HOW TO ADAPT PRIMARY SCHOOL SCHOLARSHIP SCHEME TO PREVENT DROPOUT IN SECONDARY EDUCATION.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SCHOLARSHIP SCHEME AGAINST SCHOOL DROPOUT

OBSERVATORY FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH RIGHTS

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I. INTRODUCTION & ISSUE IDENTIFICATION

Government of Albania spends about 3% of its GDP on education. Access to education despite this low expenditure level has expanded in the last decade. This expansion has not reduced the level of disadvantage especially for those residing in rural areas, including poor people. According to the National Institute of Statistics in Albania (INSTAT), currently in Albania the NEET[1] group comprises 25.5% of the 15-24 age group and 26.6% of the 15-29 age group (INSTAT, 2020). One of the measures proposed internationally and that has a direct impact on the reduction of the number of students dropouts and reducing the number of NEET while improving the quality of public education is demand-side financing. Through this mechanism public funds are channeled directly to individuals or institutions based on demands, performance and / or attainment of low rates and drop out.

According to literature related to NEET, schooling is influenced by socio-economic, political and cultural factors. The offer of free education and the existence of schools in the vicinity are not sufficient factors to bring children from poor families to school. Demand-side financing channels public funds for public and/or private education to the individual or his/her family. In this way the resources are in the hands of those who demand education and not those who supply it. The barriers that prevent children from attending school are removed through this financing mechanism.

In Albania the demand-side financing schemes are limited. Currently the national government allots funding for need-based and merit-based scholarships. The mechanism for approving and distributing these scholarships is based at the local government and the decision is taken by the municipal council following proposals of the education unit of the local government. Scholarships are mainly distributed among high school and university students who study away from their hometown or village – in Tirana or in any other big towns. Another part of the scholarship supports vocational education. The scholarship covers living expenses in dormitories.

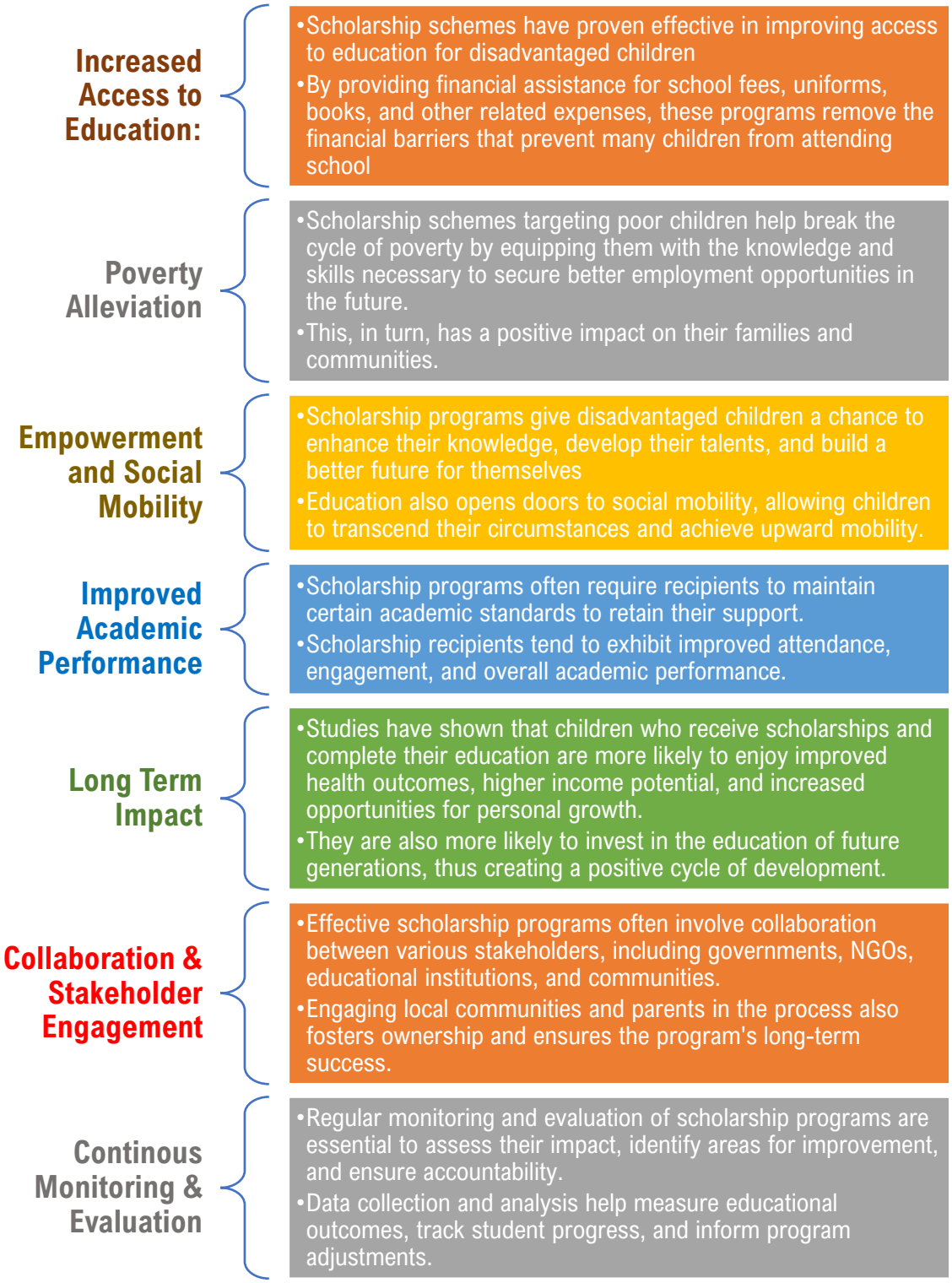
Recently, through the implementation of government decree 666/2019, the Ministry of Education supported local level approved scholarships in the form of stipends[2] for children risking dropout at the primary level of education (grade 1 – 9). The implementation of this decree, performed by Observatory for Children and Youth Rights, was accompanied by several processes of consultations with local government and education offices as well as training for the municipal staff involved in the process of providing the stipends. The work was based on well-defined criteria and was completed in collaboration with local agencies and in smaller geographical areas to minimize some risks. The stipend covers all school related needs of a child and provides an extra incentive in upper grades to reduce high dropout rates.

