
Albania Case Study Report

Effectiveness in COVID – 19 Response

September 2020

Case study on Effectiveness in COVID-19 Response

This Case Study Report is part of a global study on effectiveness in COVID-19 response compiled by the CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness (CPDE).

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I. Socioeconomic impact of COVID-19 in Albania

Government strategies and policies on COVID-19

At the start of the pandemic, the Ministry of Health and Social Protection and the Public Health Institute prepared an Action Plan for Prevention, Preparation and Response towards COVID-19 scenarios. The plan was followed by the decision of the Council of Ministers No.243 of 24 March 2020 “On the Declaration of Natural Disaster Situation”, which enabled the Albanian government to impose preventive and precautionary measures towards minimizing the number of cases infected with COVID – 19. These measures include the closure of public activities such as: closure of educational institutions (nursery, kindergarten, schools, and universities); forbidden internal travel; suspended sea, air and land movement to neighbouring countries except for goods; closure of bars, restaurants, schools, mosques, churches and the banning of all sports and large people gatherings. Weekday curfew hours and weekend lock down measures were imposed to minimize and restrict citizen movement. As of September 14, 2020, there are 211 legal acts on COVID-19 that have been approved and published in the official gazette.

Main impact on the economy

In the last two years, Albania faced two shocks that are impacting its economy: the devastating earthquake of November 26, 2019 and the COVID-19 global pandemic. The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the first quarter of 2020 decreased by 2.52% compared to the first quarter of 2019[1]. Most of the main branches of economy were hit by COVID-19 when compared to the same period of 2019. Construction decreased with 16.66%, financial and insurance activities decreased with 7.18% and the group of wholesale; retail trade; transportation; and accommodation decreased with 3.65%.

Referring to domestic and regional market, as of September 2020, the exports of goods and services during 2020 decreased by 13,6 %, while imports of goods and services decreased by 10.9% compared to the same period of September 2019[2]. As of April 2020, the tax revenues declined by 12.2% compared to the same period of April 2019[3]. The most affected sector in the Albanian economy is tourism. As of July 2020, the number of foreign visitors declined by 67.1% compared to the same period of 2019[4]. Public debt is expected to increase in 2020, as the deficit increased to 3.9% of GDP to counteract the loss in income due to the epidemic and support for post-earthquake reconstruction[5].The pandemic situation has affected businesses in every sector of the economy, especially the SMEs (small and medium enterprises). Due to COVID -19 restriction measures, they faced reduction in capacity utilisation, supply of labour, and liquidity shortage.

[1] The information is retrieved from the official webpage of INSTAT <http://www.instat.gov.al/media/7258/gdp-q1-2020.pdf>
[2] The information is retrieved from the official webpage of INSTAT <http://www.instat.gov.al/media/7591/tj-shtator-2020.pdf>
[3] <https://www.unicef.org/albania/media/3101/file/UN%20ALBANIA%20COVID-19%20SOCIO-ECONOMIC%20RECOVERY%20&%20RESPONSE%20PLAN.pdf>
[4] The information is retrieved from the official webpage of INSTAT <http://www.instat.gov.al/en/themes/industry-trade-and-services/tourism/publications/2020/movements-of-citizens-july-2020/>
[5] <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/albania/overview#3>

As a consequence, SMEs were not able to pay salaries[6] to their employees. The surveys to date shows that apart from lack of customers, lack of liquidity and lack of contingency plan, the small businesses have difficulties in meeting tax obligations[7].

Main impact on the people

As of 15th September, a total of 11,672 COVID-19 positive cases are confirmed and the number of reported deaths is 340[8].

Around 50,000 people have lost their jobs due to COVID-19[9], while initial analysis by the Bank of Albania indicates that around 100,000 jobs are at risk due to the COVID - 19 measures, and that the annual unemployment rate could increase by 7.4% due to the combined impacts of COVID-19 and the earthquake disaster.

To support people and companies affected by the pandemic situation[10], the government adopted two financial packages of a total size of 45 billion ALL, about 2.8% of Albania GDP. The first financial package[11], consists of an additional funding for the health sector of 3.5 billion ALL, 6.5 billion ALL to support small businesses who were forced to close activities, 2 billion ALL reallocated to humanitarian aid, and 11 billion ALL as a sovereign guarantee fund for companies to be able to receive loans. The second financial support consists of 7 billion ALL for the provision of a single payment to the employees of the affected small businesses, and a sovereign guarantee of 15 billion ALL for the provision of loans to all private companies that have paid their tax obligations and were able to pay before the pandemic. In addition, the Decision of Council of Minister no. 651, date 13.08.2020 addressed public transport sector affected by the COVID - 19 lockdowns, and the financial support stipulated is 134,966,000 ALL[12].

