



WHAT HAPPENS TO ALBANIAN RETURNEE FAMILIES AND CHILDREN?

*Key findings from the situation assessment on access to
services for returning migrants in Tirana, Dibra and Fier*

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This assessment refers to information collected during the period March – April 2017 by Observatory for Children’s Rights (Observatory) through interviews with central and local institutions, with service providers, as well as through focus groups with returned migrants, in Dibra, Fier and Tirana district.

The initiative for realizing this assessment was realized in collaboration with Austrian Development Agency (ADA).

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INTRODUCTION

Albanian migrants have returned to Albania in increasing numbers since 2015 when it was classed as “a safe country of origin” by the European Union. A substantial number of Albanian, recently-returned migrants are children, who have emigrated together with their families¹ or unaccompanied (the largest numbers in this group come from Germany, France, Sweden and The Netherlands²).

There is available literature about mass migration from Albania and its effects on the country’s economy, on rural and urban communities, and on families and children, but much less on those who return. The scale of emigration means that the corresponding scale and impact of its reverse trend are likely to be that much greater. Only three per cent of Albanian migrant asylum applications to other European countries were successful between 2015 (third quarter)³ and 2017 (first quarter) and, in 2015, Germany accepted only 55 of 23,300 Albanian asylum seekers (less than 0.25 per cent)⁴.

Work by UNICEF in Albania, for example, underlines that what information there is on returning families and children shows that they can face hard reintegration realities, including around health, education, social protection and employment. Previous Observatory for Children’s Rights’ research⁵ has noted the problems that local agencies in Albania have to identify, and to reach out to, returnees.

This current study by the Observatory, with the support of the Austrian Development Agency, focusses on an important, single issue – what happens to migrant families, especially their children, when they return to Albania. It is framed around the core public services that these migrants need to access, from the start of their hoped-for reintegration into Albanian society.

¹ UNICEF in Albania and Observatory (2015). *Massive emigration of Albanian citizens toward EU member states and the new administrative units’ capacity to face the needs of the returned migrants*. Available at: <http://observator.org.al/case-investigation-massive-emigration/>

² Information from General Directorate of Border and Migration, April 2017

³ Eurostat 2017 Asylum Quarterly Report, Available at: <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/asylum-and-managed-migration/publications>

⁴ Hackaj, A, Shehaj, E. & Zeneli, N. (2016) *Comprehending Albanian migration to Germany in the period 2014-2016*, p.12. (Working paper Berlin Process series 2/2016.)

⁵ Shanaj, H., Hallkaj, E. & Cuninghame, C. *Child Notice Albania* (2015), Tirane:UNICEF in Albania, p.84.

⁶ UNICEF in Albania and Observatory. November 2016. *Albanian Returned migrants: a child focused overview of data management*. Available at: <http://observator.org.al/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Case-investigation-06-12-2016.pdf>

The new research for this briefing was carried out across Albania in three contrasting regions. Tirana, in the centre, was chosen for being the most populated and, with the country's only international airport, the main returnee destination. In the north-east, Dibra is one of the poorest parts, with over half of children aged between 6-15 years old supported by Economic Aid, and has high emigration and return rates. Fier, in the south-west, is Albania's largest region territorially, and ranks second only to Tirana for emigration and return.

The Observatory's research focus for this briefing was about migration, civil registration, social, employment, health and education services. It was conducted through questionnaires sent out to all these services' representatives, at national⁷, regional and municipal levels. Focus group interviews with service providers at regional and municipal levels were also carried out, and with ten focus groups of returned migrant families (all adults, from the target areas) who were consulted about their experiences with the services. Most of the families had emigrated illegally, or illegally overstayed, in the host country. All the research for this briefing was carried out between March and April 2017.

Through this briefing, the Observatory offers some practical suggestions and recommendations, to motivate further work among national and local policy makers to improve the experiences of migrants returning to Albania. This is particularly crucial for returning children, if their chances of long-term reintegration are to increase. The research findings in this briefing are organised around the key services, and the recommendations target the central level institutions, with rolling-out actions for their subordinate entities.

KEY FINDINGS



1. Border and local reception services

The first point of contact for the returning families and children is the General Directorate for Border and Migration (within the Ministry of Internal Affairs, MIA) at Albanian border crossing points. In the focus groups, respondents said that they were typically in difficult emotional states at this point of their return journeys and, otherwise, could not, or would not, say much about their experiences.

