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THE RESPONSE OF THE ALBANIAN SOCIAL PROTECTION SYSTEM TO THE NEEDS OF CITIZENS DURING THE PANDEMIC

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The Response of the Albanian Social Protection System to the Needs of Citizens during the Pandemic

Izela TAHSINI[1], Marinela SOTA[2], Veronika DUCI[3]

Abstract

In Albania, during the pandemic, access to social services has been a challenge for the most vulnerable communities, with limited capacities of existing social services and absent specialized services in rural areas. In this context, this study was undertaken, based on the necessity to assess the effectiveness of the response of the social protection system to the citizens 'needs during the pandemic, in four municipalities, Kukës, Lezhë, Kamëz, and Durrës. The methodology of the study was qualitative. 81 participants were involved in the assessment. Primary data were collected through 31 semi-structured interviews with representatives of municipality staff, employment office, prefecture, regional social services, regional education directorate, health service, and police service; and seven focus group discussions with representatives of public and non-public community centers, and school personnel. Main findings show that though several measures were taken to respond to the needs of citizens, there was limited access to services, especially for families living in remote areas, those with limited access to the internet, victims of domestic violence and child abuse, Roman and Egyptian. The quality of services offered was perceived as lower than before the pandemic. Services were partly relevant to the needs of citizens, because of late and limited measures concerning employment, lack of access to online services for victims of child abuse and domestic violence, limited access to online education, and unaddressed needs of service providers and parents. Overall there was inadequate financial support for families. Several lessons were learned, such as developing further interinstitutional cooperation and good cooperation with NGOs, and developing intersectional approaches to address poverty and vulnerability, to ensure continuity of services. The main best practices in this regard were full mapping of families in need and

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municipality services offered in cooperation with NGOs, such as home assistance, direct assistance, etc.

Keywords: pandemic; social protection system; access; quality; victims; child abuse.

Introduction

Albania is an upper middle-income country located in Southeastern Europe. Even though Albania has made progress in improving the living standards in the country, so GDP per capita, PPP is 14,516 USD in 2021 (World Development Indicators, 2021) and has in place a more effective social protection system (Nikoloski, 2019), still a high number of the population lives in poverty and the coverage of social protection program in comparison with countries in the region is low.

The pandemic posed big challenges in regard to accessing social protection and social care services for the population. Still, more specifically some groups faced the most negative effects of COVID-19. The OECD (2020) emphasized the need for governments to adapt and scale up social services during the pandemic. Countries that implemented flexible policies, such as remote healthcare services, emergency cash transfers, and expanded unemployment benefits, showed more resilience. The report also highlights the importance of multi-stakeholder partnerships in enhancing the reach and effectiveness of social services during the crisis. In addition, Moghanibashi-Mansourieh (2021) highlighted the challenges faced by vulnerable groups, particularly in securing access to healthcare, food aid, and financial support during the pandemic. Their study points out that disruptions in social services, coupled with limited digital literacy, exacerbated inequalities in accessing social protection and care services (Moghanibashi-Mansourieh, 2021)

Despite a considerable number of measures taken by the Government of Albania and local government to respond to the negative impacts of the situation, most vulnerable groups continued to demand social assistance from various institutions because they did not meet the required conditions to benefit from social assistance, or the assistance was insufficient to cope with their situation (Save the Children, 2020a).

Other studies discuss how the pandemic stressed the importance of local governance and CSO organizations in providing social services. The local governments played an important role in delivering food aid and health services to affected populations, despite facing limited financial and human resources. Yet, the situation revealed gaps in service delivery, particularly in rural and marginalized communities (Bino & Dodbiba, 2022; Bashki të forta, 2020). According to Rapid Gender Assessment (UN Women, 2020), women and female-headed households were most impacted by economic insecurity, having difficulties paying rent or

covering basic expenses. The same report shows that women who reported an increase in domestic violence stated that they experienced a higher impact on their psychological and mental health, in both urban and rural areas. The older women in rural areas and women living alone were experiencing emotional problems and were more at risk of food shortage (UN Women, 2020; Save the Children, 2020b).

