

AA.VV.

SOCIAL SERVICES IN ALBANIA: BACKGROUND AND STATE OF THE ART

A report from Tirana, Shkoder and Elbasan



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Erasmus+ Capacity Building in Higher Education

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CHAPTER II

DEMOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND AND THE KEY SOCIAL ISSUES

by Giulia Mascagni

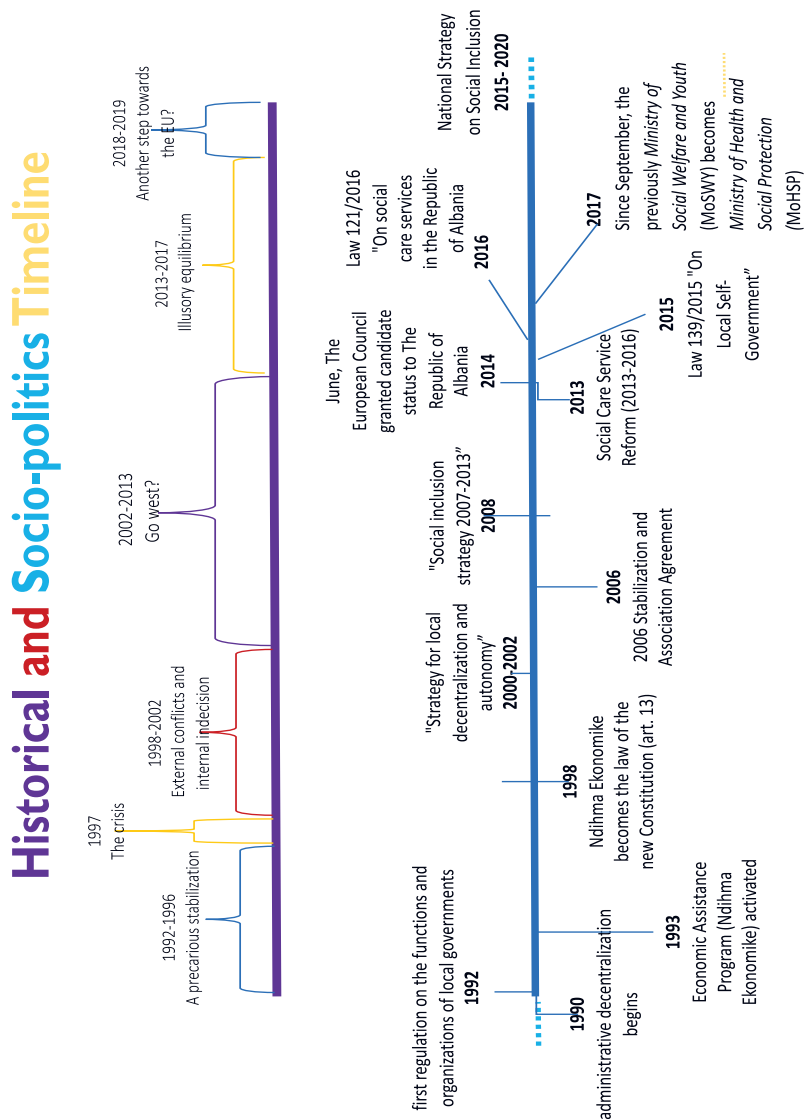
2.1. A first demographic profile

The purpose of this Chapter is to perform a sociological review of the main events that have marked the Albanian society from a political, economic, demographic and cultural point of view.

The review will serve as a baseline assessment for the understanding of more specific data and problems that will be presented in the second part of the volume, which includes the analysis of three local realities – those of Tirana, Elbasan and Shkoder – and of activated social services in their respective territories.

The entire work explores existing historical and social contexts, Social Service organization, budgets and expenditures to serve as a baseline for future measurement and development.

It is in the historical framework just presented that the social phenomena that we are going to describe and analyze in this Chapter are inscribed. The graphic summary proposed below will help us to continue this path.



The aim of these pages is actually to reconstruct the profile of the main demographic dynamics and of social inequality and poverty in the Albanian context and to attempt a first recognition of social services active on the national territory.

Let's start with some demographic data that allows us to define the current structure of the Albanian population and the main trends that characterize it.

The population of Albania on January 1st, 2018 is 2.870.324 inhabitants with a density of 101 people/square meter, and a structure by sex of 1.438.609 men and 1.431.715 women. Albanian population is homogenous with only around 2% of the population being of a different nationality, with three national minorities recognized: mainly Greek, Macedonian as well as Montenegrin. Looking in detail at the 2011 census, the population of Albania was officially 83% Albanian, 0,9% Greek, 0,2% Macedonian, 0,01% Montenegrin, 0,3% Aromanian, 0,3% Romani, 0,1% Balkan Egyptian, 14% no declared ethnicity and 1,6% not relevant¹ (World Population Review 2019).

