

NEW DIGITAL SOCIAL ASSISTANCE SCHEME AND ITS ON-SITE PROBLEMS

(Case study, Shijak-Albania)

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ABSTRACT

The poverty in Albania is not only related to the individual, but also to the system that this country has inherited. Unfortunately in our country, a large part of families is still living in absolute poverty. Albanian politicians in the early 1990s argued that the redistribution of income should be estimated based on the best interest of all members of the society, not only to the poorest ones.

In the given years, the first structures responsible for social care services for each Municipality were Law no. 7710, dated 18.05.1993, and Law no. 9355, dated 10.03.05 "On social assistance and services" which were followed by Decisions, Instructions of the respective Ministry.

Based on the gaps of previous laws, in 2016 the Law no. 121 "On social care services in the Republic of Albania" was approved and pursuant to the given law, Albania became part of the Digital Agenda for Europe (DAE), taking concrete steps through the construction of the online portal E-Albania.

The purpose of this study aims at presenting how the new scoring system has been influencing the persons excluded from receiving economic assistance and the psycho-social consequences for the given category.

The method used in this study is the qualitative method. The instrument used is the semi-structured interview. The target groups interviewed were the heads of families excluded from Economic Assistance. Fifteen heads of families were interviewed in order to obtain information with regards to the reason for not receiving economic assistance, how the exemption from NE benefit has affected the family relationship and how they estimate the resolution of the given matter. Based on the information retrieved from the interviews, it resulted that most of the respondents were not familiar with the new digital scheme. They did not know the reason for being excluded from receiving the economic assistance scheme.

Economic assistance was a source of income received from the state and used again to repay debts to the state (payment of utility bills), and in the lack of this source, consequently they remained debtors to the state. The lack of the only source of income brought conflicts in the family, violence, and often falling into addictions such as alcohol, gambling, etc.

Keywords; economic assistance, new digital scheme, psycho-social consequences.

INTRODUCTION

The Albanian state in the early 1990s was required to provide for its citizens that everyone benefits from social or private programs, sufficient assistance to prevent or eliminate personal / family social problems. There were great difficulties because in our country it was not about relative poverty, but the vast majority of the poor were living in absolute poverty, so they could not provide the minimum standard of living such as food, clothing, etc. due to the insufficiency or lack of income. Based on the given situation in Albania, Albanian politicians tried to adapt contemporary social assistance programs to specific Albanian conditions.¹

Even though more than two decades have already passed and the country has experienced economic growth, there are still families living in absolute poverty. Social policy towards groups in need has taken on an international dimension, sanctioned in many documents that guarantee citizens the right to a normal life, setting mandatory legal

¹ Project "Social Safety Net Development" of the World Bank, 1992-1998

requirements for member states. Over the years, the ruling majority of another coalition implemented a special law on economic assistance (Law No. 7710, dated 18.05.1993; Law No. 9355, dated 10.03.05 "On social assistance and services") and other bylaws (mainly Decisions of the Council of Ministers and instructions from the relevant department), the current majority has amended this law as well as other bylaws.²

The Decision of the Council of Ministers, dated December 7, 2016, provides that: "Economic assistance, for families without income or with insufficient income, is a payment given in the form of a monthly remuneration in ALL, which is limited to time, for a 5-year period".

The sector of economic assistance and social services, by law 121/2016 "On social care services in the Republic of Albania" is the structure responsible for social care services for each Municipality. Exactly in the new Economic Assistance Scheme (SNE)³six categories shall benefit, inter alia:

- a. families in need, who have no income or have insufficient income;
 - b. orphans, who are part of social care institutions
 - c. parents with more than 2 children born at the same time, belonging to families in need
 - d. victims of trafficking, after leaving social care institutions until the moment of their employment;
victims of domestic violence, for the period of validity of the restraining order or immediate restraining order, who are not treated in social care institutions.
- a. Children who may have a normal development or children with disabilities who are grown up by their respective guardians.

Statistically, the interruption of economic assistance has affected all districts of the country, but beyond this phenomenon, it has been accompanied by numerous psycho-social dramas. The print media, but especially the multitude of legal and illegal portals have published many cases of family trauma, even some of them, which have not been provided with any assistance, have addressed some shows such as " Fundjavë ndryshe "4, "Fiks Fare",⁵the show "Stop"⁶and they were helped by them. A foundation called "Alsar"⁷funded by Turkish donors has been able to identify thousands of poor or orphans, who helped them with a temporary pension or providing them with food and clothing.

