

RAPID NEEDS ASSESSMENT (RNA)

Impact of COVID-19 crisis on
Roma and Egyptian Communities
in Fier, Krujë and Lezhë

July 2020



Leave
No One
Behind

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Disclaimer

This report is commissioned by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Albania in the framework of "Leave No One Behind", a United Nations (UN) Joint Programme, which is supported by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). Opinions and views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect those of the UNDP or the UN.

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ABBREVIATIONS

FGD	Focus group discussions
HfC	Help for Children" Foundation
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisations
LNB	Leave No One Behind
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisations
RNA	Rapid Need Assessment
R&E	Roma and Egyptians
SDC	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
ToRs	Terms of References
UN	United nations
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UN Women	UN organization for women

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

COVID-19 crisis and lockdown had a considerable impact on breaking and impairing the precarious ordinary course in some crucial aspects of Roma & Egyptian communities' lives. Given this background, the aim of this Rapid Need Assessment (RNA) is to investigate the social and economic situation of R&E families from March to May 2020. It identifies the R&E's life aspects more affected in Fieri, Fushë Kruja, and Lezha by the COVID-19 crises, in order to assist social services providers in identifying areas of higher priority intervention.

This report is conducted in the framework of the project "Integrated Social Services for Sustainable Social and Economic Development of Roma and Others" that is being implemented by "Help for Children" Foundation and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), in the framework of the UN Joint Programme 'Leave No One Behind' (LNB), a Swiss Government supported programme. It aims to fill in the existing gaps in the provision of integrated multidimensional social services for R&E in the three municipalities through setting up a new basket of social services for R&E communities.

Alongside the project, the RNA aims to share with interested central and local service providers the best practices obtained in project services delivery and implementing activities that could be used to address the most urgent needs that emerged by the Covid-19 pandemic situation.

The RNA methodology was developed in close collaboration with the HfC/LNB, that commissioned this study and played an active role in data collection and reaching the LNB project beneficiaries.

The study is structured in three parts, mainly corresponding with the groups of findings. **Chapter 1**, "General data," outlines households and individuals' profiles, project beneficiaries who participated in this survey. It is followed by **Chapter 2**, "Findings - What COVID-19 is teaching us about inequality", which investigates the impact of the lockdown on the economic situation of R&E households, employment, and education. This chapter also analyses the main challenges the households face in taking and implementing appropriate measures as advised by health institutions concerning protecting themselves against COVID-19. Finally, in the **third part of the report**, after reviewing the evidence presented in chapters one and two, we have identified several findings related to gaps in services provided for R&E communities during the pandemic. In this regard, the study offers a set of recommendations seeking to reduce and mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on vulnerable communities through future actions. We note that recommended interventions do not target one actor in social services; indeed, they can be implemented only through building trust and meaningful cooperation between HfC, their partners, and communities while complementing each other's efforts.

METHODOLOGY

During June 2020, the HfC team carried out a Rapid Needs Assessment (RNA) study to explore the situation, needs, and priorities caused by the COVID-19 pandemic on Fier's Roma and Egyptian communities, Lezha, and Kruja (Fushë Kruja). The RNA objective was threefold: (1) to make an evidence-based analysis on the COVID -19 lockdown impact on R&E individuals, families, and communities; (2) to provide the necessary information in order to adopt such services that match the current needs of communities/beneficiaries (3) to provide a set of recommendations to develop an adequate response.

RNA has adopted the following methodology:

- **Document analysis and review:** The review provided insights from existing project documents such as periodical reports and academic literature, other research studies, and relevant policy documents consulted.
- **Interviews with beneficiaries:** **262** individual interviews were conducted with representatives of households and youngsters, both beneficiaries of the integrated social services provided by HfC- LNB. Also, **six** focus groups were organized, involving **18** participants from local government institutions, teachers, labour offices, health services, etc.
- A combined structured and semi-structured individual questionnaire (Appendix 1) was used to capture the relevant information for RNA's purpose. The interviews were conducted with a variety of respondents through local project staff (who were trained in advance) in person. The Questionnaire included a combination of quantitative data and qualitative data that reflect the experiences and opinions of beneficiaries and stakeholders. Keeping in mind the level of participants' education, the researcher tried to avoid the complexity of the question items. This issue was addressed using concise, not very detailed questions with long lists of answer choices.
- **Focus group discussions (FGD):** To further reflect upon and validate the results of the analysis, as well as to discuss potential areas of action for services providers, six focus groups were organized involving a total of 18 participants from local government institutions, teachers, labour offices, health services, etc.
- The focus groups were encouraged to act as a working group for furthering actions, building trust among R&E communities, and raising awareness on potential cooperation among stakeholders. The draft list of recommendations was shared with all FGD participants for comments and suggestions.
- **Data collection, data entry, and data set.** Data collected through individual questionnaires were entered in an Excel file. The dataset went through the data cleaning process, codification, and the transfer in SPSS for statistical analyses.

LIMITATIONS

The fact that the survey was conducted two months after the lockdown (the reference period) was a concern related to the **respondents' recall error**. However, the results showed that recall errors did not lead to a general incidence. Only ten questionnaires from 262 (3, 8%) turned out to be invalid due to time inconsistencies in respondents' answers.

For this RNA, as defined in the TORs, the study population covered only project communities and beneficiaries in three operation areas where HfC works. **RNA findings are not representative of Albania's entire R & E communities and cannot be easily generalized**. However, results withdrawn from the surveyed R&E communities **provide valuable insights and knowledge relevant for interventions and policies** in times of crisis such as the COVID19 pandemic and sheds light on the **urgent need to support vulnerable populations who are at more significant risk of being left behind**.

KEY FINDINGS

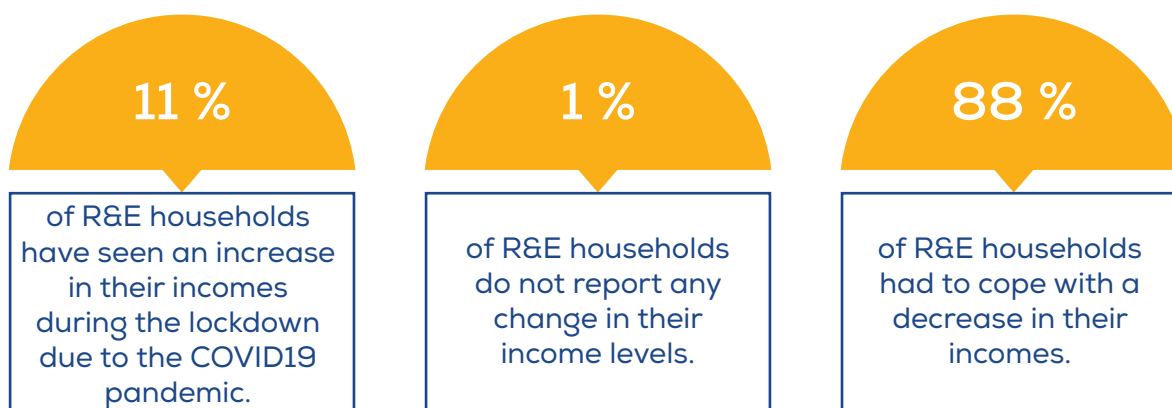
Employment and Incomes

Many respondents (67%) have lost their jobs during the lockdown and have not recuperated it after the crisis, consistent across gender. 13.2% of respondents (referring to the household breadwinner) stated that they were unemployed before the lockdown, and this figure has been doubled after the lockdown; it means that another 13,2% remained unemployed due to the crises.

