

TRANSNATIONAL PROTECTION OF CHILDREN
The case of Albania and Greece
2000 – 2006

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EXTRACT

Introduction

Cross border child trafficking is a phenomenon that involves at least two countries. In the past ten years, traffickers of Albanian children have taken advantage of the specific political, economical, social and legal situation in Albania and of the demand existing abroad. Throughout these years, Albanian children have been exploited in Greece for different purposes, including sexual exploitation, begging, forced labor, criminal offences such as robbery, drug dealing, etc.

This paper would seek to summarise an upcoming¹ publication on the activities conducted under Transnational Action against Child Trafficking (TACT) project. The project implemented by an international child rights organisation (Terre des hommes-Tdh) and a Greek organisation (ARSIS) working with vulnerable people, has sought since 1999 to address trafficking of Albanian children to Greece for begging and child labor in the streets. The publication pays attention to the various inter-related causes behind this phenomenon both in Albania and Greece. It also demonstrates the evolution of the phenomenon due to the intervention of the project as complementary to the children's, communities' and both States' actions.

Albania-Greece: end of the '90s- beginning of '00s

The change of communist regime did not constitute an easy process for Albania. By the end of the '90s, the country was still going through a deep social and economical transformation. Many families were reduced to live in extreme poverty. The self-evident relations of the individual within the family, society and towards the State structures as existed in the past were strongly put into question. Most of the Albanian children found begging in the streets of Thessaloniki, Greece by the end of '90- beginning of '00, belonged to families living in extreme poverty and experiencing instability in the relations with the parents. The poverty and unemployment would make their parents hopeless about the future. They had lost trust in the state institutions, which as a matter of fact were very weak. On the other hand, the hopelessness would make the families eager to pursue what friends and relatives would propose as a solution. Moreover, due to Albania's long isolation and influence by the media, both the parents and the children would easily believe that more opportunities would be available for them once abroad, in particular in the neighbor countries of Greece and Italy. This situation would be abused by traffickers, in most of the cases friends, relatives or neighbors of the family, who would lure the parents and children and impose a debtor-creditor relationship.

In most of the cases the movement of the trafficked children to Greece would occur illegally across the mountains of the border areas. In Greece, the children would be placed at the traffic-lights, where they would beg, sell tissues or wash windscreens. Gradually they were told to move to the bars and restaurants. The children, very poorly dressed, would raise feelings of compassion

¹ The publication will be launched in Tirana, Albania on Thursday, 5th October 2006. The full text of the publication is available in pdf format at www.childtrafficking.com .

in the Greek citizens who would give money and buy the products sold by the children. This, together with the long hours made by the children would bring high profits to the traffickers. The children were “cheap”: accommodation and food were provided in minimum quantity and quality and in most of the cases no profits were shared with the parents in Albania. Moreover, there were no risks involved: the Albanian institutions were weak, while the Greek unaware and unprepared to address the phenomenon. The estimated numbers of children trafficked to Greece by the end of the ‘90s would reach the thousands².

The current situation

The first initiatives to address the phenomenon both in Albania and Greece were taken by civil society, including TACT project. The intervention in Albania sought to increase the awareness of the children and parents on the exploitation of the children abroad. Awareness raising activities were conducted also in Greece demonstrating to the Greek citizens the consequences of them giving money to the children. The project would instead recommend more effective ways of assisting the children, such as providing them with food and contacting the project.

In addition, efforts were also made towards the empowerment of the children and their parents, so that they could resist traffickers’ offers. In Greece, Albanian children identified trafficked were protected by the Greek NGOs, including ARSIS, the TACT implementer in Greece. With the assistance of ARSIS some of the trafficked children succeeded in liberating themselves from the traffickers and willingly returned to Albania. Their stories constituted evidence the authorities both in Albania and Greece could not ignore. The existence of trafficking was recognized and the State institutions commenced to intervene. The State intervention both in Albania and Greece has developed mainly along the criminalization of the phenomenon. Today child trafficking constitutes a severe crime in both countries and severe sentences are prescribed by law for perpetrators.

