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Albania Report on Focus Group Discussions with children and young people in the consultation phase of development of the European Union Strategy on the Rights of the Child

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With the contribution of: Save the Children Albania, Terre des hommes Albania, World Vision in Albania and Kosovo, UNICEF Albania

*This report represents the views of children collected through a large consultation process focused on children's rights, aiming at informing the development of the European Union's Strategy on the Rights of the Child.

I. Summary of the process

To inform the development of the new EU Child Rights Strategy, the European Commission has requested Eurochild, Save the Children, UNICEF, World Vision International and ChildFund Alliance to lead consultations with children in Europe and beyond to include their opinion in the definition of the priorities of the new strategy. In this framework, UNICEF Albania, Save the Children Albania, Terre des hommes Albania, World Vision in Albania and Kosovo have organized the process, following the guidance provided by the EU commission, guaranteeing a common approach to consultations and fulfilment of ethical principles and safeguarding standards of working and consulting with children.

Twenty Focus Groups Discussions were conducted, with a total of 247 children and young people of the group age between 11–17 years old from 11 municipalities of Albania¹, both urban and rural areas. Part of the consultations were also children from ethnic minorities (Roma/Egyptian), children from immigrant parents, children from urban/rural areas, children from vulnerable families (economic difficulties and households benefitting from economic aid), children with divorced parents, children with disability, asylum seeking children, children returnees from EU countries and children in residential care institutions.

The questionnaires have been translated in Albanian and administered by adult facilitators representing the characteristics as per the guidance provided by the EU commission. Consultations have been carried out in a combined approach: online and face to face, by taking into account the situation of the COVID-19 infections in the selected areas and taking all the necessary precautions as per the Ministry of Health and Social Protection protocols.

II. Findings

Almost all children participating in the Focus Group Discussions claim to have **heard about children's rights** and of the Convention on Children's Rights. This is a topic often discussed in school, as part of the extracurricular program of the mandatory school. There are many awareness raising activities in relation to the child rights going on yearly at local and central level and the celebration of international days such as the international day of the CRC, the international day of children; the international day of Roma etc where information and awareness raising materials are shared with children participating in those activities. Another source of information and learning about child rights results to be the cooperation and support provided through interventions and programs of different national and local child rights organizations operating in the areas where the consulted children are living.

"Yes, I have heard and read about the rights on the internet as it was a topic for a school project, of the Civic Education class. There were a lot of information". (Girl 14 y.o.)

¹ Elbasan, Durrës, Diber, Burrel, Shkodra, Kukes, Lezha, Fier, Kamza, Korça, Kurbin

“We have heard about children’s rights since the 1st grade, but now we can understand and analyse how important they are for us” (Girl 15 y.o.)

The rights most frequently cited by children are as follows:

- The right to life and identity;
- The right to have a family;
- The right to education;
- The right to be protected from violence;
- The right to health care;
- The right to leisure;
- The right to social life;
- The right to participation.

As per the reports of the group discussions children feel that generally adults do not **respect children’s rights**. Some of them think this is an issue of mentality and general attitude of the society in relation to children as not as valuable as adults since “they are young and don’t understand” therefore it is not common to ask for their opinion or consider making them part of the solution.

“We live in a democratic country and this is why children’s rights must be respected if not, the law should be applied. There are several child rights violations in our community” (14 -year-old girl)

“Yes, the majority of adults respect our rights because they are not only children’s rights but their obligations as well, such as ensuring education, food, housing etc” (15-year-old boy)

This is happening in the families, in the community, in schools, everywhere. Children declare to experience discrimination at home; gender stereotypes are still strong creating misbalances in the way the adults see and value girls and boys; there is discrimination at home, at school and community level as result of race, socio-economic situation of families or of the provenience; children that drop out school as result of poverty are obliged to work to help the family surviving. The participants state that children experience physical and psychological violence from their parents as a form of disciplining them and as an education tool. Psychological violence is still present in schools too.