Children and households with young children were among the groups at risk of multiple deprivation due to the limited access to social protection structures as well as increased economic pressure on the families (Save the Children, 2020a). According to an impact assessment on the well-being of children and families in Albania (World Vision, 2020), 75.5% of families did not fully meet food needs, a situation that was even more critical for families with at least one family member with disabilities. Terre des Hommes (2020) assessed also the impact of COVID-19 on families in need in Albania and found that only 20% of participant families declared having regular monthly income and about 16% of children didn't have access at all to online education while 69% were able to attend only sporadically. Furthermore, Roma Versitas Albania (2021) reveals the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on Roma communities in Albania, who experienced significant barriers to accessing health care, social assistance, and education services, while a World Bank report pinpointed the importance of access to digital services, which was hindered for some populations and regions (World Bank, 2020).

People with disabilities faced greater difficulties as a direct result of COVID-19, but the highest percentages are among those aged 51-60 years old, men, those living in rural areas as well as among persons with different types of disabilities (TFL, 2020). The survey showed that people with disabilities faced isolation for more than 3 months (70%), and they had problems with access to health services and other services. The participants in this survey listed as measures of priority that should have been taken financial support, food insurance, health support, and provision of medicines, which shows that the most prevalent need was that of financial support.

Many reports concluded that people appreciated the work of the government in regard to information dissemination (Save the Children, 2020b; TFL, 2020), but concerning access to services and effectiveness, more than 50% declared that the government response was completely ineffective (TFL, 2020).

Study framework

According to the European Commission Assessment of the Economic Reform Programme of Albania, one of the main challenges to reducing the impact of COVID-19 is increasing coverage and adequacy of social protection to reduce the population at risk of poverty (European Commission, 2021). The report mentions the social transfers' low effectiveness in decreasing poverty, low economic aid benefits, and scarce social services, as some of the challenges in this regard.

In this context, the main aim of this study was to assess the response of the social protection system to the citizen's needs during the pandemic, with a focus on the most vulnerable groups. Access, quality, relevance, and adequacy were the components of the response that were explored and analyzed, using a human rights-based approach. This is a conceptual framework normatively based on international human rights standards, operationally directed towards the promotion and protection of human rights, and seeking to analyze obligations, inequalities, and vulnerabilities, to tackle discriminatory practices, which harm human rights (Social Protection & Human Rights, 2015a). UN agencies have listed in agreement the essential attributes of a human rights-based approach:

– As policies and programs are formulated, the main objective should be to fulfill human rights,
– A human rights-based approach identifies rights holders and their entitlements and corresponding duty bearers and their obligations and works towards strengthening the capacities of rights holders to make their claims and of duty bearers to meet their obligations,
– Principles and standards derived from international human rights treaties should guide all policies and programming in all sectors and all phases of the process. (Social Protection & Human Rights, 2015a)

Based on Principle 20 of the European Pillar of Social Rights, everyone has the right to access essential services of good quality, providing a non-exhaustive list, which includes water, sanitation, energy, transport, digital communications, and financial services. (European Commission, n.d.-a). Also, the EU definition of access to high-quality social services, states that every citizen, especially the most disadvantaged, should be able to count on quality social services such as: early childhood education and care; long-term care; social assistance (social welfare or benefits); social housing; needs-based personal targeted services aimed at social inclusion and labor market integration. (European Commission, n.d.-b).

According to the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights General Comment 19 (para 22): "Benefits, whether in cash or in kind, must be adequate in amount and duration in order that everyone may realize his or her rights to family protection and assistance, an adequate standard of living and adequate access to health care, as contained in articles 10, 11 and 12 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights". (Social Protection & Human Rights, 2015b).

Principles of adequacy and predictability for the design and implementation of social protection benefits are also set out by ILO Conventions and Recommendations, such as the fact that state parties must respect the principles of human dignity and non-discrimination, in this regard, must apply methods that ensure the adequacy of benefits, and monitor regularly the adequacy criteria. (Social Protection & Human Rights, 2015b).