In the case of returning unaccompanied children, the Regional Directorate of the State Social Services (under the Ministry of Social Welfare and Youth,

⁷ The Ministries concerned (with their respective departments) are: (1) Ministry of Internal Affairs (General Directorate for Boundary and Migration Department and General Directorate of Civil Registry), (2) Ministry of Social Services and Youth (State Social Service Department, National Employment Service, and Child Protection Agency), (3) Ministry of Education and Sports, (4) Ministry of Health.

MSWY) is important. It conducts interviews and observations with the child's family to assess the socio-economic position and their readiness to receive the child. This assessment process is time-consuming, and the authorities in the host country are notified, so that they can make corresponding arrangements to ensure the child's safety and wellbeing before any return.

The research found that some host countries do not notify the Albanian authorities in time for the checks to be performed before the child's return. In these cases, the border police arrange for the child's initial accommodation. In questionnaire responses, the Regional Directorates for Border and Migration confirmed that they followed procedures together with the State Social Services for the unaccompanied children. This research did not detect if returning families and children's experiences reflected this.

The 36 Migration Counters (or desks, their locations based on the former districts) are meant to be the first point of entry for returnees, facilitating their reintegration by referring them on to other key services. They were established in collaboration with the International Organisation for Migration, are managed at central level by MSWY, and located in Employment Offices premises. In practice, the main function of the Counters is like that of the Employment Offices – to provide support in finding work. The Counters have previously been criticised for not being proactive enough⁸, and most of the focus group families in this research said that they had not heard of them.



2. Civil registration

A main function of civil registry offices (also managed through the Ministry of Internal Affairs and located in each of the 61 municipalities and their component administrative units) is to register children who were born abroad. Problems were identified in these cases, mostly in the cases of illegal migrants returned from Greece who gave birth there, where incomplete documentation was issued by the Greek authorities, and who were not yet registered at the civil registry⁹.

Many returned migrant families contact their local registry offices to obtain the essential documents that enable them to register for services, such as social support, health care and schooling, in the same way that the rest of the population can access them. Since, civil registry offices keep records only for registered Albanian citizens (i.e. not all current residents), the absence of official records may create difficulties for some of those who are newly-returned. For example, if the civil registry has not alerted the education authorities that

⁸ Gjojutaj, E. & Hroni, E (2013). *Stories behind visa liberalisation: asylum seekers and visa liberalisation*. (s.l.): European Fund for the Balkans.

⁹ Researchers were told in focus group discussions that the Greek authorities did not register the child by name but only put 'baby' on the papers, and that they provided parents with unsigned documentation which could not be used in other countries.

a returned child should be enrolled at school, the child may not be able to receive their education on time.



3. Social services

The State Agency for the Protection of Children's Rights (SAPRC), within the MOSWY, does not have any specific guidance concerning this group. However, the SAPRC does have the potential to address the needs of all returned children, since it oversees the Child Protection Units (CPUs), in all 61 municipalities, mandated to work with children at risk. The CPUs have the responsibility to ensure that every child receives equality of treatment from the services they use, and they can also act as bridges between these different services. Further investigation is needed about their capacities to take on this role.

Information about social services provision was obtained from the municipal social service departments, and the State Social Services (SSS) general and regional directorates. For general child protection work, and broader social care and support issues, they treat returning families and children as they would do the wider population. Their specific responsibilities for returning unaccompanied children have already been outlined. Terre des Hommes and Save the Children also collaborate with the SSS to assess the family circumstances of unaccompanied children and to refer on their needs to other appropriate agencies.

An important problem found was for any returned migrants who have been away for over three months. All focus group respondents confirmed that to receive statutory Economic Aid payments, they had to start their applications all over again. This can cause real problems for returned migrants, whose financial situation is likely to be worse than when they left, since they may have already spent any savings on their travel abroad.



"I BORROWED MONEY TO TRAVEL AND I HAVEN'T BEEN ABLE TO PAY IT BACK SINCE WE DIDN'T EARN ANYTHING THERE."

DIBRA RESPONDENT



Newly-introduced legislation on Economic Aid does not mention prioritising returnees¹⁰.

¹⁰ Law No. 44/2016 On Some Changes and Additions in Law No. 9355 Dated 10.03.2015 "On Social Assistance and Services" Amended



4. Employment services

According to the Regional Directorate of Employment Services, migrant returnees should be treated as a priority group when they register for employment. Their need to find a job was a main concern expressed by the returned migrants interviewed for this research. Some of the returnees said that they had received employment advice from the Employment Offices, or had been registered as unemployed (allowing them to claim for unemployment benefits).