The majority of children demonstrate little to no **knowledge on the role and the work of the EU** in regard to protection of children’s rights. From school they have learned about the EU ‘as an economic and political union of some European countries’ but cannot enter into more specificities. They mostly relate the role of the EU as a financing body for different programs and interventions in Albania.

The others report to have information on the work of the EU to promote and protect children's rights, as for example raising the voice on the rights of refugee children, protection of children from violence and trafficking. Some children are aware on the role of the EU structures in Albania since they have heard or participated in different awareness activities organized by the European Commission as well on the efforts to support Albania in fulfilling the obligations to adhere to the EU.

School projects in subjects such as History or Civic Education have provided the grounds for children to receive information of the history and the scope of the EU. As well children participating in activities such as info sessions and trainings organized by child rights organizations have more information and knowledge compared to other peers in the FGDs.

I heard about the campaigns for Albania's membership in the EU which demands respect of the children's rights (18-year-old girl)

The EU is one of the most well-known organizations for protecting universal human rights, especially children's rights (15-year-old boy)

EU is a force that unites many countries for peace, cooperation, equality between people, funds projects for organizations working to protect the rights of children. (15 -year-old boy)

From the group discussions, it seems that the **differentiation in treatment** is a burning issue. Children bring personal experiences of being treated differently at least once or witnessed the way how other children and peers have been treated as result of being from a village, for speaking in a different dialect, for having a different colour, belonging to minorities or families with low income. According to them, this is related to a closed mentality of their communities which are resistant to accept and welcome the differences and to promote tolerance. Children declare that those attitudes are being demonstrated by children themselves, by teachers, parents or other community members.

All children report that in one way or another themselves or children they know have been treated differently from other children; **girls from boys**; poor families from well off (the social and economic status of families affects the way some children treat their peers or teachers treat them), etc. Coming from **rural areas or being children of Roma/Egyptian minorities** lead to bullying and discrimination. In relation to the **sexual orientation** children think that this is a taboo in our society where no one is welcomed in talking about it. In cases of children with disability they are often seen with pity by peers, teachers or other adults.

In families there are differences in the expectations toward boys and girls or first-born children from younger siblings. In schools, children of teachers or from wealthy families are favored for better grades or are more engaged in extracurricular activities.

"Always in our class the best grades are given to children of teachers or whom parents have a

*business, even though to be honest there are other students that deserve those grades more”
(12-year-old girl)*

“I am often told ‘...he is Roma, who needs school...’ or if something happens in the classroom, the first who is pointed out is me as the cause of the mess”. (12-year-old boy)

“A guy in my class spoke up saying that he didn’t afford to pay for the school guard... for this he has been ridiculed and insulted” (13-year-old girl)

Almost all children participating in the FGD or online questionnaire, **consider school** a very important place for them to learn and socialize. They like going to school even though they are aware of many issues that need to be improved from the infrastructure, to the curricula and the teaching methods. They express that the lessons are very theoretical, based on the explanations of the teachers with little to no possibilities to introduce practical, hands on, ways of learning which would make the content more understandable. In the same time, they think there is an overload of homework and tests for each subject.

Most of the children, especially those from suburban and rural areas are unsatisfied with the physical conditions of the schools, often lacking dedicated laboratories, dedicated spaces to sports and other common recreational outdoor spaces. Children complains on the poor hygiene of the bathrooms since there are few toilets and lack of running water. During winter the classrooms are very cold as schools lack heating systems.

Textbooks are free of charge for children from 1st grade to the 6th (the elementary) which is considered as positive from children, but this schema foresees the return of the text at the end of the school year and distribution of the used textbooks to children of the next year. This creates problems and difficulties for children since often texts contains notes from previous owners which distracts the learning. They all claim that prefer to buy the books rather than take the used books for free.