Aim of the study and research questions

This paper presents part of the qualitative results from a mixed methods national study that focused on the impact of COVID-19 on access of vulnerable children, families and communities to social protection in Albania (Jorgoni, Stubbs & Ymeri, 2021). The paper aims to assess the effectiveness of the response of the social protection system to the needs of citizens, especially those from vulnerable groups, during the pandemic. Its research questions were the following:

– How was the access of citizens to social services during the pandemic and which were the main barriers hindering it?
– How was the quality of social services during the pandemic?
– To what extent were social services relevant and adequate to respond to the needs of the citizens during the pandemic?
– What were the lessons learned and best practices for future considerations?

Methodology

To address the paper aim and to respond to the research questions, a qualitative methodology was used, including two instruments of data collection, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions with key actors in local government institutions and non-public organizations cooperating with them.

Methods

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with key informants in the social services sector, including municipality staff, employment offices, prefecture, regional social services, regional education directorate, health services and police service, while focus group discussions were conducted with representatives of public and non-public community centers, working in the territory of the municipality, and school personnel (directors, teachers and school psycho-social unit workers), to explore their views and experiences on the response of social services to the needs of citizens, during the pandemic.

Participants

In total 81 participants were involved in the assessment (26 in Kukës, 21 in Lezhë, 15 in Kamëz and 18 in Durrës). Of them, 31 were key informant interviews - 8 in Kukës, 10 in Lezhë, 8 in Kamëz, and 5 in Durrës -) and seven were focus group discussions - one in Kamëz, and two in every other municipality.

The key informant interviews and focus group discussions were tape-recorded and transcribed, in order to ensure higher accuracy of the data. The confidentiality of the interviews and anonymity of responses were preserved. The data were coded

around the main categories of primary data collection. Sub-codes were further developed, merged, and rearranged based on the variations and new insights that emerged during narrations. The findings were analyzed and harmonized with the literature review and methodology sections. This process was guided by the conceptual framework this paper was based upon.

Results

Access and quality of services

As a result of the pandemic, municipalities reported new needs of their communities, some of which were already suffering the socio-economic and psychological consequences of the earthquake of November 2019, with Durrës being the epicenter of it and Lezhë significantly affected out of the six targeted municipalities.

> *"The children were out of school due to online schooling, so they were reported to be more involved in criminal activities such as theft and selling narcotics" (NGO representative, Kamëz)*

The main groups in need, identified by each municipality, included: families in the economic aid (cash assistance) scheme, unemployed/newly unemployed, victims of domestic violence, children in need of protection, women head of household, families with members with disabilities, Roma and Egyptian community, older people living alone and children with disabilities especially concerning the access to education; children in conflict with the law (in Kukës and Kamëz); homeless families and individuals (in Lezhë and Kamëz); returnees and unaccompanied foreign migrant children in Durrës; people with mental health problems (in Kamëz).

Immediate support: Several measures were taken, to respond to the immediate needs of citizens and the most vulnerable groups. Two main categories of measures reported by the local government representatives were cash benefits and home assistance. More specifically, the economic aid and unemployment aid benefits were doubled for the period April-June 2020 (DCM 254, 2020). The economic aid was doubled again for the period January-June 2021, following a decision of the Council of Ministers. The second category consisted of home assistance to the groups in need during the pandemic focusing on special groups such as older people living alone or families with members with disabilities (DCM 236, 2020). Funding was also transferred to the local government to implement these measures.

During the lockdown, food packages and hygienic kits for families in need[4] were financed through the municipal reallocations of funds and from the state reserves. Each identified family in need received one package, and some of them up to 2-3. The main groups of people receiving more than one-time support were applicants and beneficiaries of the economic aid, and families with members with disabilities, excluding the ones that benefited from the disability assistance as the disability assessments were delayed due to the pandemic. NGOs also contributed with food packages, hygienic kits, and in some cases furniture, medication, cash payments, and targeted support. Lezhë provided medications to older persons living alone through municipal teams and NGO staff, while Durrës supported families in need, women victims of domestic violence, and children with limited abilities mainly with the distribution of packages, but also by providing information on COVID-19 protective measures and communication with doctors. In Kamëz, 3000 families were provided with payments.

