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Information on Albania

Compliance with ILO Convention No.182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour (ratified in 2001)

Child begging in Albania

In 2007, research was conducted on forced child begging in the towns of Tirana, Elbasan and Korca in Albania and in Thessaloniki in Greece, where Albanian children are also known to beg.¹ During the research, in-depth interviews and group discussions were conducted with 234 individuals (child beggars, ex-child beggars, children at risk of begging and parents of child beggars or ex-child beggars).

The research did not seek to measure the scale of child begging, but the fact that 82 of the children who participated in the study were currently begging, indicates that significant numbers of Albanian boys and girls are affected.

Child begging: a worst form of child labour

53 children who are currently begging took part in in-depth interviews for the research. Roughly one-third of these boys and girls were forced to beg, the vast majority by their parents, by beatings, or through threats of violence and being denied food. Members of the research team in Albania thought that this figure underestimates the scale of children being forced to beg by their parents as children are extremely reluctant to report violent parents, either out of a sense of loyalty or because they fear reprisals.

This view is supported by other information collected during the research. For example, both children and parents talked about the violent methods used by parents to force children to beg in 18 out of the 21 group discussions conducted. In many cases specific examples were cited. Mothers of children who beg in Tirana stated: *“There are parents who beat their children if they don’t earn that quota of money that their parents have decided that morning”* and *“If the children don’t earn this amount of money the parents beat them or don’t give them anything to eat.”*

While cases of children being forced to beg by their parents were found to be much more common than forced begging by third parties, the research did reveal a few

¹ This research was managed by Anti-Slavery International and conducted by partner agencies, Terre des homes-Albania, Association for the Social Support of Youth (ARSIS) and Children of the World and of Albania (FBSH). Emily Delap, *Begging for Change*, Anti-Slavery International, London 2008.

examples of children who were forced to beg by individuals other than their parents. One girl from Tirana was forced to beg by her aunt and grandmother whilst her mother worked overseas and was beaten and shouted at if she tried to refuse or if she did not bring home sufficient income.

One 13 year old Albanian boy in Greece begged to help his mother re-pay debts to her live-in boyfriend which she incurred during their migration. He was beaten by the boyfriend if he did not bring home enough money.²

Having said this it should be stressed that many children who beg are in loving and supportive family relationships and would suffer no repercussions if they did not beg or failed to bring home the expected sums of money. Some children also agree with their parents' choice and feel a responsibility to contribute to the family's income.

Regardless of whether the child beggars are described as forced to beg or not, they would still come under the scope of ILO Convention 182. The research suggests that begging, whether forced or not, starts at a young age. Many reported starting at four or five years of age, and some said they began in their mother's arms before they could walk. Group discussions revealed that it was common for girls and boys to stop once they reached puberty and the in-depth interviews supported this. All child beggars in Albania and Greece are at risk from abuse from other beggars and members of the public they encounter on a daily basis. The majority of children interviewed beg most days of the week, with around a third of the child beggars begging every day. Of the 40 child beggars who provided detailed information about working hours, the majority worked between 6-12 hours per day. Only five girls and ten boys from this number attend school, most going to schools run by local NGOs for a few hours each day. None of the children who were forced to beg attended school and all were working as beggars for more than six hours a day.

The causes of child begging

The research identified a number of interrelated causes of child begging in Albania, including discrimination and poverty.

All of the child beggars interviewed for this research came from the Roma or Egyptian communities.³ Hardly any children from the majority Albanian population beg. Discrimination against the Roma and Egyptian ethnic groups has been widely documented in terms of access to employment, education and other basic services, and this appears to be a pivotal factor in explaining why these families cannot meet their basic needs.

Some research suggests that 71 per cent of Roma and 67 per cent of Egyptian adults are unemployed as compared with a national average of around 18 per cent. All of the child beggars who took part in the research had parents with either no education or only very limited education and were either unemployed or in low paid occupations. Fathers most commonly worked collecting cans for recycling or in construction,

² The research indicates that forced begging related to trafficking has declined as the risks of being caught are now much higher.

