

Report study visit to Albania: SRC Project

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Introduction

In the context of the **Strengthening Capacities for Return and Reintegration Counselling through CSOs** (SRC) project, Caritas Albania and Caritas International Belgium organised a study visit to Albania from December 2nd to December 6th. The primary objective of this visit was to gain an in-depth understanding of how Caritas Albania collaborates with national government bodies to implement its reintegration programs. By observing on-the-ground projects and gathering insights from local stakeholders, participants aimed to identify best practices and strengthen reintegration support models.

The study visit included a diverse program. First, participants visited the municipality of Shkodra in northern Albania to explore the collaboration between Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and local institutions. Additionally, a site visit was conducted to the UNHCR border project and the reception center in Kapshtica. This part of the program offered insights into the services Caritas Albania provides for vulnerable groups, particularly unaccompanied minors, as well as the referral systems in place to ensure their protection and care, including coordination with Peace Village in Shkodra.

The visit had three core objectives. Firstly, it aimed to observe and identify effective practices in CSO-government collaboration to strengthen reintegration models and share these learnings with SRC partner organizations. Secondly, it sought to facilitate connections between EU-based CSOs in Bulgaria, Croatia, and Slovenia and non-EU CSOs in Albania, Kosovo, and Moldova. Lastly, the visit aimed to establish links with local representatives, fostering deeper collaboration to address the complex challenges of reintegration and migration.



Round table in Shkoder

Best Practices of Collaboration Between Civil Society Organizations and State Institutions in Reintegration Programs

The first panel of the day brought together key stakeholders from local institutions and CSOs in Shkoder to share experiences and strategies in supporting returnees, especially vulnerable individuals such as minors. The session analyzed the collaboration between public institutions and CSOs, highlighting successes, challenges, and areas for improvement to ensure sustainable reintegration.

Ms. **Ariela Mitri** and **Lorela Marku**, Caritas Albania, welcomed the participants and presented the objectives of the study visit.

Ms. **Juljana Reso**, Director of Caritas Albania, opened the session by emphasizing the organisation's mission to empower individuals in need. Caritas Albania focuses on fostering cooperation between civil society organizations and public institutions to address irregular migration and create better conditions for returnees. Ms. Reso stressed the importance of supporting returnees as they adapt to the realities of life in Albania, advocating for the sharing of expertise and analysis of best practices to strengthen cooperation.

Ms. **Daniela Jakoja**, Regional Social Service Director in Shkoder, provided a detailed account of the work done to support vulnerable populations, including minors who have returned after migrating to European Union countries. Until 2017, needs assessments for these minors were conducted by the Regional Directorate, after which the responsibility was transferred to CSOs. Ms. Jakoja highlighted the challenges faced in assessing family conditions, particularly economic hardships, which often discouraged families from welcoming back their children. The directorate works closely with institutions such as the police to guide minors into education and employment programs, ensuring their smooth reintegration. Awareness campaigns conducted each October focus on discouraging illegal migration and educating youth about opportunities for continuing education and employment in Albania. One notable case she shared involved an eight-year-old girl in difficult circumstances due to her parents' divorce. Through inter-institutional cooperation with child protection units, police, and social services, the girl was reunited with her mother under improved living conditions, effectively preventing a potential trafficking risk.

Ms. **Arlinda Kruja**, Social Service Director at the Municipality of Shkoder, described the municipality's collaboration with Caritas and other organizations in providing various social services. These include pre-social services, psychosocial support, parenting programs, and community empowerment initiatives. She underscored the municipality's focus on child protection and community-based approaches to empower families and vulnerable individuals.

Ms. **Juljana Cepi** from the Child Protection Unit of Shkoder Municipality elaborated on the specific challenges faced in addressing the needs of migrant minors who cross borders illegally. She highlighted the need for enhanced cooperation between public institutions and CSOs, particularly with the border police and Caritas, to ensure minors receive proper care. A key initiative in this regard is the Peace Village, managed by Caritas Shkoder, which provides accommodation, food, healthcare, and psychosocial support to minors. Ms. Cepi noted that

Albania remains a transit country, with 80% of minors seeking to continue to other European countries where they have family. Despite this, the municipality struggles to plan funds for these services due to their unpredictable nature, relying heavily on Caritas to fill the gaps. Translators and specialized services for non-Albanian minors were identified as urgent needs, as these minors often come from countries like Egypt. The cooperation between child protection units, the Ministry of Interior, and CSOs remains critical in managing the needs of vulnerable minors effectively.