Projections based on the 2011 census data and comparison with previous census data suggest that the Albanian population is showing the first signs of ageing. The average age is nowadays approximately 35 years old against a number of approximately 31 years old for the 2001 census. Life expectancy for Albanian females estimated to be 77,2 years in 2005 has reached 81,4 years in 2017, while for males it was 72,4 years and it is now 75,8 years (INSTAT 2006, 9; INSTAT 2018 a).

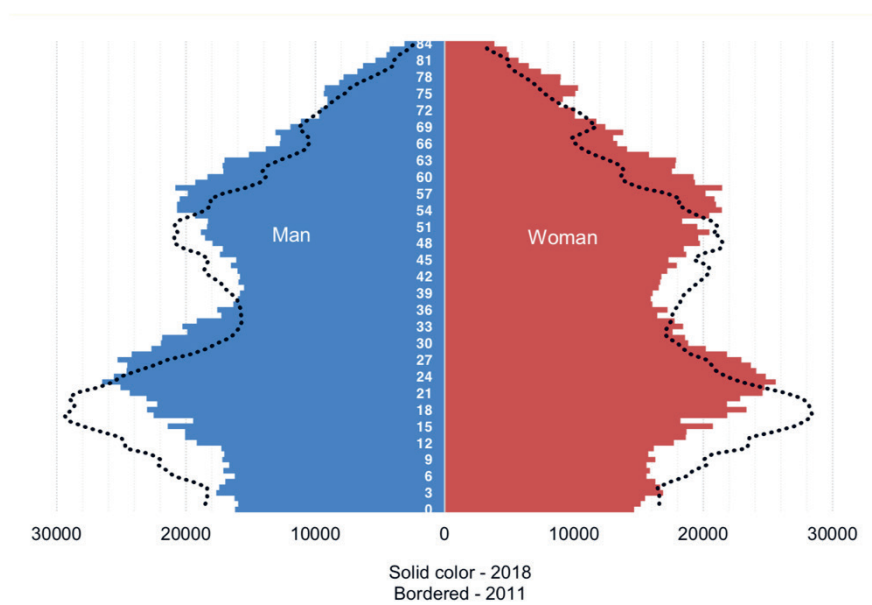
During 2017 the natural increase of population (births-deaths) is 8.637 inhabitants, by experiencing a decrease by 16,5% compared to the previous year. The total fertility rate is 1,51 children born/woman and during 2017 were born 30.869 babies, by experiencing a decrease by 2,7% compared to the previous year. The number of deaths in 2017 is 22.232 persons, by experiencing an increase by 3,9 % compared to the previous year.

In 2017, the number of emigrants is 39.905 persons and the number of immigrants 25.003 persons. Net migration (the difference between emigrants and immigrants) results -14.902 people.

So, in synthesis, Albania's demographic profile is characterized by three main phenomena: declining mortality rates, declining fertility rates and large internal and external migratory waves (Nikolovska 2008).

¹ It is necessary to remember that ethnicity is a delicate issue in Albania, and one that is debated: minority groups like the Roma, Greeks and Macedonians have questioned the official data and claim a larger share. There are also two cultural minorities – Aromanians and Roma – and other Albanian minorities like the Bulgarians and Jews.

Figure 2.1: Population Pyramid of Albania in 2011 and 2018



Source: INSTAT 2018 a

As represented by the age pyramid (see Figure 2.1), the age structure has changed significantly in the past two decades: the population below 15 years of age is now decreasing and the population over 65 years is growing faster than the rest of the adult population². Albania stands out for having one of the youngest populations in Europe, despite continuous increases in life expectancy and large-scale emigration by young people.

Albania is known more for its massive international migration: between 1994 and 2001, 900.000 people emigrated from Albania, leaving a total population of 3,06 million in 2001; and the projection based on most recent census (October 2011), recorded a migration of 1.240.118 compared with a resident population of 2.883.000.

Demographic changes and internal migration have influenced in the decrease of the average household size. While in 1979 the average household size was 5,6 persons with 4,6 in the urban zones and 6,2 in the rural areas, the same indicator for 1989 was 4,7, 3,9, and 5,3 persons, respectively, and in the 2001 census was 4,2, 3,9, and 4,5 persons, respectively (ISB 2008). The latest available survey shows that the mean household size is 3,3, with only slight differences between urban and rural areas: 3,1 and 3,5, respectively (INSTAT 2018 a).

² The 2001 census put Albania's population at 3,063 million, with a median age of 28,3 compared to 39 for EU (INSTAT 2004); Albania Census Atlas 2001, Tirane.

Albanian population grew by an average rate of 2,4% during 1950-1990. Based on INSTAT's evaluation, the natural growth rate of Albania's population after transition (1990) has converted to a rate of 1,9% up to an estimate population growth rate for 2017 of 0,31% (CIA Index Mundi), a lower one that reflects a decrease in birth rates and especially the migration flow – both consequences of increased economic insecurity in transition (ISB 2008, 19). As pointed out by the literature (Betti et al. 2018; King 2004), this out-migration provides an economic safety net for many people but creates some negative externalities for families and communities. Moreover, although, it also has a high level of internal migration, mostly to the coastal region and the main urban centers. In the 2011 census, 10,6% of respondents had returned home within the prior decade after residing outside the country, and, for the first time, the urban population (53,5%) exceeded the rural population (46,5%).