Thus, the latest statistics in Albania show that about 80,964 families receive economic assistance in Albania. The average monthly fund given to a family is 4,211 ALL, a value that is almost negligible and not sufficient for a family that is in difficult economic conditions. Exemption from the economic assistance scheme counts over 20 thousand families all over Albania.

²Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Law No. 9669, dated 18.12.2006 "On measures against domestic violence".

Law No. 10 329, dated 30.9.2010 for some additions and changes to law no. 9669, dated 18.12.2006 "On measures against domestic violence", as amended.

Law No. 10 347, dated 4.11.2010 "On the protection of the rights of the child".

Instruction no. 6, dated 21.5.2014 "On the procedures for the placement of children in residential institutions of social care, public and non-public".

Instruction no. 10, dated 25.2.2015 "On the ways, forms of cooperation and intervention procedures. To help children at risk for the main institutions and structures responsible for child protection.

Instruction no. 14, dated 10.5.2016 "On the provision of emergency services in social care institutions funded by public state budget funds that provide residential care services for children in need."

Instruction No. 830, dated 14.4.2008 "On the implementation of standards of social care services for children in public and non-public residential institutions.

Law no. 121/2016 "On social care services in the Republic of Albania".

Law No. 8153, dated 31.10.1996 "On the status of orphans".

DCM No. 233, dated 10. 4.1998 on the implementation of the law "On the status of orphans".

³Constitution of Albania 78 and 83, point 1

Law no. 57/2019 on Social Assistance in the Republic of Albania

Decision no. 518, dated 04.09.2018 'For community and residential social care services, criteria, procedures for their benefit and the amount of personal expenses for the beneficiaries of organized service "

⁴ <https://ffn.al/>

⁵ <http://top-channel.tv/programe/fiksfare/>

⁶ <https://tvklan.al/stop/>

⁷ <http://alsar.al/>

• **Theorists and poverty**

Social assistance as an institution targets those individuals or social groups who do not have the opportunity to ensure a minimum standard of living based on their income from salaries or their own properties, lands, businesses, etc.

The poor or, in a general term, individuals in need, constitute an important objective of social policy. A political analyst when dealing with poverty must choose two different intervention alternatives, although closely related to each other:

- 1) Paying attention to policies that allow the poor to provide sufficient economic resources, ie to have the minimum of food, housing, health care, and other necessary services;
- 2) Aiming at raising the economic level of the community in general, to reduce extreme inequalities in income levels, thus reducing the relative poverty. (Prigmore. Ch.S. and Atherton, Ch.R., 1979: 106)

Two different categories shall be enlightened in here. First, absolute poverty, where social policies that intervene to reduce it aim at achieving a minimum standard of living for all persons living in absolute poverty. Second, the category of relative poverty, where social policies aim at changing the social structure in a given community. This is achieved through the redistribution of income to increase the level of well-being of all members of society.

Some inequalities are inevitable, but the problem lies in the extreme inequalities, which are created in certain periods of society's development and have negative consequences for all its members.

Therefore redistribution of income is estimated for the benefit of all members of society, not just for the benefit of the poorest ones.⁸

Albanian politicians also stood in these positions to argue that poverty in Albania is not only related to the individual, but also the inherited system.

Social support in the Municipality of Shijak, Prefecture of Durrës

Focusing only on the municipality of Shijak, it is noticed that 4.3% of this population benefits from the cash payments of the social assistance scheme (individuals of families receiving economic assistance and individuals in need, persons with disabilities and their guardians, disabled employees). In this municipality, 92 families received economic assistance in 2018, or 0.7% of families live through economic assistance. If we compare it with the year 2017, where the number of beneficiary families was 82, in 2018 we see a decrease in the number of beneficiary families of economic assistance by 50.5%. The main reasons for this reduction are explained by the sector staff to be as follows:

- Refusal of employment because they do not have the conditions to go to work,
- Some incorrect statements by applicants,
- change the dotted formula,
- Adults who work several days a month but do not declare it and as a result make false statements.

In 2017 the level of eligibility in the economic assistance scheme (the ratio between the number of applications and the number of beneficiaries of economic assistance) was 94%, while in 2018 this level of eligibility has gone to 59% (out of 157 applicant families only 92 received economic assistance). There is a tendency for families who have not received assistance for several months not to reapply, since the majority has realized that the non-acceptance of the job offer is already always applicable to the non-granting of economic assistance. In 2017, 33% of families receiving economic assistance lived in rural areas. In 2018, 54% of families receiving economic assistance lived in the rural area (ie an increase of 21% of families receiving NE in the rural area in 2018 compared to 2017). The scheme turns out to include more families living in the village.

