he was scared and agitated, sometimes even aggressive." *Tjëter Vizion* asked the local CPU for help to bring together other services in order to complete the intervention. The priority was to ensure Ardi's wellbeing and feeling of safety in the institution and he was offered psychological treatment with NGO support. Ardi slowly started to build confidence, developed a very close relationship with the staff and had found a safe environment at *Tjëter Vizion*.

Tdh had from the beginning contracted the NGO "Legal Clinic for Minors" to work on Ardi's case. The Clinic provided legal and psychological counselling to Ardi from the beginning and throughout the legal procedure against his abusers. In December 2011, his abusers were convicted and handed prison sentences.

According to the CPW in Elbasan, during the second half of 2012 *Tjëter Vizion* were lacking funding and the centre was going to suspend its services. The CPU then called a multi-disciplinary group in order to discuss possible alternative options for Ardi. It would not have been appropriate for him to be moved back to the village, thus Tdh financially supported the continuation of his stay at *Tjëter Vizion*. However, at the end of the school year in June 2014 following a joint decision by the State Social Services office and *Tjëter Vizion*, and against his own wishes, Ardi was placed back with his family, who had moved back to their family house in S. as it would be safer for him and his siblings. A *Tjëter Vizion* worker explained that the decision was based on the importance for Ardi to be reunited with his family rather than spend more time in institutions.

The CPW in Elbasan expressed her concern that while this was a case she was managing, she had not been party to the transfer decision and she had only been informed once Ardi had already moved back with his family. Ardi's return back to S. village may not have been in his best interests, as no support services were available in that remote rural part of Albania while he was still suffering from health and emotional problems. In addition, the community was very small and everyone reportedly knew his story. Indeed, Ardi emphasized that he had not wanted to move back to the village, because his family was very poor and, not only did he miss support, but was also forced to confront his traumatic past. "They tease me at school. When other people in the village mention what happened to me I get very sad. I go to the mosque, and to the lake to try to forget, but it doesn't work."

When the abuse had been discovered, Ardi was taken out from a harmful environment, placed into safety and was given support for his recovery. But when NGO funding strained and he could not anymore stay at the shelter, Ardi's future had been decided by default, and raises the question of how sustainable his protection has been. He returned to an environment that exposed him again to hardship, deep poverty and stigma, if not even further risk. And, as with many other children like him in remote rural Albania, whose stories may never be discovered, Ardi would not be able to access the support, social and care services that he needs.



## Surviving sexual violence

Sexual violence against children is a gross violation of their rights. It can take many forms, including sexual abuse, harassment, rape or sexual exploitation in prostitution or pornography. The CRC prohibits sexual violence against children.<sup>18</sup> Article 39 of the CRC further requires that states take “all appropriate measures to promote physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of a child victim of... abuse” and further stipulates that such recovery and reintegration shall take place in an environment which fosters the health, self-respect and dignity of the child.” The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention), which was ratified by Albania in February 2013 and entered into force in August 2014, further calls on states to “take the necessary legislative or other measures to provide for the setting up of appropriate, easily accessible rape crisis or sexual violence referral centres for victims in sufficient numbers to provide for medical and forensic examination, trauma support and counselling for victims.”<sup>19</sup>

According to NGOs and authorities at central and local level, providing effective support to children survivors of sexual violence is one of the main weaknesses in child protection in Albania. Lack of emergency services, expertise and experience among psychosocial and other professionals to work with children survivors of sexual abuse are some of the main gaps. The Director of the State Agency acknowledged that “this is a very weak area; we are failing systematically”, but noted that the Agency is currently prioritizing this area.

<sup>18</sup> CRC, Art. 34

<sup>19</sup> Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence CETS No.: 210, Art. 25, available at: <http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/EN/Treaties/Html/210.htm>

## Children in institutional care

The CRC at Article 9 requires that states “ensure that a child shall not be separated from his or her parents against their will, except when competent authorities subject to judicial review determine...that such separation is necessary for the best interests of the child...” and that “all interested parties shall be given an opportunity to participate in the proceedings and make their views known.” Article 18(2) further stipulates: “States Parties shall render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities and shall ensure the development of institutions, facilities and services for the care of children.” Recommendation (2005) of the Council of Europe’s Committee of Ministers on the rights of children living in residential institutions further notes that parents have primary responsibility for the upbringing and development of their children and emphasizes that separation of children from their families should be a solution of last resort and should only happen, when it is unavoidable, as a temporary measure. States are further required to identify family-based solutions in order to address the root causes of family separation and ensure contact between parents and children.<sup>20</sup>