2.2. Poverty and inequalities

It is therefore in this scenario and with the issues mentioned that the intervention of social services takes place. But what kind of problems – target of social intervention – afflict the Albanian society in a more serious and urgent manner? And which services does the current Albanian welfare system provide?

Let's start by briefly dwelling on the first of the questions, and let's talk of poverty³ and inequalities.

A first fact is that although Albania experienced impressive *per capita* economic growth over the decade up to 2009 and modest growth since then, it remains one of the poorest countries in the Balkan region (Betti et al. 2018). Despite these high rates of growth, income *per capita* is relatively low compared with other European countries indeed, and poverty has increased in recent years after a long period of falling poverty levels. This situation is described in more detail by the data taken from the Household Budget Survey below (Table 2.1 and Figure 2.2). It should also not be forgotten that inequality of incomes has widened during the transition and has reached levels similar to other European market economies (Pere, Bartlett 2019): the average monthly consumption of 716€ (= 87968 Leks) in the capital Tirana is significantly higher than the national average of 597€ (73400 Leks), and practically double compared to the average monthly consumption of the poorest area which is around 386€ (= 47467 Leks).

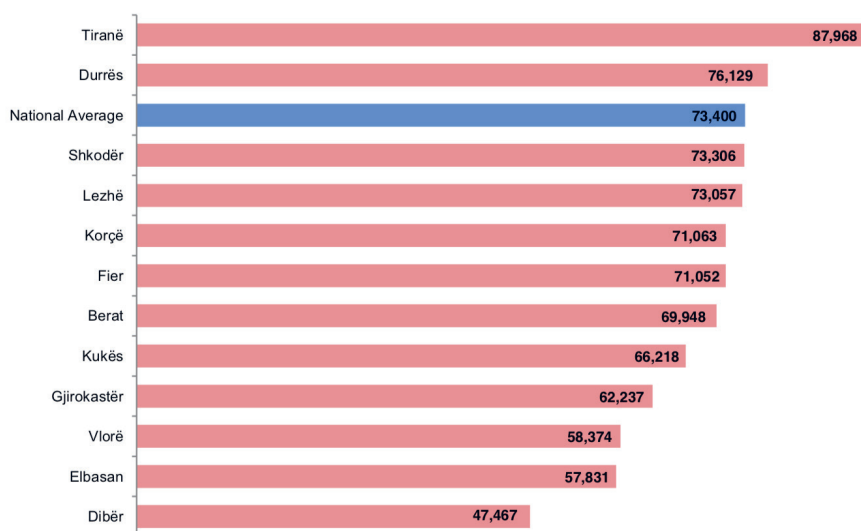
³ Poverty reduction is a key objective of the Albanian government (Betti, Bici, Neri, Sohnesen, Thomo 2018).

Table 2.1: Monthly consumption expenditures by Prefecture, Years 2007 -2017

Prefecture	Year					
	2017	2016	2015	2014	2009	2007
Berat	69.948	64.222	65.840	59.854	53.114	54.146
Dibër	47.467	63.212	56.221	66.951	56.744	51.262
Durrës	76.129	77.933	74.602	68.083	55.762	82.905
Elbasan	57.831	57.290	55.671	53.013	58.217	65.037
Fier	71.052	71.242	69.125	68.721	76.242	63.122
Gjirokastrë	62.237	57.068	74.993	74.293	79.494	82.815
Korçë	71.063	67.829	64.417	57.633	64.096	62.171
Kukës	66.218	68.197	68.989	59.623	54.205	57.866
Lezhë	73.057	75.470	79.374	78.811	68.679	62.562
Shkodër	73.306	75.503	74.658	76.509	67.179	70.591
Tiranë	87.968	85.344	81.710	81.656	71.687	83.817
Vlorë	58.374	58.872	51.198	54.931	63.008	56.146
Gjithsej	73.400	73.143	70.766	69.442	65.753	69.383

Source: INSTAT 2017

Figure 2.2: The household monthly expenditure by Prefectures, 2017



Source: INSTAT 2017

Relevant theoretical studies on the subject clarify how poverty – in an absolute sense but nevertheless relative – is “stigmatizing” (Wilkinson 2000; Marmot 2004). Deprivation experienced in the economic sphere, even if relative, implies fact, often important, sometimes absolute, renunciations in the capacity space. To participate freely and fully in the life of the community (Sen 1992, 162) or, as Smith argued, “being able to appear in public without shame” are general social activities that require an investment of resources, and in particular of economic resources, in quantity depending on the average availability of the other subjects of the community (Mascagni 2010).

