

BASELINE STUDY: SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL INCLUSION OF YOUTH IN ALBANIA**COUNTRY OVERVIEW**

In 2014 Albania was granted the candidate country status for the accession to the EU. The process of integration has been a main driver for key reforms in the economy, the legal and institutional framework, as well as in the political arena. Moreover, the support from the US in fostering Albania's membership of NATO, as well as multilateral organizations' interest in the country's development have proved essential on the transformative process Albania is being undergoing since the fall of the communist regime on the early nineties of the last century– OECD, WB, and UN are among those fostering a democratic, developed Albania.

Complimentary to the external influence and foreign aid flowing into the country from governments, multilateral organizations, and development CSOs and NGOs, the Albanian National Government led a process of fast and steady economic growth from within. According to UNDP, "Albania's GNI per capita increased by about 108.0 percent between 1980 and 2014" (UNDP, 2015; p.3). The combination of foreign aid and internal development enabled Albania to upgrade from a medium human development to a high human development position in UNDP's Human Development Index – In 2015, Albania ranks 85 out of 189 countries, below the average for the Europe and Central Asia region and in the last position among the Balkan countries with the same score as Bosnia and Herzegovina. (UNDP, 2015)

Despite the great progress macroeconomic figures show, there are several challenges to overcome in the forthcoming years. The average unemployment rate is 17,9% (INSTAT, data from 2014) and 14,3% of population lives under the relative line of poverty in the country (World Bank, data from 2012). There are significant disparities from rural to urban settings regarding infrastructure, access to services, and income. As far as its demography is concerned, Albania has one of the youngest populations in Europe, with 40% of it being below 25 years old. Out of them, more than 25% are neither in employment, education or training (EBRD, 2016). Furthermore, participation of women in the economy is lower of that of men, even more so in public office – According to the National Study on youth participation in politics, "data shows that 14% of the Ministers of the Albanian Government are young people below 35 years old, while only 5% are females" (National Study, 2015; p.2).

These and other challenges need to be overcome in order for Albania to both meet its population's needs, as well as fulfil the EU-membership requirements. Economic, political, and legal reforms are being undertaken following EU and US recommendations, but they need to be effectively implemented in order to improve the social situation of Albanians, bridging the gaps between different geographic areas, social classes, and age groups. As UNDP's National Country Development Report for Albania states, "Failure to give more attention to social inclusion might also prove problematic, both for eventual EU membership, as well as for Albanian society... Albania will need to pay more attention to resolve social inclusion issues simply to become a fair, equitable and modern state" (UNDP, 2010; p. 61).

In view of the fact that youth constitutes between a third and a half of Albania's population, youngsters are called to play a major role in its country's development. For this to happen, though, work is needed in several areas, i.e.: lower youth unemployment rate, increase youth ratios of completion of education and vocational trainings, foster their engagement in social and political activities, ensure a cultural change in order to see youth's contribution to society as essential to the country's improved future perspectives. Reforms in such areas and others that will be detailed at the end of this study require the will, commitment and coordination of a variety of stakeholders ranging from public institutions such as the Ministry of Social Welfare and Youth, to the NGO sector and civil society more generally, to businesses. The National Youth Action Plan for 2015-2020, with its six strategic objectives, intends to put in place measures tackling some of the challenges mentioned above.

The following sections will address the current situation of the country regarding the social, economic and political inclusion of youth. Given the deep interrelation between social and economic inclusion, the narrative of this study will deal with these two areas in one bloc, leaving the political inclusion for a separate section.

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC INCLUSION

The analysis of the social and economic inclusion of youth in Albania will focus on seven main areas that are essential to depicting the current context. Upon the description of the current social and economic situation in Albania, this study synthesizes the policies regulating these two thematic areas, the funding allocated to interventions in these fields, and enumerates the key stakeholders involved. The last part of the analysis approaches priority areas for intervention and the most notorious impediments and, finally, defines a set of recommendations.

➤ **Current social and economic inclusion situation**

Albania's economy has been growing for the last 25 years, more than doubling the GNI per capita from the 1980s to nowadays. The ongoing global financial and economic crisis started in 2008, has affected the pace of this growth in Albania. Even though the country is not highly inserted in the international financial markets, the severe effects of this crisis in Greece and Italy, Albania's two major business partners, have slowed down own economic growth. Neighbouring countries' ill economies are not only detrimental to Albania's economy in terms of trade, but also in relation to opportunities for Albanian migrant workers as well as for the remittances, which account for the 8,5% of the Albanian GDP (EBRD, 2016). However, the growth experienced during the decade prior to the financial crisis enabled Albania to achieving a middle-income status. According to the World Bank, extreme poverty halved between 2002 and 2008, from 25,4% to 12,4% of the population (World Bank, 2013).

Moreover, Albania's economy is transitioning from an agriculture-based economy to a services-oriented one. Even though primary sector accounts for above 40% of employment share, the services sector is the main contributor to the GDP with a percentage around 50% for the past 10 years. (INSTAT). The unemployment rate remains high at 17,9% on average, but particularly high for youth, at around 22%. There is a prevalence for long-term unemployment, and gender differences regarding women participation in the economy are notorious as well.

The lack of opportunities is both for educated and non-educated youngsters, which is one of the causes for more of 25% of youth not being enrolled in employment, education, or training. Youngsters with low levels of education are more likely to be unemployed, suffer discrimination and poverty. Yet, those with high level of education do not have many job opportunities for their level and /or fields of expertise. Therefore, vocational training is emerging as an intermediate job niche for young people. The lack of opportunities for young people triggers internal and external displacements: first from the mountains to the plains, second from the rural to the urban settings, and third from Albania to abroad. According to a survey carried by Friedrich Ebert Foundation “two young Albanians out of three nurture hopes of migration” (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, IDRA, 2013; p.1).

