

**Universal Periodic Review
19th session, September 2013**

**Stakeholder report on Albania
Submitted by Child Led Groups “Voice 16+” and Peer Educator’s Group
with the support of Save the Children and World Vision**

Introduction

The Child Led Groups (CLGs) were established in 2000 in Albania with the support of Save the Children, as part of a project to re-write the Convention on the Rights of the Child in child friendly language. They now operate in four regions: Elbasan, Dibër, Durrës, and Burrel and are known locally as *Zeri 16 + (Voice 16+)*. Each group comprises 50-60 children aged between 12 and 18 and represents a group of around 1500 other children volunteers. The purpose of the CLGs is to improve the capacity of children to monitor and report on the child rights situation and through child led initiatives to advocate for their rights both in their local area and at national level.

Peer Educator’s Groups are part of a network of 2000 youth, aged 12-18, and with the first groups created in 2007. These youth groups are supporting World Vision programs in 10 (ten) regions of Albania; Shkodër, Lezhë, Kurbin, Dibra, Tiranë, Durrës, Elbasan, Librazhd, Korçë, Vlorë. It is the goal of World Vision’s Youth program to create space for youth to express themselves freely, build their competencies, and become socially conscious and compassionate young leaders. Youth have led advocacy initiatives in their communities that aim to raise awareness on Child Rights and Protection, Inclusive Education, Peace-Building etc, but also engage in passing on their knowledge and information to their peer and younger children.

A one-day training on the UPR was organized for children from CLGs and Peer Educators Groups, although some children were already familiar with this process. The training gave them information on the purpose of the UPR, the stages in the process, the value of their contribution and how to structure the submission. After the training, they divided into 6 working groups in Elbasan Durrës, Vlorë, Shkodër, Dibër and Burrel.

On August 26th 2013 24 children from programs supported by Save the Children and World Vision, from the regions of Elbasan, Durrës, Shkodër, Vlorë, Dibër, and Burrel, came together, to finalise a four month process of monitoring implementation of CRC in their locations and worked on the drafting of the UPR report. In total one hundred children from all six regions have been interviewed by the children’s working groups. The methodology used for the data collection in the field consisted of interviews and focus groups.

Children can be contacted through the supporting organisations in the following:

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PROMOTION AND PROTECTION OF CHILD RIGHTS IN ALBANIA

1. EDUCATION

(Referring to recommendation no.12, 14 from the 61st session of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, and to recommendation no.24, 27-28, 84 from the 13th session of HRC- UPR,)

Lack of access to quality education

The interviews revealed that a significant number of children drop out of compulsory education due to financial causes, material and infrastructural reasons, due to parents' attitudes or for health reasons. Official drop out statistics for the regions covered by the children's survey vary between 0% and 1% but the survey found drop out in all regions.

In the cities, we observed that classes are overcrowded, which causes a decrease in the teaching and learning levels. In rural areas, there is a lack of high schools, which leads to the children of these areas not attending secondary education. In addition, in some rural areas, children are taught in mixed classes (i.e. children from the 1st to the 5th grade are in the same class).

There is also a lack of material and equipment and of a suitable and safe infrastructure needed for the teaching process. There is a lack of desks, chairs, heating systems, sports pitches, science labs, computer labs, and Internet connection (even in the schools in which computer labs exist, they are not available for children). In terms of the infrastructure suitable for children with disabilities, there are no ramps or other support facilities.

In some schools, there are no security guards as there are no funds for the appointment of a school guard. Some schools (mainly in rural areas) have no school fence. In general, there are no fire escapes or other safety equipment for emergencies such as fire or other disasters in schools.