[1] NEET – Neither in Education, Employment or Training

[2] *Stipends* are cash payments that a public agency makes to a family to either offset a child's schooling expenses or to compensate a family for the loss of the child's labor. Generally, core expenses such as books, tuition, and transport, and incidental expenses such as materials, game fees, and clothes are covered. A stipend enhances equity by enabling poor children to attend school. This mechanism is particularly effective in enabling girls from poor rural families to attend school. While possible, cases of misusing the scheme through directing stipends at non-target beneficiaries are rare.

II. INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE WITH DEMAND-SIDE FINANCING SCHEMES FOR SECONDARY EDUCATION

Scholarship schemes aimed at supporting poor children to attend school have been implemented in various parts of the world, and they have yielded valuable policy insights that can be summarized as follows:



Overall, scholarship schemes supporting poor children to attend school have shown that targeted interventions can make a significant difference in breaking the cycle of poverty and providing opportunities for a brighter future. By removing financial barriers and providing comprehensive support, these programs empower children and contribute to their overall development.

III. LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE APPLICATION OF NEED-BASED SCHOLARSHIP IN PRIMARY SCHOOL SYSTEM BY THE OBSERVATORY FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH RIGHTS

The Observatory for Children and Youth Rights, funded by UNICEF, and in cooperation with central (Ministry of Education and Sports) and local (education departments) government structures facilitated the process of need-based scholarship distribution among families whose children were risking school drop-out. The monitoring of the process of distributing need-based scholarships (stipends) indicates the lack of accurate and reliable statistics for NEET for each municipality. This is strongly challenged by the inaccurate figures of people in circular migration or permanent migration and those trying to migrate. Establishing a sustainable system of norms, procedures, criteria, and institutional and community responsibilities to reduce secondary school dropout and increase the level of education of young people remains a challenge for Albania, although steps have been taken to consolidate the educational system, to increase the qualifications and training of pedagogical staff, and to inform parents about financial support for NEET.

Poverty is the common denominator of all typologies of out-of-school children created through the analysis of survey responses of 140 out of school children that the Observatory for Children and Youth Rights closely monitored during the school year 2021-22. These children were supported with scholarships and interviewed as part of the monitoring processes. However, all other elements such as ethnicity or living in a violent environment should be taken into consideration in both identifying the problem and assessing and addressing it. The analysis showed that children from the Roma and Egyptian communities face more prejudice and are less engaged in school life. Meanwhile children coming from the violent environment need greater protection as they feel more insecure. The cultural context in which Roma and Egyptian children live makes them more vulnerable as their parents are less educated and less employed but at the same time their community affiliation offers them a greater sense of support and care. This perception helps them cope better with the different forms of bullying.