Most of the households are reported informal in the labour market. RNA accounted for an informal 70 % of employed R&E people. Consequently, around 70% of the respondents reported they did not access emergency assistance provided by the government, especially war payment due to their economic activities' informal status.

The COVID-19 crisis and lockdown has exposed youngsters to inequalities and exacerbates their situation concerning employment. 38% of females and 46.9 % of males, 19-34 years old, stopped working during the lockdown.

While the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown have the most significant economic impact on the poorest (low-income communities), especially those living in deplorable economic and social conditions, as R&E is, the epidemic can potentially result in extreme risks for these families for causing hunger and lack of essential services. With this regard:



Household income has decreased, particularly among R&E people working in informal arrangements. Being mostly informal in the market economy, employers, or self-employers from the R&E communities lost the opportunity to access the economic support ensured by measures taken by the government.

Education and Services

RNA showed that at first sight, education of R&E children had not been disrupted for 81% of them, with parents declaring that their children pursued remote and online learning. Nevertheless, almost all parents reported that they could not afford an appropriate home environment for learning with adequate equipment and devices for remote and online learning.

Nearly half of parents are dissatisfied with their child's progress and development since lockdown. They are worried that the education of their children has been set back. 90% of parents think that children are bored and not motivated to learn in the distance. 85, 4% of parents reported that they find it challenging or very hard to support their children's learning.

Social assistance and social services coverage by the local government for R&E households was limited to 16.2 %, while 100 % of households reported that have received social services facilitated by HfC through the project.

The RNA results show that *nine out of ten R&E families did not have enough money to cover basic food needs during the lockdown*. Results show that *90% of households have been unable or faced difficulties in fulfilling basic food needs. 81 % reported that they did not fully meet the needs for hygiene supplies such as face masks and disinfectants as instructed by health authorities*.

Although the social protection system has reacted by doubling the social assistance benefits (social assistance in cash and disability allowance), they are still limited. R&E working informally does not benefit from these supporting schemes. Also, these schemes are not fully integrated with other social care services.

Targeted assistance to R&E communities lacks with no proper public measure committed specifically to vulnerable R&E populations in response to their emergency needs. Even though the pandemic and the lockdown affect the marginalized communities and those in poverty the most, the government has not introduced specific relief packages for these categories.

100 % of young people interviewed reported that lockdown had disrupted their life and work activities. Complementary services tailored to their social needs from the local government or school have been missing. Attending VET courses is a vital tool to ensure R&E youngsters access in the labor market and income generation. Nonetheless, the lockdown has made it impossible for them to attend such courses, and if soon, VET courses will be organized online, R&E youngsters are at risk of being further marginalized.

Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices

Around 82% of respondents held positive attitudes toward the government's measures to mitigate the outbreak of COVID-19 and control of the disease. Most participants admitted that they were taking precautions such as avoiding crowds and collective family events (73.2%), practicing proper hand hygiene (87.8%). However, the wearing of face masks was less common (30%). Two-thirds of respondents (65 %) agreed with the statement that their duties, including housekeeping, childcare, and disabled people responsibilities, increased during the lockdown. A higher share of women (74 %) than men (59 %) reported that their duties increased within the family.

The most significant impact of the pandemic and the lockdown has been a limited supply of essential goods and services, including but not limited to, food security and nutrition support, sanitary means, and education services.

Emergency response

Services provided by the HfC -LNB project have been significantly complementary to the local government's services. While local government social services have been focused on social transfers, the services provided by HfC -LNB have been focused on resolving the emergency caused by lockdown through offering direct services. HfC has redesigned the plan of activities and services to address the emergency duly.

The ability and resources of the local government to respond to the needs of R&E communities during the lockdown and COVID19 pandemic have been limited, fragmented, and slow. The local government was not prepared to deal with such an unprecedented crisis and was already burdened by the major earthquake crisis of November 2019, particularly in Kruja and Lezha.

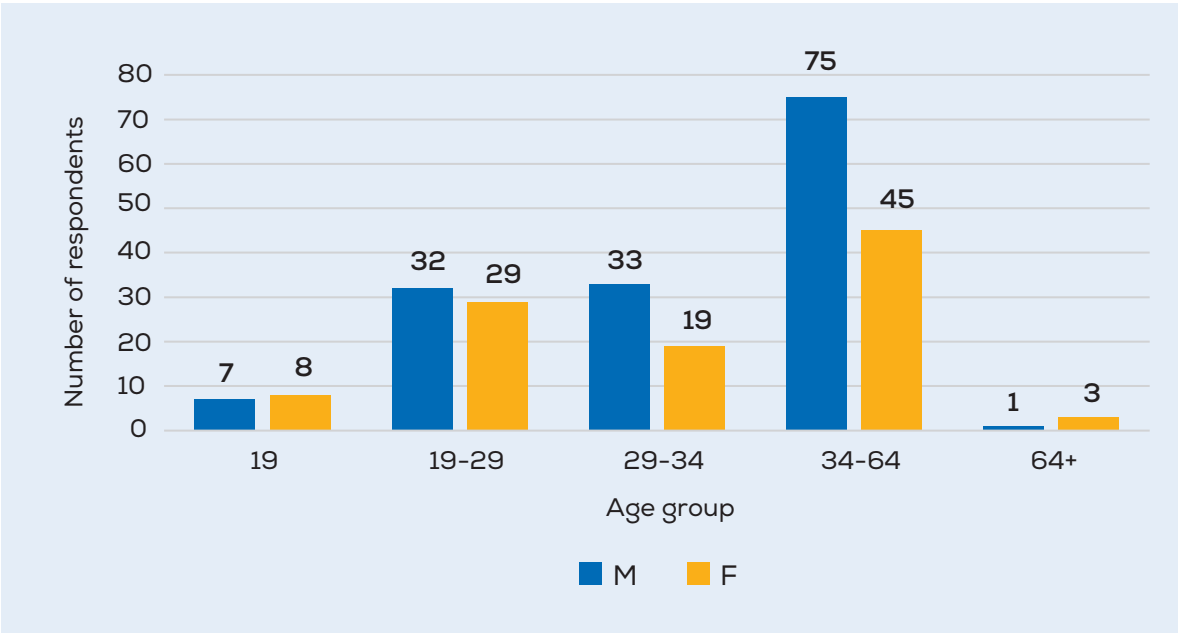
CHAPTER 1.

