

Albania

Information provided further the statement by the Lanzarote Committee Chair and Vice-Chairperson on stepping up protection of children against sexual exploitation and abuse in times of the COVID-19 pandemic

As a result of the situation created by COVID-19, the government of Albania declared the state of natural disaster starting from 24th of March until 23th of June 2020. Following this decision, the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare approved the Instruction No. 253, dated 10.04.2020 “On the management of cases of children in need of protection during the period of natural disaster due to the epidemic caused by COVID-19”.

This Instruction aims to determine the concrete procedures and actions of child protection structures for the management of cases of children in need of protection during the period of COVID-19.

According to the Instruction, Child Protection Workers in municipalities or administrative units cooperate actively with health workers in order to support, raise awareness and inform children and their families about the situation created by the COVID-19 pandemic, about the preventive measures, signs and symptoms to identify the disease, communicate the emergency numbers, as well as give information on how they can access the services in the territory where they live. The document instructs the Child Protection Workers to assist and support children in need and their families through the telephone or other ways of distance communication. They must adhere to strict COVID-19 protocols, such as social distancing, the use of protective equipment, and other hygienic and sanitary measures.

Child protection structures are instructed to pay special attention to the treatment of the following cases:

- children without parental care, who are separated from their parents or legal guardians due to illness, including children in isolation and emergency centres, treatment centres or alternative care;
- children whose parents or legal guardians are ill, quarantined, hospitalized or have died, as a result of COVID-19;
- children in street situation;
- children isolated at home who do not have access to services, such as children with disabilities and children with chronic disease;
- children affected by COVID-19 disease, who may not be accepted by their families and/or the community;
- children whose family members are affected by COVID-19 and thus cannot care for the child;
- children abused and neglected by their family members, who are even more at risk due to the isolation measures;
- migrant or asylum-seeking unaccompanied children who have been separated from their parents

The State Agency for the Rights and Protection of the Child (SARPC) has shared and instructed child protection structures in local level all over Albania to properly understand and implement the Instruction.

The General Directorate of State Police has prepared and sent to all local police structures, a Letter of Request No. 2192, dated 25.03.2020 "*On the maximum assessment and increase of attention to cases of domestic violence, during the time of restriction of movement and the implementation of measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19*", which provides for measures to be taken in cases where victims of violence are minors and requests the immediate notification of the Child Protection Worker.

Based on several identified cases of child sexual abuse, the State Police has delivered to its local structures the Letter of Request no. 2930, dated 13.05.2020 "*On the correct legal and professional treatment of cases of violence involving minors*", in order to prevent refusal or unnecessary delay regarding complaints of citizens, as well as treating cases (criminal offences) in which minors are involved, with priority and professionalism. The heads of local police have been instructed to pay special attention to criminal cases or events involving children (victims, witnesses or suspected perpetrators), in order to allow for a correct legal treatment of the child, to respect the rights of child, as well as taking the necessary measures to safeguard child in need of protection.

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Responses to specific questions by the Bureau of the Lanzarote Committee on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the protection of children from sexual exploitation and sexual abuse

- 1. To what extent, if at all, has the threat of child sexual abuse/exploitation changed due to COVID-19? If so:**
 - Please tell us about whether the level of risk has increased/decreased/remained the same and if possible specify this with regard to the various types of sexual offences against children (Articles 18-23 of the Convention);**
 - You may also wish to indicate any emerging trends relating to child sexual abuse/exploitation, as the result of COVID-19, and point at measures taken to address them.**

No information received.

2. Did lockdown cause child sexual abuse/exploitation cases (identified/reported) to increase, decrease or stay the same? Please submit data (number of victims/offenders) and highlight what you think may explain the trend.

Monitoring the situation of child protection and the issues of sexual abuse

Pursuant to Law No. 18/2017 "On the Rights and Protection of the Child", the Child Protection Units (CPU) submit a periodic report to the State Agency for the Rights and Protection of the Child (SARPC) of the statistical data regarding managed cases of children in need for protection in the territory of the municipality and its administrative units.

29 cases of sexual abuse of children have been reported throughout the year 2019, which shows an increase in the number of cases of sexual abuse of children for this year compared to the year 2018, during which there were reported 12 cases in total.