Even more in-depth analysis is needed for NEET, as they have and represent different backgrounds and the approach to have them stay in school needs to be tailored to the characteristics of each group. Clear identification of quality and groups of NEET is also necessary to determine the criteria on which the decision is made for service recipients.

The community, parents and every member of society have a direct and indirect impact on the empowerment and effectiveness of the dropout prevention scheme. Continuous information of these actors can affect family and community safety, whether to motivate children to go to school or to refer cases of children who are in a school dropout situation. *Raising ongoing awareness and information on child support programs with scholarships or services to facilitate their school attendance should be an integral part of informing and raising public awareness on dropout issues.*

The work of identifying NEET requires that each actor coordinates and organizes joint efforts to identify secondary school students risking school dropout. The psycho-social sector in the school, among others, has the task of identifying cases of children who have long absences from school for no reason, or come from families with social problems and families which may affect their attendance at school. The study shows that this sector has very little presence in identifying these children risking dropout and building individual development plans to help

them. Also, their partnership with the teacher in assessing the status of the Child in dropout situation is almost absent in all the experiences reported in the report. *One of the study recommendations is to strengthen the role of the school psychologist and social worker in coordinating joint institutional efforts to identify and assess children at risk of school dropout. Also, a more active involvement of the entire psycho-social service network in the process of identifying, evaluating, and supporting all cases.*

According to our study data, the most vulnerable groups of children left out of school are children with various social problems, children of Roma and Egyptian minorities, children who work to help their families, children who are not registered in the civil registry, etc. Educational institutions can play an irreplaceable role in preventing school dropout. These children are the ones who are often absent from school, sometimes for long periods of time. However, the definition of "school dropout child" is perceived to be not very clear among professionals implementing the scheme by identifying the need to clarify the characteristics of children at risk of dropout. *Prevention by institutions requires training focused on understanding and clearly identifying characteristics of children who do not attend or are often absent from school and who may be at risk of dropping out.*

In the case of Albania, a relatively small country, incidence of NEET can be completely reduced if all these stakeholders work to optimal capacity. Better inter-governmental cooperation and effective cooperation of actors at the local level – would contribute directly to the lowering of school non-attendance. Moreover, without systematic impact assessments of policies aimed at boosting participation and fighting drop-out, it is impossible to accurately indicate priority areas of intervention for improving the situation of these children or means to make current programmes and strategies more efficient and more effective.

The facilitation of the scholarship distribution process allowed us to reflect and draw several lessons that are summarized below. Although these lessons are applicable to all the five dimensions of exclusion[3], the main focus is placed on dimensions 2 and 3 corresponding to primary and lower secondary school children risking school dropout.

- **Without the effective participation of government agencies, collecting and reporting drop-out data may be a challenging procedure.** If all parties engage in the process and allow the educational authority to take the lead, it can be rather simple. On the other side, the slow adoption of a digital data education system is impeding progress across the entire nation. To maintain the positive momentum brought on by the requirement to address NEET, quick action is required to develop the system.

- **Developing a Country Wide Survey about NEET following international standards.** The time is right to make changes to the way INSTAT gathers educational statistics about student presence, participation, and school drop-out. We believe that the changes will be rapid and successful if we build a nationwide survey based in schools and then follow it up with a national training programme connected to NEET that focuses on the application of governmental legislation and efficient data collection.

- **Strict School Monitoring of Truancy, Drop-out and Children never attending school.** It is crucial to closely monitor school attendance as well as truancy, drop-

[3] For more information on these please see: The dimensions of exclusion framework (unesco.org)

out rates, and children who never attend school to decrease and recover the number of out-of-school preschoolers and schoolchildren. As local cooperation with organizations gets consolidated to include school and health mediators, unofficial community leaders, child protection structures, and representatives of NGO's that manage pertinent local initiatives, it is also necessary to hold schools and local authorities accountable.
From this perspective, it is recommended that schools keep an eye on the circumstances of kids trapped in circulatory migration. It is appropriate to implement a fly grade book/academic passport at the national level for those children and young people in migration.

- **Appropriate Human Resources Training on a Curriculum Adapted to the Needs of Children at Risk of Dropping Out**
  Teachers are encouraged by the existing evaluation system to produce kids who perform well on standardized examinations. On the other hand, pupils from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds perform at much lower levels than the national average in terms of education, making it difficult to assess any progress they make unless it matches the standards set by the country.