However, this criminal approach has proven that alone is insufficient to fight the phenomenon. At present, even though the trafficking of Albanian children to Greece has decreased, it still exists. The decrease in the number of Albanian children moved to Greece and exploited there by third parties has been accompanied by the increased number of children exploited within Albania or/and in Greece directly by their parents. The situation of the children exploited today within Albania by their own parents is similar to the situation of children in Greece some years ago. The children are poorly dressed and fed. They beg, sell small items in the streets or wash cars’ windows throughout the day. In Greece however, the image of the children and the forms of labor they are forced to conduct have changed. The children are clean, wearing tidy and warm clothes. Few of them beg (usually the newcomers), while the majority sells tissues or small items (e.g. small icons, pins and small toys/decorations for mobile phones) or even play a musical instrument. Their merchandise is determined according to the current “fashion” and their attitude towards the customers is professional.

An overwhelming majority of the Albanian children found in an exploitative situation throughout this period in both countries belong to the Roma and Jevg/Egyptian³ community. From the legal perspective, both communities are entitled to the same rights as other Albanian citizens.

² For detailed analysis see Pierre Philippe & Vincent Tournecueillert, “*The trafficking of Albanian children in Greece*”, Terre des hommes-Lausanne, 2003.

³ This community claims to derive from Egypt and refers to itself as “Egyptians”. However, this claim has not met general agreement and many still use the term “Jevgj” when referring to this community. In this text both terms will be used together when reference to this community is made.

However, they have historically been discriminated and the Albanian State has failed to support them to access the rights recognized on paper. Today, a large number of Roma and Jevg/Egyptian families suffer from low education, unemployment, lack of shelter and resources. While Albanian child protection environment is in general weak, children belonging to these communities have extreme difficulties to access the services available, also due to the fact that most of them are even unregistered as citizens. Because of the history of discrimination, the communities themselves have also developed an under-valuing tendency towards some important institutions for children, including birth registration and schooling.

In Greece as well, the protection environment remains weak not only for the Roma and Jevg/Egyptians children coming from Albania, but for foreigners in general. Legally migrating from Albania to Greece is in theory possible, but in practice the criteria set forth by the law are extremely difficult to fulfill. Many Albanian children and their parents still consider Greece as an opportunity to improve their lives and take the risks of crossing the border illegally. Once there, however, due to their status as foreigners lacking a residence permit, the parents often fail to find a job or become exploited by the employers. Thus, the incomes earned by the children become necessary. Very often, both in Greece and Albania begging and child labor in the streets is better paid than the jobs of the parents. In other cases, child labor is the easy solution, conveniently preferred by unstable parents (facing alcoholism, health problems, use of violence, practices of polygamy, abandonment of family, etc, as mentioned above), or by single mothers.

TACT Intervention: the child as a social actor.

The joint intervention of Tdh and ARSIS in the TACT project is based on the principle of “the child as a social actor”, in line also with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. According to this approach, **every child should have the freedom to take decisions about his or her future. The overall objective of the project is to reinforce the child’s role in making the right decision.** The same objective is pursued by TACT project towards the family of the child, since the situation and position of the family strongly influences the child.

In achieving this, **the establishment of a relation based on trust between the child and the family on one side and the project on the other is a must.** Only when such trust exists, the social workers succeed to understand the real motivation behind the actions of the child and the family. Then the project can work on assisting the child and the family to achieve the same aim, but in a safer way. The school attendance by the child is considered by the project, both in Albania and Greece, as a very important tool not only in preventing the children from being exposed to the risks of exploitation and trafficking, but also in their further empowerment and development.

The project also addresses the society/community of the child, aiming at increasing the opportunities offered to the child and his/her family within this society/community. This aspect includes a large range of activities, such as awareness raising, assistance to communities (particularly Roma and Jevg/Egyptian) and exchange with them on the role and position of the child. The project has particularly invested in advocacy aiming at the improvement of legislation, policies and their implementation. **In its advocacy, the project has sought to address child trafficking as a transnational phenomenon requiring a strong collaboration between the authorities of both countries having at heart the best interest of the child.** Moreover, the root causes of the trafficking phenomenon have been targeted. Thus, the areas covered by the project’s advocacy are wide and include social legislation and policies, family law, anti-discrimination and foreigner’s legislation (in Greece), etc.