Whereas during January - March 2020, 17 cases of sexual abuse of children have been reported which means there is an increase in awareness of reporting cases of sexual abuse of children.

During the quarantine period, 4 cases of sexual abuse of children have been reported, 2 of which were made public by the media, were reported to the SARPCH and were managed by the Child Protection Unit.

According to the reports of the Albanian National Child Helpline ALO 116 111, during the period March 2020 - May 2020, 60 sites with harmful and illegal content for children have been reported. All these sites have been investigated and have been shut down. 1 site contained child pornography and 20 sites were about child cyberbullying.

The National Authority for Electronic Certification has launched a new Online Portal where responsible institutions report sites with illegal and/or inappropriate content, that may be blocked by this Authority.

According to State Police, during the pandemic situation, there was an increase in number of reports of videos with images containing child pornography published on social networks, mainly on Facebook. These videos were uploaded on sites and profiles created by foreign citizens and published by foreign IPs. The sites have been shut down, but they have been also accessible by Albanian IPs.

Until now, no new trends/modes of action have been identified during Covid-19 pandemic, in regards of Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE). The number of internet users and the time spent by children on the internet has increased, but currently State Police do not have platforms or programs to identify the online behaviour of violators, either on the most frequently used social platforms, or their activity on Clearnet and Darknet.

Regarding child trafficking offences statistical data for the period from 01 March - May 2020 shows that there 4 referred cases with 4 perpetrators and for the same period 01 March - May 2019 there was reported only 1 case with 1 perpetrator regarding the criminal offense "Child trafficking".

Also, in the framework of the International Day of Missing Children on 25 May 2020, the State Police became part of the awareness campaign "DontBeAnEasyCatch", organized by the Centre for the Fight against Cybercrime, Europol. A video produced in Albanian was published on the social network of the state police, aimed to raise awareness among children over the age of 10 who use the Internet. The messages that were broadcasted through the publication were: "Careful!!! Not everyone who contacts you online is as they present themselves to you! Do not share your personal data and photos online with strangers! If you fall victim to such a circumstance, talk to people you trust or contact the State Police!"

Link to the video: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?t=8&v=279131809909220>

- 3. Please also tell us whether and how general child safeguarding measures were, or are likely to be, affected by measures taken by governments in response to COVID-19. In addition, highlight any additional, specific measures put in place during lockdown to ensure reporting by victims of child sexual abuse/exploitation as well as to support and assist them, and whether these measures will be maintained even when the lockdown is lifted.**

Services

Municipalities, in cooperation with the State Social Service, has identified emergency services for the protection of children, as well as any other services for the protection of children during the situation of the epidemic caused by COVID-19. There are 2 national emergency centres that provide services to children.

Cases of children (and parents) in need of psychological support are directed to the relevant services, such as:

- a) The Ministry of Health and Social Protection has published on its website the newest free psychological service for all citizens, for children and any person in need of such support during the pandemic through the green line 0884040 every day from 8:00-22:00;
- b) The Albanian National Child Helpline ALO 116 111– by calling the toll-free number 116 111;
- c) Online counselling on www.nukjevetëm.al. The platform offers counselling via messages or individual therapy via chat service;
- d) Online counselling by the psychologists of the respective school of the children.
- e) The service offered by the Order of Psychologist, "Albanian psychologists online ", which has published on its official website the lists of psychologists available to respond to citizens. (<https://arsimi.gov.al/kontakto-psikologun/>)

Ministry of Health and Social Welfare opened the first Centre for the treatment of victims of sexual violence in Tirana "Lilium Centre" which will provide integrated services for victims of sexual violence. "Lilium Centre" operates based on certified standards and will be able to provide services to all victims of sexual violence, including cases of children, without discrimination and in complete anonymity. The Ministry of Health and Social Protection will set up such models which provide multidisciplinary services to victims of sexual violence across the country.