Unemployment is one of the main causes for social exclusion. According to INSTAT data for the first quarter of 2014, the unemployment rates for the “15-29 age group were at 30,2%, out of which 33% are males and 25,4% are females” (NYAP, 2014-2020; p.8). There are though, other drivers for social exclusion that reinforce unemployment of certain groups such as discrimination based on gender, age, sexual orientation, and ethnic origin. This vicious cycle requires a holistic approach to be reversed. Women, youth, LGTB, disabled, and Roma and Egyptian minorities are the social groups more prone to be unemployed in Albania. Unemployment for Roma is at 23% (18% for non-Roma); and out of those unemployed, 55% reported having unskilled jobs. An striking percentage of 90% of Roma and Egyptians report not having regular work contracts and not paying social insurance. The difficult engagement of minorities in the labour market is partly caused/ reinforced by high illiteracy rates characterizing these populations -40.3 percent of Roma and 12.7 percent of Egyptians (UNDP-Tirana, 2012)

➤ **Policies/ legal framework**

The legal framework regulating social and economic inclusion is wide and varied, as are policies in these fields. A review of them deems as essential the following regulations and policies:

- Within the Albanian framework:
 - *National Strategy for Development and Integration 2014-2020* (NSDI) – defines an integrated approach for the socio-economic development of the country as well as for the integration in the EU. The impact the NSDI is seeking is threefold: firstly, a greater economic development through enhancing the job markets, strengthening education services –including vocational trainings and voluntarism- and minimizing the informal economy. Secondly, it aims at turning economic growth into social welfare, through investing in public services that further inclusion, cohesion, and quality of life. The third axis of the strategy is based on strengthening governance, democracy and rule of law parameters.
 - *Employment and Skills Strategy 2013-2020* – is aimed at building a more educated and skilled workforce according to the job market needs, as well as to boost job creation capacity in the country. Priority policies are identified: a) foster decent job opportunities through effective labour market policies; b) offer quality vocational education and training to youth and adults; c) promote social inclusion and territorial cohesion; and d) strengthen the governance of the labour market and qualifications system.
 - *Social Protection Strategy 2015-2020* – designs a plan for building a social protection system where individuals are empowered, vulnerable groups are provided with

- opportunities to become more autonomous, and mechanisms for prevention and reintegration into society are in place. This strategy was drafted in consultation with, local experts, donors, and civil society.
- *National Youth Action Plan 2015-2020* – is the plan within the NSDI that targets the specific social and economic needs for youth. Considering youth constitutes a third of total population and around 40% of the workforce of the country, the Action Plan aims at designing transversal policies for the full integration of youth in schemes of health care, education, social work, and political participation, in order for them to become active member of society in all its facets. National Youth Action Plan is embedded in the EU Youth Strategy which strongly advocates for “youth work”, a holistic concept that goes beyond employment and covers different aspects of youth personal development. As defined in the EU Youth Strategy website, it is about “*empowerment, emancipation, responsibility and tolerance [...] is also defined by its broader more societal aims which are participation in democratic societies, prevention and social inclusion and cohesion*” (Retrieved from http://ec.europa.eu/youth/policy/implementation/work_en.htm , p.54). The document further defines how to achieve this aims through means that are characteristic of youth work –including but not limited to informal education, mentoring, and experiential pedagogy.
 - *National Action Plan for Integration of Roma and Egyptians* (within NSDI) – builds on the National Action Plan 2010-2015 – The decade of Roma Inclusion. The plan is based on a comprehensive approach targeting minorities with the objective of their inclusion. Therefore, policies range from basic services such as health, education, employment, and housing; to more sophisticated ones such as the protection of their cultural heritage.
 - *The Law "On gender equality in society" (adopted in 2008) maybe it should go only under the political section?.*
 - EU / international level: Albanian economic and social inclusion strategies are influenced by and benefit from European-level frameworks and policies, the most important ones being:
 - *Europe 2020 Strategy for Smart, Sustainable and Inclusive Growth* – intends to lift 20 million people out of poverty, fight social exclusion, and foster employment. The flagship initiatives under this strategy are the Platform against Poverty and Social Inclusion and the Agenda for New Skills and Jobs.
 - *EU Social Inclusion Strategy 2015-2020* – is rooted on the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-2016, which defines mechanisms and strategies for social inclusion throughout the life cycle of individuals: children, people of working age, older people, people with disabilities, and communities. Moreover, it is supported by the PROGRESS programme, a financial instrument aiming at policy development in five strategic areas: employment, social inclusion and protection, working conditions, anti-discrimination, and gender equality.
 - EU Strategy for Sustainable Development – renewed in 2006, fosters an overarching, inclusive development in pursuit of MDGs/SDGs. Amongst the different policies it includes, there is a particular focus on social inclusion.
 - Instrument for Pre-Accession (IPA), 2007, and Stabilization and Accession Agreement (SAA) signed in 2006, guide Albania’s reforms in different policy areas aiming at achieving the country’s EU membership.
 - In November 2012, the Parliament ratified the UN Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities, signed in 2009.

➤ Main Stakeholders (further development?)

Social and economic inclusion are two fields that require a multi-level, multi-sectorial approach to be dealt with. Therefore, there are several stakeholders involved in policies and projects regarding socio-economic inclusion, from public to private actors, from national to local level. The key players in these arenas are:

Public stakeholders

- International level:
 - UNDP, UNW, UNFPA WB. OECD, USAID, EC, IOM, ILO,?
 - Embassies and development agencies of the European Union, the US, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Austria, Germany, Italy, Greece, among others.
 - INGO such Olof Palme Centre,
 - Chambers of Commerce from foreign countries.

- National level:
 - The Ministry of Youth and Social Welfare – it is the lead Ministry in developing legislation, as well as in executing policies related to employment, VET, social protection and youth.
 - The National Employment Service
 - The State Social Service
 - The Ministry of Education and Sports
 - The National Agency for VET and Qualifications
 - The National Centre for Continuous Learning
 - The Ministry of Finance
 - The Ministry of Economy
 - Social Business Promotion Agency
 - The Ministry of Health
 - The Ministry of Culture
 - The National Institute of Statistics

- Local level:
 - The regional departments / representations of the above mentioned national-level institutions play a role in the implementation of socio-economic inclusion policies at the regional and local level. Therefore, they are included as actors in the respective areas where they have a presence.
 - Local government institutions – Regional Councils, Municipalities and Communes- hold decentralized responsibilities regarding social inclusion.