There are currently 24 residential institutions and eight Development Centres in Albania, a combination of public and private, providing residential care for children less than 18 years who are orphans, abandoned, or lack proper parental care. According to a recent survey by UNICEF and the MSWY, Romani children represented 18 per cent of children resident in all public and non-public institutions in Albania, between 1 January 2013 and July 2014 – a proportion far in excess of the Roma population as a percentage of the total population in Albania. Romani children made up over 40 percent of residents in some institutions. The proportion of children of Albanian and Egyptian ethnicity was found at 77 and 5 percent respectively. The survey also revealed that a large number of children were in fact not abandoned or orphaned, but their placement in institutional care had been motivated mainly by socio-economic reasons.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Council of Europe, Committee of Ministers, Recommendation Rec(2005)5 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the rights of children living in residential institutions (16 March 2005), available at: <https://wcd.coe.int/wcd/ViewDoc.jsp?id=835953&Site=CM>

<sup>21</sup> Peter Evans with NGO Future Centre, Albania, A survey of children resident in public and non-public institutions in Albania [http://www.unicef.org/albania/2014-Albania\\_stock\\_flow\\_analysis\\_report\\_ver3.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/albania/2014-Albania_stock_flow_analysis_report_ver3.pdf)



Since 2005 – in line with international standards, EU law and policy trends – the Albanian government has identified the deinstitutionalization of care, especially for children, as one of the fundamental principles of the social services reform. Alternatives are supposed to be sought in order to gradually replace institutions with fostering, kinship care or family-like group homes. A pilot project for foster care of children without parents was initiated in 2010.<sup>22</sup> It is of interest to see that, according to the recent UNICEF and MSWY survey, only three out of nearly 1,000 children were placed in foster care during the period covered. 88 children reportedly returned to their original family and 59 were adopted.<sup>23</sup> However, a representative of the State Social Services department of the MSWY noted that, for deinstitutionalization to work, there is need for non-residential community services, which are currently largely missing in Albania.

22 Irene Stevens, Graham Connelly and Ian Milligan, Moving forward on alternative care Assessment of the Foster Care Pilot Project in Albania, September-October 2013, p. 10, [file:///Users/FotisFilippou/Documents/Albania%20-%20child%20protection%20research/UNICEF\\_Albania\\_Fostering\\_Evaluation.pdf](file:///Users/FotisFilippou/Documents/Albania%20-%20child%20protection%20research/UNICEF_Albania_Fostering_Evaluation.pdf)

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Ervin's room at the dorm for orphans who have exited the residential institution in Tirana, Albania.  
April 2015

## Ervin

Ervin is a 16-year-old Romani boy. When he was two years old his mother abandoned him and his older brother and moved to the United States. Ervin's father, reportedly, used to force the children to beg and later placed the two in a religious residential institution in Tirana, "His Children's" home, run by a British national. Ervin was seven years old when a scandal broke out in May 2006 following allegations that the missionary and two other British staff had been sexually abusing children at the centre. Police raided the centre and closed it down. Ten children, aged between four and 13, had reportedly testified to having been sexually abused by staff.<sup>24</sup> State Social Services placed Ervin and other children from the centre in an orphanage in Tirana. Ervin's older brother was placed with his maternal grandmother and uncle in Elbasan.

Tdh contracted the NGO Legal Clinic for Minors to provide psychological counseling, treatment and legal support to the abused children. The psychologist of the Clinic recalled: "The children were in a dramatic situation." Ervin had been sexually abused several times and according to her, "he was one of the children that had been most traumatized. He had a lot of psychological problems and consequences from the trauma. For months he couldn't sleep with the lights off. But all the children had problems and were aggressive." The children received psychological counseling and the Clinic was by their side supporting them throughout the long judicial process. Following a lengthy trial the British missionary was convicted in November 2008 to 20 years in prison. The other two staff involved in sexually abusing children were handed 20 and 15 years prison-sentences in January 2010.<sup>25</sup>

Legal guardianship for Ervin was taken from the father and assigned to the institution. Social workers in the orphanage reportedly also worked with Ervin and the other children coming from "His Children's" home to help their recovery.

<sup>24</sup> The Guardian, "UK police withheld details of sex abuse at orphanage from Albanian authorities", 20 November 2008, <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2008/nov/20/police-abuse-albania-child-extradition>

<sup>25</sup> Daily Mail, "Two Britons jailed for abusing children at orphanage in Albania", 13 January 2010, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1242767/Two-Britons-jailed-abusing-children-orphanage-Albania.html>



Psychosocial staff at the orphanage said that, considering his situation, Ervin was collaborating well with them and other children and was showing progress. In fact, when Tdh interviewed him in May 2015, Ervin remembered his time at the orphanage really fondly and said it represented the best years of his life. He was getting in trouble sometimes in the institution and also in school, but the problems intensified when he was around 15 years old. According to the orphanage's psychosocial staff: "Ervin needed to be free and out of the institution, which is normal for a teenager; but he also wanted the safety he had missed previously; here he had found basic needs, support and safety, and on the other hand he wanted to be like the other teenagers, to smoke, go out..."