The government also initiated a humanitarian operation to support individuals and families in need during the COVID-19 pandemic with food and health drugs.[13]The poverty rate in Albania is estimated to double in a short time with the assumption that the self-employed lose 100% of their income and wage employees lose 50%, resulting in an additional 115,000-230,000 people moving below the poverty line in the country[14].

The impact of COVID - 19 on women and girls is higher compared to men and boys, as they face more economic uncertainties and greater risk of domestic violence during the confinement[15]. Many women in Albania are employed in informal, low-wage activities that are disrupted due to COVID-19 quarantined measures[16]. With regards to domestic violence, from March - May 2020, calls for help by girls and women to help line centres tripled when compared to the same period in 2019[17].

[6]<https://www.unicef.org/albania/sites/unicef.org.albania/files/2020-07/UN%20ALB%20Socio%20Economic%20Recovery%20%26%20Response%20Plan%201.0.pdf>

[7]https://www.investment.com.al/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/EN_AIC-Presentation-of-IC-Survey-Covid-19-Impact-on-the-Business.pdf

[8] The information is retrieved from the website of Ministry of Health and Social Protection <https://shendetesia.gov.al/covid19-ministria-e-shendetesise-45-te-sheruar-151-raste-te-reja-dhe-1-humbje-jete-ne-24-oret-e-fundit/>

[9] <https://www.oecd.org/south-east-europe/COVID-19-Crisis-in-Albania.pdf>

[10] The information is retrieved from the official website of the Ministry of Finance and Economy <http://financa.gov.al/raporte-per-covid-19/>

[11] <https://financa.gov.al/masae-e-marra/>

[12] <https://financa.gov.al/masae-e-marra/>

[13] <https://www.kryeministria.al/newsroom/operacioni-humanitar-ka-mbeshtetur-263-mije-familje-individe>

[14]https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/ALB_Socioeconomic-Response-Plan-2020.pdf

[15]<https://albania.unwomen.org/en/news-and-events/stories/2020/04/unpacking-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women-and-girls-in-albania>

[16] <https://www.unicef.org/albania/sites/unicef.org.albania/files/2020-07/UN%20ALB%20Socio%20Economic%20Recovery%20%26%20Response%20Plan%201.0.pdf>

[17]<https://awenetwork.org/covid-19-trefishohen-thirrjet-per-ndihme-per-dhune-ne-familje-prane-linjes-kombetare-116-117-deri-ne-6-urdhera-mbrojtje-ne-dite-vetem-ne-durres/?fbclid=IwAR12FM80IL7ZqsgJbdY8kgy027QpkpCVNOINC-Fmw8LAVm5CHHJnoaL8J50>

Since the closure of schools on March 9, 2020, around 572,000 students from preschool to higher education shifted to online education, which limited the social interaction of in-school youth. Access to online learning is also a major problem as an estimated 11,000 students, mainly those living in rural areas, do not have access to online learning because of the lack of access to internet or digital devices at home[18]. Also, when considering children with learning difficulties and disabilities, 1 in 2 children with disabilities could not access education activities online[19].

During 2019 -2020, the number of migrants and refugees that used Albania as a transition country was estimated at about 11,344 migrants and refugees. The closure of borders noted a decrease in movement of Albania's asylum-seeker population. On the other hand, albanian authorities during the pandemic situation have closed down migrant reception centres, which have left many stranded in the cold[20].

II. Analysis of the application of EDC principles in COVID-19 response

A. Ownership

Description and analysis of the national strategy or government strategic plan for COVID-19 response. The Ministry of Health and Social Protection and the Public Health Institution prepared two strategic documents in response to COVID-19 situation in the country: (1) The Action Plan for Prevention, Preparation and Response against COVID – 19[21] which foresees measures for the prevention, preparation and response to COVID-19 situation; and (2) The Reopening Strategy that identifies four main phases for the reopening of the economy based on recommendations from the WHO and the country risk assessment.

The above mentioned documents and other legal acts prepared and approved by the government in response to the pandemic situation have not been prepared based **on a multi-stakeholder participation** of the parliament, civil society, private sector, and subnational government and development partners.

Particular participation, roles and contribution of CSOs in Task Forces, Committees or other multi-stakeholder bodies to respond to COVID-19. There are two main bodies established to respond to COVID-19: (1) The Task Force for the prevention of infection spread by the new Coronavirus; and (2) and the Ad – Hoc Committee for the Spread of New Coronavirus Infection. The Ad – Hoc Committee consists of 12 members, all coming from health institutions and agencies, while the Task Force consists of 10 members who represent public health institutions, one member from WHO sited in Albania and one from the Department of Border Police and Migration. There is no participation from the parliament, civil society, private sector, subnational government and development partners in these bodies.