The line of the condition of poverty can be effectively redefined by going beyond strictly material parameters and taking into account the availability of all those resources necessary to lead a dignified life with respect to the rest of society (Wilkinson 2000, 27; Paugam 2005). The state of well-being starting from psychophysical health, if it is true that it cannot fail to be affected by a condition of poverty (of absolute poverty), it is also true that it is strongly conditioned by those situations characterized by a disadvantage even if only relative.

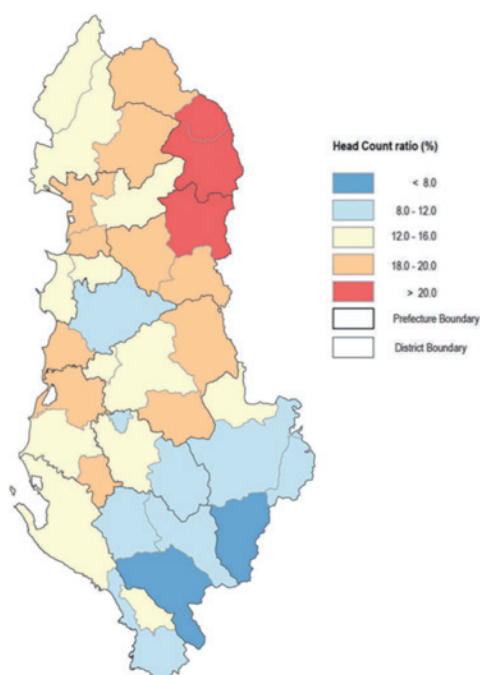
Because even in those societies that have long left behind real states of material deprivation and where the majority of the population has a standard of living well above the poverty threshold, the dynamics that come into play and exert their weight on expectations life and health manifest themselves in particularly complex and subtle forms, which see powerful and highly discriminating mechanisms in action (Mascagni 2010), this is no less true in a context “in progress” like the Albanian one. A reality where – to resume the Paugam (2005) classification and propose its application by updating it to the specific case – we are moving from a type of integrated poverty, typical of contexts where the lack of resources is generalized and where, consequently, the poor are not stigmatized and excluded but considered an integrated part of normal social life, to a new poverty. A type of poverty that we can venture to define as marginalizing: because it holds together: A) characteristics of “marginal poverty”, for the empowerment of subjects (marginal subjects are considered responsible for their situation of hardship) given the greater margins of space and power of the market economy combined to neo-liberal approaches; and B) some characteristics of the “disqualifying poverty” typical of post-industrial societies and of precarious employment and economic insecurity: a poverty that affects individuals and communities when suddenly, consequently to the loss of employment, they find themselves deprived of resources and at the same time of social recognition.

Returning to the data, according to INSTAT (2013) and to the World Bank the food poverty line or extreme poverty line in 2002 was set at 3.047 ALL (24,87€)⁴ per month, whereas the poverty line has been set at 4.891 ALL (39,93€) per month at constant prices (World Bank, ECSHD).

⁴ The amounts in € are calculated according to the current exchange rate of 122.500 Leks = 1€.

Starting from this reference threshold⁵, extremely poor population, defined as those with difficulty meeting basic nutritional needs, increased from 1,2% in 2008 to 2,2% in 2012; moreover, the percentage of the population living in Albania below the poverty line was decreased from 25,4% in 2002 to 18,4% in 2005 and to 12,4% in 2008, to then reverse the trend and grow to 14,3% in 2012. At the same time extreme poverty decreased from 4,7% in 2002 to 3,5% in 2005 to 1,2% in 2008. In 2012, extreme poverty has increased for both urban (2,2%) and rural areas (2,3%)⁶.

Figure 2.3: Poverty rates in Albanian Districts 2012



Source: 2011 Census in Betti et al. 2018

⁵ A lot of the literature leads us to emphasize the bias and the limits of this approach. Indeed, Simmel (1908) already warns that it is not possible to speak of absolute poverty because the key element, the social and political definition of poverty, can vary significantly from one historical period to another and from one society to another.

⁶ The calculation of absolute poverty is based on the World Bank methodology (use of the Living Standard Measurement Survey-LSMS for data collection) and the reduction in the population rate below the poverty level is mainly due to the sustained Albanian growth rate of these years. As reported in Thomo, Laja, Bici, Muja, the LSMS is the only source of information to measure the living standard, poverty (absolute poverty), and wellbeing of Albanian household until 2012. LSMS was conducted for the first time in 2002, followed by two other surveys every three years, respectively in 2005, 2008 and 2012 (INSTAT, 2013). From year 2016 in the activities of INSTAT was included the Income and Living Conditions Survey (SILC).

As it is known, poverty is very much due to both to the demographic composition and the territorial distribution of the population and these phenomena are strongly intertwined with that of migration.

Poverty in Albania has marked spatial and regional dimensions, with rural areas and the mountain region being consistently poorer than rest of the country, according to all definitions of poverty. As shown in the following table, poverty headcount in rural areas is 66% higher than in Tirana, and 50% higher than in other urban areas. *Per capita* consumption in rural areas, at 7.212 Leks (= 59€), is about four-fifths of the consumption levels in urban areas. Households in the most remote districts in the mountain region in the north and northeast of the country do not fare well in terms of poverty, and almost half of residents of this area are poor, and more than a fifth live in extreme poverty (World Bank, EC-SHD, xii).