CHARACTERISTICS OF ECONOMIC ASSISTANCE	SHIJAK	MAMINAS	XHAFZOTAJ	GJEPALE	TOTAL
<i>Families with female heads of family</i>	7	3	0	15	25
<i>Families with up to 2 minor children</i>	0	0	0	0	0
<i>Families with over 2 minor children</i>	15	3	0	18	36
<i>Roma gipsy family</i>	0	0	0	0	0
<i>Families with at least one disabled member</i>	10	1	0	8	18
<i>Families with at least one member of retirement age.</i>	1	0	0	1	2

⁸Merita (Vaso) Xhumari, Procesi dhe institucionet e politikës sociale, (fq 247) 2006

METHODOLOGY

The method used in this study is the qualitative method. The instrument used is the semi-structured interview. The target group interviewed are the heads of families excluded from Economic Assistance. The purpose of this study aims at presenting how the new scoring system has been influencing the persons excluded from receiving economic assistance and the psycho-social consequences for the given category.

15 heads of families were interviewed, from whom we received in section no. 1 general data (gender, age, status, number of family members, if they were the heads of families, total income in their family), while section no. 2 aims at obtaining information on the reason for not receiving economic assistance and how the exemption from the benefit of NE has affected the family relationship and how they estimate the resolution of the given matter. The information for persons excluded from NE was obtained from the Municipality of Shijak and interviews were conducted face to face.

NEW DIGITAL SOCIAL ASSISTANCE SCHEME

Albania, like most European countries, became part of the Digital Agenda for Europe (DAE), taking concrete steps through the construction of the E Albania portal. The online governance platform is a positive step with beneficial results for the citizens, but in the meantime, many problems have been noticed in this process, where the most sensitive ones have been noticed are related to the community that is treated with Economic Assistance (EA).

The online governance platform in Albania excluded from the economic assistance scheme about 70% of poor families and those with no assistance at all.

This fact is confirmed by the World Bank report which states that 70% of the poorest families in Albania are excluded from economic assistance or expressed differently in the first two months of this year, through this system; the government has removed economic assistance for over 20 thousand families.

The report analyzes the families that make up the poorest 10 percent of the population, or 75,000 of the poorest families in the country, where only a third of them are covered by economic assistance, while the rest are actually not.

This means that, out of 75 thousand poorest families in the country, only 22 thousand of them receive economic assistance, while another 53 thousand families do not benefit.

ITS ON-SITE PROBLEMS

For the realization of this article, 15 heads of families were interviewed, out of which 2 families with female heads of families, 11 families with male heads of families (out of these 8 families had at least one member of retirement age) and 2 families with at least one disabled member. The age of the respondents was from 36 -64 years old, the number of family members varied from 2-6 people. Regarding the total income, if we do an average for all the interviewed families, it turned out that each of the members lives on 2.5 dollars a day.

Through the second section, information was obtained on the reason for exclusion from receiving economic assistance. It turned out that 4 families were excluded from receiving economic assistance after not declaring employment. One respondent replied "to tell the truth our son had started working and we did not declare it, since life is very expensive and the salary of 200 thousand ALL that the boy received working as a waiter could hardly afford our expenses.. While 8 families had not received enough points from the system, most of the respondents when asked why they were excluded shrugged their shoulders, one of the respondents answers "to be honest I do not even know why they excluded us, they told us that we shall not benefit anymore and we had 9 months that we did not benefit, now we have two months that they have started to provide us with assistance again ", another interviewee answers " How can I know why did they exclude me, and even though my husband is paralysed, I was told that I do not benefit it, but I cannot follow the issue by myself. They said that I was automatically rejected by the system since I did not show up to make the quarterly declaration; Failure to declare any items (TV, Fridge, Washing Machine, Dishwasher, Gas / Electric Stove, Kerosene Stove, Firewood Stove, Microwave, Radiator, Sewing Machine, Boiler, Satellite / Cable Device, Bicycle, Motorcycle or Car) ; non-declaration of any cattle (cows, pigs, sheep / goats, poultry, horses, donkeys, mules, bulls, beehives, rabbits, fish); the validity period is already terminated, none of the respondents was excluded.

For the motive "you are looking for a job", 3 families have been excluded, one of the female heads of families who had two minor children answers "*the state says that I am of working age and I have to look for a job, forgetting that I also have two small children who shall I take care of. I send one to the kindergarten but the other one is very young*

to be admitted to the nursery so that, what am I supposed to do: to look for a job and leave my child alone or to take care of him and have nothing to earn our livings.