Impact and adaptation of services: During the lockdown, the municipalities switched some of the services online. The employment offices also combined online and office-based services. The application processes for the economic assistance were simplified. Furthermore, following an ordinance of the Ministry of Health and Social Protection suspending the commissions for the assessment of disability, the payment of disability benefits continued, even if the period set by the commission was over. The use of online or remote application processes through mail/email/phone calls for economic aid, unemployment aid applications, and other services, were considered effective measures, especially during lockdown. In Kukës, a guideline was approved by the mayor for the employees engaged in direct response to the communities in need during the pandemic, describing the approach of the operationalization of services as well as the roles and responsibilities of employees. This guideline required setting four teams for identification and verification of the individuals and families in need in the territory, and four mobile teams for delivering assistance. In addition, a special order signed by the mayor setting the role and tasks of these teams was also published to inform the citizens on the services and contact persons at the assigned staff (Order of the Mayor of Kukës Municipality, 2020). An online platform was designed and launched to provide information on the available services and were to seek support. In Lezhë, the entire staff of social care services were transformed to mobile community based teams and working beyond

[4] The municipality of Lezha, which was one of the first to do so, approved a transfer of funds, a reallocation of 20 million ALL.

regular hours to provide home-based support, from the start of the lockdown to June 2020. Municipalities shared contact phone numbers to respond to the needs of citizens. The social care services staff were managing cases through phone, including monitoring the victims of violence with a protection order. The municipality of Kamëz set a 24-hour emergency desk service that was receiving calls complaints, requests of the individuals and families during the lockdown period. Part of the public social services was transferred online, through phone, or by offering mobile services at home. All NGOs adapted their services online, while some of them (emergency services) continued to work even during the lockdown. The main services that were adjusted included: community centers working with children with disabilities, which started offering services through multidisciplinary groups, supporting parents in providing therapy to their children; daily centers for older persons were offering multidisciplinary services at home; community centers were offering psycho-social support and orientation online, etc. All four municipalities with NGO support provided to several children from vulnerable families phones and tablets to be able to follow the academic program online. School psycho-social services were also offered through online platforms, or phone counselling, for children and parents.

Impact on clients - challenges in service provision and accessibility: The EU definition of access to high-quality social services, states that every citizen, especially the most disadvantaged, should be able to count on quality social services such as early childhood education and care; long-term care; social assistance (social welfare or benefits); social housing; needs-based personal targeted services aimed at social inclusion and labor market integration (European Commission, n.d.). During the pandemic, citizens faced limited access to local services, with municipal and NGO centers closing and some remaining closed for months or even until September 2020. This delay was due to a lack of information, unclear government instructions, and the closure of daily community centers. Remote rural areas faced difficulties in accessing services, while vocational training attendance was also affected. The centers continued to function with limited capacity (30% or 50%) even after the lockdown, in order to comply with the protocol requirements on COVID-19. Therefore, children and families received fewer hours of service per week than before. The therapy time for children with disabilities was reduced, and parents did not bring children regularly to the center, as before, though online work continued. Social activities for these children were significantly affected due to the risk of