Table 2.2: Spatial dimension of poverty in Albania, 2002

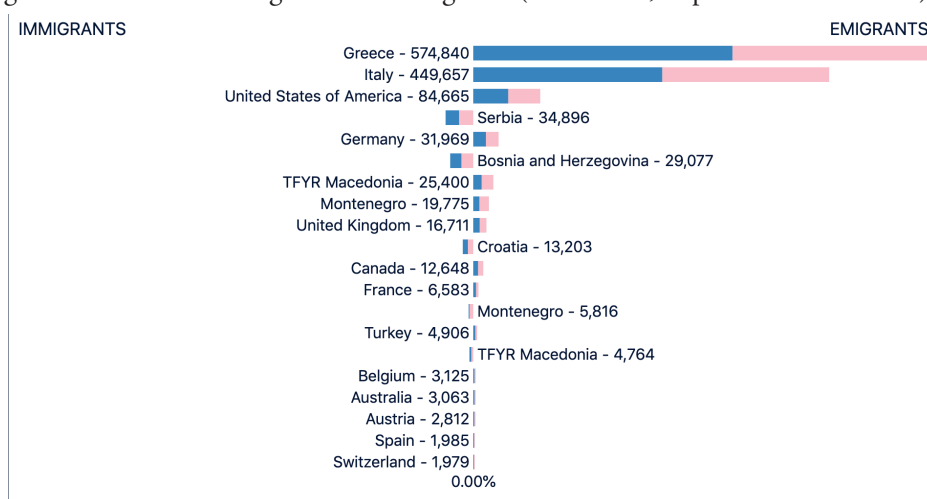
	Tirana		Other Urban		Rural		Total	
	Poor	Extreme poor	Poor	Extreme poor	Poor	Extreme poor	Poor	Extreme poor
Headcount (percent)	17.8	2.3	20.1	4.8	29.6	5.2	25.4	4.7
Mean per capita consumption (Leks)	9,043		8,468		7,212		7,801	

Source: World Bank-ECSHD

Studies on Albanian migration have indicated that internal and international migration flows have distinctive patterns, in terms of both geography and poverty: internal migrants come mainly from the mountain and northeastern regions, migrate to the outskirts of big urban centers, and are generally poorer (Zezza, Carletto, Davis 2005). As for migration, between 1994 and 2001, it is estimated that 900,000 people emigrated from Albania⁷.

⁷ Although emigration has been continuous since 1990, as shown by Betti, Bici, Neri, Sohnesen, Thomo (2018, 5), massive outflows can be divided into three periods: (1991-92), immediately after the fall of communism; (1997), when a series of corrupt pyramid savings schemes collapsed, bankrupting a large share of Albanian households; (1999), when the country was destabilized by the Kosovo crisis and an influx of half a million refugees from the conflict region. In terms of effects on the composition of population by gender and age, the 2001 census reflects the emigration effects as a marked loss of males in the age-band 15-35; for females the loss is both less marked and more narrowly confined in age terms, affecting the range 18-32 (ISB 2008, 18).

Figure 2.4: Albania Immigrants and Emigrants (Year: 2013; Population: 2.883.000)



Source: PopulationPyramid.net

The migratory phenomena clearly also have effects and repercussions on the demographic dimension: the 2011 census data show a continuing decline in the 20-45 age group since 2001, which is attributable mainly to emigration. In 2010 alone, net emigration totaled 47.889. In addition, a considerable internal migration sees significant numbers of people moving towards the coastal region and the main urban centers (King 2004). Many of them move to the outskirts of urban areas, often occupying former agricultural communes or abandoned public industrial areas (*Kombinat*). In particular, they move towards the capital: more than 60% of Tirana's population in 2001 did not live in the capital before 1989 (Zezza, Carletto, Davis 2005); the inhabitants of the city increased from 368,000 in 1989 to at least 600,000 in 2002, while unofficial estimates are much higher, as many as 800,000 (Dabalen, Miluka 2010).