Children explain that even though the public schools are free, there are many things that children and their families are obliged to pay for. Textbooks, school supplies, school uniforms are to be bought in the beginning of every academic year. There is as well a quota that children need to pay once a year for the school guard, or for other minor maintenances of the classrooms. In the other hand, children are asked to pay for the tests that are printed by teachers with personal expenses. Additionally, children are asked to print all the works necessary for their personal dossier, which they consider to be an overburden since they do not possess internet or printers at homes, so they need to pay for it. It results that many times children are asked to collect money in ‘volunteer’ bases to provide for the organization of different extracurricular activities.

Children had mixed feelings and thoughts in relation to the **situation created by the COVID-19 pandemic**.

“I realized how important freedom, school and friends are.” (14-year-old boy)

“It has been a time that served me to reflect more, to appreciate more some things that I used to take for granted” (15-year-old girl)

They feel positive on the time spent with their families, which generally has strengthened the relationship and communication between family members. They had more free time and have rested more. Many children report to have read more books or explored new things such as cooking. Another positive aspect was the possibility to expand their skills on the use of the technology, find new creative ways of socializing, maintaining communication with their friends and relatives, playing online games, etc. Some children brought to the discussion the positive impact the quarantine had on the environment, as the pollution was reduced, ‘the air was fresher, and the sky was clear blue’.

It seems that the list of negative aspects bits the positive one. Children report negative effects on their emotional and physical wellbeing. They have experienced increased stress, anxiety, fear, headaches, sleep disorders etc. They have feared constantly about their health and for the health of their parents and grandparents.

The online learning has been a challenge, some of the children called it a failure. Many children did not have the means to support the **online learning**, not all children have PCs, or tablets of smartphones. As well many of them didn’t have access to internet, often relying on neighbours connectivity, ad hoc solutions, etc. They explain how their families had to provide children with smartphones to follow the classes and to pay more internet. The online learning was chaotic, since different teachers have used different channels of communications and tools, some have organized learning through WhatsApp, others through ZOOM, Google classroom etc. Some of them have made video materials others explained the subject in handwriting others in ppt presentations. All this has created confusion, distraction and difficulties in following a normal flow of the learning process.

Another negative aspect pointed out during discussions was that many people have lost their jobs which has created more poverty in the communities. The fear and insecurity for their employment has affected all parents and was another stressing factor that has been felt by the whole family.

“The good thing is that we spent more time with our family members, but the difficult things were so scary, it made us so anxious, worried, many people got depressed, the way we had our lessons was very difficult, because we were not used to having online classes” (15-year-old girl)

“I was almost depressed; it was very hard to adjust and get used to the new situation” (12-year-old girl)

The public schools in Albania does not **provide food** in the lunch time. Before the pandemic, children usually take a snack from home and consume the lunch after returning home from school. Actually, due to the measures taken to prevent the spread of COVID-19 infections, it is

not allowed to consume food of any kind in school premises.

All children consulted declare to have **knowledge on health** care centres, and where to get help in case of need. Health promotion is a topic that is treated in school as part of the Biology or Citizenship subjects, where there is information about hygiene, STD, effects of tobacco, alcohol and drugs. Apart from school program, health promotion activities are organized within schools by local structures of public health as well as by non-governmental organizations. Children state that they use other sources of information on the topic such as TV and internet.

Sexual education is part of the school curricula, but generally it is considered as shameful to speak about sex and sexual relationships, which affects the way teachers treat this topic. As a result, sexual education related topics are explained in a superficial way.

Many children visit the doctor only when they are sick, thus depriving themselves of the opportunities to prevent health problems. There are not nurses or doctors in the schools which hamper the use of preventive measures or early identification of health problems that might arise.

Participants noted that they have never been informed about **mental health issues** and have not yet addressed it at school or in any informing activity. They think that each school should have their own psychologist in order to invest more in awareness and prevention activities.

When answering the question “Do you think you are **happy** with your life?” in general all children were focused on few basic elements: family, social connections, economic situation and future perspective. Thinking in that level children feel to be happy with their life since they have supportive families, good relationships with relatives and close friends in and out of school.

The dissatisfaction comes with the fact that children are often suffering a closed mentality which consider shameful that children, mostly girls can go out in the evenings or participating in celebrations or activities that are not organized by the school.