  Additionally, there is not enough development in teacher-training programmes geared towards working with learners with limited opportunities. Projects that recognized the value of curriculum modification for the prevention of drop-out and truancy produced excellent outcomes in this regard. It was necessary for projects like those to generate training guidelines that should be better integrated into the national teacher training programmes because initial training programmes do not adequately prepare students in class-specific and catch-up teaching techniques.

  From this vantage point, it is critical to acknowledge the significance of and the necessary abilities for working with children at risk of dropping out as well as to raise the profile of educators who work in the schools where most of these kids attend class. For teachers to take on new obligations outside of those directly relevant to the subject matter they teach, motivation is crucial.

- **Valorizing School-Parents Partnership and Increasing School Attractiveness:**
  As we've seen, the main reasons why kids drop out of school are related to their families. Major risk factors include low educational attainment, unstable employment, income that is barely enough to survive, and extremely low educational expectations for one's children. Therefore, it is important to involve the families of the kids who are at risk of dropping out in school activities in an honest and useful relationship. More specifically, parents might participate in organizing extracurricular activities and might gain from counselling or expert training services. The collaboration with the family may take on new meaning since schools currently frequently resort to a small number of parents whose children are not risking dropout but do quite well instead.

IV. VARIOUS FORMS OF DEMAND SIDE SUPPORT TO PREVENT SCHOOL DROPOUT AT THE SECONDARY LEVEL OF EDUCATION

There are various scholarship schemes available for secondary school students, depending on the country and region. Scholarship programs are designed to support students financially and encourage academic excellence. Below are some of the most common schemes.

Merit Based Scholarships

- These scholarships are awarded based on academic achievements, such as high grades or standardized test scores.
- Students who demonstrate exceptional performance and potential are often considered for these scholarships.

Need Based Scholarships

- These scholarships are awarded to students from low-income backgrounds who demonstrate financial need.
- The purpose is to provide financial assistance to students who might not be able to afford secondary education otherwise.

Sports Scholarships

- These scholarships are specifically available for talented student-athletes.
- They are often awarded to students who excel in a particular sport and demonstrate a combination of athletic ability and academic achievement.

Minority Scholarships

- Certain scholarships aim to support students from underrepresented minority groups.
- These scholarships help increase access to education and promote diversity in schools.

Subject Specific

- These Scholarships focus on specific subject areas, such as science, technology, engineering, or mathematics (STEM).
- They encourage students to pursue education in these fields and often require students to meet certain academic criteria.

V. ROLE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN PREVENTING SECONDARY SCHOOL DROPOUT

The local government plays a significant role in shaping and overseeing the education system in a community. Some of the key responsibilities and roles of the local government in relation to secondary education include:

Funding and Resource Allocation

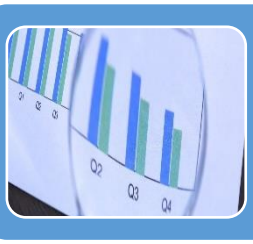
- Local governments allocate funds for education, including secondary schools.
- They determine the budget for education and ensure that schools have the necessary resources, such as textbooks, facilities, and equipment, to provide quality education.

Curriculum Development

- Local governments often have the authority to shape the curriculum taught in secondary schools.
- They work closely with education experts, teachers, and administrators to design a curriculum that meets national standards and addresses the needs of the local community.

School Governance

- Local governments establish policies and guidelines for school governance.
- They may oversee the appointment of school principals and administrators, as well as the formulation of school rules and regulations.



Monitoring and Evaluation

- Local governments are responsible for monitoring the performance of secondary schools within their jurisdiction.
- This includes evaluating the quality of education, student achievement, and overall school performance and they may conduct regular inspections and assessments.

Community Engagement

- Local governments facilitate community engagement in education..
- They encourage parental involvement, establish partnerships with local organizations and businesses, and provide platforms for community feedback and suggestions

Support Services

- Local governments may provide additional support services for secondary school students.
- This can include counseling services, career guidance, extracurricular activities, and access to scholarships or financial aid programs.