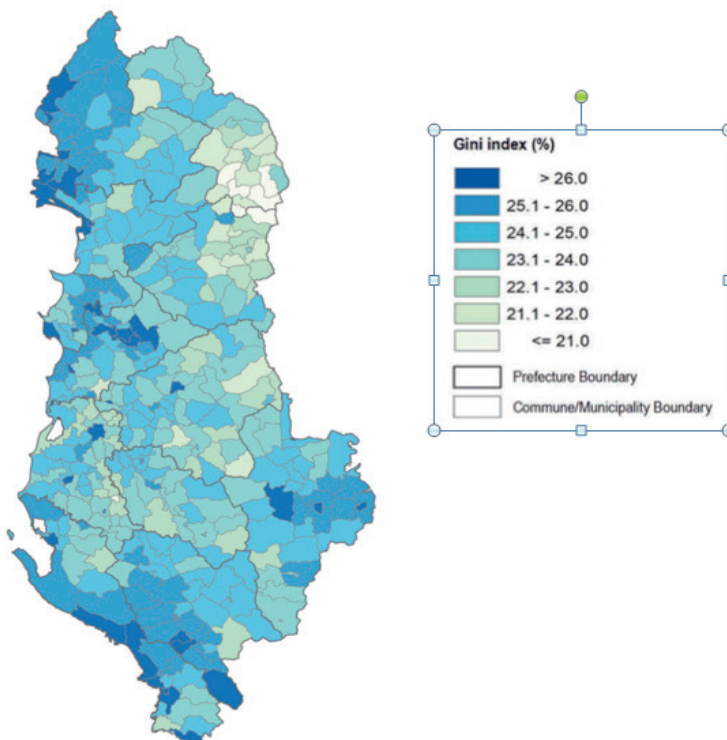
Another very critical aspect remains that of the informal economy⁸, whose estimation is very difficult. Numerous studies that have analyzed the trends since

⁸ The Economic Reform Programmes 2017-2019, prepared by the Western Balkan economies, recognize that informal economy is widespread, and a comprehensive reform is required. More specifically, informal and undeclared work constitute serious concerns in the region and have been strongly highlighted in the EC assessment of the 2017-2019 ERPs of the Western Balkan economies. According to this analysis, Albania needs to step up current efforts to achieve a comprehensive approach to reducing undeclared work. Currently, there is widespread engagement in informal work, which remains a challenge and there is no strategic approach to increase formal employment. Low labour market participation is linked with widespread informal work, particularly in construction and agriculture, the latter being the main employer in the economy. See Employment and Social Affairs Platform <https://www.esap.online/pages/11/informal-employment>.

the end of the '90s place it between 30 and 50% of the national GDP (Apuzzo 2012; Boka, Torluccio 2013; EBRD, 2013). If on one side in the short term the informal sector helps to alleviate poverty by guaranteeing a kind of income to many people and to reduce unemployment, from the other side – and beyond the dimensions of ethics and legality – this phenomenon leads to the worsening of some situations of exclusion, and in particular the gender gap, the school dropout and the access to health services. It is remarkable to note that in addition to a problem in terms of justice and legality, or what is lawful and what is illegal, for those who are responsible for social services the question arises of evaluating and monitoring the real resources available for individuals and provide services and/or welfare payments truly adequate. This is still more true, and we will see it in the following paragraphs in a country with the social and economic characteristics of Albania.

Finally, the issue of the redistribution of resources. Because – as well-known – even in the richest countries and in those having better living conditions as EU Member States, the advantages and the benefits are unevenly distributed and there are pockets of poverty, distress, vulnerability, to indicate briefly the level of inequality it is possible to adopt the Gini Concentration Index as an effective benchmark. In fact, the Gini index provides a method to quantify the concentration of transferable quantitative variables, in this case income. In a very simplified way, it is possible to include the values of the Gini index between 0 and 100: where 0 represents the perfect redistribution and 100 the perfect inequality. According to WHO estimates regarding Europe, a low level of inequality is in the range of 23-25; high levels in the range 35-36. According to Development Research Group of the World Bank estimates – whose data are based on primary household survey data obtained from government statistical agencies and World Bank country departments – Albania is in a position of clear inequality in wealth distribution, albeit with a slight improvement: it goes from a 31,7 in 2002 to a 30 in 2008 to the most recent of 29 in 2012 (World Bank Open Data). As noted above, although Albania has faced a long period of high GDP growth and decreased absolute poverty between 2001 and 2008, inequality has not been reduced according to LSMS data, a trend which is in line with what occurred in many other European countries. Moreover, the Gini index slightly increased in 2012. The results of poverty mapping by Betti et al. (2013; 2018) confirm this tendency: from 2001 to 2011 the Gini index increased slightly, from 29.54 to 29.83, with a great increase in the already richest and most economically dynamic coastal region and a strong reduction in the isolated and (in all senses peripheral) mountain region.

Figure 2.5: Inequality (Gini index) in Albanian Municipalities, 2012



Source: 2011 Census in Betti et al. 2013

In 2014, the country appealed to the IMF for financial support, which was given on condition that a policy of fiscal consolidation would be implemented. This may make it more difficult to expand redistributive social assistance programs for the relief of poverty in the future (Pere, Bartlett 2019). And that is clearly indicated by the growth direction taken by inequality markers synthesized from the Gini index.

To overcome the IMF directions and the related limitations, policies should be thought through and should aim beyond the economic sphere and competitiveness, encouraging technological development and the added value of production to support future development not only of the economy itself but of the country's cultural and social dimensions.

2.3. The Social Service workforce: from institution to perception

It is therefore in this scenario and with the issues mentioned that the intervention of social services takes place. But what kind of services does the current Albanian welfare system provide?