We observed that, some teachers, are obliged to teach additional subjects in order to complete the required number of teaching hours for their monthly salary. Specialized teachers for specific subjects have to teach extra subjects even though they lack the required professional education. These subjects include IT, physical education, music education, visual arts education, technology, and so on. This results in poor quality classes, inaccurate evaluations of the students, and some classes not even taking place. The teachers stay in the classroom and organize free discussions with the children or the teacher does not carry out the lessons at all thus preventing the children from developing their talents. Driven by personal economic interests, qualified teachers force children to attend private classes in exchange for grades the children did not merit or deserve, by using psychological pressure against them.

Children report that textbooks are difficult for them and overly complicated. Some of the books have been translated from other languages without being adapted or edited, which makes them difficult to understand.

Recommendations

- 1.1 The government must allocate funds for the continuous and compulsory development of teachers as well as for the selection and adaptation of the curriculum and of the teaching workload.
- 1.2 The government must take the necessary measures to enforce the law, analyse the cases of school dropout and develop concrete action plans to eliminate this phenomenon.

- 1.3 New schools must be constructed, and the existing ones must be extended; their infrastructure must be improved and adapted to basic standards, in order for children to have optimal schooling and education conditions.
- 1.4 Measures should be taken to ensure professional delivery of classes ensuring teachers with relevant specialised degrees teach those specific subjects, such as IT, Literature, physical education, music and visual arts, and sciences.
- 1.5 Funds must be allocated to ensure security in the school by providing schools with specialized workers, and measures should be taken for children's safety in cases of emergency.

2. VIOLENCE

(Referring to recommendations coming from Argentina and Chile in relation to use of corporal punishment of children as a disciplinary method, recommendation no. 16, 66 from the 13th session of HRC- UPR)

The interviewees state that they experience psychological and physical violence from their parents as a form of punishment and education. All the interviews revealed that children, especially those belonging to the Roma community, do not know where to go when they experience violence; they also do not know about the child protection unit. Extensive findings showed that children see violence as normal behaviour, they are not aware of the negative consequences of violence, they even say that violence is an appropriate means of education for them and they do not know where to report it. Violence is even more prevalent for children in less developed communities: Roma and Egyptian children and children in rural areas. Violence is used in their families as a means to educate and discipline children when they make mistakes.

Children belonging to vulnerable groups experience violence in their homes when they make mistakes. The bigger the mistake, the more severe the punishment.

In vulnerable families, the head of the family forces children to work in order to earn money, and if the child refuses to do so, the father is violent towards him/her until he/she agrees. If the child does not earn the amount of money expected by the head of the family, he/she is punished by food being withheld, or by being beaten up. It was found that some of the children are not aware of the existence of the child protection unit and its functions.

During the interviews, it was noticed that violence is still present in schools. Teachers are violent towards students and students are also violent towards each other. Teachers do not know about the existence of the ethical and behavioural code, they do not follow it, and neither do they know about the law on child protection. Children are concerned about the fact that schools lack control and do not enforce the internal regulations about school students carrying weapons. Violence among peers is one of the most sensitive problems nowadays. Children do not solve their problems in peaceful ways; they rather choose violence as the faster solution to a problem.

Recommendations

- 2.1 The government must organize awareness activities against violence in all environments in which children are present. Practices of family conflict resolution without the use of violence must be taught to children and positive models of communication must be provided to them, for a healthy relationship with their families and communities.

- 2.2 Child protection mechanisms must be promoted and strengthened, cases where children experience violence must be identified and referred to the responsible structures, and measures should be taken to stop violence everywhere.
- 2.3 The government must take measures to enforce strong laws in order to prevent violence by teachers. Training modules and projects against violence and its consequences must be carried out. The government must promote the referral of cases of violence both in and outside schools and must establish a monitoring and reporting system for these cases. In addition, schools must be surveyed in order to prevent and minimise the cases of violence.
- 2.4 The government must allocate funds to make the monitoring and reporting system fully operational, including the installation of video surveillance systems.