Regarding the psycho-social consequences in the family, it was noticed that these families, considering the minimum income they had and the fact that they had years of receiving economic assistance, considered themselves unlucky for the situation in which they found themselves. An respondent says *"when you were born unlucky you were born, God did not give us children, who can provide us with some furniture for the house, at least with the economic help I paid water and electricity bills but now I have no option rather than to stay a debtor to the state "*, another head of the family who was returned to the scheme says *"It is very hard for us to cope with the given situation, I will benefit until February then the deadline expires, we are at the retirement age but we have no pension "*.

Problems in the family also increased when the heads of families used alcohol, tobacco, or gambling, and often conflicts were caused by such vices in the family.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the new economic assistance scheme as well as the digitalization system, it was noted that the interviewed families in the area of Shijak were excluded from receiving economic assistance.

Failure to declare employment,

- Refusal of employment because they do not have the conditions to get employed (minor children or persons with disabilities). So the system does not favour single-parent families with dependent children. The system has generally penalized the neediest women's heads of families. The system has penalized a very large number of families that have persons with disabilities or work disabilities in their family tree.
- Changing the scaling formula. The system is non-transparent. No one has information about the points calculation criteria. The scoring system does not explain the insufficiency of points for families with one or more members.

The excluded were: persons who are single in the family and young people who can work.

It is also important to note that, NE payment should be higher starting from the subsistence minimum as most find it difficult to afford to live.

REFERENCES

- Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- Law No. 9669, dated 18.12.2006 "On measures against domestic violence".
- Law No. 10 329, dated 30.9.2010 for some additions and changes to law no. 9669, dated 18.12.2006 "On measures against domestic violence", as amended.
- Law No. 10 347, dated 4.11.2010 "On the protection of the rights of the child".
- Merita (Vaso) Xhumari, The process and institutions of social policy, 2006
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Annex no. 1

INTERVIEW

The purpose of this interview is to identify the motives that have influenced your exclusion from receiving economic assistance and the psycho-social consequences for you and your family.

Section no. 1

Personal data

Gender F M

Age _____

Status Single, Married, Divorced, Widow

No. of family members _____

You are the head of the family Yes No

Total income in your family _____ (ALL)

Section no. 2

Information on the motive for not receiving economic assistance

1. Please specify the reason for non-inclusion in the economic assistance scheme and consequently in the non-benefit of economic assistance:

(circle below)

1.1 you have not declared an employment

1.2 you did not get enough points

1.3 Automatically rejected by the system after you did not show up to make the quarterly declaration

1.4 Failure to declare any items (TV, Refrigerator, Washing Machine, Dishwasher, Gas / Electric Stove, Kerosene Stove, Firewood Stove, Microwave, Heating, Sewing Machine, Boiler, Satellite / Cable Appliance, Bicycle, Motorcycle or)

1.5 non-declarations of cattle (cows, pigs, sheep/goats, poultry, horses, donkeys, mules, bulls, beehives, rabbits, fish)

1.6 the validity period has already terminated

1.7 you are looking for a job

1.8 non-declaration of income

2. If you chose the first option you can specify to me what was the reason for not declaring your employment:

3. If you have chosen the second option you can specify which were the main reasons that penalized you for not getting enough points:

3.1 Were these reasons communicated to you by the social administrator? YES NO

4. If you have chosen the third option can you specify which were the reasons you did not appear to make the quarterly declaration:

4.1 Are you going to reapply at a later stage? YES NO

4.2 Specify for each of the answers why will you reapply or why not?

5. If you have selected the fourth option can you specify which of the items you have not declared:

6. If you have selected the fifth option can you specify which cattle you have not declared:

7. If you have chosen the seventh option can you specify how long you have been looking for a job:

7.1 Have you participated in any professional training YES NO

7.2 If yes, where did you apply for a job _____

7.3 If not, where do you think you are going to be employed _____

8. If you chose the eighth option please specify the reasons for not declaring your income?

9. Please specify the reason why are you not employed?

a. you have not been offered a job by the Labor Office

b. you have small children to take care of

c. you shall take care of elderly . You have persons with disabilities under care

e. you have no vocational training

f. age

g. other (specify) _____

10. Describe how the exclusion from the economic assistance scheme has actually affected your family.

11. How has it affected your relationship as a couple?

12. How did it affect your relationship with other family members/ children and/or the elderly?

13. Do you think that returning to the economic assistance scheme would reduce your family's problems to some extent?

14. What is the solution you have thought of to get out of this situation?

15. What would you like to own in order to have a normal life?

THANK YOU!