Father Gjovalin Simoni, Director of Caritas Shkoder, addressed the broader issue of youth migration, particularly in northern Albania. He explained that many young people leave Albania in search of better opportunities for education, employment, and healthcare. This migration, he noted, is driven by a lack of opportunities at home. Father Simoni emphasized the importance of developing good practices to retain youth, including the creation of employment opportunities and initiatives to improve local conditions.

Mr. **Marjan Lukani**, representing Arka Youth Center, shared the organization's work in employment, professional training, and social activities for returnees. Arka Youth Center collaborates with Caritas to help returnees secure employment and accommodation. Mr. Lukani also discussed a recent project that investigates the root causes of migration from Albania. The organization, in collaboration with Caritas Albania and the Red Cross, provides medical and social assistance to vulnerable individuals. He announced plans for an upcoming conference to discuss immigration challenges and develop an action plan in partnership with authorities.

During the **Q&A session**, several critical issues were raised. Panellists acknowledged that many reintegration programs are project-based, relying heavily on donor funding. This reliance creates challenges for sustainability, as services often cease when projects end. While Shkoder benefits from a strong presence of CSOs, other regions lack similar support structures. Migration remains a pressing concern, particularly in northern Albania, where poverty, inadequate education, and poor healthcare systems push families to send their children abroad.

A notable concern was the lack of structural support from national institutions. While CSOs and local governments play a significant role in delivering services, the Albanian government must invest in long-term, sustainable solutions. Legal frameworks are in place, but their implementation remains inconsistent, leaving families without adequate support. Additionally, European stakeholders were urged to recognize the importance of reintegration programs and provide continued support for Albania, as families require protection and dignified opportunities to return home.

The director of Caritas Albania expressed it poignantly: **Civil society organizations (CSOs) serve as the dignified opposition to the government.** It is vital that we ensure governments hear our voices and that we continue to highlight the pressing issues that need attention. We must foster collaboration, share our expertise, and address the challenges of the reality we are living in.

Testimonials returnees

The Round Table continued with testimonials from beneficiaries of reintegration programs, providing insights into the challenges returnees face and the support they receive.

The first testimonial was from a 56-year-old man who had sought asylum in Belgium. His request was rejected, but he was referred to Caritas Belgium, where he received reintegration counselling. Caritas Belgium connected him to Caritas Albania to establish a reintegration plan. Upon returning to Albania, he faced significant difficulties reintegrating, particularly due to his age. He explained that employment opportunities in Albania are predominantly targeted at younger people, leaving older individuals at a disadvantage. Although Caritas Belgium provided initial reintegration support, including medical assistance for his diabetes, he struggled to navigate bureaucracy in Shkoder. The returnee highlighted the need for more comprehensive support, particularly regarding employment opportunities and access to medical care.

The second testimonial came from a woman who emigrated to Belgium with her three children. While she was warmly welcomed there, her children struggled to adapt, feeling stressed. This led her to return to Albania. Upon her return, she received support from Caritas Albania, which facilitated her reintegration process. The assistance enabled her children to resume their education, and she found employment in a furniture workshop. With the financial support she received, she was able to purchase essential household items, which significantly improved her family's living conditions. When asked how she learned about Caritas support, she explained that someone at a reception center in Belgium had informed her about the available services. Her experience highlights how reintegration programs can successfully support returnees by addressing both employment and family needs.

The third testimonial featured another woman who stayed in France for 14 months as an asylum seeker due to health-related reasons. She was forcibly returned to Albania by the French police, an experience that she described as deeply distressing. Upon her return, she was referred to Caritas services by a women's center. Through Caritas, she enrolled in a professional manicure course as part of a project aimed at youth employment. This regional project, which includes collaboration with Kosovo and Northern Macedonia, focuses on equipping young returnees with soft skills such as communication, CV building, and other job-readiness training. The woman's main priority was employment, which motivated her to pursue the professional course as a pathway to entering the labor market.