Online meetings for training and support during COVID-19 period

- Periodic online weekly meetings were held between the SARPC, UNICEF and Child Protection Workers during the pandemic period. In these meetings, the child protection workers have been given technical support regarding cases identified and procedures to be followed. Brochures with practical instructions on how to cope with the pandemic situation have been distributed.
- On 8th of May, the SARPC, in cooperation with the Organization Children's Human Rights Centre of Albania and the Albanian National Child Helpline ALO 116 11, participated in the workshop conducted by ISIGURT.al where it was found that 49% of online cases are addressed to the State Agency for the Rights and Protection of the Child, in order to take measures to protect children from harmful content online and to strengthen the referral mechanism.
- On 8th of May a webinar was held between SARPC and OSCE on the situation created by COVID19, emphasizing the role of the State Agency as the main partner of the OSCE Presence in the fight against trafficking and exploitation of children even during the state of natural disaster caused by the coronavirus, as well as during the next tourist season.
- On 27th of May, an online training "Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Situation" started, which aims to equip first-line professionals with the knowledge and tools to protect and improve the mental health and psychosocial well-being of individuals during an emergency situation. It will be a 8 weeks training with the involvement of health professionals and child protection workers. The training will be delivered by WHO organization with the support of UNICEF Albania. One of the training sessions will address the topic: Sexual and gender-based violence during humanitarian emergencies.
- The meeting of the group of parliamentarians "Friends of children" was held on online on 27th of May. The ministers, parliamentarians, SARPC, the People's Advocate (Ombudsman) and representatives of UNICEF were part of the meeting. The purpose was for parties to report on the situation of children during the pandemic period and the measures that had been taken to support children of families in need.

Media presence

During the COVID-19 period, the media has been an important partner. The Chair of the State Agency for the Rights and Protection of the Child has been a guest in several shows and has raised awareness on the importance of vigilance and the denunciation of cases of sexual abuse of children in the family or in the circle of trust.

<https://abcnews.al/alma-tandili-ne-abc-news-nuk-duhen-justifikuar-abuzimet-seksuale-viktimat-kalojne-ne-shok-emocional/?fbclid=IwAR3kaMU6NPZvx96vyWJoDRwecuvavrRP1SXoC86pHrL16AUo30qoVAcj5Fw>

<http://www.tvt.al/2020/04/29/karantina-7-denoncime-t-f-mij-ve-p-r-dhun-n-familje-video?fbclid=IèAR10XÈU Do oAqRcvE83AdÈTbNkZqq9D6nUÈMZPel6BqCXxGaiBov61lbsk>

- 4. Finally, please tell us whether children have been duly listened to on decision-making concerning their protection against sexual abuse/exploitation during this period. Please also tell us whether and how children will be involved in decision-making on or assessing the impact of COVID-19 measures in the future.**

No information received.

APPENDIX

MINISTRY OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL PROTECTION

MINISTER

No. of Protocol 1801

Date, 10.04.2020

DIRECTIVE

No. 253, Date 10.04.2020

“ON THE MANAGEMENT OF CASES OF CHILDREN IN NEED OF PROTECTION DURING THE PERIOD OF THE NATURAL DISASTER AS A RESULT OF COVID-19”

Pursuant to Article 100 (5) of the Constitution of the Republic of Albania, Article 42 (2) and Article 53 of the law no. 18/2017 “On the rights and protection of children”, to Article 24 of the law no. 121/2016 “On social care services in the Republic of Albania”, pursuant to Paragraph 6.1 of the DCM no. 243, dated 24.03.2020 "On the declaration of the state of natural disaster", pursuant to the DCM no. 578, dated 03.10.2018 "On referral and case management procedures, drafting and content of the individual protection plan, financing the costs for its implementation, as well as the implementation of protection measures",

THE MINISTER INSTRUCTS:

CHAPTER I

GENERAL PROVISIONS

1. The purpose of this Directive is to determine the specific procedures and actions of child protection structures regarding the management of cases of children in need of protection, during the period of natural disaster as a result of the pandemic caused by COVID-19.
2. Child Protection Structures support, raise awareness and inform children and their families about the situation created by the COVID-19 pandemic, about the preventive measures, signs and symptoms to identify the disease, referral routes to health structures, communicate the emergency numbers, as well as give information on how they can access the services provided, in the territory where they live.
3. In order to carry out the tasks defined in paragraph 2, Child Protection Structures assist and support the groups that are vulnerable to COVID-19, through the telephone or other ways of distance communication. Child Protection Workers must adhere to strict COVID-19 protocols, such as social distancing, the use of protective equipment, and other hygienic and sanitary measures.