Throughout his time in the orphanage, Ervin had been in touch with his uncle's family in Elbasan. Taking this into consideration, as well as Ervin's skills and capacities, when he finished grade nine in the summer of 2014, the orphanage staff decided to enroll him in the mechanics high school in Elbasan. Ervin said: "I went for the summer holidays first. Then there was a misunderstanding with my uncle and they no longer wanted me. I had to take the school exams in September, so [the orphanage] sent me to the dormitory in Elbasan. I hoped that my family would have taken care of me and I thought it would have been better there, but it turned out worse."

Accommodation and meals at the dorm were provided for free by the municipality of Elbasan after an arrangement with the orphanage, which also gave him 1,000 Lek per month as pocket money and covered his books, school material and clothes. However, psychosocial and other kinds of effective support were missing. Ervin did not regularly attend school and he did not enjoy living in the dormitory. "Sometimes it was ok, but I was not used to being far away from Tirana. I didn't go to school at all." A young psychologist working at the dorm explained that Ervin had found it difficult to comply with the strict rules of the dorm, which allowed rare opportunities to visit family or attend external events such as football matches. At the same time, the dorm staff admitted that there were no programmes or activities during the youngsters' free time: "We do not have any leisure programmes at the dorm, and if we wanted to organize something we would not have had money for such things."

According to the psychologist, Ervin was having serious behavioural problems, but staff at the dorm said it was hard to deal with him as they had no knowledge of Ervin's background and history, as allegedly the orphanage had not provided them with any information about Ervin's past when they had first brought him to Elbasan. Ervin admitted: "I started stealing, what could I do without a job? I am an adult now and 1,000 Lek per month is not enough for me. All other guys were going out, to have coffee. I was staying alone there. I stole for the money, I needed money." The psychologist noted that, "even though I have talked a lot with him and counseled him, asking him not to repeat these things, he didn't listen to me. But – he said – the problem didn't start here in Elbasan, he came with these problems from [the orphanage]." The dorm staff confirmed when Ervin began showing this behaviour they had not sought additional support either from the CPU or other actors in Elbasan.

According to the dorm psychologist, in March 2015, Ervin stole some computers from an office in Elbasan and the police came around at the dorm asking to talk to him. Ervin remembered: "police officer in Elbasan told me to leave. If not, he would arrest me. So I went back to Tirana." Around the same time, the orphanage received a letter from Ervin's school in Elbasan informing them that he had been expelled because of his absences. Ervin had gone back to the orphanage asking for a place to stay, but he was told he could no longer live there. The director explained that they had been aware of his behaviour and "we thought the best thing for Ervin and the other children was his accommodation in a dorm" where children of orphan status would move after leaving the orphanage. Ervin was offered a place there and free meals at the orphanage. The conditions at the dorm in Tirana were really bad, with the building being in a serious state of disrepair, and

nearly 60 people sharing two toilets, one for men and one for women. Ervin was one of two minors living there. He was sharing a room with two men in their forties and Tdh was informed by other residents that there was minimum, if any, supervision, as the care-taker was often not around.

In April 2015 Tdh staff identified Ervin as being in a street situation together with a friend of his. The boys said they had been sleeping at a building near a gambling shop in a rough area of Tirana. As Ervin did not want to stay in the dorm, Tdh alerted a CPU in Tirana and Ervin and his friend were placed in the ARSIS emergency shelter for a few days. A representative of the Task Force at the State Agency called for an emergency multi-disciplinary group meeting. Different scenarios were discussed, however, before any plan could be set in motion Ervin had been arrested and taken by police to Elbasan. The orphanage, as Ervin's legal guardian, told Tdh that they had not received any official information from the police and stated they had only known because the case was reported in the news.

Ervin recalled that he was with his friend when he was approached by a police officer from Elbasan. "He handcuffed me and said 'we have some unfinished business' and they took me to Elbasan. I was surprised. I had left Elbasan for over a month already. Then they interrogated me for one or two hours. They behaved well; they slapped me a couple of times, but it's ok. I can handle it." According to Ervin, there was no lawyer or psychologist present during his questioning by the police. "I stayed there for one night, the next morning they interrogated me again and showed me the video from the security cameras in the office. Then I was transferred to pre-trial detention. I stayed there for four or five days." Ervin said that he was provided with a lawyer. "He told me what to say. To tell them that I stole because I needed the money and then I met him the next morning. He said he would help. I met him in the court of Elbasan. They interrogated me. I didn't tell them where I sold them and then they told me that they would transfer me to Kavaja. I asked them for how long? They said undetermined..."