During the following Q&A discussion, representatives acknowledged the varying challenges faced by different demographic groups. For example, older individuals struggle to find employment in Albania unless there is a specific need, whereas programs and initiatives are often more focused on youth, given that young people constitute the largest group emigrating from the country. Caritas Albania emphasized that coordination with other CSOs is essential to provide tailored support to returnees. Caritas Albania offers individualized reintegration plans designed in collaboration with the beneficiaries. Building trust is central in the approach, as reintegration counsellors work on the front lines, maintaining continuous communication with returnees and ensuring their needs are addressed. Caritas Albania also emphasized the

importance of empowering beneficiaries by giving them ownership of their reintegration process. A key point raised was the sustainability of reintegration programs, which goes beyond immediate assistance. The coordination and collaboration between CSOs, public institutions, and returnees remain vital in addressing the complex challenges of reintegration and ensuring meaningful, sustainable outcomes.

Border visit Kapshtica: UNHCR – Caritas Albania Border project

Caritas Albania and UNHCR have been working to address the challenges faced by people crossing Albania's borders, particularly focusing on immediate protection and referrals for vulnerable groups, including unaccompanied children. This cooperation has played a significant role in safeguarding rights and providing services on the ground. Despite a significant 66% decrease in the total number of arrivals compared to the previous year, there has been a concerning increase in the number of unaccompanied children, with approximately 400 new arrivals, including 38 unaccompanied minors.

The border police remain the primary authority overseeing migration flows, and services provided through Caritas Albania's partnerships are set to terminate in the following year. One of the central facilities in this initiative is the **Kapshtica Reception Center**, which focuses on vulnerable cases and includes critical support services, such as translation, particularly for Arabic-speaking individuals, and cultural mediation.

Caritas Albania has been actively supporting border police since 2015 when migration began to emerge as a new challenge for Albania. At the onset, local institutions were unprepared for the influx of migrants, most of whom were in transit to other countries, while only a few sought asylum and remained in Albania. Over the years, Caritas Albania's work has evolved to reinforce cooperation between state institutions, other CSOs, and local authorities, while also strengthening institutional capacities. A particular focus has been on unaccompanied minors, a group often overlooked at the beginning of this migration wave. Caritas Albania has worked primarily near the borders with North Macedonia and Greece, where migrants typically enter from Turkey via land or sea routes through Izmir.

The majority of migrants originate from Syria, Egypt, Somalia, and Afghanistan. Notably, a large percentage of migrants from Egypt are unaccompanied minors, accounting for approximately 15% of the flow. Caritas Albania, in cooperation with border police, identifies vulnerable cases, such as unaccompanied children, women at risk, and individuals with medical needs. Upon identification, Caritas staff follow up on key details, including the migrant's country of origin, age, education level, and their route to Albania.

However, several challenges remain in this project. These include the increasing number of unaccompanied children, the lack of adequate accommodation facilities for individuals with specific needs, and gaps in the provision of services for women and medical cases. The short duration of stays—limited to 10 hours in the reception center—makes it difficult to identify and address cases of potential trafficking. Additionally, there are persistent language barriers due to a shortage of Bengali and Somali translators. The border police often lack the necessary capacity to provide comprehensive information to migrants about their rights and obligations,

leaving Caritas Albania to fill this gap. Seasonal issues, such as damaged water networks in UNHCR camps during freezing winter temperatures, further complicate conditions for migrants.

Despite these challenges, Caritas Albania has achieved significant progress in the border project. Their efforts include providing migrants with crucial information on their rights, offering real-time assistance regardless of the migrants' length of stay, and identifying and referring vulnerable individuals for additional services. Caritas staff also play an essential role in profiling cases, coordinating with local and regional institutions—including border police, UNHCR, the Ombudsman, municipalities, and hospitals—and ensuring that migrants receive medical care facilitated by the presence of doctors on-site. Moreover, the inclusion of female cultural mediators and translators has proven vital for building trust and enhancing communication, particularly with women, girls, and children.

The identification of vulnerable groups follows a structured process. Caritas Albania uses a vulnerability assessment checklist to determine specific needs, with clear priority given to groups such as unaccompanied children, women, individuals with medical needs, the elderly, and people with disabilities. For unaccompanied minors, self-declaration is a key part of the process, as proving identity without documentation remains challenging. Upon self-declaration, children are treated as minors, and in Tirana, an emergency center exists exclusively for unaccompanied minors.