“The foundations of the Albania’s social protection system have been established in the Constitution. The initial strategic objectives of Albania’s social protection system aim to first prevent any further degradation of the social security in the country, as well as the establishment of an efficient social protection system that will address emerging social problems” (Akesson et al. 2016, 15). New legislation was enacted in December 2014. With a definition largely aligned with the IFSW/IASSW ones, the Law No. 163/2014 on *Order of Social Worker in the Republic of Albania* establishes that Social Work is the professional social activity based on practice and academic discipline that promotes social change, development, social cohesion and social justice (see Box.1).

Therefore, this law comes at a time when social workers are being given a pivotal role in the new social service system and being charged with the responsibility of integrating case management into that system (Tahsini, Lopari, Tasku, Voko 2013) and expands the official scope of social work practice to include women, children, mental health, probation services, psychosocial services in schools, and reproductive health.

Box.1 The Law on the Order of the Social Worker, No.163/2014

The purpose of this Law is to regulate the organization and activity of the Order of Social Workers, as well as the legal and ethical-professional relations of social workers.

Article 4 defines social work and social worker as follows:

1. “Social work” is a practice-based profession, as well as an academic discipline that promotes change, development, social cohesion and social justice, and the empowerment and independence of people.
2. “Social worker” is a regulated occupation practiced in the field of social work, at macro, meso and micro level, serving individuals, families, groups, communities and central- and local-level institutions in the public and private system.

Source: <https://qbz.gov.al>; Rogers et al. 2018, 51

Accordingly, the social work is a regulated profession⁹ that is exercised at every level of the social field as individuals and families, groups and communities, in

⁹ The Law aims to regulate the Social Work profession in the country by including it on a list of other regulated professions such as medicine, pharmacy, dentistry, and engineering (Akesson et al.). In Albania the Law establishing an order of social work for professional licensing and regulation purposes has, in effect, created a professional body, but UNICEF Albania reports delays in issuing the Decisions of the Council of Ministers that can establish this statutory body. It is not clear from the literature if this body is also expected to advocate for social workers and the profession, or if it plays only a regulatory role. UNICEF Albania reports that there are two associations led by NGOs, formed by representatives of Departments of Social Work or Departments of Psychology, called the Albanian Association of Psychologists and Albanian

institutions of central and local level, in the public and private system. The social administrators who had been primarily administering cash benefits from social protection schemes country until 2013, transitioned towards case management as part of a general systemic approach (Dhembo 2015).

As pointed out by Rogers et al. (2018, 19) yet, the Law on social care of 2016 and the Law on child protection of 2017 specify that social workers (with degrees in social work) have to be employed in municipal social services structures in needs assessment and referral units at a rate of 1 social worker per 10.000 population and in child protection units at a rate of 1 social worker per 3.000 children.

The services currently active¹⁰ – as reported by official institutional sources (INSTAT 2018 b) – are summarized as follow (see also Table 2.3).

First of all, the beneficiaries of the services, are identified through the consultation of Administrative data on Social Protection¹¹, or from the analysis of the archives of Social Security Institute, National Employment Service and State Social Service, which contain data useful to be able to identify the population groups in conditions of vulnerability and fragility.

The offer of interventions and services is structured throughout evaluating the national territory in a comparative key; it involves, in a nutshell, the following three fields of action: a) social assistance; b) unemployment benefit; c) urban and rural pensions.

As INSTAT points out in its last updated web pages¹², one of the main sectors of public welfare intervention remains the pensions' one. Pensions are defined according to Law No. 8932, "For a change in the Law for Social Insurance", dated 02.09.1998, and differ by urban and rural area of residence¹³.

Association of Social Workers, but they have limited influence compared to the statutory professional body outlined in the legislation. They do, however, play a role in providing inputs to the Government and representing these two professions. (Rogers et al., 44).

¹⁰ Current policies and strategies that may affect the planning and development of the social work or social service workforce include the following (Rogers et al., 50): The National Strategy for Development and Integration (2015-2020); National Social Protection Strategy (2015-2020); National Inter-sectoral Decentralization Strategy (2015-2020); Albanian National Health Strategy (2016-2020); National Action Plan on Persons with Disability (2016-2020); National Agenda for Children's Rights (2017-2020); Strategy on Pre-University Education (2014-2020).

¹¹ The legal base from which the service is currently organized refers to two regulations: The National Statistical, Law No. 9180, "On Official Statistics", dated 05.02.2004, as amended, and the recent Official Statistics National Program 2017-2021.

¹² See: <http://www.instat.gov.al/en/themes/social-condition/social-protection/#tab4+methodscollapse9242>.

¹³ Special pension entitlements are provided for selected categories of workers: the state pays contribution for soldiers, unemployed receiving unemployment benefit, persons in transition payment from the supplementary state insurance and military officers in reform that take the supplementary insurance for military officers.