Private stakeholders

- Business associations, foundations from corporations (CSR) or philanthropy from business sector, and media play a role that is worth mentioning, since they can influence policy- and/or decision-making while they finance projects regarding socio-economic inclusion.

- Civil society as a whole, but more specifically CSOs, NGO-NPOs, and donors are essential stakeholders in the development of socio-economic inclusion policies, programs and projects. Since the fall of the communist regime, foreign aid flown into the country, either as financial assistance, or as technical cooperation in institutional reform, legislation design, capacity building for project implementation, or advocacy efforts.

➤ **Funding**

Social and economic inclusion is achieved through several means ranging from the provision of basic social services such as health and education, to the development of specific programs

Policy / Programme	Timeline	Spending	Source
Health as percentage of GDP	2013	5,9%	UNDP
Education as percentage of GDP	2013	3,3%	UNDP
Employment Promotion Fund	2015	490 M ALL	ALGov.
National Youth Action Plan 2015-2020			
Strategic Objective n 2: Youth Employment Promotion Through Effective Labour Market Policy	2015 - 2020	The total cost of the foreseen activities is 6,166,247 ALL, of which 91% are covered by the State Budget and 9% are uncovered funds that could be sought from cooperation with donors or stakeholders.	NYAP
Strategic Objective n 3: Health, Sport, and Environment	2015 - 2020	The total cost of the activities foreseen in this objective is 47,062,470,000 ALL, 59% of which are covered by the State Budget, 1% by the UNFPA and 40% are uncovered costs that could be sought through cooperation with donors and stakeholders.	NYAP
Strategic Objective n 4: Youth Education	2015 - 2020	The total cost of the activities foreseen for this objective is 6,166,247 ALL, 91% of which is covered by the state budget and 9% uncovered costs that can be sought through cooperation with donors and stakeholders.	NYAP
Strategic Objective n 5: Social Protection	2015 - 2020	The total cost of the planned activities in this objective is 164,005,000 ALL, of which 40% is covered by the State Budget and 60% is uncovered costs that could be secured through cooperation with donors or stakeholders	NYAP
Strategic Objective n 6: Culture and Voluntarism	2015 - 2020	The total cost of the activities planned in this objective is 343,410,000 ALL, 60% of which are covered by the state budget and 40% are uncovered funds that can be sought through cooperation with donors or stakeholders.	NYAP
National Employment and Skills Strategy 2014-2020			
Strategic Objective A: Foster decent job opportunities through effective labour market policies	2014 - 2020	The total cost of the actions planned in this strategic objective is 15.770.000 USD throughout the period 2014 - 2020.	NESS
Strategic Objective B: Offer quality vocational education and training for youth and adults	2014 - 2020	The total cost of the actions planned in this strategic objective is 52.960.000 USD throughout the period 2014 - 2020.	NESS
Strategic Objective C: Promote social inclusion and territorial cohesion	2014 - 2020	The total cost of the actions planned in this strategic objective is 18.000.000 USD throughout the period 2014 - 2020.	NESS
Strategic Objective D: Strengthen the governance of labour market and qualification systems	2014 - 2020	The total cost of the actions planned in this strategic objective is 6.900.000 USD throughout the period 2014 - 2020.	NESS
NOTE: Table created by Partners Albania with information retrieved from UNDP, NYAP, NESS, Albania's government website.			

targeting cohesion, exclusion, and minorities.

In addition to national resources funding strategies on social and economic inclusion of youth, there are international resources Albania is benefiting from. The most important one is the EU's IPA Programme, which includes among its targeted areas of intervention social inclusion, youth, cohesion, education, VET, and skills development for accessing the job market. Other funding specifically supporting youth is that of UNICEF, or that of INGOs like Save the Children.

➤ **Impediments and priority areas for intervention**

From the study of the situation and in agreement with the analysis provided in main policy papers, several impediments need to be overcome in order to foster youth socio-economic inclusion. The main challenges identified are classified into five categories:

Legal / Institutional / Governance:

The legal and institutional framework do not enhance participation of youth in economic and social spheres in Albania. There is a dominant culture among public institutions that youth is not to become a main stakeholder in shaping the country's future any time soon, which is in contrast with the demographic distribution of population in Albania – one of the youngest within Europe.

- The institutional framework should be improved in order to increase youth participation into society. Institutional development of a National Youth Agency as well as Regional Offices would definitely demonstrate government's commitment to take action in fostering youth participation in the public arena. The creation of national advisory boards and committees would contribute to including youth's particular needs into the decision-making processes at different levels, influencing policies that will affect them specifically.

Laws and regulations have been approved in recent years in frame of the country's transition to democracy and because of its objective to grant EU membership. Yet, implementation of some laws is either lagging behind or it is not producing the intended results. As an example, the "Law on gender equality in society" falls short in guaranteeing a *de facto* gender equality in the job market or in political participation.

- There is a need to ensure proper implementation of laws as well as to establish revision mechanisms in order to achieve regulations' intended results.

Moreover, there is a lack of capacity for development of youth organizations within the country, as there is scarce coordination among the ones operating nowadays.

- The creation of networking structures, promoting intra-country and international cooperation among youth organizations would enable partnerships formation and enhance their visibility. Exposure to and coordination with other organizations contributes to building capacity of nascent CSOs and NGOs.

Education:

Education is a major field of intervention for two reasons: on the one side, education's potential as a social leverage is widely documented, offering possibilities for both self-development and autonomy, as well as increasing own prospects in succeeding in job searching. On the other hand, the current situation offer room for improvement in several sides of the wide educational field, therefore major investment is required.

In order for education to exploit its potential in achieving social inclusion through economic success in the labour market, the education system needs to adjust to the market needs. According to the

EU Strategy for Albania 2014-2020, *"One key challenge is the further development of the country's human resources, in terms of skills, competences, and qualifications in line with the labour market needs. Improved access to and quality of education and training for young people and adults will need to be linked with economic and regional development goals and eventually increase employment and social inclusion"* (EU Strategy for Albania; p.12?)

- In order to raise the quality of education while making it more aligned to market needs, it is a must to undertake an exhaustive revision of curricula, enhance teachers' delivery standards, and include practical training along the studies.