However, none of the desk staff mentioned prioritising returnee cases. It is notable that, in some cases, focus group respondents complained that they received no feedback from these offices. Terre des Hommes and Save the Children offer some professional courses and support in starting businesses to families facing economic hardship.



5. Education services

For the academic year 2014-2015, 2062 migrant children returned and were registered in schools. In the 2015-2016 and 2016-2017 years, 1800 and 930 returning children were registered respectively¹¹. The Ministry of Education and Sport (MES) has provided detailed instructions to all Regional Directorates of Education (RDEs) and Education Offices on how to manage school admissions and provide support to returnee children¹².

Some of the MAS guidelines do not expect reporting on their implementation, which means they may not deliver the results expected. Currently, the RDEs and Education Offices are only expected to confirm the number of children returned and registered to school. Teachers in all three research locations said that they had not been instructed on how to implement the individual education plans that all returning children are meant to have, and that they had not received no guidance on how to manage cases where returning parents had not registered children for school.

During interviews in schools for this research it was found, for example, that the intended individual education plans for returning children only included extra homework and exercises after the usual school classes, but without the weekend and vacation classes stipulated. Compressed learning regimes such as these may not be very effective because the students become overloaded with information.

The school interviews and focus groups confirmed that the additional staff required in the MES instructions were not provided. Instead, existing staff

¹¹ MES, April 2017

¹² Ministry of Education and Sports, Guideline no. 9242, dated 10.11.2015 "For the registration and treatment of the children that are returned" no. 9242, dated 10.11.2015

were expected to provide the additional support which resulted in further overload for them, as well.



"THERE HAVE BEEN NO EXTRA SCHOOL STAFF, AND MY DAUGHTER HAS NOT BEEN VISITED BY A PSYCHOLOGIST."

FIER PARENT



Some parents reported that their children's education on their return to an Albanian classroom continued as normal.



"WE DID THE EQUIVALENCE OF DOCUMENTATION THAT PROVED THAT MY CHILDREN HAD FOLLOWED THE SCHOOL ABROAD AND THEY WERE REGISTERED TO SCHOOL AND CONTINUED IT IN THE SAME WAY AS ALL THE OTHER CHILDREN."

TIRANA PARENT



Other children were registered in the same class that they followed in host countries, especially if they had been abroad for long (usually more than a year).

Teachers and one psychologist interviewed described cases of returnee children who isolated themselves from others in schools, or who cried all the time. Insufficient provision of psychological support was considered a problem by families, schools and the psychological support staff.



6. Health services

Ministry of Health leaflets and its website offer information on the documents required, and the other formalities that returning migrants must complete to access health services and to benefit from the national health insurance scheme. According to Ministry of Health, the Public and the Regional Health Directorates, and the Tirana Regional Health Authority in Tirana also offer mental health and psycho-social support services to returnees, and their staff have been trained in this specialist area. The existence of these services was not mentioned in any of the research interviews with the Regional Director-

ates of Public Health, at health centres, or by the returnees themselves.

Sometimes, returning parents fail to ensure that their children receive the health care they need.



"I DON'T KNOW IF MY KID HAS TO RECEIVE ANY MEDICAL SERVICE. I WAS ALWAYS NOTIFIED BY THE MEDICAL CENTRE STAFF ABOUT THE IMMUNIZATION BUT I DIDN'T RECEIVE ANY NOTIFICATION AFTER MY RETURN. MAYBE THEY DON'T KNOW WE HAVE RETURNED."

TIRANA PARENT



According to the Regional Directorates of Public Health, some instructions have been sent out to health centres to address returnees' health needs including about registration with a family doctor, providing a health insurance card, and translating certificates from host countries that show which childhood immunisation protocols were completed

Health centre staff reported that the only instructions they received was to offer returnees the same services that the wider population received. It appeared from the research that the actual services offered to returning migrants were, indeed, no different.



"I HAVE TO PAY FOR EVERY SERVICE THAT I RECEIVE IN HEALTH CENTRES."

DIBRA RESPONDENT



CONCLUSIONS



"I WOULD EMIGRATE IF THE FOREIGN AUTHORITIES WOULD GIVE US THE OPPORTUNITY TO STAY. THERE ARE BETTER CHANCES THERE FOR OUR CHILDREN AND FOR US. I FEEL NOT PROTECTED IN MY OWN COUNTRY"

DIBRA PARENT





"I WOULD LIKE TO LIVE ABROAD, SO THAT I COULD RAISE MY CHILDREN IN A QUIET ENVIRONMENT AND THEY COULD RECEIVE THE BEST EDUCATION."