GENERAL DATA

Demographics

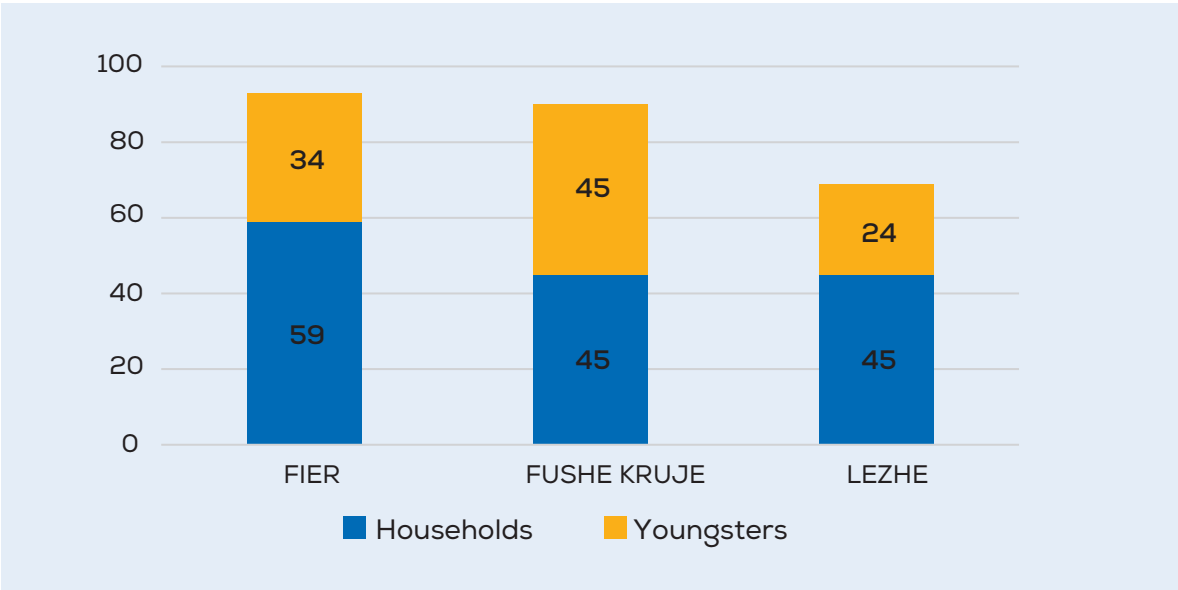
A total of 252 respondents participated in the study, all R&E communities' members and living in Fieri, Fushë Kruja, and Lezha. The sample of the survey included respondents from various age groups, as shown in Figure 1. The sample is segmented into two categories of beneficiaries: households and young people (Figure 2). Out of the total, the average age is 34 years old.

Figure 1: Respondents demographics by age and gender



A key criterion was used to select respondents participating in this study: recipients of social services as per the HfC Foundation project and supported by the LNB Programme.

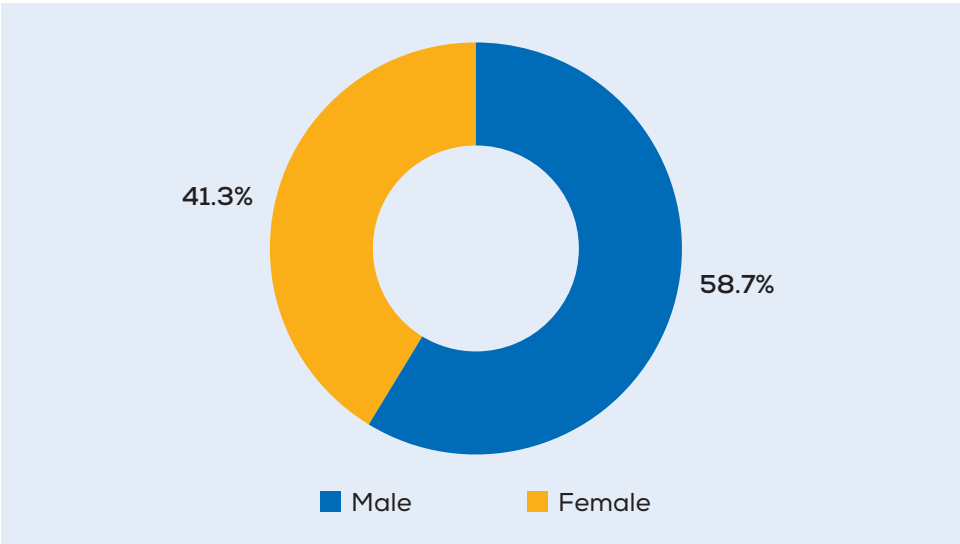
Figure 2: Number of households and youngsters interviewed in each location



The home location of respondents was defined based on project sites. So, the research team surveyed 93 participants in Fieri (36.9 %), 90 participants in Fushë Kruja (35.7 %), and 69 participants in Lezha (27.3 %). To participate, they must have received integrated services, before, during, or after the lockdown either as individuals or households.

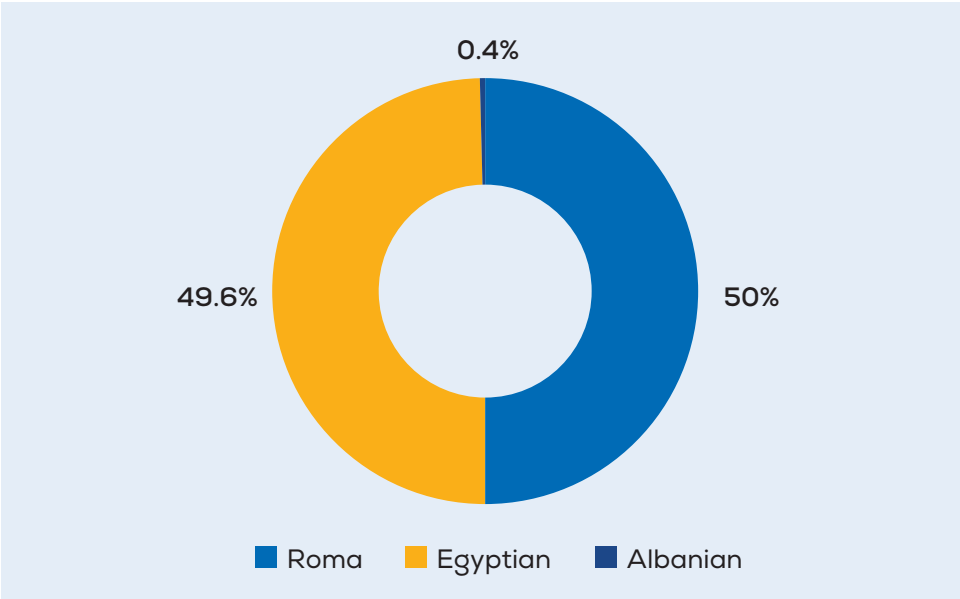
The impact of lockdown due to the COVID19 pandemic differs when it comes to gender and social background related to age, ethnicity, social origin, poverty, disability, and other disadvantages. Both men and women are included as respondents in the survey, with women composing 41.3% of the sample and men 58, 7 %. There were no significant gender breakdown differences in the three locations surveyed: Fieri, Fushë Kruja, and Lezha.