infection, thus lowering their opportunities for social integration. The staff of these centers reported that some children and parents did not return to the centers after the lockdown and were no longer benefiting from the services and activities provided. Employment offices operated online during the lockdown and their work was limited only to the distribution of unemployment benefits. There were no job offers or mediations due to the closure of most of businesses during the lockdown. Unemployment increased especially during lockdown, and also further on, and there was an overall lack of access to potential employment. Access to the benefits of the program for promotion of employment, mentioned above, was delayed until October 2020 (DCM 608, 2020). The prolonging of the suspension of assessment commissions for individuals with disabilities created a delay in assisting those who had no final assessment/or were in the process from the Disability Assessment Commission, as reported by municipalities' staff (DCM 158, 2020). Emergency shelters and services for victims of domestic violence were lacking in Kukës and Lezhë. In Kukës, during the pandemic, the reports of domestic violence doubled, while these services were lacking. In Lezhë, emergency agreements with NGOs were concluded, to respond to this need, amplified by the pandemic. During lockdown, women and children isolated at home with perpetrators faced difficulties in seeking help, leading to an increase in domestic violence cases. Lezhë municipalities engaged in awareness raising on child abuse and domestic violence, producing leaflets and sharing information on protection orders. Online complaints and counseling were created, but children could not avoid abusive parents. Increased street situations and begging were reported, with police staff facing challenges in accessing services. Kukës reported an increase in children in conflict with the law and theft. Divorce, domestic violence, and alternative guardianship cases were postponed, because of the closure of courts during the lockdown, interrupting access of children in need for protection to this service, and women victims of domestic violence, during lockdown. Domestic violence victims had challenges with the processes in court and some cases were dismissed because the victim did not show up in court proceedings. The 'withdrawal' phenomenon of women in court existed even before the pandemic, but it was amplified because of the challenges in contacting them due to lockdown restrictions, while women didn't have access to phones. For example, in Kamëz there were 181 cases for domestic violence in Commissariat Nr.5 during 2020, while only 84 of them were accepted by the court. In the same municipality, economic aid benefits for domestic violence victims have been delayed in the absence

of protection orders, which were not sent on time from the court to the Administrative units. Most municipalities, except Tirana, lack residential centers for homeless and violence victims. Kukës was building a social housing residence, covering 20% of needs. The pandemic increased the number of homeless families to 380. Rent bonuses and real estate market fluctuations made affordable housing more challenging, especially for domestic violence victims. Children also struggled with access to education during the lockdown and further on, during online learning. They were faced with a lack of access to the internet and to devices (phones, tablets), especially children of families with limited financial resources, in particular Roma and Egyptian children, some of which did not attend online learning at all during the lockdown. The schools tried to manage the situation by offering a period of in-class learning before the new school year. Those supported with phones by the municipality still had difficulties because they only had one phone for all the children in one family, thus limited access to online learning. Children living in some rural areas also faced difficulties accessing the internet or having interruptions of electricity (thus not being able to follow even the TV program for schooling 'RTSH school'). Health care institutions faced greater challenges in the early days of the pandemic where material resources were lacking and information about COVID-19 was limited. As instructions were delivered and protocols were being built, they got better organized and became more effective.

Quality of services: The social services staff and NGOs reported that especially during the lockdown months, all the staff capacities were mainly focused on immediate support needs, such as distribution of food packages and hygienic kits. The lack of adequate allocations both in terms of funds for social services and human resources affected the quality of all services offered. Case managers were faced with an increased workload and limited resources, leading also to overstretched and burned-out staff from public and non-public institutions engaged in the pandemic response. Being forced to prioritize the use of available resources all other projects and programs slowed down. The slowdown only initially affected the reconstruction programs in the earthquake-affected municipalities but picked up rapidly after the lockdown – being the most intensive program implemented during the pandemic.

> *"During the lockdown, the focus shifted to emergency services, such as the delivery of food and hygienic packages for families in need. We had to adapt and none of us was prepared for this" (Municipality of Lezhë, social services staff)*

Shifting some of the services online impacted their quality, especially regarding therapy for children with limited abilities. A strong commitment by NGO staff and parents was reported; where they engaged in counseling and guiding parents in delivering therapy to their children. However, this approach had some impact on the quality of service they could offer.

Gaps in interinstitutional coordination also impacted the quality of support offered, where both the employment offices and the tax offices were distributing payments, (unemployment benefits and the 'war salary'), while individuals could not benefit from both, were not well informed about the deadlines, resulting in their confusion and frustration.

Online schooling negatively impacted education quality, especially for children with limited access to online tools and those with special needs. It also led to emotional challenges and regress in learning. Teachers faced work overload, extended hours, adapting to new materials, and emotional and financial strain, affecting the quality of teaching and learning.