VI. DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE LOCAL EDUCATIONAL POLICIES TO PREVENT SCHOOL DROPOUT AT THE SECONDARY LEVEL OF EDUCATION

We, at the Observatory for Children and Youth Rights, have noted that designing effective local government scholarship schemes to prevent school dropout requires careful planning and consideration of various factors. Below are some steps that we identified during the experience of working with children in the primary level of education:

IDENTIFY THE TARGET GROUP	• Determine who you want to focus on, such as economically disadvantaged students, or those at risk of dropping out. • Understanding their needs and challenges is crucial for designing appropriate Identify the target group: interventions.
CONDUCT A NEEDS ASSESSMENT	• Carry out a thorough assessment of the local education system to identify the main causes of school dropout • Consider factors such as poverty, lack of access to resources, inadequate infrastructure, family circumstances, and social barriers.
DEFINE PROGRAM OBJECTIVES	• Clearly outline the goals and objectives of the scholarship scheme. • Setting specific and measurable targets will help in evaluating the effectiveness of the program.
DETERMINE ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA	• It's important to strike a balance between providing support to those who genuinely need it and ensuring that the program is sustainable. • Consider factors like academic performance, financial need, and social circumstances.
PROVIDE FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE	• Design schemes to offer financial support that covers tuition fees, books, uniforms, transportation, and school-related expenses. • The level of financial assistance should be sufficient to alleviate the financial burden on students and their families.
OFFER MENTORSHIP AND GUIDANCE	• Implement a mentorship component as part of the scholarship scheme. • Assign mentors who can provide guidance, support, and motivation to the scholarship recipients. Thls can help students navigate challenges, set educational goals, and explore future career opportunities.
PROMOTE PARENTAL AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT	• Encourage active involvement of parents, & the local community in supporting students' education. Organize workshops to raise awareness about the importance of education and provide parents with tools to support their children's learning.
ALWAYS MONITOR AND EVALUATE THE PROGRAM AND BE TRANSPARENT	• Establish a system for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of the scholarship scheme. • Use the data collected and information to make necessary adjustments and improvements to ensure the program's success.
FOSTER COLLABORATION WITH SCHOOLS AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS	• Collaborate with local educational institutions, to ensure effective implementation of the scheme. • Establish partnerships that provide mentoring opportunities, or vocational training programs to enhance the impact of the scholarships.
PROVIDE CONTINOUS SUPPORT	• Consider offering ongoing support to scholarship recipients throughout their educational journey. • This can include regular check-ins, career counseling, and opportunities for continued education or skill development

VII. CONCLUSIONS

Scholarship schemes in secondary education can play a significant role in preventing dropout rates among students and lowering numbers of NEET. We see this process as an on-going one that requires support and collaboration among all stakeholders in the Albanian society. Based on the experiences gained this year through the implementation of the project “Stay in School” and learning from our past experiences with projects focusing on out of school children, the Observatory for Children and Youth Rights has accumulated significant experience. The following are some ways that scholarship programmes can help lower dropout rates:

FINANCIAL SUPPORT

- One of the primary reasons students drop out of school is the inability to afford the costs associated with education, such as tuition fees, textbooks, uniforms, transportation, and other related expenses
- Scholarship schemes provide financial support to students, easing the economic burden and enabling them to continue their education.

INCREASED MOTIVATION

- Knowing that their scholarship is contingent upon maintaining certain academic standards can inspire students to work harder and stay engaged in their studies.
- This increased motivation can contribute to lower dropout rates as students strive to meet the scholarship program's expectations.

SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT

- Many scholarship programs offer additional support services beyond financial aid.
- The presence of a support system can enhance students' sense of belonging and reduce the likelihood of disengagement from school.

EXPANDED OPPORTUNITIES

- Scholarships can open doors to a wider range of opportunities for students. By providing financial assistance, they enable students to access quality education, which can lead to better future prospects.
- This expanded vision and awareness of opportunities can act as a deterrent against dropping out.

PEER NETWORKS

- Scholarship programs often bring together a cohort of students who share similar backgrounds and aspirations. This network of peers can provide a sense of community, support, and encouragement.
- By fostering positive social interactions & a sense of belonging, SCHOLARSHIPS help students develop a stronger attachment to their schools and resist the temptation to drop out.

PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT

- Scholarship schemes often involve parental engagement and support. Parents are often required to participate actively in their child's education, attend meetings, and monitor their progress.
- When parents are invested in their child's education, the likelihood of dropout decreases significantly.

While scholarship schemes can be effective in preventing dropout rates, it is important to recognize that they are just one component of a broader set of strategies needed to address the complex factors contributing to dropout. Creating supportive learning environments, addressing socio-economic challenges, and improving the quality of education are also crucial aspects that need attention. Nonetheless, scholarship schemes provide a vital tool in supporting students and encouraging them to stay in school.