Figure 3: Gender participation in RNA



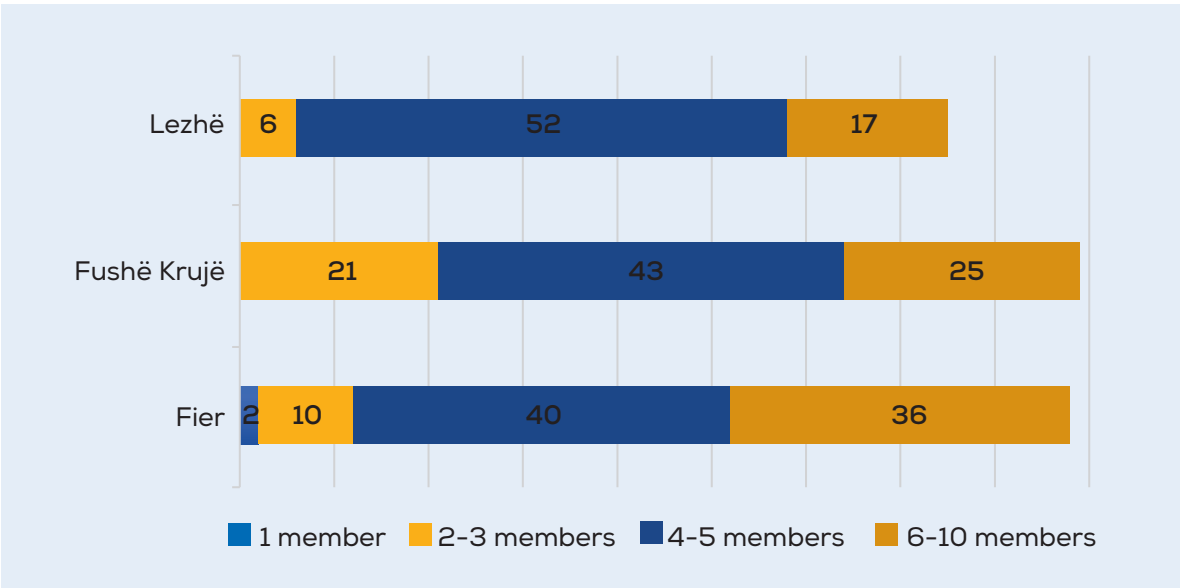
50% of respondents are Roma, and 49.6 Egyptian, as illustrated in Figure 4 below. The household's primary type comprises one nucleus family, sometimes with a third-generation (less than 10%).

Figure 4: Disaggregation per ethnicity



Most households are composed of 4-5 members, as illustrated in Figure 5.

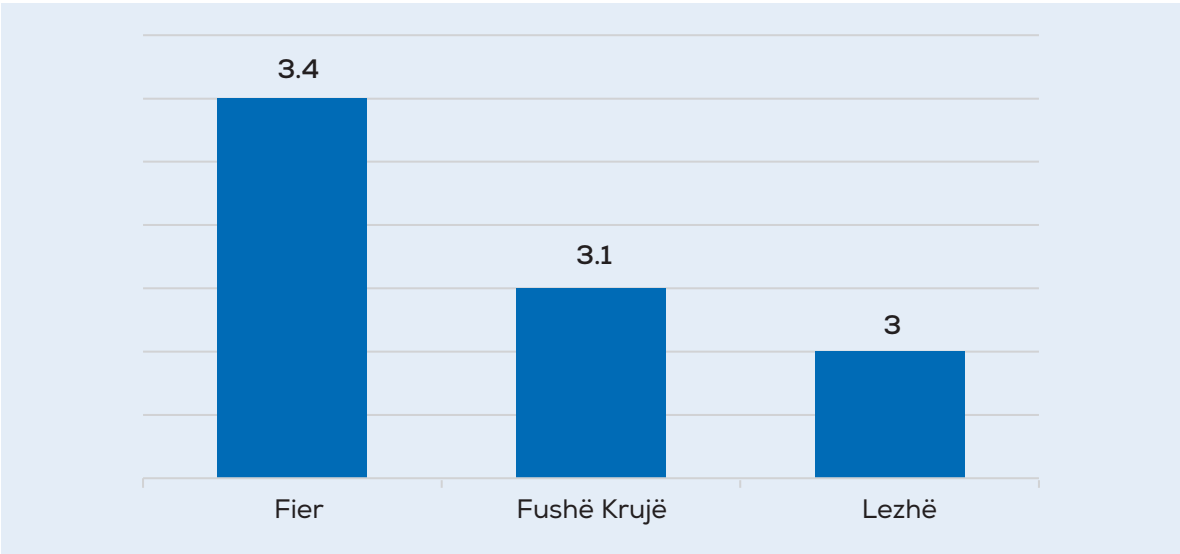
Figure 5: Households size per each location



In terms of family profile, the 252 surveyed households account for 1210 individuals, of whom 695 were children aged 0-18. The family size varied from 1 to 10 persons. 69% of the families had up to five members, and 82 % had up to four children.

Figure 5 shows that there are no significant differences between locations in terms of average family size. With a very slight difference from two other locations, Fier has many families with over six members. In Fier, most of the R&E families live in rural areas, with many family members living under the same roof and working in the family farm economy.