Albanian policies should be more aligned to EU policies in order to benefit from student mobility through ERASMUS+ programme as well as to foster quality of higher education and degrees comparability through Bologna Plan application. Education services provision has to increase its accessibility as well as to improve its quality, in both pre-university level and university/ graduate level. (NSDI, 2013)

- Reforms in education laws will be required to adjust the Albanian framework to the European standards, policies, and programmes.

Moreover, there is a need to promote Vocational Education and Training (VET). People with low levels of education find more difficult to land a job, but so do those with highest levels of education, since there are no job opportunities matching their level and expectations. In this context, VET emerges as a niche of opportunities for youngsters.

- A notorious investment of resources is the cornerstone for boosting VET provision, maximizing its potential for employability of youngsters.

Economy / Employment:

The analysis on employment is threefold: first, the primary sector accounts for majority of works but they account for a small share of GDP generation – therefore are jobs poorly paid and with conditions that are unattractive to youth. Secondly, the country undergone a process of deindustrialization that left large sectors of population unemployed. The third conclusion is that services industry, mainly tourism and construction, were severely affected by the financial crisis across Europe, which particularly touched the two main Albania's business partners, Italy and Greece. Several challenges emerge in this context: how to create jobs requiring high level of education matching the expectations of youngster with strong academic background and retain their talent, cutting off the "brain-drain" process? How to boost a decreasingly profitable primary sector as to absorb part of the unemployment and reduce the migration process from rural to urban areas? What can be done to strengthen the secondary sector of the economy, when factories re-locate and youth want have higher studies and aims at leaving the country either for studies or work? Can a service-oriented economy develop in a context of financial crisis in neighbouring countries?

- Programs like "brain-gain" are producing positive effects but they can backlash if not properly implemented. Careful attention to and further development of this kind of initiatives should be considered.
- Even though the movement of cooperatives is not well-perceived after the communist era, strengthening and coordination of small producers in the rural regions should be given a thorough thought. The modernization of land exploitation would contribute to slow down the

migration process from rural to urban areas, which at the same time influences the rising of poverty rates in urban settings.

- VET appears as a promising opportunity to build skills and competences of youth according to labour market's needs. A country with skilled human resources is more prone to retain its factories as well as to receive investment for further development. Thus, in turn would be accompanied by the creation of jobs. Tourism and construction would benefit from this VET programs as well, as there would be professionals to cope with demand during the stationary touristy season, as well as more professionalized workers to meet the construction requirements when this sector boosts. A dialogue among labour market main players, designers of VET curricula, legislators and implementing institutions, should be promoted in order to adjust the offer of courses and the competences they provide to the market needs, thus enhancing employability of participants in VET programs.
- According to INSTAT data (INSTAT, 2014), employees accounted for 40,2% of employment in 2013, while self-employment percentage was 25,6%. In order to create more employment two actions should be undertaken: on the one hand, to strengthen the mechanisms for job search and job access, investing in occupational services and providing job search-skills building; on the other hand, to create an enabling environment for development of self-employment initiatives, building entrepreneurial skills as well as easing access to credit. Social enterprises represent a niche of opportunity for both job creation and social inclusion, since they combine in their nature a profit-making strategy with a social aim. A recognition of their added-value to society should seek initiatives for a more appropriate fiscal, legal and tax treatment, as well as more opportunities for accessing to funding and in-kind resources.

There is a need to further gender equality in the job market. Despite laws being approved, appropriate implementation must follow through in order to achieve regulation's intended results.

- Complementary services should be provided to women in order to ensure a fairer distribution of jobs among genders. Guaranteeing equal treatment in regulations is the starting point but supplementary efforts must be considered. Affordable and accessible services of children and elder care as well as measures of flexibility in combining family responsibilities and work should be in place. Equal salary rates for equal jobs should be respected. A long and steady process of empowering women starting from school, should be undertaken in order to counterbalance the macho-dominant culture in the job market. Thus would certainly enhance accessibility of women to high rank positions. Access to credit is in theory guaranteed for both genders equally but in practice women lack the collateral in majority of the cases, since land is registered under the head of family -in 90% of the cases land is owned by men (EBRD, 2016) – reforms in this regard are advised too.

Informality and black market in the economy – estimated around 30% of GDP (Boka & Torluccio, 2013) – drags job creation and lowers the conditions of those already employed. Thus having pernicious effects on fiscal policy and tax collection, which in turn affects negatively government's capacity of investment. The vicious spiral continues further down, since investment in energy security, transportation infrastructure and water provision are essential to the establishment of new companies, and therefore to job creation.

- Anticorruption, law enforcement, transparency policies have been approved in recent years, but once again, implementation falls short. More inclusive, participatory processes for decision- and

policy-making that involve all societal stakeholders is needed to achieving a co-responsibility culture, building a sense of ownership, and fostering positive attitudes toward a renewed governance style.

There is a paragraph within the Youth Policy in Albania document by the Council of Europe that synthesizes some of the above mentioned ideas: *“Albania has a growing economy but, for at least three reasons, an unfavourable position for young people: the extensive informal and black market; the disproportionate number of graduates compared to the number of jobs requiring that level of qualification; and the fact that age, rather than qualification, remains a key factor in seniority”*. (Council of Europe, 2009; p.114)

Poverty reduction and social cohesion:

As mentioned above, according to UNDP data, there has been an increase in the GNI per capita of 108% since the 1980s, and data from the NSDI establishes that poverty has been reduced from 25% to 12% throughout the period 2007/2012; however, statistical data blankets reality to some extent.

Poverty reduction is an essential component of social inclusion, and sometimes is considered the backbone of anti-exclusion policies. Nonetheless, poverty is a multi-faceted reality, which translates not only into economic terms but also in (lack of) access to public services and the existence of basic welfare safety nets. Even though Albania has a growing economy, wealth is not evenly distributed and inequalities are on the rise according to the rural/ urban divide, as well as to other social divides based in gender, age, literacy rates, and ethnic origin. Therefore, social cohesion and inclusion parameters are affected by all the above mentioned facets of poverty.

