

SITUATION ANALYSIS

The impact of COVID-19 on families in need in Albania

Terre des hommes organization in Albania, during the period March-April 2020 undertook the assessment of the situation on the impact of pandemics and quarantine on families in need in Albania. This assessment sheds light on the new realities created by the COVID-19 virus and highlights how the situation of pandemic and quarantine is affecting vulnerable children, young people, and parents, including the feelings, experiences, or problems created.

Participants in the evaluation

779 participants were part of this situational analysis, respectively coming from 8 cities in Albania: Tirana, Durrës, Elbasan, Korca, Fier, Shkodra, Kukës, and Lezha, of which 58% were female and 42% male. Meanwhile, the collected data represent the characteristics of different age groups where 53.6% were children and young people while 46.4% were over 25 years old and the characteristics of different ethnicities where 45.6% were the majority of the population, 28.6% from the Roma community, 13.6% from the Egyptian community.

Key Findings:

Economy and employment

- 4 out of 5 (80%) study participants report that they are unemployed and 22% of them have lost their jobs due to pandemics. There are more women than men who report being unemployed before pandemics, while there are more men than women who report losing their jobs due to pandemics.
- Only 2 out of 10 respondents (20%) declare that they continue to have a regular monthly income
- Unemployment and income have also brought psychological challenges, after 96% of respondents claim to have felt more worried now than before about/regarding their monthly income and the inability to provide the necessary materials such as food and other products for their families.

- 9 out of 10 adults report that they feel more worried than before regarding the country's economy and job prospects in the future.

Education and Internet Access

- 488 of the respondents marked online learning as one of the main motives in accessing the internet during this period. Other reasons to access the internet; 321 respondents use the Internet to get in contact with information, followed by 224 who use it for entertainment purposes and 195 to communicate with others.

- 16% of children do not have access to online education, because they don't have internet connection while 69% are able to attend the lectures in sporadic/occasional modality. By recharging their own or their families phone credit balance, or by "borrowing/using" their neighbor's internet access, meanwhile, 15% have stable internet access and can fully attend.

- 94% of respondents say they are more worried than before about their children's education;

Emotional state

96% of respondents report that the main concerns added by COVID-19 situation are related with their household economy; 94% with the education of their children; 93% regarding loneliness and fear that unusual measures will last too long and; for 89% the risk that they or relatives may be affected or lose their lives by the COVID-19.

- Almost 9 out of 10 respondents say that during the last week they have felt sometimes or more often worried, "stressed" or even upset because of things that are out of their control, while 44% of them claim that have felt this way often or almost always.

- Almost 4 in every 5 respondents (80%) claim that during the last week they have felt sometimes or more often that the difficulties have accumulated and that they find it impossible to overcome them;

- 70% felt left out or isolated from others and did not have company / close people, or the ability to cope with personal problems.
- Almost 2 out of every 3 respondents stated that they felt powerless to control their irritability/irritation/nervousness.
- Although gender differences are generally small, it is interesting to note that men claim to have felt more than women that difficulties have increased and that they find it impossible to overcome them (92% of men in contrast to 88% of women); who have difficulty coping with problems (90% of men in contrast to 84% of women) and who have felt isolated from others more than women (91% of men in contrast to 84% of women);
- While women claim to have felt more anxious or "stressed" than men in the last week (92% of women in contrast to 88% of men) and that they have found it slightly more difficult than men to control irritations and nervousness. Mothers have also been described by respondents as the most worried persons in the family.
- As per the prevailing physical symptoms through the current situation, it was reported that physical symptoms such as headaches, followed by sleep disturbances have been experienced more often (or stronger) than before. Appetite, muscle/joint pain, heart pain, or cramping, and abdominal pain were less commonly reported, by only 29% of respondents. Almost all other respondents stated that they have experienced at least one of these symptoms during the given period.

Interpersonal relationships

- In the current situation, 9 out of 10 adults report that they worry at least sometimes about the management of children under the age of 12 and to a lesser extent worry regarding the management of adolescents with whom they are in isolation.
- Also, 9 out of 10 adults report being concerned about managing relationships with other adults they are in isolation with. Meanwhile, 1 in 5 adults states that they are almost always worried about managing relationships with other adults they are in isolation with.

- The vast majority of respondents (96%) claim that they at least sometimes worry about their friends or family members who live far away, while 3 out of 4 respondents have at least sometimes felt the *absence* of a reliable person and the absence of a person to whom they can rely on in case of emergency. 2 out of 3 respondents felt the absence of a person with whom they feel a strong emotional connection.