3. HEALTH

(Referring to recommendation no. 27-28, 78 from the 13th session of HRC- UPR)

Poor quality and lack of access to health services

The interviews conducted showed that there is a lack of health staff in schools (nurses, dentists, psychologists). Even in the cases where health professionals are appointed, they do not work full time or do not have a suitable qualification. Children reported that first aid kits are also missing, and even when there is one, it is not equipped with all the necessary materials.

In order to be able to benefit from public health service, including checkups, exams, and medications, parents are required to pay an amount of money to the medical staff, although they pay tax and health insurance. This amount of money that the doctor receives from the patient is for public health services, which are supposed to be free. In Albania, all those who pay health insurance to the state are entitled to receive free health service. This amount of money is an illegal payment made “according to the patient’s inclination and financial means”, either paid to the doctor directly or indirectly to a third party. Otherwise, the health service is not provided and the person is not welcomed next time.

The medications provided are not of a good quality or are expired, and there is a limited choice of medicines on the reimbursement list. This is a defined list of medicines that the State reimburses to various patient categories defined by legislation. This list includes cheap, low quality medicines and medicines are often past their expiry date. Parents are often forced to avoid getting medical treatment for their children because they are unable to afford these expensive medications.

Hospitals and health centres in urban and rural areas lack infrastructure and specialised doctors, which means patients have to travel 3 to 4 hours to reach the nearest city hospital. Hospitals in urban areas and health centres in rural areas lack infrastructure and specialized doctors. Patients move from the health centres of rural areas to the hospitals of big cities in order to get a specialized service. Even when the medical equipment is available in the urban public hospitals and health centres, doctors often recommend or require the patients to go to their private clinics.

The interviews conducted with the children of the Roma community showed that children who are not registered in the Civil Registry Office do not receive a free health service at all.

Use of narcotic substances

An important issue we addressed was also the use of narcotic substances by children. 85% of children surveyed by CLGs¹ say that children, especially boys, are driven to use these substances mainly by the need to show off, and out of curiosity. The other reasons given are the influence of their schoolmates, family conflict, and society's indifference towards them.

The main concerns identified by children in the survey related to:

- 65% of children say there is an increasing trend in the number of users of narcotic substances
- 53% of children say the money to buy drugs is obtained, through stealing, borrowing money and drug dealing.

Exposure to pollution and effects on health

Many health problems among children, including genetic mutations, are caused by the presence of heavy industries such as iron and steel mills, factories, industrial plants, and waste incineration near residential areas². This, together with the pollution of lakes and deforestation increase the number of children with disabilities and the cases of severe health problems.

Noise pollution is also a concern in the regions where interviews were conducted. The answers received reveal that the laws specifying time limits for loud music are not enforced.

Recommendations

The government must take the following measures:

- 3.1 Guarantee free health services in every school, with the necessary equipment and qualified staff and in health centres, with verified and quality medicines, which have not expired, for all the children (especially those who are not registered).
- 3.2 Increase the number of well-equipped health centres in rural areas. Extend the drugs on the reimbursement scheme, especially for medicines for children.
- 3.3 Strengthen and enforce the law on the reduction of waste and the minimisation of noise pollution, and raise awareness among the business community and the wider society.
- 3.4 Carry out to the largest possible extent, cultural, didactic, and sports activities, in order to improve children's social participation, cooperation, and information about drugs and narcotic substances.
- 3.5 Ensure that school regulations on access to school premises are fully enforced to protect children from exposure to drugs. For example to prevent students from leaving the school premises and strangers and unauthorized people from getting into the school premises during school time and ensure surveillance of the school's internal and external environments with cameras.

4. DISCRIMINATION

¹ In 2013, Child Led Groups surveyed 450 children in 12 schools about their use of narcotic substances. 85% of 450 respondents admitted that their peers smoke because of the need to show off and out of curiosity. Only 15% smoke because of social problems.