[18]<https://www.unicef.org/albania/sites/unicef.org.albania/files/2020-07/UN%20ALB%20Socio%20Economic%20Recovery%20%26%20Response%20Plan%201.0.pdf>

[19]<https://www.worldvision.al/gjetjet-kryesore-te-vleresim-mbi-ndikimin-e-covid-19-ne-mireqenien-e-femijeve-dhe-familjeve-ne>

[20]https://euromedmonitor.org/en/article/3543?fbclid=IwAR0t6JldBgzckKXXJMMSQakDRsA_vbXRdJJyBidVN2E3LSpi7ujT2RysSps

[21] https://shendetesia.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Covid_AL-spreads.pdf

Policies and strategies proposed/raised by CSOs that are actually reflected or integrated in COVID-19 policies and strategies. There are no cases of policies and strategies proposed/raised by CSOs that are actually reflected or integrated in COVID-19 policies and strategies.

Alignment and use of country systems in relation to COVID-19 response and financing. There is no country system in place that align coordination aid in response to COVID – 19, which could enable donors to use it. The Ministry of Health and Social Protection has conducted online coordination meetings with donors to increase support in response to the COVID-19. The information was provided in forms of public notification and news. Donors have channelled their aid through project assistance and budget support. For example, the European Union supported Albania with EUR 50 million to fight COVID-19, out of which, EUR 46 million consisted on budget support to assist the social and economic recovery[1]. The World Bank, through its projects, will assist and help the country to prevent, detect, and respond to the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic, and strengthen national systems for public health preparedness [2].

Predictability of COVID-19 financing. The Ministry of Finance and Economy has a dedicated webpage for COVID-19, but there is no information on the predictability of COVID-19 financing. Based on the information available, the aid from donors is forecasted on short-term and multi-year bases.

Harmonisation of response and financing. There is an evidence of collective reaction by donors. The United Nations developed a joint Response Plan that is aligned to the Albanian Government Response Plan, inviting international financial institutions (IFIs) to join the effort.

The main sectors that are tackled by donors' aid are health, education and economic sector[22].

The European Union supported the health care and the recovery of economy with an amount of 50 million EU. As of September 2020, the EU provided an additional support, of an amount of 180 Million EU in favourable terms loans targeting macro-economic stability and allowing resources to be channelled towards protecting citizens and mitigating the consequences of COVID-19. The United States Government, through the USAID has provided more than \$2.4 million to help Albania respond to the COVID-19 pandemic mainly in medical devises and awareness raising and community development education for behavioural change[23]. The IMF provided 190.5 million USD to Albania under the Rapid Financing Instrument and, the World Bank on July 2020, approved a financial support of 15 million EUR to help the country prevent, detect, and respond to the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic, and strengthen national systems for public health preparedness[24]. Several bilateral donors, including China, Qatar, Turkey, Germany, United Arab Emirates, have provided diagnostics and medical supplies to Albania during the pandemic.

[22]<https://www.unicef.org/albania/sites/unicef.org.albania/files/2020-07/UN%20ALB%20Socio%20Economic%20Recovery%20%26%20Response%20Plan%201.0.pdf>

[23]https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1863/USAID_Covid_19_Assistance_as_of_July_9_2020.pdf

[24]<https://reliefweb.int/report/albania/world-bank-support-will-help-albania-better-respond-covid-19-pandemic>

B. Inclusive Partnerships

Participation of various stakeholders in the design, implementation, and monitoring of national strategies and policies for COVID-19 response. There is no participation in the design, implementation, and monitoring of national strategies and policies for COVID-19 response.

Access to relevant government information. The Law on the Right to Information enables the right of CSOs and citizens to access relevant government information. Regardless, media and human rights organizations have accused the government of monopolizing the information related to the COVID-19 pandemic[25]. They felt repressed by the government, making it impossible to obtain independent information and totally limiting the verification of press releases. Media and human rights organizations have decried this restriction of information as being unconstitutional and harmful.

Incorporation of CSO recommendations in design, implementation and monitoring of COVID-19 response. No consultation happened with CSOs regarding the design, implementation and monitoring of policies for COVID- 19 responses.

Legal and regulatory environment for CSOs and marginalized populations. The legal and regulatory environment in place is neutral; it does not hinder and/or facilitate access to resources for domestic CSOs. There is no legal barrier for CSOs to work with marginalized populations and at-risk group as far as they follow the state protocols measures of COVID-19.