The economic insecurity and the fear for the future are the common issues of concern for children. They feel like abandoned by the ‘society’ and think that there are few opportunities for them to build a promising future.

The Pandemic has affected negatively to the optimistic feelings of children about the life and the future. They report to have gone through an intense period when they have felt stressed, anxious and fearful. They believe that the economic situation will worsen, their parents could lose the jobs, and even if they continue to work hard, they will not meet all the growing needs.

“I am very happy with my life, because I and my family are perfectly healthy, but COVID-19 is a very stressful situation for me and my friends” (18-year-old girl).

“Yes, I am very happy, because I live a normal life with normal conditions” (16-year-old girl).

“I have experienced unpleasant situations in my life, that have not allowed me to grow up peacefully and happy. The pandemic has made terribly anxious about the continuation of our normal life. The fact that both my parents are unemployed, gives me economic insecurity” (14-year-old girl).

Most of the children show concern and dissatisfaction about the missing infrastructure of their **neighbourhoods** such as lack of lightening and of the sidewalks, poor conditions of the roads and of the areas between buildings. There are no playgrounds for children, sport areas or dedicated places for art and culture. Many children report issues with the safety in their neighbourhoods since there are groups of older boys that often harass children.

About their homes children mostly value the favourable position of their houses in the neighbourhood when it is near the main road or near the school. They like to have small gardens where they play with siblings or friends. Most of the children don't have a personal room, they need to share the space with their siblings or in some cases even with other members of the family. The living conditions are much different from cities to villages. Children living in villages report that they lack running water, internet access and good heating in winter which makes their houses very cold and uncomfortable.

From the consultations we learn that children are often victims of **abuse**. They bring their experiences and perspectives on the presence of the violence and abuse toward children. They express concern about the widespread of the emotional abuse which targets the majority of children. At home emotional and physical abuse are still present. Parents often use physical and humiliating punishment as a form of disciplining. At school children are mostly affected by emotional abuse and bullying.

Children believe that **more needs to be done to address the child abuse** by creating more protective environments at school, communities and online. They think that changes in the beliefs of the adults around children, rearing practices and communication with children, would create ground for them to be more protected. Children themselves need to be informed about risks and help to build protective mechanisms. Cooperation among actors such as psychologists, schools and parents is important as well as development of specific programs to fight bullying and promote tolerance, cooperation and socialization among children.

Regarding the question whether they are involved in **consultations** with adults/politicians, children divide the responses into levels. At home, most of the children report that they are involved in the discussions about different decisions that the family need to take. Anyway, according to them this is more common with adolescent children than with the younger ones. As well children report that for more sensitive issue's children are not part of the discussions. While in schools there are child participation mechanisms such as the 'children's governments' in some cases they do play their role in bringing children voices and concerns into the school directory and in some cases those mechanisms do not function at all.

Children report that they are **not at all consulted in the local decision** making. The municipalities always give priority to investments in the infrastructure in their plans but none of those investments are for the benefit of the children such as construction of a playground or opening of a library. The municipal councils are composed only by adults that adhere in political parties and there is no place for children to raise their concerns.

III. Recommendations

While children participating in the consultations believe that all the alternatives listed in the questionnaire are valuable and important, they think that additional efforts are needed for improvement of some areas, as follows:

- Increase investments for children in education and social life;
- Prioritise interventions supporting the socio-emotional wellbeing of children in school, family and community life;
- Support online school programs, teacher's capacities and remote learning teaching strategies;
- Support quality and consistency of access to the internet that is necessary to open up children's opportunities in a digital world, including the most vulnerable and disadvantaged;
- All children should be protected from any form of violence, including in the online space;
- Invest in parenting education programs;
- Local and central institutions should take more responsibilities in guaranteeing children's rights;
- All children to be treated in the same way without discrimination of any form;
- To enforce the monitoring of implementation of the UNCRC;
- Invest in environmental protection and address climate change;
- Increase participation of children in central and local decision making;
- All children should live in a caring family.