- Men feel more than women the absence of a reliable person, or the absence of a person they can rely on in an emergency, and a person with whom they feel a strong emotional connection, while women feel more concerned than men regarding their friends or family members who live far away.

- While children and young people surveyed about relationships with others have generated results slightly more positive than those of adults, in the current situation only 85% of them worry at least sometimes about managing relationships with parents and other adults, and 87% of children and young people worry at least sometimes about managing relationships with other children / young people with whom they are in isolation. 79% of children and young people are concerned about managing relationships with other children/young people whom they have company but they do not live in the same house.

- 26% of children and 18% of adults claim to know someone infected with COVID-19, most of them claim that the infected are other people in their neighborhoods.

Trust in institutions and implementation of measures

- Respondents specifically asked about the trust they have in government and non-government structures and institutions regarding the management of the pandemic situation, the institutions that seem to enjoy the highest level of trust and acceptance by respondents (except non-governmental institutions or organizations) are health institutions and state police, meanwhile, rated with a lower degree of trust and acceptance by respondents are the social services and economic assistance system followed by the local administration and then by the parliament / government of the Albanian state.

- 80% of them (4 in 5 respondents) believe that the government has taken appropriate measures in response to the pandemic. Specifically, more than 1 in 2 respondents consider these measures necessary 26.2% claim that although the measures taken in response to COVID-19 may be fair, it is impossible for them to follow due to specific conditions and 18.4 % consider them excessive or unnecessary.

- Only 17% of respondents state that they have never been out in a week, while 5.39% still report that they have continued to go out every day. Also, only 27.5% report that they have not met any person other than the occupants of the house during a certain week in the current situation.

- Regarding the most common reasons for movement, the reason most often mentioned by 456 respondents is the movement for shopping, followed by walk, to make payments, for work, to assist relatives, and finally for social meetings.

Conclusions and recommendations

When the reopening phase is gradually taking place after the quarantine, although the eventual impact of the pandemic and economic consequences in mental health, in education, or other areas cannot be immediately and accurately quantified, all governmental and non-governmental structures and institutions involved in managing the pandemic situation have to be ready to point out in time and rigorously manage the long-term effects expected to come afterward.

The main implications evidenced by the situational analysis for families in need are the significant difficulties in the economic aspect, employment, and family income, which also have an impact on other areas like children's education, aggravated emotional state, and complications in family relationships. Likewise, families are highly concerned regarding the opportunities for employment and their incomes when the moment of gradually reopening happens and beyond.

Given that families in need often become part of informal employment or self-employment or alternative ways of generating income (collecting cans, etc.) they are not able to benefit from support schemes.

Similarly, isolation and quarantine had an important impact on formal and informal education of children coming from families in need, mainly due to the difficulties in attending online lessons. This has resulted in additional difficulties and concern for families and children and young people on how they feel towards attending classes and the consequences that this period will bring to their learning progress. It is mandatory that the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports provide post-school support for students, and summer school programs to fulfill gaps created by long detachment from educational institutions.

Strong emotional experiences and marked difficulties in family relationships emerge in this assessment. The need for psychological support, family counseling or protection can be deduced from the answers given.

The fact that a large number of adults claim difficulty in relationships with other adults, or children cannot be directly related to domestic violence but can be seen as an added risk factor during quarantine. Moreover, almost 2 out of every 3 respondents stated that they felt unable to control their irritation/nervousness.

The main recommendations that are evidenced by the data of this assessment are as follows:

- Designing a short-term and long-term strategy for economic recovery for groups in need in managing financial difficulties and employment in the transition from quarantine to gradual opening and beyond.
- Drafting a strategy or action plan to minimize damage to the mental health of vulnerable people.
- The Ministry of Health and Social Protection is recommended to focus the call for applications for the Social Fund for Municipalities in interventions to recover from the consequences of pandemics, with special focus on vulnerable groups.
- Providing programs such as Summer Schools to recuperate in the lessons and education of children and young people who have had difficulty following the online learning process during the summer period and during the next school start.

- Providing internet access, or ways to communication and information for groups in need during natural disaster/civil emergency times.

- Providing financial support and capacity building for Child Protection Workers in the management of cases of abuse and domestic violence need a continuous and proactive follow-up in identifying cases and taking measures for immediate protection and long term.