³ The Egyptian community are an Albanian group whose roots may or may not be historically traced back to Egypt, but who are commonly described as 'Egyptian' within Albania. Although commonly lumped together, the Roma and Egyptian communities have quite distinct identities.

whilst mothers tended to beg themselves or work as street cleaners. Those interviewed linked unemployment to a lack of education and discrimination against the Roma or Egyptian communities. For example, mothers in Tirana commented that: *“There aren’t jobs for our hands [ethnic group]”* and *“There aren’t jobs for the white, who are educated, imagine for us, we don’t even know how to write our names.”*

Children and parents spoke of racial discrimination, mainly on the part of other pupils, but also by teachers, as a key reason why Roma and Egyptian children do not attend school. This is reflected in the following comments from girls in Korca: *“The teacher beats these [Roma] children;”* *“At school the other girls mock me;”* and *“We are black and others look at us differently.”*

Many parents, particularly mothers, who took part in the research, said that they valued education. Boys and girls who were interviewed expressed a strong desire to learn, and those who had attended school and avoided discrimination, talked with satisfaction about their experience. Not attending school, however, may make children more likely to beg and will have a long term impact on them in terms of lower adult literacy rates and limited future employment opportunities. This feeds into a cycle of poverty within the affected communities.

Discrimination was identified as a significant reason for non-attendance at school. Poverty (both because the child is begging and also not having enough money to buy books and uniforms) was also frequently given as a reason for not going to school. Others, which were mentioned, include child care responsibilities, early marriage, disruption caused by migration, and, for some older children, who because of gaps in their education would have to join classes of younger children, feeling ashamed about being bigger than other children in their class.

Both children and adults repeatedly identified poverty as the principle reason for their begging, as a 13 year old girl from Korca explained: *“When you don’t have anything to eat, you beg.”* In this context, earnings from child begging can make a substantial difference to family incomes. Children in cities such as Korca and Elbasan commonly earn between 200-500 Leke (US\$2.58-6.45) a day from begging, which is roughly the same as a street cleaner would earn, but in the capital city, Tirana it could be as much as 2000 Leke (US\$25.78) per day. Children who beg in Thessaloniki in Greece also earn a considerable amount, and can expect to bring in a daily income of 30 Euros.

High levels of early marriage amongst the Roma and Egyptian communities also contribute to the problem of child begging. The average age for Roma girls to marry is 15.5 years old and the average family size is 6.4. Egyptians girls marry at 17 years old on average and their average family size is 5.2, also higher than the national average. Early marriage can lead to divorce and re-marriage, which in turn means children are brought up in step families where they may be discriminated against by step fathers and pushed into begging. Early marriage is also linked to large families and consequent household poverty. As one mother from Tirana explained: *“When you marry young, you will have more children so what will you do with them? You will put them on the streets.”*

Individuals outside and even within the Roma and Egyptian communities perceive child begging to be accepted or even promoted as a 'traditional' activity that is passed on from one generation to the next. Certainly there are strong views within these communities about what roles are appropriate for children and what tasks women should perform. However, close analysis reveals a widespread distaste for begging from both adults and children. A 12 year old boy from Korca said: "*Begging is not good... I feel ashamed of people looking at me.*" A 14 year old boy from Tirana expressed a similar view: "*It is better to work rather than to beg, plus, I am old now and it's a shame. I don't want to, it's not good.*"

Begging declines for both boys and girls at puberty as it is seen as a shameful or low status activity. Girls stop begging when marriage begins to become a possibility, but once married they may start again. Boys are unlikely to re-enter this profession. The research suggests that all members of the family disliked begging, but the decision about who is sent out to beg is closely related to power within the household. In this way men were best able to avoid this occupation of last resort.

NGO workers who took part in the research also observed a marked increase in begging amongst Roma and Egyptian communities following the fall of communism in the early 1990s, with some arguing that there was little or no begging during this time. This suggests that for many families begging is a relatively new survival mechanism and may be a response to a decline in social security and state sponsored job opportunities, rather than a 'tradition.'

Traditions of migration, particularly amongst the Roma community, can also contribute to poverty and begging. Families who move frequently between cities, often on a seasonal basis, find it more difficult to access basic services and regular employment, but once again it should be stressed that migration patterns may be based on economic necessity in the face of high levels of adult unemployment as much as a nomadic 'tradition'.

While not part of the scope of this study, there are clearly families, who face the same levels of discrimination, poverty and cultural pressures, and whose children do not beg. In other cases parental drug and alcohol abuse, particularly by fathers, is the most direct factor contributing to family poverty and forcing children into begging. However, the addictions themselves may well be linked to the frustration and stress associated with poverty and discrimination.

The legal framework

Albania has ratified ILO Conventions 138 on minimum ages for employment, 182 on the worst forms of child labour and 29 on forced labour.