- A response to this situation is well detailed in the National Strategy for Development and Integration as follows: *“reduce disparities in access to basic services between city centres and suburbs, between rural and urban areas, and between mountainous and flat areas; increase the efficiency of the economic aid scheme, switching from a passive to an active scheme; establish a fully operational and effective social care system based on the principle of decentralisation and de-institutionalisation, for the inclusion of vulnerable groups into social protection programmes”*. (NSDI, 2014; p.88)

Minorities

Roma and Egyptian communities are two minorities lagging behind in terms of access to education and health services, poverty rates, as well as in terms of participation in the labour market. While 96% of Albanian children completed primary education and 80% finished secondary education, these percentages drop to 43% and 21% respectively for Roma. (EBRD, 2016). Regarding health, 42 % of Roma and 24% of Egyptian state in a survey conducted by UNDP/WB/EC they do not have healthcare cards and do not receive services in healthcare centres. In terms of poverty, 75% of Roma families are “very poor” while this percentage is about 28% for Albanian families, according to the same report. Unemployment for Roma is at 23% (18% for non-Roma); and out of those unemployed, 55% reported having unskilled jobs. An striking percentage of 90% of Roma and Egyptians report not having regular work contracts and not paying social insurance. Several of indicators perform even worse when analysed through gender lens.

- Albania approved a *National Action Plan for Integration of Roma and Egyptians* within the NSDI. The situation depicted by the indicators above will require far more than the approval of this plan to change – implementation remains essential in producing results. Illiteracy rates should

be tackled and major efforts are required in guaranteeing access to health care services. A more skilled and healthy work force is more likely to thrive in the job search. Anti-discrimination policies should be further developed in guaranteeing a fair treatment of vulnerable groups.

Previous sections analysed the social and economic situations in Albania, focussing in specific areas of intervention and defining the most pressing challenges for socio-economic inclusion. The next section depicts a set of recommendations that build on the analysis conducted above.

➤ **Recommendations**

Throughout the previous section, some recommendations have already been drawn while describing the challenges they respond to. This section is structured following the same categories used in the previous section, building on the analysis developed above.

Legal / institutional / governance

- ✓ As it transpires from the analysis, social and economic inclusion is a multi-faceted issue which requires the involvement of variety of stakeholders from different fields and different levels. From policy-makers to beneficiaries, from national level to community level, from social welfare services to private companies, they all should be involved in the design, implementation, and evaluation of policies, programs, and projects. Effective, inclusive governance structures should be developed in order to tackle the multi-dimensional problem of socio-economical exclusion, particularly that of youth. Vertical and horizontal coordination needs to be enhanced and sustained funding is required as well, in order for those structures to function effectively in the long-run and produce the expected results.
- ✓ Institutional development of a National Youth Agency and well as Regional Offices would definitely enhance government's commitment to take action in fostering youth engagement in decision-making processes. The creation of national advisory boards and committees would contribute to including youth particular needs into the decision-making processes at different levels, influencing policies that will affect them specifically.
- ✓ The creation of networking structures, promoting intra-country and international cooperation among youth organizations would enable partnerships formation and enhance their visibility. Exposure to and coordination with other organizations contributes to building capacity of nascent CSOs and NGOs.

Education

- ✓ Throughout the inquiry above, education stands as a main field for investment in order to foster socio-economic inclusion of youth. Education provides youngsters with opportunities to foster their studies both in-country and abroad, builds their social skills, develops their autonomy as individuals, prepares them to thrive in the labour market, and prevent them to incur in destructive behaviours such as drug abuse, criminal activities, or marginalization. Access to educational services should be fostered, especially for minority groups which have high illiteracy rates. Access to services should be accompanied with mechanisms tackling the ratio of dropouts in order to ensure successful completion of studies.
- ✓ VET possesses many virtues in the Albanian context where there is a lack of employment opportunities for un-skilled labour as well as for highly specialised workers. VET curricula design

should be aligned to market needs in order to promote employability of trainees after successful completion of training programs.

- ✓ In addition to guaranteeing access to a variety of formal educational services – primary, secondary, VET, university and grad-level – there is a concern about their quality level that should be addressed. Mechanisms for evaluation and re-education of teachers when appropriate, revision and re-design of curricula if necessary, and improvement of managerial structures of educational services should be set up and periodically reviewed.
- ✓ Appealing programs to attract foreign students and Albanian youngsters who went abroad should be considered. The “brain-gain” program is proved to be an effective experiment, even though it has some drawbacks in being seen as a top-class program that requires notorious investment, of which just an elite benefits from. Further thought should be given to maximize its potential and broaden its scope to be more inclusive.
- ✓ In frame of the process of accession to the EU, Albanian education policies should embrace European programs to foster students’ exchange and degrees equivalence.
- ✓ The concept of “youth work” established in the EU Youth Strategy firmly believes in youth personal development as a strategy for youth involvement into society. The means through which this can be achieved go beyond formal education. Therefore, it is worth considering to foster informal education options, promote mentoring services, and develop programs based on experiential learning approaches.

Economy / Employment

- ✓ Economic growth is a must in fostering job creation. The EU Strategy for Albania advocates for fostering competitiveness and innovation through creating an enabling environment for small and medium size enterprises. (EU Strategy for Albania 2014-2020)
- ✓ Social enterprises proved being an innovative source for both job creation and social inclusion. Therefore, government should work on issues that hinder their creation and development such as fiscal treatment, tax system, legislative model, and institutional and financial support. (Partners Albania)
- ✓ Besides promoting self-employment, there is a need for strengthening employment promotion programs in order to ease access to labour market, build skills for job search, and establish mechanisms for life-long capacity development of labour force.
- ✓ As observed when analysing the sectors of the economy, there is a need for a more balanced economy, where primary, secondary and tertiary sector of the economy are resilient and productive enough as to absorb and retain an increasing part of the labour force. Professionalization of labour market would create opportunities for skilled youth.
- ✓ In order to create the conditions for the abovementioned balancing of the economy, there is a need for government’s investment in two major fields: on the one side, investment in infrastructure, energy and water supply, sewage, and security, in order to boost foreign investment in the three sectors of the economy; on the other side, investment in developing a skilled and competitive work force that can supply the expected raising demand of professionals.
- ✓ Creation of a space for dialogue among labour market main players, designers of VET curricula, legislators and implementing institutions in order to adjust the offer of courses and the competences they provide to the labour market needs, thus enhancing employability of participants in VET programs. Furthermore, partnerships among schools and companies should be developed in order to provide trainees with practical work experience in real companies, which contributes to their employability after successful completion of the training.