Relevance

According to the interviewed stakeholders, the municipalities, in collaboration with the other public actors and NGOs cooperated to offer services and support that were most relevant to the needs of their citizens. Some NGOs also increased their budget in this regard. However, both public and non-public service providers highlighted the need for higher accountability and increased flexibility to adapt the existing programs or to add new programs to cover new needs.

With many families who lost their jobs and were in economic hardship, the economic aid and unemployment benefits to limited eligible categories were the only financial support programs provided for families and individuals in need. There were no job opportunities during the lockdown, and even later on, these opportunities were low, especially for the already vulnerable categories. Two new Employment Promotion Programs (EPPs) were introduced for people who lost their jobs due to the pandemic, one of which targeted people who were informally employed. However, as also stated by the local officials, these measures were introduced late and did not include every unemployed jobseeker who was registered in the employment office for the entire year of 2020 (DCM 608, 2020).

In some municipalities, the poor coordination between municipalities and NGOs supporting families with emergency packages resulted in overlapping support for some groups and failure to reach out to others also in need. *"There are 230 Roma families in our area, but we could not reach them all."* (Staff of a public social care service, in Durrës)

Though the government introduced a measure to deferral of rental payments for two months, with most agreements usually finalized informally and the limited time deferral, the measure didn't respond effectively to the needs of the vulnerable families (who couldn't afford their rents anymore) that remained unprotected or

without alternatives (Joint Order of the Governor of the Bank of Albania and the Prime Minister, 2020). In addition, the budget for social housing did not increase, especially for domestic violence victims (particularly relevant for Lezhë and Kamëz), and homeless Roma returnees (Durrës).

Online services for child abuse and domestic violence, (not accompanied by proactive identification in child protection) were not a suitable approach for the needs of those without access to phone or Internet or with no privacy to seek help.

Carrying out online education with minimal equipment support, while many children from vulnerable groups did not have access to the internet, or any equipment at home, was not relevant to their needs, leaving especially many Roma and Egyptian children without access to education.

> *'There are many Roma and Egyptian children who have nothing at home, no internet, sometimes not even one phone. Not all of them have received one by the municipality. They just do not attend school.' (NGO representative, Lezhë)*

Online learning platforms were also unsuitable approaches for children with limited abilities, who find technology difficult to use and lack the live support of assistant teachers. Teachers reported that there were significant differences between online and face-to-face learning even when combined learning was being applied. The pandemic situation deepened the issue of hidden and real dropouts because teachers themselves faced difficulties in controlling the situation and have been much more tolerant in taking absences. Recovery programs needed to be planned by educational institutions to enable students to fill the knowledge gap.

Local officials highlighted the lack of attention to mental health and chronic illness needs, as well as the need for additional resources and compliance with pandemic protocols. Municipal staff and teachers were overworked, lacking financial support for equipment and internet access, while parents were viewed as support providers.

Adequacy

> *"We have tried hard to ensure support for the citizens, but this support has not been continuous. Their needs and the consequences following the pandemic are still present." (Municipality of Durrës)*

Local officials reported several challenges regarding the adequate response provided to the needs of the most vulnerable groups, as summarized below. Doubling the economic aid beyond the lockdown period of January to June 2021 reflected the effort of the Albanian government to respond to the needs of the most vulnerable families, beneficiaries of the economic aid program. Despite this, the level of financial support remained low and could not respond adequately to the needs of the most vulnerable. Moreover, between the two periods when the cash

benefit was doubled, for a period of six months (July to December 2020), these families received the same cash benefits as before the pandemic – while their needs remained high. Rent bonuses have been limited, and the budget for social housing did not increase.

> *"More help is needed for women with children who remain at a crossroads; employment opportunities are needed for this category. The quality of jobs available is also very low and unsuitable, with very low salaries leaving them unable to provide for their families. Rent bonuses are also limited in number." (Municipality social services staff, Lezhë)*

Roma and Egyptian communities in all municipalities were more in need of food packages, because of the lockdown restrictions that affected more the informal employment. They received some support from public and non-public actors, but this was short-term and inadequate to cover their real needs. Sometimes, the high expectations and needs led to violent reactions from Roma and Egyptian citizens (Durrës). Local budgets for cash assistance, food packages, and hygienic kits remained inadequate due to the lack of resources. NGOs received support from donors and emergency response projects, but existing staff had to prioritize basic family needs. Social administrators faced increased workload and conflicting tasks, particularly in rural areas, where violence against children and women was reported. Distributing food packages and hygienic kits to Roma and Egyptian communities was challenging due to their poor financial capacities and lack of information.