Figure 6: Average number of children per family in each location



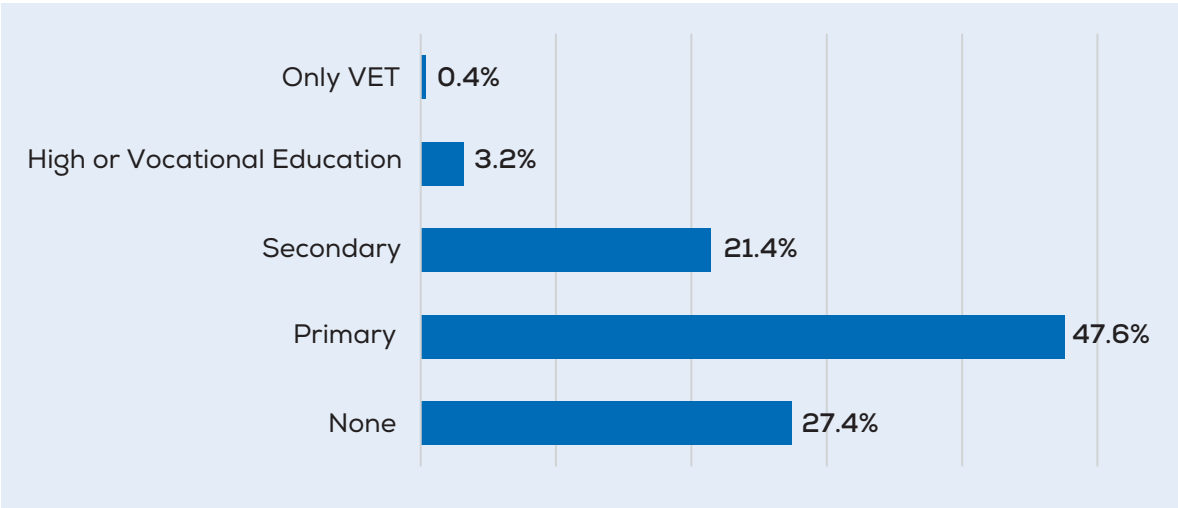
The area with a higher number of children is Fieri. Thirty-two households (12.6%) reported that they have one person with disabilities in the family.

Education Profile

The education variable deviates from that of the general population. As with other studies, Roma and Egyptians have a significantly lower level of education than the majority. The response rate was high for those with no education, so almost one-third of respondents (27,4 %) have declared that they have received neither education nor any vocational course.

Low levels of respondents' education are explained by various reasons related to socio-economic disadvantages for families, gender inequalities, and several barriers related to culture, tradition, background, etc.

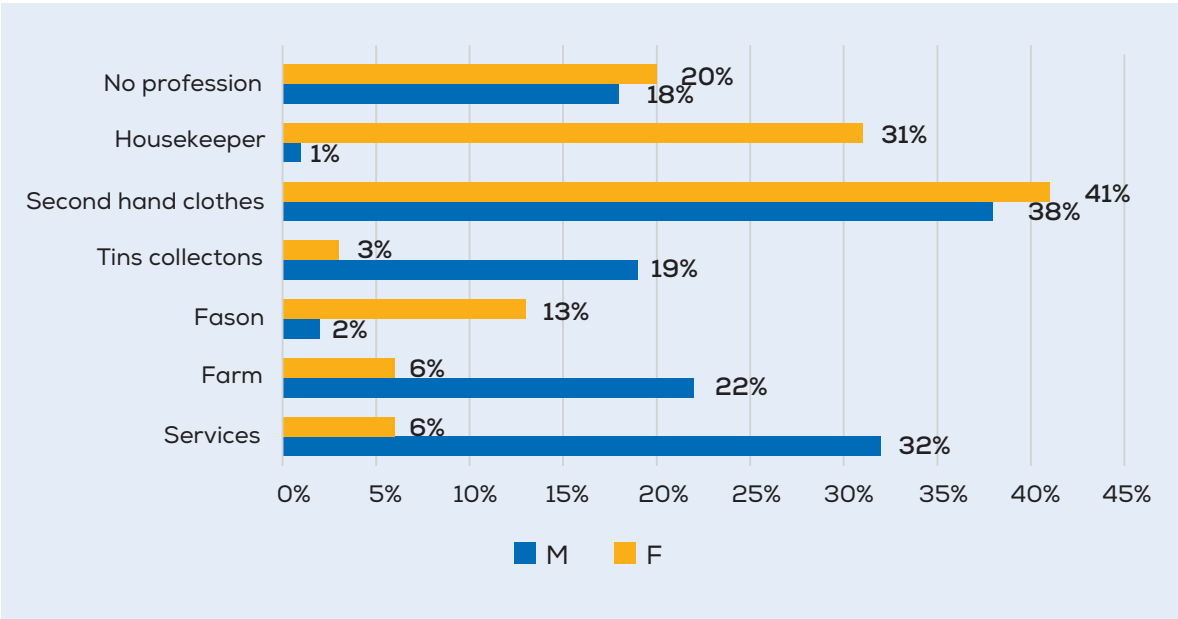
Figure 7: Household level of education



Profession and Employment

The survey results presented in Figure 8 show that most employed respondents are engaged in the trade sector, selling secondhand clothes, followed by services (such as barbers, cleaning services; babysitter; electrician; plumber), farm (agriculture; fishery; poultry), and fashion industry.

Figure 8: Number of respondents by profession and gender



CHAPTER 2.