Despite Albania's status as a transit country, there are clear legal processes for migrants who arrive without documents but do not seek asylum. In such cases, individuals are interviewed and issued an order to leave the country. If they fail to comply and are subsequently identified again, they are sent to a closed center near Tirana. Although, in theory, these individuals should be returned to their country of origin, this rarely happens in practice.

The **Border Project** highlights both successes and ongoing gaps in Albania's migration management system. Caritas Albania's collaboration with UNHCR and state institutions has been instrumental in addressing immediate needs, particularly for vulnerable groups, while building capacity and reinforcing inter-institutional cooperation. Nonetheless, the short duration of stay, lack of infrastructure, and resource limitations remain persistent challenges that require further attention and sustainable solutions to ensure effective protection and reintegration for migrants.



Visit of the Border project in Kapshtica

Round table: Collaboration between state institutions and CSOs in particular Caritas Albania

On Thursday, December 5th, a round table discussion was held in Bilisht (Devoll Municipality) to highlight the collaboration between state institutions and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), with a focus on Caritas Albania's role. The session welcomed key stakeholders, including representatives from the Devoll Municipality, the Child Protection Unit, and the local Health Directorate.

Mr. **Eduard Duro**, Mayor of Devoll, emphasized the vital role of Caritas Albania in supporting the municipality, particularly as a border town where migrants first enter Albania. Mayor Duro acknowledged that managing the influx of migrants, particularly vulnerable groups, would be nearly impossible without the support of CSOs like Caritas Albania.

Ms. **Marilda Bejleri** from the Child Protection Unit provided an overview of the challenges faced in the municipality, where a population of 40,000 residents and 30,800 families are significantly impacted by migratory movements. A key issue discussed was the increasing number of unaccompanied minors (UAM), with 40 cases reported this year, mostly from Egypt and Syria. These minors arrive famished, exhausted, and often with medical needs or psychological trauma due to their experiences in war zones. Ms. Bejleri highlighted Caritas Albania's support in covering immediate needs, including shelter, medical care, clothing, and transportation to the Peace Village in Shkodër. She noted that, while the municipality is responsible for immediate protection measures, Caritas has been instrumental in managing transportation and providing translators—services that are increasingly at risk due to current funding uncertainties.

Looking ahead, Ms. Bejleri announced plans for a national center for unaccompanied minors in Tirana by 2025, which will be managed under the Ministry of Interior. Until then, the transportation of UAMs remains a challenge, although the municipality has allocated a small portion of its budget for these costs.

The discussion also addressed systemic gaps, including the lack of translators, which complicates medical assessments and the identification of trafficking victims. Legal guardianship for unaccompanied minors remains a challenge, as guardians are appointed through lengthy court processes in Korce. By the time legal procedures are completed, many children have already been relocated to other centers.

Mr. **Feliks Cane**, Director of Public Health in Devoll, underscored the strong collaboration between Caritas Albania and the local health directorate. He pointed out the importance of Caritas for providing vital resources, such as medicine and medical support, particularly where state resources fall short. Despite Albanian law providing free emergency care, Caritas has been crucial in covering additional needs, including medication and dental treatment. Mr. Cane expressed concerns about the sustainability of these services, especially given the end of the involvement of Caritas Albania in the Kapshtica border project. A clear process for the identification of needs for migrants was established between police, Caritas Albania and local institutions.

He also highlighted the acute shortage of medical staff in rural areas, noting that Caritas' 24-hours medical presence has significantly eased the burden on local institutions. Emphasis was also placed on maintaining a balance between the needs of the local Albanian population in the area and those of the migrants passing through. Caritas Albania stands out as one of the few CSOs actively working in regions beyond Korçë. It often feels as though an invisible barrier halts funding and CSO activities at this last city in Albania.

A clear example of cooperation is given in this border project: When a migrant arrives at the border, the Border Police, with help from Frontex, identify them and bring them to the reception center in Kapshtica. After a quick administrative interview, Caritas Albania steps in to assess the person's situation. If there's a medical issue, the 24-hour medical staff contacts the Public Health Department of Devoll. For urgent cases, an ambulance is called right away, and the person is taken to the hospital. If other needs come up, like medication, Caritas Albania takes care of it. When a child or unaccompanied minor (UAM) is found at the border, the Child Protection Unit gets involved. Once identification is done, Caritas Albania steps in again to help, making sure the child is safely taken to the Peace Village in Shkodra.