Some municipalities reported a lack of funding for protection equipment for municipality staff during the lockdown period, and for the families in need, this need was partially addressed through NGOs. This resulted in personal costs for the staff, to ensure protection, and increased the risk of infection for those unable to comply with preventive measures. Protocols for community centers were lacking, and even when there was one, such as in the case of the emergency center for children in need of protection, supported by World Vision in Durrës, it was impossible to follow, because of lack of space and staff.

Lessons to be learned from the local level

Interinstitutional cooperation during the pandemic was substantial, especially during the crisis. Good cases of it, such as the cooperation of the municipality with NGOs in Kukës, Lezhë and Kamëz, have helped the coordination of efforts and maximized the effectiveness of the response, and need to continue. Less successful cases, such as in Durrës, or reported by the employment office in Lezhë, reduced the impact of the response to citizens, requiring support, including the one provided by the central government.

Poverty and vulnerability cannot be addressed unless intersectional approaches are adopted in social protection programs. One of the key ways to strengthen

intersectional approaches to social protection is to improve the collection and sharing of disaggregated data on the circumstances of individuals, families, and groups at risk. Updated local/national information systems can play a major role in scaling up social protection programs when needed.

Measures cannot be planned only top-down, but need consultations with the groups of interest. Policy processes need to be more reflective versus reactive ones, with a short-term impact.

Partnerships with civil society organizations, especially those that work with marginalized or remote communities, can be critical for their inclusion in the available protection programs. The positive cooperation with NGOs, even before the pandemic, can be better integrated in future planning and response. The NGOs need to be supported through the social fund to be able to improve the coverage and service provision. Through community engagement, significant support to families was provided. Creating a functional operational network, especially efficient during lockdown, was a new experience for some municipalities, such as Kukës, which can be repeated especially in emergencies.

Municipalities cannot be fully effective by shifting existing budgets to respond to emergencies. By doing so, they risk their communal services, cannot engage in investments, and face difficulties in managing the territory, local economy, and businesses. In situations of lack of human and logistic resources, cash payments for families in need are more effective and help them in a timely manner, versus food package distribution, as reported by the municipality directorate of Durrës.

Informal workers were hit harder by the pandemic and were left on the fringes of government support, increasing their risk of falling deeper into poverty and social exclusion. The COVID-19 pandemic pointed out the need for a national and local multi-sectoral response to address informal workers.

The existence of well-functioning structures at the level of administrative units is a must to respond to the needs of citizens through concrete and focused action plans, especially in emergencies. This calls for Need Assessment and Referral Units (NARUs) to be better established with social workers and adequate funding. Adaptation to the situation has required using new methods of work. Continuous staff training for service providers at the local level needs to be provided in this regard, to ensure quality of services.

The currently developed models that have included online access to services also in relation to health services need to be consolidated and sustained. Developing communication strategies with patients and citizens for the care they need to continue to offer, is very important. Online learning is a major solution in providing education during a pandemic. The response of the education system in this regard was rapid, but the digital gap between children from vulnerable groups and others needs to be reduced, in order to ensure equity and inclusion in education.

Best practices

> *'The families were met one by one from our staff. Some families ask for support all the time, while there were many other families in need who had no information about any of our services.' (Municipality social services staff, Lezhë)*

The full mapping of the families and individuals in need and their needs, at the municipality level, and their increased information on the social services the municipality offers and, on the staff, offering it, which happened because of the food packages distribution, is a very valuable new practice, that needs to be integrated into their daily work and beyond the pandemic. Many newly identified families in need were not aware of their rights and the services they could benefit from. – For the elderly living alone in Lezhë, the municipality is now planning new supportive services and some of these services should continue beyond the pandemic.