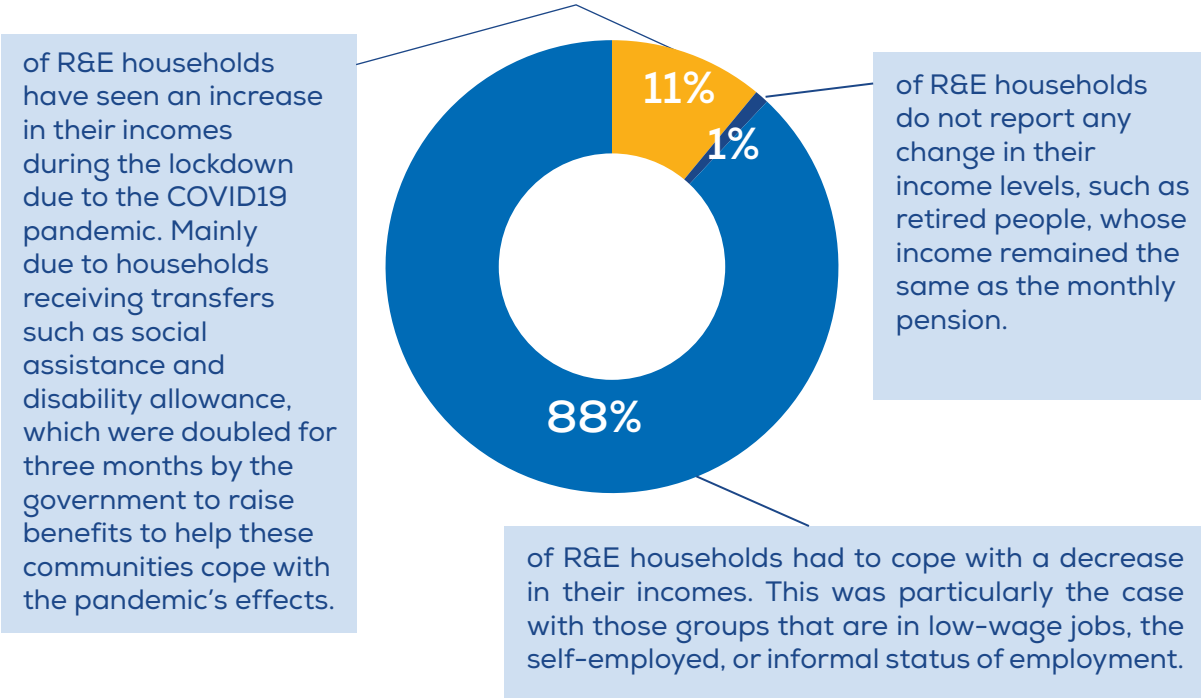
FINDINGS

Lockdown impact on economic situation of R&E families

The most affected R&E community groups by the lockdown due to the COVID19 pandemic are those with risky and unstable labor conditions; those who are not able to work and who are not covered by public social protection transfer schemes. Incomes have decreased, and respondents reported not having enough cash fluidity to cover basic needs during the lockdown. 90% of respondents reported that the lockdown has negatively affected work, particularly those in the informal employment status.

This, in turn, has affected people’s incomes in the form of salary/wages, with 90 % reporting that they did not have enough money to cover food and other essential life supplies during the lockdown.

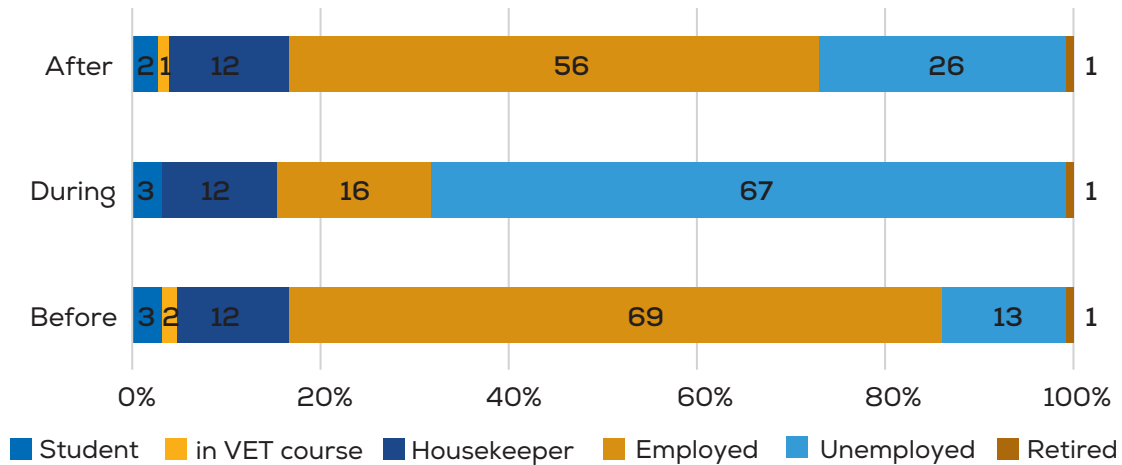
In this respect, the survey showed that:



Lockdown impact on employment

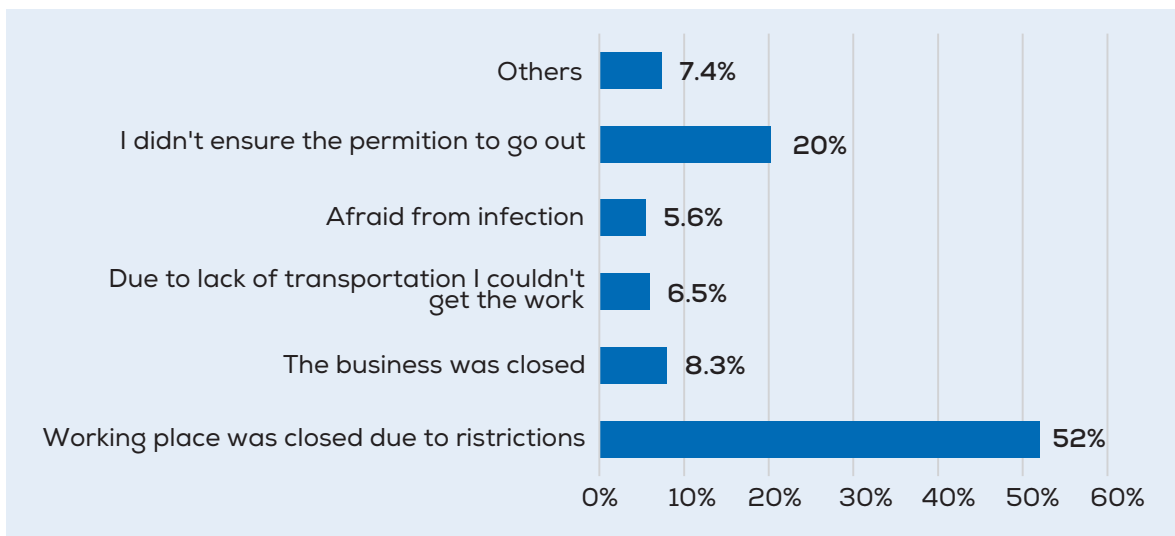
13% of respondents declared that they were unemployed before lockdown, and their status did not change during the lockdown. 67 % of respondents stopped working as a result of the lockdown of the COVID19 pandemic. Another 13 % of those who stopped working during the lockdown did not resume working after the pandemic and lost their job entirely due to the COVID-19 pandemic situation.

Figure 9: Occupation status of respondents before, during and after lockdown in %



Only 16 % of the respondents reported having worked during the lockdown. Several reasons were cited by respondents for stopping the work during the lockdown, as shown in Figure 10, primarily due to closure of working place due to restrictions put in place to stop the spread of coronavirus.