Impact on fundamental rights and freedoms, repression and other violations in line with COVID-19 response. Through the Normative Act no. 3 dated March 15, 2020[26], all public activities, including gatherings and assemblies were closed until April 3, 2020 to protect public health. According to Order 222 dated April 1, 2020, the Ministry of Health and Social Protection amended the initial order and prolonged the closure of all public activities, including gatherings and assemblies till the end of the pandemic situation. Within the same day, the Albanian Government through its Permanent Representative to the Council of Europe (CoE), sent a verbal note, informing the Secretary General of the CoE, that it will exercise its right to derogate from Article 15 of the European Convention of Human Right (ECHR). The derogation came as a result of measures taken to cope with the situation of COVID-19, which may be interpreted as a violation of article 8 and article 11 (freedom of assembly and organization) of ECHR.

Shrinking or closing civic and democratic spaces due to COVID-19 policies. From March 2020 (when the Normative Act no.3 was enacted) till the end of July 2020, nine (9) assemblies were dispersed by State Police and 119 individuals were prosecuted[27]. Based on the developments with regards to assemblies, the Albanian Ombudsman released a letter[28] with recommendations on necessary measures that public institutions should take to respect the right to free assemblies. The letter was addressed to the Civil Emergency Inter- Ministries Committee, General Persecution Office, Ministry of Health and Social Protection, and to the General Director of State Police.

[25] <https://kohajone.com/keshilli-shqiptar-i-medias-qendrimi-i-rames-eshte-i-rrezikshem-qeveria-po-censuron-informacionin-per-situaten-me-koronavirusin/>

[26] <https://qbz.gov.al/eli/akt-normativ/2020/03/15/3/333da18e-47fd-4cc7-b38c-562ec56da463>

[27] <https://citizens-channel.com/2020/07/27/gjate-pandemise-policia-shperndau-nente-tubime-dhe-procedoi-penalisht-119-qytetare/>

[28] <https://www.avokatipopullit.gov.al/media/manager/website/media/Rekomandim%20p%C3%ABr%20marrjen%20e%20masave%20t%C3%AB%20nevojshme%20p%C3%ABr%20respektimin%20e%20liris%C3%AB%20kushetuese%20t%C3%AB%20tubimit%20edhe%20ogjat%C3%AB%20ogjendjes%20s%C3%AB%20jasht%C3%ABzakonshme.%20.pdf>

The letter provides a set of recommendations stressing necessary measures that the State Police should take in order to interrupt the up-to-date practice of not allowing non-mass gatherings indoors or outdoors, as well as to guarantee the right of journalists to report events on assemblies and other activities on this nature. In addition, it recommends the need for the amendment of the Law No. 8773 “On Assemblies” in order to guarantee the right of spontaneous and anti – counter assemblies, and the need to improve normative acts of public institution issued on assemblies.

With regards to the detention, the Ombudsman recommended preparation and approval of an instruction by the General Prosecutor's Office, in cooperation with the High Judicial Council and High Prosecution Council for the unification of practices by the prosecution and judicial bodies in line with article 262 “Organization and participation in an illegal gathering” of the Criminal Code of Albania.

Availability and access to technology to effectively perform the work of CSOs and other stakeholders. There is access to affordable and reliable technology to effectively perform the work of CSOs and other stakeholders, but there is lack of capacities and skills in the sector to access and use of technology. Based on a needs assessment with CSOs, on April 2020, Partners Albania and the National Resource Centre for Civil Society provided a support package of rapid support for the sector. The support package has two main interventions:

(1) One-year access on the Zoom Platform, the costs of which are covered by Partners Albania and the National Resource Centre for Civil Society in Albania.

(2) Online training for the use of a series of online platforms and creative tools. Given the wide range of applications, tools and platforms available, in most cases it is difficult to choose the right one. As part of these trainings, participants have the opportunity to get acquainted with the platforms, assess which ones are appropriate and most economical for the needs they have.

C. Human rights at the core of pandemic response

Operating guidelines/practices on COVID-19 response in relation to human rights laws and norms. On April 2020, the Government proposed some amendments to the Criminal Code for the prevention of the COVID-19 pandemic. The amendments criminalize some forms of citizens’ disobedience to the measures during the state of emergency or natural disaster and some forms of violation of quarantine rules to prevent the spread of the infectious diseases. The proposed amendments included fines and imprisonment sentences of up to 15 years for those violating quarantine and curfews imposed under the state of emergency, being infected or not by the virus. Considering these proposed penalties as very harsh and not proportional, a group of 32 CSOs issued a statement, and requested from the Parliament not to approve the proposed amendments that violate the freedom and rights of citizens. The President and the People’s Advocate also issued similar opinions resulting in the Parliament’s Legal Affairs committee to make changes to the proposal, mitigating the sentences to a maximum 8 years of imprisonment, removing the double charges and only imposing a fine for asymptomatic patients. The Parliament approved the amendments.