The Q&A session brought attention to key challenges, including the limited budget of small municipalities like Devoll, despite their heavy responsibilities as border towns. Participants raised concerns about the lack of central government support for municipalities overwhelmed by migration flows. While efforts have been made to secure transportation funding and improve local services, the reliance on Caritas Albania remains substantial.

Additional topics included the reintegration of Albanian returnees, particularly seasonal workers and Roma communities. Many returnees face significant challenges such as unemployment, lack of housing, and unregistered children, who often require support to obtain legal documentation. The municipality highlighted efforts through projects with international partners, such as UNDP, to provide services like psychological support, vocational training, and employment assistance for vulnerable groups. However, budget constraints and limited resources continue to hinder comprehensive support.

Round table in Bilisht

The round table concluded with a consensus on the importance of continued collaboration between state institutions and Caritas Albania, particularly as migration flows are expected to increase due to ongoing conflicts. Participants emphasized the urgent need for sustained funding, advocacy to the central government, and stronger institutional support to address the needs of unaccompanied minors and other vulnerable populations. The session underscored Caritas Albania's indispensable role in providing immediate humanitarian assistance and supporting state institutions in fulfilling their responsibilities.



Visit of Caritas Albania

During the visit to the premises of Caritas Albania, Ms. **Juljana Reso**, Director of Caritas Albania, provided an insightful overview of the organization's strategies and challenges in engaging with government and external stakeholders. Caritas Albania's services, such as centers for people with disabilities, are officially recognized by various ministries, including the Ministry of Justice, with whom they collaborate on initiatives for minors in the penitentiary system, and in providing support to women and individuals with disabilities in prisons. Despite these partnerships, structural funding remains a significant challenge, as Caritas Albania is not eligible to apply for direct governmental funding for their services.

Furthermore, Ms. Reso highlighted the strong partnership with the Municipality of Tirana, particularly in emergency response projects, and emphasized Caritas Albania's leadership in the field of disability advocacy. As Chair of the Network of Disability in Albania, they actively lobby for legislative changes. Additionally, Caritas Albania facilitates access to reintegration programs like the EUROJOB project for returnees and asylum seekers and collaborates with diocesan Caritas organizations to provide referrals tailored to individual needs. However, donor funding challenges persist, with resources often directed to specific hotspots or allocated through top-down objectives that overlook local needs assessments.

Conclusion

The meetings in Shkoder, Korce, and Bilisht underscore the importance of collaboration between civil society organizations (CSOs) such as Caritas Albania and state institutions in addressing the multifaceted challenges posed by migration and the reintegration of returnees, particularly vulnerable groups like unaccompanied minors (UAM). While significant efforts are being made at the local level, including through awareness campaigns, reintegration programs, and the provision of critical services such as shelter, healthcare, and psychological support, there are substantial gaps in long-term structural support from the central government.

The cooperation between municipalities, Caritas Albania, and other local actors has been instrumental in responding to immediate needs. Programs like the Peace Village, professional training initiatives, and tailored reintegration plans showcased impactful approaches to empowering returnees and improving local conditions.

However, the reliance on project-based funding, which often provides only short-term solutions, remains a major challenge. This limits the sustainability of the services offered and prevents the development of more comprehensive, long-term strategies. In particular, the lack of government investment in social services and the shortage of resources at the local level impede the effective and consistent support of vulnerable groups, including the reintegration of returnees and the care of UAMs.

Furthermore, the loss of funding for critical projects, such as the border project in Kapshtica, highlights the vulnerability of these services to shifts in donor priorities and the urgent need for stable, government-led initiatives. Overall, while collaboration between state institutions and CSOs is progressing, it is clear that continued advocacy and structural reforms are needed to provide lasting solutions and ensure the protection and reintegration of vulnerable populations across Albania.

A key takeaway from this visit is the importance of continuity of care. The need for clear communication and a well-defined process after return is just as critical as the collaboration and communication required before return. Establishing a seamless system of care in EU countries, where CSOs and local governments each fulfill their roles while communicating and sharing responsibilities, is absolutely essential.

When designing a return and reintegration project, certain elements must not be overlooked: providing information, identifying needs, and truly listening to migrants. This care begins before the return, through a strong partnership between CSOs and governments, and continues in the same collaborative spirit after the return.

In the words of the director of Caritas Albania, CSO's are the dignified opposition of the government.