² Including the metallurgical factory *Çeliku I Partisë* in Elbasan, owned by the Turkish company Kurum

(Referring to recommendation no.1-7, 13, 15, 24, 39, 85 from the 13th session of HRC- UPR)

The rights of children with disabilities are not recognized and their basic needs are not fulfilled. This leads to their isolation and non-inclusion in education. This situation is exacerbated by the lack of specialized staff needed for the fulfilment of their specific needs.

In the interviews conducted with them, children from the Roma community said that they wished they had a white skin in order to be equal with other children. The lack of basic minimum living conditions (food, housing, hygiene) leads to school dropout and consequently to the increase in discrimination against this community. Children of the Roma community are often forced to beg for money and, as a consequence, they lose their childhood, education, inclusion, and are denied their right to play. They also encounter problems in their physical and emotional development.

Discrimination is also present in the education of all the above-mentioned children, due to lack of “personal connections” and inability to pay bribes. Students who have the possibility to pay for their grades are always more favoured compared to those who do not have the financial means to do so.

All these factors contribute to perpetuate their exclusion from the rest of society. This is not only seen amongst the Roma community, but also in the low-income families and those coming from rural areas.

Recommendations

- 4.1 The government must allocate funds for the adaptation of the infrastructure for children with disabilities (not only during election campaigns). The government must ensure and guarantee the implementation of the 2010 law “On Protection from Discrimination” for children with disabilities.
- 4.2 The government must guarantee the organizing of awareness campaigns aimed at sensitizing public opinion to the concerns of the Roma community.
- 4.3 The government must ensure specialized staff for Roma children (coming from their community), for children with disabilities, as well as for children with learning difficulties.
- 4.4 The government must take strict measures to eliminate bribery and favouritism in schools. Corruption through bribery includes: parents of children giving money to the teachers in order to get a better grade than the children deserve or to ensure the children pass the class. Favouritism in schools includes the over-evaluation or undeserved evaluation of children who have special links, for example: family origin, social-economic status and family connections with the teachers. Stopping bribery would prevent corruption in school and ensure the children would focus on learning in school to achieve results.
- 4.5 The government must take measures to inform society about the law against discrimination and the mechanisms responsible for its implementation.

5. PARTICIPATION

The mechanisms ensuring child participation are the Children’s Governments in schools, and child-led groups. Child-led groups function effectively because they are supported by organizations and civil society. This is not the case for the Children’s Governments, which are

the school-based mechanisms that protect and guarantee children's rights; they function only partially due to poor support and lack of teacher-coordinators' motivation. Due to these shortcomings, the students' voices do not reach the highest school authorities. In addition, vulnerable children in schools do not recognize the Children's Government as a mechanism for the protection of their rights.

The interviews conducted revealed that children's voices are not heard as much as they should be in some regions of Albania (Dibër, Durrës, Shkodër, Vlorë, Burrel, Elbasan). Children are not consulted on issues concerning them. As a result, children do not believe that they can have an active role in participation and in finding a solution to problems. Since children are not consulted on issues affecting them, their needs are not fulfilled which leads to a proliferation of problems. Even when children's voices are heard, they are not taken into consideration. A lack of coordination and cooperation is found between children and the state structures responsible for the implementation of children's rights. The structures and institutions responsible for children's rights do not fully perform their responsibility to monitor and support child participation. They only deal with the cases in which children are at risk.

Concerning decision-making within the family and the children's role in making decisions related to their future, we learned from the interviews that their voice is not heard. Usually parents are the ones who decide on the selection of the optional subjects in high school and on other issues directly related to children. During the past year, it is noticed that children are becoming more aware of their inability to meaningfully participate in matters related to them.

Recommendations

- 5.1 The government must take measures to strengthen the children's government by allocating funds to ensure the Children's Government election process, and to make Children's Governments properly known and functional to all the actors. Regular trainings must be provided to the children who are active in these structures, and all Children's Governments must be included in these trainings.
- 5.2 The government must allocate funds for organizing awareness campaigns on the role of children within the family.
- 5.3 The government must ensure and guarantee consultation processes with children on issues directly related to them.