In January 2008, the Government amended the Criminal Code to include the exploitation of children for begging as a separate criminal offence. This includes criminalising parents who exploit children for begging, labour and income-generating activities. To date, no cases have been pursued in the courts. Although many welcome this new provision, several NGOs have raised concerns about the degree to which parents will be criminalised, arguing that their imprisonment may not act in the best interest of the child. Terre des hommes reported that some police have also

questioned how the law might be applied and where they should refer the children they find begging on the streets.

Albanian law also contains provisions enabling the removal of parental responsibility if parents gravely abuse their children's rights, and to provide alternative care and protection for children in these circumstances. The removal of parental responsibility has also not been tested in relation to forced child begging. However, in addition to concerns about whether this would act in the best interest of the child, such a strategy may not be tenable given the scale of the problem suggested by this research.

Laws referring to broader strategies relating to child labour in general and social services provision are in reality applied in a patchy manner. For example, social services provision tends to focus on economic aid to families, rather than applying specific measures aimed at protecting children. The creation of Child Protection Units, initiated by NGOs and UN agencies and managed by municipal government in nine cities may go some way to alleviating this problem.

Evidence from two boys trafficked to Greece for begging included in this research suggests that in the past children's rights have not been respected and children who have been trafficked for the purposes of begging have been treated like criminals.

Conclusions and recommendations

Institutional discrimination against Roma and Egyptian communities, particularly in terms of their access to housing, employment and education, is a key factor in child begging among these minority groups. Other factors within these communities also contribute to the problem, such as poverty, early marriage, patriarchy, which assigns the least desirable jobs to women and children and high levels of migration. Child begging is propped up by the willingness of the majority Albanian population to give money to children.

All child beggars may be exposed to physical and sexual abuse and drugs. Those who are forced to beg through the use of violence, threats of violence or other forms of punishment suffer the gravest abuses, have less access to school and generally work longer hours than other child beggars.

Legal provisions in Albania offer some avenues for addressing forced child begging, particularly in relation to trafficking. However, such provision is limited and remains untested with regards to parents forcing their children to beg. Any legal action against these groups would have to carefully assess the implications of criminalising parents and ensure that children's best interests take precedence at all times.

Other strategies have been aimed at helping child beggars, and include drop-in centres and informal education for boys and girls working on the streets, awareness-raising of the problems associated with begging, and work to reduce the discrimination faced by ethnic minorities in Albania. These have largely been NGO initiatives, although some, particularly awareness-raising campaigns, have received Government support.

Practical steps are needed to address the root causes of begging, particularly discrimination on the grounds of ethnicity and the poverty that is linked to this.

Assistance in this area was most frequently requested by children and parents during the research.

While the Government's anti-trafficking strategy is fairly comprehensive in nature, their strategy on the Roma has been criticised for being too vague in its commitments and offering too little in the way of State support for the Roma and provisions for integrating Roma children into 'normal' life in Albania. Some work is also being done with local authorities to ensure that minority groups have better access to social service provision, education and other basic services. Again, the Government strategy on the Roma can be criticised for offering too little in the way of practical and effective efforts to address the extreme discrimination faced by this group.

Anti-Slavery International and Terre des hommes' Mission in Albania urge the Government of Albania to:

- Provide an effective child protection safety net, with staff fully trained and experienced in all areas of child protection. It should play a role in preventing and protecting children from exploitation, by offering refuge and rehabilitation for children who have been rescued from the streets and/or referred by personnel in education, healthcare or social services or the police authorities. Officials who refer these children must be fully trained in how to identify and handle such cases sensitively.
- Assist children who work on the streets to overcome barriers to education and help them to re-enter the school system, by:
 - Providing short-term, informal courses to enable children to learn basic skills and get used to the structure of schooling before they enter formal schools.
 - Working with local authorities to reduce discrimination in schools.
 - Teaching children life-skills and using school as an opportunity to explore pertinent subjects in children's lives such as trafficking and early marriage.
 - Work with parents to encourage more supportive attitudes towards education, and to get them to send older girls to school in spite of their concerns about propriety.
 - Providing alternatives to formal education for older children who have missed many years of school.
- Introduce and/or support programmes to reduce the poverty and inequality faced by Roma and Egyptian communities via enhancing skills and job opportunities and to provide credit for income-generating activities.
- After analysing the likely effects to the children involved, consider reducing the 'demand' for child begging through discouraging people from giving to children who beg. The public should be offered alternative ways to donate to those in need.