Accountability systems (new or existing) for COVID-19 response. During COVID-19 pandemic, Albanian CSOs continued to monitor online the developments in the legal framework, the attitude of the institutions towards citizens and to offer free legal assistance to vulnerable groups especially prisoners and pre-detainees. They have been vocal to the authorities and the media on these issues, calling for a higher level of responsibility on the part of state institutions. A group of CSOs in a letter addressed to the President, Prime minister and the Speaker of the Parliament, asked them to ensure that the principles of transparency and good governance are respected during the pandemic situation. They requested the decision makers to adjourn any decision making that does not present any immediate importance for health and security of people, for which the meaningful participation and transparency is not ensured[29].

III. CSO good practices in leveraging EDC in COVID-19 response

There are identified some initiatives especially designed to engage young people:

The #DoGoodFromHome! is an initiative from a youth organization Epoka e Re in the city of Fier. The activity included the use of digital tools to empower young people and send positive messages to the local community. It organized a series of tailor-made online activities, to engage young people in delivering messages on the importance of social inclusion during the COVID-19 pandemic under the moto: “Physical Distancing is not Social Distancing for us... Let’s get together.”

#DebateClub, has become #OnlineDebateClub by using web-conferencing platforms, where young people participate in online conversations on different topics concerning their community such as pros and cons of online education; Global Youth Service Day discussion, etc. Many young people from Fier but also other cities of Albania have joined these discussions.

#OnsiteTraining has become #OnlineTraining: through this programme, 25 students followed the “Online Academy of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)” online. This training helps young people to develop knowledge and skills on world issues such as health, the environment, poverty, gender equality, energy and sustainable cities. The course is offered free-of-charge and is opened to all youth.

#LocalCommunityCampaign has become #WorldCommunityCampaign: Epoka e Re volunteers and Youth Parliament have produced and shared two short videos on their social media channels.

[29] <https://www.reporter.al/shoqeria-civile-ben-thirrje-per-qeverisje-te-pergjegjshme-gjate-covid-19/>

Recommendations on making COVID-19 response more effective

- ***The government should ensure meaningful participation of various stakeholders (the parliament, civil society, private sector, local government, development partners, etc.),*** by involving them in the design, implementation, and monitoring of national strategies and policies for COVID-19 response. Policy and decision makers should engage in meaningful consultations and discussions with different stakeholders to effectively respond to pandemic situation in a strategic way. Multi-stakeholder's bodies with representation of various stakeholders should be established by the government, or representation should be ensured in the existing mechanisms to bolster representation and to ensure effective COVID-19 response strategies and policies.
 - ***The government should ensure that human rights and fundamental freedoms are respected and guaranteed.*** Measures taken by the government to avoid the spread of the COVID-19 virus should not violate fundamental freedoms and rights of the citizens. The right to free assembly and gatherings should be guaranteed, and citizens under any circumstances should not be denied from exercising this fundamental right.
 - ***Accountability systems with regards to the measures, budget allocations and expenditures in the COVID-19 response should be enhanced.*** Accountability and transparency on state budget allocations and expenditures, and organisational development assistance (ODA) aid should be increased to improve COVID-19 response effectiveness. Harmonisation of response and financing to ensure that the needs of the government to effectively respond to the COVID-19 situations and those of the citizens are address is needed. A central system for data collection and publication on COVID-19 response to ensure relevant information for citizens and all interested stakeholders with this regards should be in place.
 - ***The role and contribution of CSOs in COVID-19 response should be recognised, promoted and supported by the government and international donors.*** Regardless of the many challenges faced as a result of the pandemic situation, CSOs have been very active to response to the needs of their beneficiaries by developing alternative approaches to deliver their services to the individuals, families, and groups in need. They have supported the government, especially the local government, in the identification and delivery of support provided to the marginalised groups in the society. Considering close connections of CSOs with their beneficiaries and marginalised groups, as well as their ability to involve in awareness raising and community mobilisation, the government should consider their recommendations in the COVID-19 response strategies and policies.
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You can reach us at:



partners@partnersalbania.org

WWW

www.partnersalbania.org



Rruga e Elbasanit, Park Gate , kati i 10-të,
Ap. 71 / 73, Kutia Postare 2418/1
1010 Tiranë, Shqipëri