- ✓ Participation of women in the labour market remains lower than that of men. In addition to laws on gender equality, services to conciliate familiar responsibilities and professional career should be developed. In rural areas, easing access to credit for women would certainly contribute to their livelihood. Capacity building in developing business plans, as well as management and marketing skills would enhance women opportunities to run SMEs. Economic empowerment is but one side of the change needed – a more gender-balanced culture should transpire decision- and policy-making procedures as well as in selection processes for high rank positions.
- ✓ Informality and black-market economy are a delicate area that requires special attention. Even though it might be the only source of income for marginalised groups like Roma and Egyptian communities, its negative effects on the overall economy outbalance the positive. In consequence, there is need for implementing the anticorruption laws, enforce fiscal regulations, create alternatives for job seekers, and foster voluntarism.

Poverty reduction and social cohesion

- ✓ As observed throughout the analysis above, poverty is a complex area of intervention that cannot be reduced to income, even though lack of employment –therefore lack of income- is one of the main variables that explains poverty. Employment policies described in previous sections are designed to tackle this face of poverty (See previous section about economy-related interventions).
- ✓ However, poverty is also related to re-distribution of wealth within society through policies enabling access to public services, progressive fiscal policies, efficient and well-targeted economic-based aid schemes. In this regard, unemployment benefits as well as minimum living aid packages should be well-targeted and financed in the long run. In order to design and implement efficient policies, data gathering and analysis services need to work in an effective manner.
- ✓ Social cohesion is an even broader working area that has its roots in poverty issues, but expands its horizons to geographical distribution of wealth and opportunities, ethnic cleavages, social and age groups within the population. There is a need for an effective decentralised social care system, which ensures accessibility of population, particularly ethnic minorities. Fostering social cohesion requires both prevention and protection services, requires reaction capacity for punctual particular needs –after extreme natural events or a spreading disease- but also a protection net for vulnerable groups. Moreover, there is a need for rehabilitation and reinsertion of specific groups as drug-addicts, former inmates, victims of gender violence, and disabled. Access to preventive, reinsertion, and protection services has to be guaranteed, especially to vulnerable groups.

Minorities

- ✓ In order to ensure youth inclusion into society and the economy, particularly when they belong to minority groups –Roma and Egyptians– education is the cornerstone. It is not only important in certifying a certain level studies, but also for developing social skills and becoming more able to thrive in the labour market. Social services and local authorities should invest in bringing children from these communities into the education system and offering the complementary services in order to cope with the special needs these particular children might have.
- ✓ Of major concern is the access of minorities to health care services. As developed in the previous section, not only a high percentage of Roma and Egyptian people do not receive health care services but furthermore, many of them do not know how to get access to them.

Awareness raising campaigns about accessibility to these services should be undertaken at community and local level.

- ✓ Regarding employment, more than half of people belonging to minorities work in un-skilled employments, majority in the informal sector. If Albania is meant to tackle the informal and black-market economy, alternative opportunities for income generating activities should be provided to these workers. VET appears as an option worth exploring, but also the further development and professionalization the rural activities, as well as support for self-employment and entrepreneurial ventures.

POLITICAL INCLUSION

The analysis of the political inclusion of youth in Albania will follow the same structure depicted in the previous section. Building on the description of the current political situation in Albania, this study synthesizes the main policies, the funding, and enumerate the key stakeholders involved. The last part of this section deals with the priority areas for intervention, the most notorious impediments and, finally defines a set of recommendations.

➤ **Current political inclusion situation**

Albania undergone a long path in order to enhance the democratic standards of the country. The process has been driven from within as well as influenced from the outside. The process to access the EU is a major driver for change in the democracy field –i.e. the Law "On gender equality in society". Furthermore, the European integration process is enhancing a trend for public institutions and political stakeholders to look at youth as a social group worth taking into account in the political sphere. However, Albania's political and social systems are still in transition from a past where political participation was not encouraged – some of these features remain present nowadays such as "A lack of democratic tradition, weak institutions and weak civil society [...] criminalization, corruption and the shadow economy" (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2015; page 20).

Population under the age of 30 represents about one third of the total population in Albania. Notwithstanding, youth participation in both social and political spheres remains low. According to data from a study conducted by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in South Eastern Europe, 35,8% of youth participate in some way in politics and 27,7% are active in civil society (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2015). Data from a study by the Olof Palme International Centre (Olof Palme, 2015), only 7,1% of MPs are under the age of 35. The percentage of Ministers under 35 is 14%, and the percentage of female Ministers is 5%. At the local level, after 2015 elections, 92% of Mayors were over 35 years old. It is worth noting that the percentage of members of City Councils under 35 was 10% in the elections of 2011 and it increased up to 26,4% in 2015 elections.

In addition to political participation in terms of representation in governing institutions, there are other forms of participation in social and political matters that youth can engage with. Although youth organisations exist, not many youngsters are engaged in their activities. There is a lack of capacity in terms of leadership, management, and funding that render these organisations ill-equipped for surviving in an environment where they face several constraints – i.e. public perception do not welcome much voluntarism activities since they remind the communist period

forced volunteer activism; the lack of funding within the country increases dependency from foreign donors; the legal framework do not provide youth organizations with a place in society for them to engage youth in different forms of civic and political participation.

➤ **Policies/ legal framework**

- The Law "On gender equality in society" (adopted in 2008) and its further development through the amendments introduced in 2012. They introduced a 30% representation quota for women in candidate lists for election, at both local and Parliament levels; increased the fines for political parties' lists not meeting the requirement; introduce requirement of this 30% quote to be respected within the first three positions of the list.
- National strategy for Development and Integration 2014-2020. Develops an integrated approach for the socio-economic develop of the country as well as for the integration in the EU. The third axis of the strategy is based on strengthening governance, democracy and rule of law parameters.
- National Youth Action Plan 2015-2020. The strategic objective n.1 of the plan is Youth Promotion and Participation in Democratic Processes / Decision-Making. In the frame of this objective the plan seeks to provide the infrastructure for supporting youth in becoming active participants in democratic processes and decision-making, as well as to strengthen the capacities and resources availability of youth organisations.