Ervin was transferred to the Institute for Minors in Kavaja, a detention center for juvenile offenders, on 28 April 2015. At the time when Tdh staff met him there on 18 May 2015, no one else – including his legal guardian at the orphanage – had been in touch with Ervin. "No one knows I am here. I couldn't inform anyone. I was with [my friend] when they apprehended me. From there they took me to the Police Commissariat in Elbasan, but no one knew. They held me there and I stayed there for five days and then I was brought here." Ervin said that most youngsters in Kavaja were in for burglaries and that he knew many of the guys already from Tirana. Ervin told Tdh that he hoped he would not stay in there for long: "I have nothing here, just these clothes, this is what I had on when they arrested me. I can't stay here, I can't stay closed inside."

Ervin's case is not rare. In fact, he is a typical child who has spent all his life in institutions only to end up in the margins of society and in conflict with the law. Ervin's case also illustrates how ineffective interventions can be, when institutions work in silos. Tdh and other organizations are concerned that often, directors and staff of residential institutions responsible for the care or assigned legal guardianship of the child, might unilaterally take decisions affecting the child, without referring to the wider child protection structure, such as the CPU and other relevant bodies at the central or local level. Children leaving the institution below the age of 18 are often left completely unsupervised, and this in many cases might expose them to risks, such as finding themselves in street situation, risk of being trafficked, or even of committing petty and more serious crimes.



## Children in conflict with the law

The CRC at Article 40 provides that “States Parties recognize the right of every child alleged as, accused of, or recognized as having infringed the penal law to be treated in a manner consistent with the promotion of the child’s sense of dignity and worth, which reinforces the child’s respect for the human rights and fundamental freedoms of others and which takes into account the child’s age and the desirability of promoting the child’s reintegration and the child’s assuming a constructive role in society.” The CRC further stipulates in more detail the state’s obligations in this area, including that “a variety of dispositions, such as care, guidance and supervision orders; counseling; probation; foster care; education and vocational training programmes and other alternatives to institutional care shall be available to ensure that children are dealt with in a manner appropriate to their well-being and proportionate both to their circumstances and the offence.”<sup>26</sup>

Children in conflict with the law are very vulnerable within the current justice and social care system in Albania. Child-friendly justice for children who find themselves in contact with the law is scarce and at times non-existent. According to a study commissioned by Tdh, despite some

<sup>26</sup> CRC, Art. 40



reforms in the juvenile justice system there are several structural gaps, including an inadequate legal framework. There is a lack of guidance for police in line with international human rights standards on arrest and investigation of cases involving minors as well as lack of adequate facilities and services making use of alternatives to detention almost impossible.<sup>27</sup> Cooperation between social care institutions – including the CPU – and law enforcement officials, such as the police, and most importantly, prosecutors and judges, is weak and often very problematic. A study by Save the Children and Meridia Albania notes “there is a lack of an inter-institutional mechanism for the reference of children and juveniles in conflict with the law by the penitentiary institutions to the Child Protection Units.” In addition, the study highlights “there is a lack of legal instruments safeguarding and protecting specifically the rights of children and juveniles in conflict with the law, focusing on the reintegration through education, guidance and vocational training or employment.”<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Renate Winter and Peter Evans, for Terre des hommes Mission in Albania, A research into the current system of children in contact with the law in Albania, Draft report, upcoming 2015

<sup>28</sup> Save the Children and Meridia Albania, Reintegration of children and juveniles in conflict with the law and corporate social responsibility in Albania, 2013, pp. 8-9 <https://albania.savethechildren.net/sites/albania.savethechildren.net/files/library/Analyze%20Studimore%20%20Anglisht%20Meridia-%20FINAL.pdf>



# Listening to the Views of the Child

The possibility for the child – and his or her family – to express their views about and participate in any decisions affecting them, is not only a right enshrined in international human rights law<sup>29</sup>, but also a way to ensure effective intervention that will take the child and its family out of a risk situation. There is a general lack of participation of children – especially the most vulnerable ones – in decisions that affect their life, and this is replicated within the system and services of child protection in Albania. While policies and guidelines, such as the Working Protocol for Child Protection Workers and upcoming guidelines on the Street Work expected later in 2015, position the child and his or her family at the centre of the protection system, in practice this is not the case.

