**Albania’s Contribution to the OHCHR’s Study on the Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on human rights of young people – Human Rights Council Resolution 48/12**

1. *What are the main challenge that young people face in your country in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic and the response to it? If any age- disaggregated data has been collected in this regard, please include it in your response.*

Following the first cases of the Covid 19 virus in Albania, the Government took drastic containments measures to mitigate the health risks for the population. The state of natural disaster was initially declared on March 24th, 2020 and later extended until June 23rd, 2020. The initial containment measures were particularly stringent, comprising a mandatory curfew from 17:30 to 05:00 during the working week and through the weekends. Moreover schools, universities, and all types of economic activities deemed non critical were closed. In addition, traveling restrictions were enacted in Albania and across the region which impacted the lives and businesses of a large part of the population.

The containment measures were progressively eased after April 20th, 2020 with expansion of allowed economic activities for 600 additional sectors and reopening of closed businesses, the introduction of Green Zones with fewer restrictions in cities with lower contagion risks, etc. As the situation improved, de-confinement measures were progressively expanded, comprising the reopening after June 1st, 2020 of kindergartens, parks, educational and training centers, internet centers and gyms. On September 14th 2020 the school academic year started with the option of physical participation of students in classes.

While the containment measures were effective in ensuring the viability of the health system in the fight against the pandemic and protection of people’s lives, they had a negative impact on the national economy and the wellbeing of the populations living in more precarious conditions.

Regarding the negative impact of domestic and international containment measures to the national economy, the largest hit was experienced through the first nine months of 2020 with a real GDP annual growth estimated at -5.5[[1]](#footnote-1). Unemployment rates were especially high for youth, estimated at 20.7 %[[2]](#footnote-2) through the first 9 months of 2020, with around 22,000 youngsters losing their jobs[[3]](#footnote-3). The highest rates of job dismissals in youth related professions were evidenced in the leisure (-31.8%), hospitality (-20.2%) and manufacture (-12.8%) sectors.

The Government of Albania took a number of measures of economic nature to ease the impact of the pandemic, including doubling the amounts of the unemployment and social assistance benefits, providing direct payments to self-employed and employed individuals in small and large companies with a total amount of 12,934,989,502 Lek (approx. 120 Mil USD) and 299,217 individual beneficiaries[[4]](#footnote-4).

Moreover, payment of rents were postponed for two months for closed businesses, families affected by the pandemic, as well as students returning home due to schools and universities closures.

Kindergartens, Schools and Higher Education Institutions were closed on March 9th, 2020, and besides some minor exemptions[[5]](#footnote-5), 612,534 registered students in the academic year 2019/2020 attended the final part of their learning programes in an online setting. The online teaching process was organized via online platforms such as Google Classroom, Zoom and Edmondo, while the Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth prepared the necessary guidelines and digital solutions to support the distance learning processes during the pandemics, comprising a range of televised courses aired on YouTube and national tv media RTSH. Yet, changing teaching process from classroom to online was a process for which the Albanian education system was not best equipped, and created many challenges especially for children and youth living in more vulnerable conditions. Based on UN Albania assessment[[6]](#footnote-6) there were at least 11,000 students that did not have access to online learning, many of them living in remote and rural areas, with no internet or devices at home. Moreover, roma children and children with learning difficulties and disabilities had additional difficulties in accessing online learning. Despite all the best efforts, they estimated that the learning loss from switching from classroom to online based education was unavoidable and likely to increase the percentage of “low performers” by about 8%.

In order to ensure proper protection services for most at-risk children during heat of the pandemic the Ministry of Health and Social Protection instructed and equipped the child protection workforce to continue the provision of life-saving interventions and home visits for children at risk of violence, exploitation, abuse and neglect.

1. *What measures is your Government taking to support young people and ensure the full implementation of their rights during and after the pandemic? Please provide examples of policies and programmes adopted to this end, in particular regarding right to work and social security (including, for example, to address the job loss, reduction of working hours, wage cut etc.,); right to education (including in the context of the closure of educational institutions and transition to online learning); right to the enjoyment of the highest standard of physical and mental health (including with the increase in domestic violence and abuse, anxiety and depression, stress caused by social isolation etc.); right to participate meaningfully in political and public affairs (including in connection with the prohibition of gatherings and transition to online rallies); other rights or freedoms*.

Despite the post Covid-19 economic turnaround in Albania, with the real GDP annual growth estimated at + 8.5-9% in 2021 and unemployment rate for Youth decreasing with 0.8 percentage point compared to the previous years, a number of initiatives have been enacted by the Government of Albania in support of the employment, education and training conditions of youth. A new initiative in the preparation phase in Albania is the Youth Guarantee programme which will target Youth not in education employment or training NEET, currently estimated at around 29 %. Within the Youth group age group, the share of NEETs in Albania is highest among upper secondary graduates (28.9%), followed by university graduates (26.5%), while young people with only lower secondary education fared the best (24.4%). The Youth Guarantee will provide a quality offer for employment, continued education, apprenticeship and traineeship within a four month period from NEET registration as jobseeker or being removed from formal education. The scheme is expected to initially target Youth NEET in most vulnerable conditions before being fully deployed at the national stage.