➤ **Main Stakeholders**

International level

- UNDP, UNW, UNFPA WB. OECD, USAID, EC, IOM, ILO,?
- Embassies and development agencies of the European Union, the US, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Austria, Germany, Italy, Greece, among others.
- INGO such Olof Palme Centre,
- Chambers of Commerce from foreign countries.

National level

- Government:
 - Ministry of Youth and Social Welfare
 - Youth Consultation Board
 - National Youth Service and Regional Youth Services
 - Albanian Agency for the support of Civil Society (AMSHC)
- Political parties: The three largest political parties in Albania created their respective youth factions, even though their activity level remains pretty low or inexistent in some cases.
 - FRESSH – the Albanian Euro socialist Youth Forum,
 - LRI - Youth Movement for Integration is a political youth organization of the Socialist Movement for Integration.
 - FRPD - Youth Forum of Democratic Party
- Within the Albanian Youth Council there are many organizations: (YP-Albania, p80) (just pick some and delete the rest....what are the one important to keep?)

- European Law Student Association – ELSA (International NGO) Albania 2. Student in Free Enterprise – SIFE * (International NGO) Albania 3. Albanian Student Abroad Network – AS@N * 4. Youth Group of SOS Village * (International NGO) Albania 5. Albania Youth Press – part of European Youth Press (International NGO) 6. European Youth Parliament Albania – (International NGO) Dega Shqipëri 7. Young European Federalists – Albania – JEF – Albania (International NGO) 8. Youth Group of the Centre on Population and Development (International NGO) 9. Young European Liberals – Albania 10. Youth Group for Human Rights A+ (Action Plus) 11. Youth Centre – Vlora 12. Albanian Centre for Integration of Young People 13. Albanian Environmentalist Students Club – KSASH 14. Centre of Education and Civic Participation 15. Students for Students – S4S 16. Youth Associations Council – Durrës 17. Youth Club of Office of Consumer Protection 18. “Art Contact” Centre 19. First Step Association 20. Youth Shaker 21. Association 16+ 22. Association for Integration and Development 23. Associate for Sportive Culture and Recreation “PRO-ALBANIA” 24. ZMIMSC Foundation – Gjirokastër* 25. Social Club – Korçë* 26. National Students Council (Observer Member) 27. Students Council of University of Tirana (Observer Member)*
- Youth Parliaments
- Student Governments and Student Councils
- There are many organizations, foundations, associations, youth activist groups promoting youth decision making, such as :
 - Network Albanian Students Abroad (AS @ N)
 - Albanian Youth Council
 - Albanian Youth Parliament
 - Action Plus
 - Gender Alliance for Development
 - Center for the Rights of Children
 - Albanian Association of the United Nations
 - SIFE Albania
 - KRIIK – Albania

➤ **Funding**

In the frame of the National Youth Action Plan 2014-2020, Government allocates funding for “Youth promotion and participation in democratic processes/ decision-making”, under strategic objective 1. The total amount to cover the planned activities is estimated at ALL 1,048,928, of which 52% is covered by the state budget. The remaining amount is expected to be covered by donors.

Foreign aid used to constitute a major component in funding initiatives related to foster democracy and citizens’ participation. However, ODA flowing into Albania is decreasing, and it represents the 3% of the GNI. Percentages below 3% are historical minimums since the country started receiving foreign aid at the beginning of the 1990s, and they have remained this low since 2007.

➤ **Impediments and priority areas for intervention**

Legal / institutional / governance

The legal, institutional and governance structures regarding youth and youth participation in politics are not developed in Albania. There is a lack of mechanisms aiming at developing youth's interest in participating in the public sphere, neither through political involvement nor by other more socially-oriented means. Moreover, the low levels of engagement of youngsters combined with high rates of unemployment, an alarming rate of 30% of youngsters not engaged in employment, education, training, and a prevalent intend to leave the country among highly-educated youngsters depicts a grim perspective for the future of the country.

- Therefore, there is a need to revise and strengthen the legal/ institutional framework of the country at all levels, from national to local, as well as to re-think the governance mechanisms and processes at the core of these institutions in order to bring youngsters on board. The reform process of this framework should definitely involve youth.
- Reforms regarding political participation of youngsters, such as defining a quota in parties' lists through amendment of the Electoral Code, or establishing financing for youth political organisations, should be considered.
- Preference for senior politicians is observed in the legal framework and should be addressed. The legal system establishes the minimum age for being elected president at 40 years old, which is high in comparison to other European countries – 18 years old is the minimum requirement to fill any position in Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, France or Spain. This fact discourages voters in seeing younger politicians as capable professionals.
- Additionally, new legislation recognizing the existence and championing the development of youth organisations in the social sphere is highly recommendable. Youth involvement in volunteering, sport- or culture-related activities should be strengthened from different angles. Involvement in such activities develops in youth a sense of active citizenship.

Political parties are the core of the democratic system, therefore in order to increase youth participation in democracy and decision-making processes, it is a must to improve political parties approach to youth.

- Reforms range from the composition of the parties, internal rules, governing structures, electoral programs, mechanisms for taking stock about youth needs and include them in their agenda, or empowering the Youth Forums of Political Parties.
- The reform of the legal/ institutional framework described above requires will and commitment of political parties of both sides of the parties system. Therefore, only a change in parties' mind-set can fuel the subsequent reforms, and this change need to be partly promoted from within.

Advocating for an enabling environment for political participation

Complementary to the change in political parties' mentality from within mentioned in the previous paragraph, there must be a change of mind-set from the outside – a shift in mentality of the whole civil society, fostering youth engagement in the public sphere.

- CSOs should create demand for enhanced transparency, accountability and effectiveness from public institutions and facilitate greater focus on the needs of citizens in policy-making, as advised in the EU Strategy for Albania 2014-2020. Considering the distribution of population by age group, youth should be at the core of policy-making.
- CSOs could be more active in supporting the democratic political culture and encouraging citizens to participate in decision making processes in an informed way. Participation of youth and minority groups, fostering inclusive decision-making mechanisms, should be advocated for.