Figure 10: The number of respondents stopped working during the lockdown by reasons in %

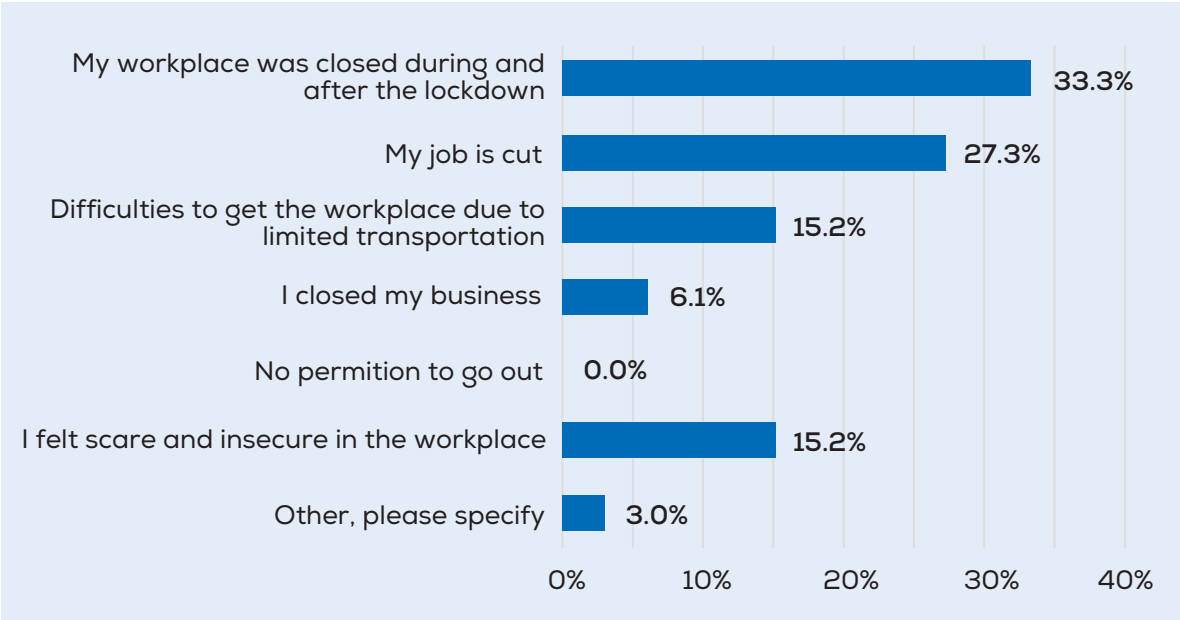


was closed due to the restrictions. 22% were not able to obtain permission to go out during the lockdown. Respondents could not receive/use this service provided by e-Albania or found it very difficult to handle it. 8.7% of respondents reported that the business was closed during the lockdown. 6% stopped working because they were afraid of the coronavirus infection.

The lockdown has affected R&E work in different ways. It is important to note that the respondents' unemployment rate is doubled due to the pandemic situation. Consequently, it is normal for them to feel uncertain about what the future holds concerning their work.

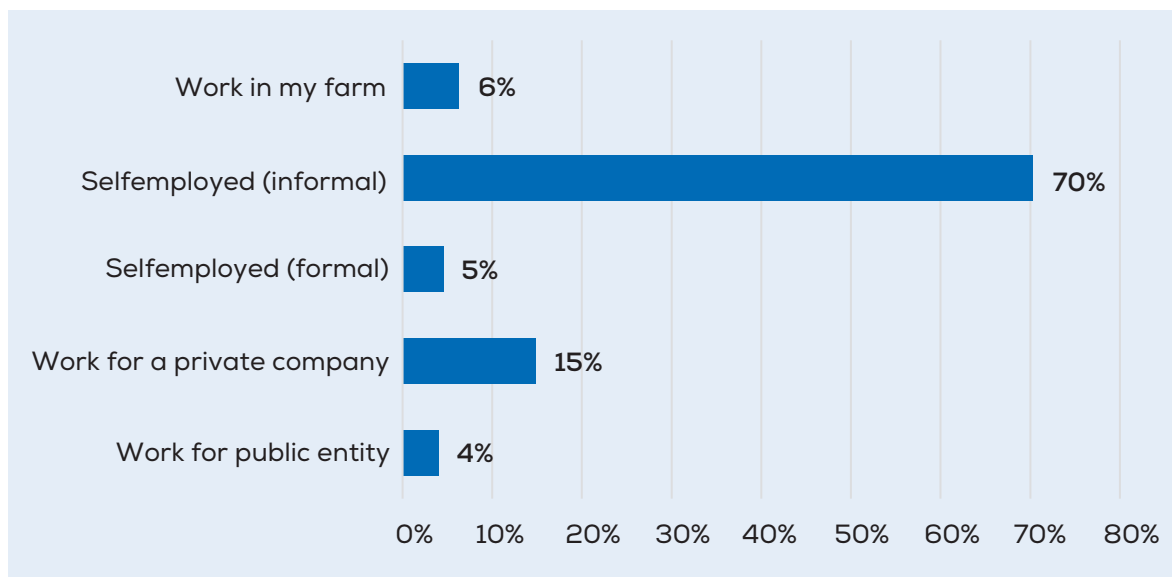
The RNA found out that for 33.3% of respondents, the working place continued to be closed, even after the lockdown. For 27.3%, the job is cut. Many R&E people (15.2%) feel confused, worried, and apprehensive about going back to the workplace.

Figure 11: Reported reasons for job losses due to crises



Looking at employment type (Figure 12), most households work informally in the labor market. RNA accounted for as informal workers, around 70 % of employed R&E people. Consequently, they cannot receive assistance through government schemes introduced during the lockdown, such as war wages or other support. Apart from that, regulations are not well-designed to cover the farmers or people selling in the open markets. Thus, overall, the number of families that have benefited from the government's measures was too low.

Figure 12: Type of employment in %



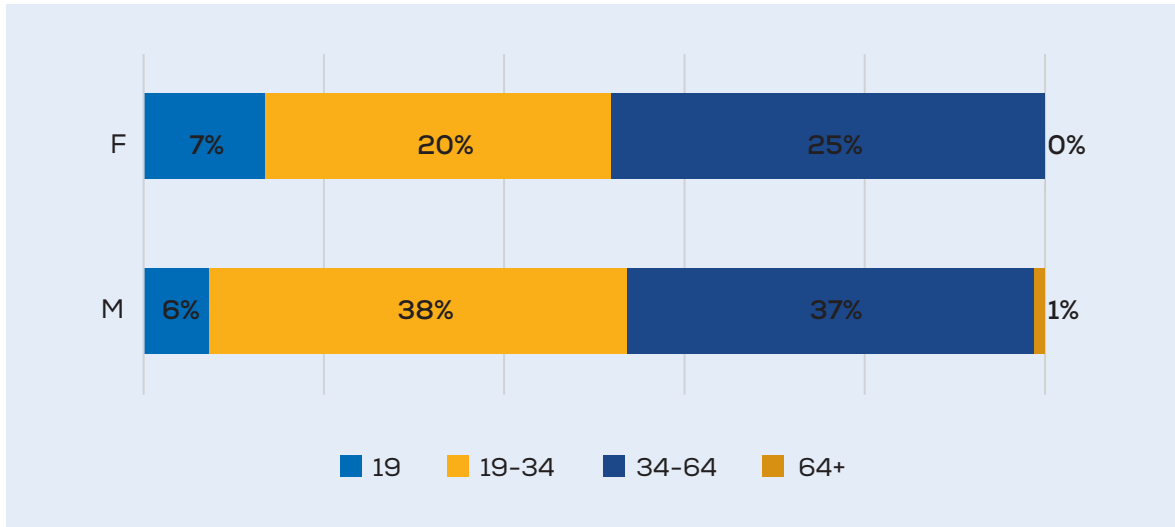
Among households, (11 %) are engaged in farming livestock, poultry, and fishing activities.