It should also be pointed out that the project has sought to intervene only when necessary - in absence or inadequate actions by the community and State institutions - and always complementary to them. **In particular, TACT level of intervention aiming at the empowerment of the child and opportunities offered to her or him within the community has depended throughout these years on the level of intervention to the same aim by the concerned community and State institutions.** In the past, when the intervention by the State was almost inexistent, the project was directly implementing activities of awareness raising, prevention, identification, protection, and durable solution for the trafficked children. In this aspect, the transnational dimension of the project, guaranteed by the collaboration between Tdh and ARSIS was crucial. It facilitated the establishment of the trust between the child and the project, ensured a follow-up of the child and cross-checking of the information between both countries. This on its side led to a better understanding of the situation of the child and to efficiency in the intervention to assist him or her.

Today, in particular in Albania, initiatives are undertaken by the State institutions towards children's empowerment in accordance with the principles laid down in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Thus, the current focus of the project is to assist such initiatives and the establishment of a comprehensive, non-discriminatory child protection environment. In this respect the project is working at the local level with institutions such as State Social Services (aiming to establish child protection offices at the local level), schools (seeking the enhancement of the school's protection role, in particular towards vulnerable children who are at a higher risk of trafficking and exploitation), police (enhancing their understanding of a child rights approach) etc. In addition to working individually with these institutions, it is crucial to bring them working in a net, to ensure thereby the referral of cases and comprehensive protection of the children referred.

While the initiatives undertaken by the State on child protection are substantially increasing, the initiatives coming by the communities remain limited in Albania. **Thus the project is focused on promoting and supporting child protection initiatives coming from the communities, in particular the vulnerable Roma and Jevg/Egyptian communities.** Efforts are also directed towards the economical empowerment of the families from these communities to avoid the parents resorting to child labor and trafficking. Youth employment opportunities are also explored by children aged 16-18 with the assistance of the project.

In Greece however more challenges are faced for a comprehensive child protection environment since the children needing assistance are foreigners, most of them without a valid residence title in Greece. The project in Greece would continue to provide direct assistance to the Albanian children and their families. As until present, such assistance would consist of in kind support, psychosocial support by specialised psychologists and social workers and assistance in administrative procedures (passport issuing/renewal, birth registration, health insurance, access to state grants), as well as in the procedures for issuing or renewal for residence permits in Greece. Additionally support will continue to be available in matters concerning the health care of children, like vaccines and the general health of children. Also advices on family programming are given, concerning the hygiene conditions at home, the personal hygiene and nutrition of children, etc. Basic aim of the team in Greece is the child's education: enrollment of children at school, follow up of their progress and support classes. **Once again also in Greece, the aim of the project is to improve the family environment at the benefit of the children.**

For children found unaccompanied and exploited by the third parties, ARSIS notifies immediately the anti-trafficking authorities in Greece. In cooperation with them, it seeks to

enable the withdrawal of the child from the exploitative situation and shelter him or her in safe place. The child is also assisted in re-establishing the contacts with the family in Albania and encouraged to express his or her views about the future. These views together with the assessment of the family and environment back in Albania are presented by the project to the Greek authorities, who then take the decision on the future of the child. Also because of the project intervention, the Greek authorities are at present obligated to decide on the future of a trafficking victim only after a careful assessment of the potential threat and opportunities facing the child upon return.

However, this obligation applies only in cases when the child is identified as a victim of trafficking. The identification remains problematic, since very often only the police come in contact with the children and they classify them simply as illegal immigrants. In such cases, the detention and deportation of the children is not banned and the police resort to these procedures in large scale. **TACT project would continue to advocate for banning detention and deportation of children as a repressive measure for their illegal entry in Greece, not only in order to improve the identification of children victims of trafficking in Greece, but also because they present especially child-unfriendly procedures.**

TACT model of intervention has proved that transnational collaboration to the benefit of the children is successful. The signing of the Bilateral Agreement between Greece and Albania on the protection and assistance of children victims of trafficking on 27th February 2006 has been welcomed by TACT as an important step forward. By publishing extensively on its model of action, its adaptation to the evolution of the phenomenon and the challenges faced, TACT seeks the enhancement of transnational collaboration between Albanian and Greek institutions which remain the ultimate responsible to guarantee the prevention of trafficking and the protection of the victims.

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