4. Child Protection Structures ensure that children receive the necessary information regarding COVID-19, through appropriate means of communication, in accordance with their development, age, gender, culture and family situation.

5. Child Protection Workers should be provided with the necessary individual protection equipment, should be provided by the police with authorization to drive and move at any time, and should be provided with the necessary logistics to allow for home visits.

CHAPTER II

REFERRING CASES TO HEALTH, SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES

1. Child Protection Workers in municipalities or administrative units, cooperate with health structures and operational structures of the civil protection system, to update information regarding the identification and treatment of suspected cases of COVID-19 in their territory.

2. Child Protection Workers in municipalities or administrative units, cooperate actively with health workers and school psychologists regarding referral of cases of children in need of protection, as well as cases of children without parental care due to the parent or legal guardian being hospitalized or a victim of COVID-19.

3. The Child Protection Worker in the municipality is obligated to support the child protection workers of the administrative unit regarding the management of cases of children in need of protection, as well as to inform them about the health, social and psychological services provided by state structures or civil society actors in their territory.

4. Child Protection Workers in municipalities or administrative units refer cases which require psychological support for the child, to the relevant services that offer psychological support at a distance such as:

- a) National Advice Line for Children ALO 116 111– by calling the toll-free number 116 111;
- b) Online consultation on the platform www.nukjevetem.al. The platform offers counselling via messaging, or individual therapy via chat service;
- c) Online counselling by the psychologists of the respective school of the children. Child Protection Workers must have the phone numbers of school psychologists in the respective unit where they operate;
- c) The service offered by the Order of Psychologist, "Albanian psychologists online", which has published on its official website the lists of psychologists available to respond to citizens.

CHAPTER III

MANAGEMENT OF CASES OF CHILDREN IN NEED OF PROTECTION DURING THE PERIOD OF NATURAL DISASTER

1. The Child Protection Worker in the municipality or administrative unit, manages new cases of children in need of protection in accordance with the rules and procedures set out in the Law 18/2017 "On the rights and protection of the child" and the DCM No. 578, dated 03.10.2018 "On referral and case management procedures, drafting and content of the individual protection plan, financing the costs for its implementation, as well as the implementation of protection measures", as follows:

- a) low-risk cases of children in need protection will be managed by telephone;
- b) in cases with medium and high risk of children in need of protection, when there is no indication for COVID-19 in the family or community, the child protection worker carries out family visits in compliance with the strict protocols for COVID-19, such as social distancing, use of protective equipment and other hygienic and sanitary measures.
- c) in cases of children in need of protection with medium and high risk, when there is a confirmation of COVID-19 in the family or community, the child protection worker communicates by telephone to ensure that the child and the family are well. The child protection worker, must take measures to place the child in an alternative service by cooperating directly with the health and police structures, and by following the protocols already defined in the order of the Minister of Health.

2. According to the procedures defined in the Law 18/2017 "On the rights and protection of the child" and the DCM No. 578, dated 3.10.2018 "On referral and case management procedures, drafting and content of the individual protection plan, financing the costs for its implementation, as well as the implementation of protection measures", the child protection structures pay special attention to the treatment of the following cases:

- a) children without parental care, who are separated from their parents or legal guardians due to illness, including children in isolation and emergency centres, treatment centers or alternative care;
- b) children whose parents or legal guardians are ill, quarantined, hospitalized or have died, as a result of COVID-19;
- c) children in street situation;
- ç) children isolated at home who do not have access to services, such as children with disabilities and children with chronic disease;
- d) children affected by COVID-19 disease, who may not be accepted by their families and/or the community;
- dh) children whose family members are affected by COVID-19 and thus cannot care for the child;
- e) children abused and neglected by their family members, who are even more at risk due to the isolation measures;

ë) migrant or asylum-seeking unaccompanied children who have been separated from their parents;

3. For all the categories of cases of children in need of protection defined above, health structures have the legal obligation to report the cases they identify to the Child Protection Worker.