Funding

The allocation of the funds foreseen by the executive for implementation of the strategic objective 1 of the Youth Action Plan 2014-2020 – Youth promotion and participation in democratic processes/ decision-making– amounts ALL 1,048,928. Only 52% of the total amount is covered by state budget, relying on donors to cover the rest. Given the importance of engaging youth in democratic practices, in decision-making processes, and in governance of public institutions, funding should be increased –particularly considering that youth makes up for a third of the population in Albania. Furthermore, taking into consideration the fact that ODA flowing into Albania is shrinking –it is below 3% of GNI since 2007, according to the World Bank data – government should not expect half of the budget to be covered by foreign aid.

- The investment in promoting youth participation in democratic processes is extremely low – it is just above USD 1,200 per year. Even more so, considering that only about half of the total budget will be covered by state budget.
- Given that state budget allocation of funds in fostering youth engagement in democratic processes remains very low, new models of financing youth organisations should be explored beyond relying on donors.

Gender perspective/ women participation

Women participation in society is a challenge present in all countries and Albania is not an exception. Involvement in economic activities, education system, and social activities has been dealt with in previous sections. Strengthening their presence in all these sectors enhances in turn their participation in the public sphere of the country. There is a need for women empowerment for them to become agents of change, as well as there is a need for a change in mind-set of power structures in fostering women involvement in participation. The approval of the Law "On gender equality in society" (adopted in 2008) and its further development through the amendments introduced in 2012 is seen by international observers as a positive step forward, but there is still room for improvement regarding its implementation so the regulatory framework produces the intended results.

- Increasing the percentage of women in political parties' membership, candidates' lists, and governing structures is needed. According to Freedom House, in 2013 the three largest political parties were penalised because of them not meeting the quota of 30% in their candidates' lists. (Freedom House, 2014)
- Capacity development, support programs, and financing of projects targeting women willing to be involved in politics should be in place in order to promote them assuming leading roles and reaching decision-making positions.
- Women are very present in CSOs, therefore creating spaces for public institutions to engage with CSOs would enhance women participation in decision-making as well as improve governance of these institutions.

➤ **Recommendations**

Legal / institutional / governance

- ✓ Revision and reform of the legal and institutional framework regarding youth engagement in democratic activities and processes of decision making is recommended. The revision process should involve youth associations, take stock on European framework examples, and develop a holistic approach.

- ✓ In the frame of a holistic change, there is a set of key areas of intervention: financing of youth-based and/ or youth-oriented organizations; regulations on youth people' participation in politics, from quotas to minimum age for running for office; enhancement of more inclusive, participatory governance processes of decision-making.
- ✓ Political parties constitute the entry door to the political system, therefore it is worth analysing their composition, internal norms of functioning, and dynamics towards younger generations. There should be a change in the mind-set of political parties: from using youth as voters and passive beneficiaries of few youth policies, to seeing them as active citizens with potential for becoming new leaders, citizens who hold their government accountable, and citizens whose voice must be heard and taken into consideration throughout the political cycle –from agenda building to accountability processes after implementation.

Advocating for an enabling environment for political participation

- ✓ In line with the previous recommendations, youth engagement in democracy-related activities and processes should be fostered as well from the civil society sector. Awareness-raising campaigns focusing on the added-value of youth participation in the public sphere should be developed. Empowerment of youth activists and leaders of youth organisations through internships in public institutions, and trainings in leadership and managerial skills should be organised.
- ✓ Requests to public institutions for creating spaces of collaboration among societal actors and including them in decision-making processes should be stepped up. Stakeholders from civil society should demand the development of mechanisms for such involvement, not only in terms of empowering CSOs but also for further accountability of public institutions towards citizens.

Funding

- ✓ Given the importance of creating a culture of participation in society and political matters among the youngsters, and being aware this is a long complex process, funding should match the relevance of the task to undertake. Therefore, government should increase the state budget devoted to this purpose as well as to develop new sources of funding, in order to meet the needs while becoming increasingly independent from shrinking foreign aid flows.
- ✓ Funding is not only a concern by governments and public institutions, but also for CSOs focused in fostering youth engagement in democracy and decision-making processes. Reliance in foreign aid should decrease since it is not sustainable in the long run, the less in a context of diminishing foreign aid flows into the country as well as raising competing needs as environmental issues and refugee/ migration concerns. Alternative funding mechanisms should be considered and given legal framework to develop in. The fiscal treatment of CSOs developing revenues-generating activities should be revised in order to allow them increase their financial sustainability, thus enabling them to further invest in social-aimed activities –i.e. social enterprises.

Gender perspective / women participation

- ✓ The legal framework does establish a 30% quota system for women representation in public office, as well as safeguards regarding the top positions. However, according to the Council of Europe Resolution of 2012, this percentage should be of 40% in proportional electoral systems (CoE, 2012). Therefore, and in the frame of aligning Albania's legal framework to EU recommendations, there is room for improvement in this regard. Furthermore, complementary

mechanisms fostering gender parity in representation should be explored –i.e. public financial incentives for gender-balanced candidate’s lists.

- ✓ As in the case of youth, gender should be approached in a holistic manner, not just from the legal perspective. There is a need for a mind-set change within political parties in order for them not to try avoiding to meeting the quota and instead make them willing to increase this minimum percentage. Parties should be willing to include larger number of women in their governance structures as well as broader their presence within their membership structures. There is a need for democratizing the internal functioning of political parties regarding gender equality.
- ✓ In operatizing the former, CSOs working for women rights and inclusion have an advocacy role to assume – they should request the government for capacity development, support programs, and financing of projects targeting women willing to be involved in politics. Thus, certainly contributing in them assuming leadership roles reaching decision-making positions.
- ✓ CSOs focused on gender issues, should raise demands to public institutions regarding the creation of spaces for consultation and dialogue among these very institutions, political parties, and gender-based CSOs in order to involve the latter in decision-making as well as to improve governance of these institutions.

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS / CONCLUSIONS

- Levels of investment in social affairs remains pretty low. More investment in supporting political involvement of youth as well as youth organizations’ development is also advised.

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