Urban pensions include pensions of all categories, according to Law No. 4171, “For State Social Insurance in the Republic of Albania”, dated 13.09.1996, for people that have been state employers, and pensions of all categories, according to Law No. 7703, “On Social Insurance in the Republic of Albania”, dated 11.05.1993.

Rural pensions include: a) pensions of all categories, according to Law No. 4976, “For Pensions of Agriculture Cooperatives Members”, dated 29.06.1972; b) pensions that meet the requirements of article 96 of the Law no. 7703, dated 11.05.1993, “For Social Insurance in the Republic of Albania”.

Social Assistance is a cash benefit for poor families and is distributed every month. It may be partial or full, according to the family incomes. The amount of partial assistance is calculated as a difference between the full amount of social assistance and the real family incomes.

Table 2.3: Legal Frameworks, Agency Structures, and Job Descriptions

Relevant Legal Frameworks for Social Service Provision	Institutional Structure for Social Service Workers	General Social Service Worker and Child Protection Roles
Constitution of Albania – states that “social justice and social assistance are the foundations of this state.” Law No. 163/2014 “On Order of social workers in the Republic of Albania”. Law No. 7703 “On social insurance in the Republic of Albania”. Law No. 7710 “On social assistance and care”. Law No. 10347 (Article 39), “On protection of child’s rights”. – requires at least one professional social worker per each established child protection unit (CPU).	Ministry of Social Welfare and Youth – develops legislation to regulate the social work profession General Administration of Social Assistance and Services (GASAS) – is responsible for implementing the social care system; State Social Service (SSS); – is accountable for institutions and staff providing social services at the national level – provides economic assistance, standardization of social services, administration and budgeting of social services, institutional improvements, inspections of social services, licensing of non-profit organizations	Social Service Worker: – identifies, assesses, and coordinates interventions based on action plan involving the child and the family

Source: Akesson et al. 2016, 2 (adapted)

Referring to perceptions and understanding of the social service workforce it emerges quite clearly how the Law on Social Care of 2016 and accompanying reforms to local authority responsibilities for social services planning has enhanced the role of social worker as case manager (Matković 2016). “The reformed legal and policy framework gives the social worker a clear mandate for outreach work with families and for intervening in child protection and other cases. These changes introduce clarity in the role of the social worker and may have an impact on how the social work workforce is perceived, as well as building trust in the system” (Rogers et al. 2018, 47).

The general expectation of the last years is that “regulation will have a positive impact on the profession, ensuring more efficiency and professionalism in social service delivery. At the very least, research participants noted that the law will add some legitimacy to the profession. [...] At the national level, the State Social Service (SSS) is accountable for the institutions and staff providing social services at the national level. NGOs are expected to support and fill the gaps left by the relatively weak SSS. An analysis of the SSS found that the SSS struggles to match their staff to relevant job positions and is faced with an unstable workforce due to high turnover rates” (Akesson et al. 2016, 15-16).

In Albania there is more than one mismatch between resources, investments and labor forces.

On one hand UNICEF Albania notes that “the lack of sufficient government allocations of funding to support the implementation of legislation are not unique to the social sector, with the health, education and justice sectors facing similar challenges. The Law on Pre-University Education in Albania, for example, makes statutory provision for social workers and psychologists to be hired in education inclusion units, but does not make explicit provision for a budget for salaries” (Rogers et al. 2018, 27).

On the other hand many social work graduates are not subsequently employed as social workers: recovering a study on Child Protection Practices (Dhembo 2015). Rogers and colleagues note that “many hundreds of social work graduates have been in the labor market since the first bachelor degree cohort graduated in 1996 (over 1,500 have graduated from Tirana University alone), but they continue to account for only minority of employees. This is the result of issues around employment procedures and the fragile positioning of the social work professions, among other professions in the country” (Rogers et al. 2018, 34).

The theme of the recognition of the profession and its professional operators still stands: “social service workers were viewed largely as government bureaucrats who serve as gatekeepers to financial assistance for vulnerable groups. Although their role in child protection is not well known to the general public, where they are perceived to be involved in child protection, it is as those who take children away from their families” (Akesson et al. 2016, 11). Often the negative perception of social service work tended to be viewed precisely through the prism of the

Albanian social security system: for example, the *ndihma ekonomike* (= economic assistance), that is the core poverty reduction mechanism, “has contributed to an understanding of social service workers as simply municipal employees who administer financial assistance” (Akesson et al. 2016, 11).

To conclude: national and international literature highlights that to date institutional reforms must be completed, including an improvement in the quality of institutions (Imami, Bejko, Shutina 2018; Pere, Bartlett 2019). Without the presumption to indicate a standard-issued formula with the belief that there is no “one size fits all” to the process or method, we wish that a serious study of the current living conditions of the population and the intervention modalities of the social operators allow to collect all the useful elements for an additional enhancement of the social work in terms of skills and resources in the field. The final goal is in fact that better trained and equipped social workers can also address their action towards focusing and landing up all those negative situations better, as a result of a process of cumulative advantage in which labor market marginalization, poverty and increased social isolation become mutually reinforcing.

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