Cooperation with NGOs, as mentioned above, is an already existing good practice in many municipalities, which needs to be developed further, through continuous coordination of the social services offered in their territory, while supporting through the social fund the sustainability of the NGO-run services.

Best practices presented by municipalities include mainly services offered in cooperation with NGOs, including home assistance for the elderly, home assistance and online services for children with disabilities, direct assistance, psychosocial and parenting services for families in need and their children, emergency center for children in need of protection, etc.).

Discussion

Our study findings show that though several measures were introduced by the government, in order to respond to the needs of citizens and the most vulnerable groups, there were limitations regarding the access of citizens to local services during the pandemic for several reasons: closure of municipality and NGO run social services during lockdown and working with limited capacity later on; loss of jobs and lack of offers by the employment offices; the initial delay of the disability benefits; lack of shelter services for the newly homeless and victims of violence and increased rent prices; challenges to access help for women and children living with perpetrators; postponement of divorce, domestic violence and alternative guardianship cases/court closure; lack of access to internet and equipment especially for children of families in economic need, from rural areas, Roma and Egyptian, which limited access to online education. Other similar studies showed struggles with access to social services, especially for women head of households, victims of domestic violence, or elderly in rural areas, children and adults with disabilities, and Roma and Egyptian communities (UN Women, 2020;

UN Women, 2021; Save the Children 2020b; Terre des Hommes, 2020; Xhepa, 2020; authors own).

The quality of social services offered was affected by the pandemic. The focus on emergency response and limited resources to respond adequately have often led to offering services not fully in compliance with the service standards. In addition, the shift to online service provision also impacted significantly their quality.

The municipalities struggled to provide adequate responses to the needs of their citizens, because of: inadequate financial support for families, a six-month gap period in economic aid increase; limited rent bonuses, and lack of extra budget for social housing; inadequate response addressing the multiple needs of Roma and Egyptian communities; financial resources did not increase to respond to the new needs of citizens; failing to address the need for more human resources to address outreach and service coverage issues. Other studies emphasized the inadequacy of financial benefits and scarce social services during the pandemic (Terre des Hommes, 2020; Together for Life, 2020; World Vision, 2020; European Commission, 2021; authors own).

Overall, from a human rights-based perspective, the findings show that the local government response to COVID-19 did not manage to provide accessible, high-quality social services, and adequate benefits and services for citizens, especially those most vulnerable. To maintain continuity and adapt to future crises, lessons to be learned include fostering interinstitutional cooperation, addressing poverty and vulnerability through intersectional approaches, increasing budget allocations, addressing informal workers, strengthening NARUs, training staff in new work approaches, and finding technological solutions for providing services to children in need.

Conclusion

Though several measures were taken to respond to the needs of citizens at the central and local levels, still the policy measures didn't function with effectiveness in the real situation of families, groups, or individuals in Albania. Access to services was limited, especially for families living in remote areas, those with limited access to the internet, victims of domestic violence and child abuse, Roma and Egyptian minorities, and children and adults with disability. The quality and relevance of services offered were perceived as lower than before the pandemic covering only some of the needs of the citizens, because of late and limited measures with regard to employment, lack of access to online services for victims of child abuse and domestic violence, limited access to online education, and unaddressed needs of services providers and parents. The financial support to families was inadequate and small municipalities with limited budgets were unable to respond to such needs.

The responsibility for budget allocation to respond adequately to the needs of citizens during emergency situations is of both levels, central and local level, so the local level should be supported through additional budget allocations, especially municipalities with limited budgets. The implementation of the municipalities' functions to assess the needs of families and individuals and plan interventions needs proper structures at the local level, such as Needs Assessment and Referral Units. Municipalities should also invest in adequate human resources in quantitative and qualitative terms and continuous staff training to capitalize on and consolidate the methods developed during the pandemic. Mapping of families and individuals in need and the intersectionality method used at the administrative unit level are among the best practices of the pandemic, which should be periodically updated and become permanent instruments, feeding into local social care plans, support assessment of needs, planning, and implementation of social care services.

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