FIER PARENT



"IF I COULD [ATTEMPT TO RE-EMIGRATE], I WOULD TRY IT OVER AND OVER AGAIN. WE LACK ESSENTIAL SERVICES IN ALBANA."

TIRANA RESPONDENT



From the entire research carried out for this study, families and children returning from abroad do face significant challenges. Initiatives have been undertaken at central and local levels to support their reintegration, but each of the essential service providers that returnees need to access should review whether they prioritise this group enough. Remaining problems include:

- 1. Overall lack of accessible information.** After periods of up to several years abroad, returnees need information about the agencies and services they can approach to support them. Migration Counters were established to offer this, but most returnees do not know about them. The services offered in local government units (LGUs) are better known, and could provide this advice, but do not appear to have undertaken any initiatives in relation to assisting returnees.
- 2. Limited financial support schemes.** Many of the returnees interviewed were in a worse financial position than when they left Albania, and most had been abroad for more than three months. To obtain benefit from the Economic Aid scheme, the claimants must begin their applications again, even if they were claiming before they left.
- 3. The difficulties individuals and families face in finding work.** Although being a returnee is an established priority factor to receive help in finding employment, it is questionable whether this happens. Young people who stopped attending education and vocational training when they left Albania face special difficulties in re-entering the labour market.

4. The difficulties children face in catching up with their education. While concrete steps have been taken to help returning children reintegrate into schools, the lack of guidance to effectively apply their individual work plans and of additional staff to implement them, and insufficient psycho-social support continue to hold these children back in their learning.

5. The difficulties families face in accessing health services. Unless returnees have paid Albanian health insurance while abroad they are unable to obtain free health care. In practice, the health sector does not appear to treat returnees differently from anyone else. Migrants may, in fact, need additional psychological support on their return, disappointed after having left to create a new life abroad, to face the challenges of starting again.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO POLICY MAKERS

For all recommendations, the Ministries should work together wherever appropriate. Co-operation between state and non-state actors will further facilitate the reintegration of returning migrants and help ensure that their specific service needs are properly met.

All Ministries

1. To ensure that there are effective policies in place for returning families, applicable down to the lowest government levels, with detailed information on how actions are to be implemented, who by, and how implementation and results are monitored and reported.
2. To prepare information about the relevant services for returning families that they offer, for distribution to families in all schools and health centres.

Ministry of Internal Affairs

3. To empower border police to identify every returnee, since these checkpoints are the best place and are best equipped to do this.
4. To equip the border police with sufficient, up-to-date information to share with returnees about where to address their specific needs, to better support them as early as possible.

Ministry of Social Welfare and Youth

5. To raise the profile of Migration Counters to perform as the main referral points for returned migrants, relocating them within LGUs and strengthening their links with all relevant local services, to facilitate migrants' access and reintegration.
6. To address returnee family needs, beyond re-entering the Economic Aid scheme, through complementary social care services, including engaging

social workers and psychologists to support these families and their reintegration processes.

7. To ensure that Employment Offices prioritise returned migrants and, if suitable employment cannot be identified, to provide immediate unemployment benefit (in accordance with existing legal provisions) alongside vocational training for those who lack appropriate skills and qualifications.

Ministry of Education and Sport

8. To provide continuing training of teachers at the educational unit level in all aspects of returning children's Individual Educational Plans including guidance on how to implement them.

9. To promote co-operation between the school, its student council, and parents to create a positive environment for returning children. MES should require schools to report on:

a. how they support parents of these children to achieve the objectives set by teachers;

b. how they evaluate progress with all stakeholders (in and outside school) in support of returnee children, including assessing the children's current numbers, needs and achievements, and helping them to realize their Individual Educational Plans.

Ministry of Health

10. To ensure that all health centre staff can identify all returnees, and to inform them accurately about the health services they can receive - and whether freely or otherwise.

11. To engage with psychologists and, in liaison with MSWY social workers and MES, to follow returning families and children, and to support their reintegration in relation to psychological and other health needs.

Municipalities/Local Government Units

12. To develop specific and dedicated initiatives and programmes within the LGUs, and potentially the overall local co-ordination role to support returning families, because the LGUs are identified by the returnees themselves as the place to go to seek support.