4. If the Child Protection Worker suspects they have any of the symptoms of the COVID-19 infection, they must not leave their home. In this case, the child protection worker immediately notifies via writing or electronic means their superior and the State Agency for the Rights and Protection of Children. The Director of Social Services in the municipality appoints another employee of the social services to manage cases of children in need of protection.

5. The Child Protection Workers review their existing folders of cases to ensure that the assessment of the level of risk is appropriate, during the period of natural disaster caused by COVID-19 pandemic and during the period of social distancing.

6. Meetings of the Inter sectoral Technical Group will not take place during the period of natural disaster. Throughout this period, the members of the Inter sectoral Technical Group will continue to communicate through alternative means of communication such as telephone, email and video call. The Child Protection Worker records the discussions and opinions of the group members and sends the meeting minutes to the members via email.

CHAPTER IV

PROTECTION MEASURES

1. During the period of natural disaster due to COVID-19 pandemic, the Child Protection Worker takes protection measures and the Director of Social Services in the municipality confirms these measures by email. These protection measures remain valid throughout the period during which the courts in the country have suspended their work and have not begun to review cases, or until another directive is issued or this directive is abrogated.

2. Municipalities, in cooperation with the State Social Service identify emergency services, as well as any other services necessary for the protection of the child during the epidemic situation caused by COVID-19. The list of emergency services and relevant contact numbers are communicated to all child protection workers in municipalities and administrative units. The State Agency for the Rights and Protection of the Child publishes on its official website the list of emergency services on national or regional level.

3. The State Agency for the Rights and Protection of the Child, with the support of civil society organizations, enables the establishment of one or more transit services for the protection of children during the epidemic period caused by COVID-19.

4. In case of a child in need of emergency protection (including cases of children without parental care because the parent or legal guardian has been hospitalized due to COVID-19 infection), the Child Protection Worker takes the emergency protection measure and refers the case to the emergency shelter service. In any case, prior to referral to the emergency housing service, the Child Protection Worker receives detailed information about the child and other family members regarding the possibility that the child or other family members may be infected with COVID-19.
5. During the management of the case for the implementation of the emergency protection measure and the measures for placing the child in alternative care, the Child Protection Workers contact the National Emergency Service to ensure safe transport of children to the Institution of Residential Social Care or the Emergency Service.
6. Institutions of Residential Social Care, take all measures to establish a specific space for quarantining children with signs of COVID-19 who are already within the institution, as well as for children who are placed in the institution under protection measures, up to the moment the test results are revealed. During the quarantine period, the child is supervised by health personnel and a social worker, who are present at all times to support the child and prevent the spread of COVID-19 infection. The child stays in quarantine as long as he/she is infected with COVID-19.
7. Children who are placed in alternative care, in an institution of residential social care as a result of a protection measure, are referred by the State Social Service to the Institute of Public Health, which enables testing for COVID-19 within 48 hours. The child stays in the special quarantine space before and during the test. In case the test results are positive, the child continues to stay in the special quarantine space created within the Institution of Residential Social Care. In case the test results are negative, the child may stay in common areas with the other children. Other health examinations are provided for the child, according to the procedures for placing children in residential institutions.
8. Children with disabilities, who are placed in alternative care, as a result of a protection measure, will be placed in Social Care Institutions which provide psycho-social services and specialized services specifically for these groups, respecting the procedures set out in paragraphs 3 and 6 of this Chapter.
9. The psycho-social service workers in the hospital centers provide psychological support to the children affected by COVID-19 infection, who are admitted to the hospital due to COVID-19, as well as decide if legal guardians are allowed to stay in the hospital with the children.

CHAPTER V

FINAL PROVISIONS

1. The State Agency for the Rights and Protection of the Child, the State Social Service, the Institute of Public Health and the Child Protection Structures on local level are in charge for the implementation of this Directive.
2. This Directive is valid until the end of the declared state of natural disaster as a result of COVID-19.

This Directive enters into force after publication in the Official Journal.

MINISTER

OGERTA MANASTIRLIU