Other ongoing initiatives aiming to provide quality and inclusive education especially for the most vulnerable and marginalized Albanian children, as well as develop resilient capacities for an effective response to Covid 19 pandemic relate to improving digital competences and digital learning in Albanian schools. Ministry of Education and Sport and UNICEF developed new standards for digital competencies for teachers, trained over 2200 of them in ICT education, and provided on line content in the interactive national platform Akademi.al with over 6,000 video lessons and 350 courses. Moreover, the national education strategy 2021–2026 has set ambitious targets in relation to building appropriate infrastructure for the use of ICT in schools and its maintenance; setting standards for ICT equipment in schools; invest in digital equipment and internet access for the schools; placement of equipment in classrooms; setting standards regarding the number of students and teachers for the computer; installation of wireless networks in schools to be in function of the use of mobile devices by students and teachers; investment in adding digital equipment to schools (including computers, projectors, interactive whiteboards, wireless networks, and various accessories).[[7]](#footnote-7)

Following the implementation of de-containment measures and the resumption of classroom based teaching in schools, the Ministry of Health and Social Protection, issued Guideline no. 496/12/2021 "On movement and stay at school", which set detailed rules on entry, stay, exit in schools, disinfection of premises, care for hygiene etc. This Guide focused on students, including teaching staff, support staff and parents and established the necessary balance between protecting health and supporting education in the mild state of the pandemic.

Following these measures, in the framework of the right to enjoy the highest standards of physical health, the Ministry of Health and Social Protection sanctioned that school institutions themselves should put control mechanisms in place in order to check all vaccination certificates for the staff. Starting from October 11, 2021 this request was extended to the students as well. Students would not have permission to enter the premises of universities if not providing a vaccination certificate. Moreover, in the framework of the free month of vaccination campaign, vaccination centers were opened during the months of September and October 2021 within HEIs. Both measures aided in increasing the number of young people vaccinated.

Regarding the right of participation in public events, it should be noted that gatherings of up to 50 people are currently allowed in Albania, while cultural and sports activities are accepting an attendance of up to 30 percent capacity. Such measures have had a positive impact on the cultural and artistic life of Albanian Youth, while also providing benefits to their physical and mental health.

The participation of youth in the political and public life was guaranteed and supported, as evidenced during the past national general elections held in April 2021, where Albanian youth fulfilled their right to vote and be voted. Election events were opened to the participation of youth, both in physical and virtual settings, provided that anti-covid measures were respected.

1. *What role have the young people had in COVID-19 response, vaccination and recovery efforts in your country?*

Young people have been one of the most affected segments of the population by the COVID-19 pandemic that faced challenges in the provision of education, employment, health support, leisure and sports activities. Nevertheless, their engagement and optimism remains one of the driving forces for the post pandemic recovery of the Albanian society. Youth CSOs, Youth non formal organizations and young people in general have been engaged in projects and initiatives all around Albania aiming to provide greater opportunities and better solutions in addressing problems faced by their peers and local communities in the post pandemic era. Currently a group of Albanian Youth CSOs, supported by the Albanian Government, Municipality of Tirana, International Development Partners and local businesses prepared and launched the Tirana European Youth Capital 2022 programme which will support dozens of youth projects and hundreds of wide-range youth activities to promote empowerment, engagement and positive behavior.

1. *What measures is your Government taking to value/encourage the role of youth in COVID-19 response, vaccination and recovery efforts?*

The Government of Albania approach, which is in line with the approved legislation and strategic sectorial goals, is to strengthen the capacities and operationalize the national and local youth councils as the promoters of youth engagement and empowerment with respect to national and local affairs. The Government and the State Minister for Youth and Children have enacted a number of policy and regulatory initiatives to ensure the contribution of Youth umbrella organizations and Youth CSO in the National Youth Council and adopted a state funding scheme for supporting Youth projects in priority areas, comprising Covid -19 response, vaccination and recovery efforts. One of such projects funded in this framework, is the project "Empowerment of young people after the pandemic: challenges and opportunities" project.

1. National Statistical Institute, three quarterly report. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. National Statistical Institute, Working Force Survey, three quarterly report. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In Albania, Youth are considered individuals of 15-29 years of age. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. https://financa.gov.al/raporte-per-covid-19/ [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Kindergartens opened on June 1st, 2020, and graduating high school students were allowed between May18-June5 to attend schools to prepare for national exams. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. UN ALBANIA COVID-19 SOCIO-ECONOMIC RECOVERY & RESPONSE PLAN https://www.unicef.org/albania/media/3101/file/UN%20ALBANIA%20COVID-19%20SOCIO-ECONOMIC%20RECOVERY%20&%20RESPONSE%20PLAN.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. UNICEF Albania, Experiences in Digital Learning: Documenting and sharing emerging, promising, good practices in Albania, 2021; [↑](#footnote-ref-7)