Decisions made by CPUs or multi-disciplinary groups, may, but are not always, discussed with the child or their family. One CPW from Tirana said: “We do take into consideration more the opinion of the family rather than of the child. We normally ask the family, not the child.” But she acknowledged that this is largely an issue of mentality: “The CPU doesn’t have the understanding of how important it is to ask the child and institutions don’t have the capacity and time to communicate with the child and ask them what they want, and when it comes to other actors, such as the school, health care services, labour office, the police, it’s even worse.”

29 CRC, Art. 12



# Conclusion and Recommendations

The stories of the children featured in this briefing could be the stories of thousands of children in Albania facing similar risks and protection needs. Zamira, Leonora, Ardi and Ervin have all been, in one or another way, in touch with and assisted by care and protection services. But in all cases these interventions addressed immediate needs, dealt with the emergency, but left a lot to be expected when it comes to a safe future for these children, where they can enjoy the full range of their human rights. In all cases, the lack of a long-term sustainable plan and intervention is evident. But does the system do more than just “rescue” the child from the emergency? And what is the purpose of “rescuing”, unless a system is in place that ensures the child does not fall back into the cycle of marginalization and abuse?

Whilst these stories are typical, they are also exceptional, insofar as they have been identified and benefited from any kind of services at all. In this context, NGOs have stepped in and identified the cases, provided services and supported staff working in child protection institutions. The reliance of the “system” on NGOs is still extremely high as the Head of the State Agency acknowledged: “We would not be able to function without the NGOs, if they were to stop their support tomorrow.” But there are many more children, in remote areas without any access to services, or NGOs, or whose stories are ‘invisible’ due to acceptance and toleration of abuse and exploitation by their surroundings and lack of understanding that taking care guaranteeing the child’s wellbeing is everyone’s responsibility.

Child protection in Albania has come a long way in building structures and mechanisms that provide protection services to children at risk; but it still has a long way to go before it becomes an effective “child protection system” that has the scope, capacity and resources to both prevent and protect children from abuse, exploitation and violence.

# Recommendations

- The Albanian government and authorities at all levels, central and local, should prioritize, support and create the necessary conditions for multi-agency work aimed at preventing, responding to and following up on cases of child protection.
- The Albanian government should develop and adopt a Law on Child Protection to ensure the legal framework fully and comprehensively covers child protection and provides clarity about the processes, roles and responsibilities across various institutions at both national and local level.
- An independent quality monitoring and accountability system needs to be developed to ensure that CPUs – also with the engagement of other actors at the local level – are effective and successful in the identification, referral and management of cases of children in need of protection. This should include work beyond emergency and immediate intervention to address long-term risks.
- Authorities at central and local level should ensure that changes to the public administration and service provision at the local level, resulting from the territorial and social care reform, do not lead to the reduction of child protection services, but ensure strengthening of such services and increased availability across the country.
- Authorities must ensure that there is adequate budget for CPUs at the local level, including for operational costs, such as conducting family visits, and for emergency assistance to families in need.
- Authorities at central and local level should ensure that staff employed as social workers in Child Protection Units and other child protection services demonstrate minimum knowledge and skills; and that training on child protection is rolled out for all actors taking part directly or indirectly in protection and other service provision.
- Authorities should ensure the provision of a service for children survivors of sexual abuse specialized in the treatment and response to such cases, including also the availability of emergency shelters easily accessible across the country. In addition, training and sensitization should be developed and provided to all actors that may come into contact with children survivors of sexual abuse.
- Government authorities should strengthen efforts to address structural factors, such as poverty, gender and traditions, that may lead to child labour, children in street situation, early marriage, school dropouts or institutionalization of children, through social and housing assistance, income-generating programmes and parenting programmes with an emphasis in gender roles and traditions, aimed at empowering families and youth in a vulnerable situation.



- Authorities should continue efforts towards deinstitutionalization ensuring the availability of alternative schemes such as foster or kinship care, or family-like group homes; children placed in institutions for socioeconomic reasons – and their families – should be supported in the transition back to the family, ensuring the best interests of the child and availability of community-based services once the child is back.
- Authorities at the central and local level should continue the proactive approach to identification and assistance to children and families in street situation as a good practice. However, on-going support should be provided to the family through empowerment programmes, including life skills, access to employment and parental skills.
- The Albanian government should develop and adopt a comprehensive Juvenile Justice Code that recognizes the particular needs of children in conflict with the law, ensuring the best interests of the child principle is at the centre of the system and a child-friendly procedure is in place from investigation to detention. Law enforcement authorities should also ensure coordination with child protective bodies to ensure services are in place for the effective reintegration of children that come out of detention.

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