For them and for many self-employed persons who are occupied as “Trader” selling second-hand clothes, being unable to move freely or unable to get to the market means losing the job and not providing income for the family.

The decrease in household income due to COVID-19 and lockdown has some critical implications for R&E families, such as: first, decreasing level of trust in the government’s ability to support and assist communities in times of crisis. Second, lower-income and economic hardship correlates with lower interest in and commitment to children’s education due to the inability to fulfil basic needs such as food, hygiene, health, clothing, and added insecurities, fear, and anxiety. Third, the decrease in household income also brings about a higher sense of pessimism and deteriorated emotional conditions for families and children alike. Fourth, various studies are now claiming an increased level of domestic violence during the lockdown and in economic hardships, and women and girls are most vulnerable to this phenomenon.

The COVID-19 crisis and the lockdown expose youngsters to inequalities and exacerbates their situation concerning employment. The survey found that younger people are more affected by lockdown. Regarding people that stopped working and considering age and gender variables, the survey showed that those under 34 years old are more affected by the situation. 38% of females and 46 % of male 19-34 years old stopped working during the lockdown.

Figure 13: People stoped working during lockdown per age groups and gender



Lockdown impact on VET

Lockdown has been incredibly hard for young people’s employability, even because they have not been able to complete the VET courses due to disruption of training both in workplaces and in the classroom. For instance, the HfC project supported around 78 young people to get a profession, but the lockdown forced them to interrupt it.

In the short term, the interruption presents a waste of time and fewer opportunities for R&E youngsters to access the labor market. Particularly for women and girls, it brings additional constraints in terms of time available due to competing responsibilities, such as caring for children and other household duties. While in the long term it might be difficult to bring them back into the VET course. In particular, adjustments to remote and online learning can be the hardest in low-income contexts and among vulnerable students. So, if the lockdown continues over a long time or is repeated if and when there is another wave of COVID19, the closure of vocational training institutions may force VET providers to adopt online learning system and technologies which make it difficult for R&E young people to attend the courses.

100 % of young people interviewed reported that lockdown had disrupted their life and work activities. We asked if they had received other complementary services tailored to their social needs from the local government or school. They cited that apart from online counseling provided by HfC project, they had not received any other services. The ability and resources of the local government to respond to the needs of R&E communities during the lockdown and COVID19 pandemic have been limited, fragmented, and slow. The local government was not prepared to deal with such an unprecedented crisis and was already burdened by the major earthquake crisis of November 2019, particularly in Kruja and Lezha.

Lockdown impact on family basic needs

One of the RNA's main objectives is to find out the effects of COVID-19 on the family and children's situation. Part of the survey focused precisely on the lockdown impact on basic family needs.

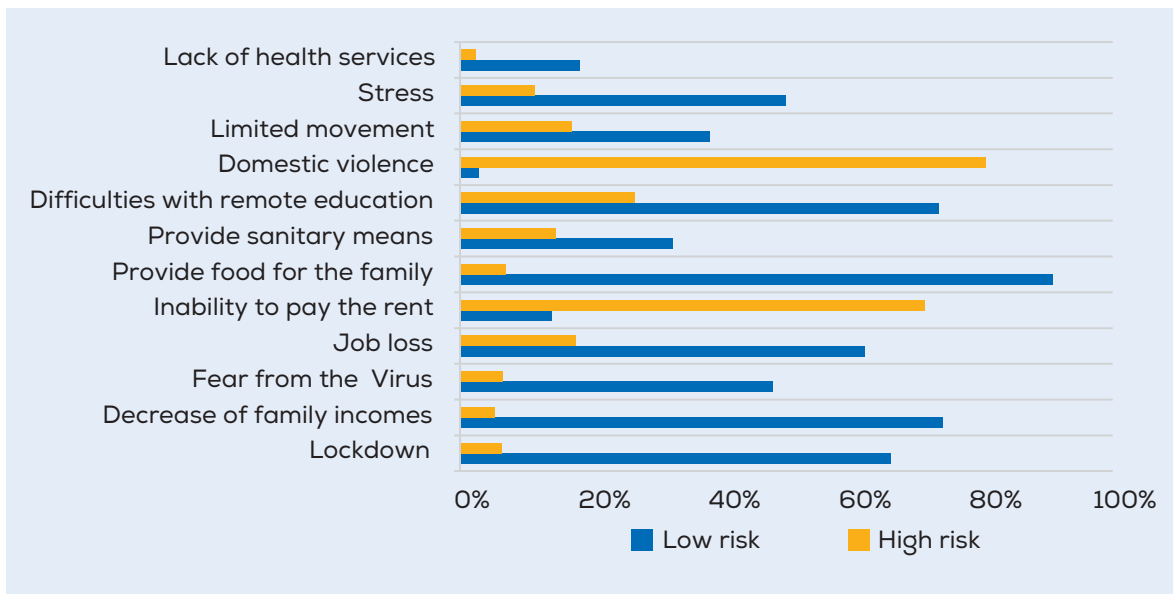
The most significant impact of the pandemic and the lockdown has been a limited supply of essential goods (for about 91% of the families) and services (85% of the families), including but not limited to food security and essential sanitary means, as well as services related to health and education.

As such, the provision of food packages by the local government for R&E communities has been slow and limited. Non-governmental organizations, donors, and other development projects in Fieri, Lezha, and Kruja swiftly and adequately filled the gap. Also, HfC-LNB has coordinated its work with municipalities to provide good quality and necessary food packages and hygiene supplies as well as educational materials to R&E families in the three target municipalities.

The most pressing needs of the R&E communities during the lockdown were food and sanitary and hygiene supplies. Unavailable food, decreased incomes, and job loss were the most needed during the lockdown (Figure 14). Results show that 90% of households have been unable or faced difficulties to fulfill basic food needs. 81% reported that they did not fully meet the needs of hygiene supplies such as face masks and disinfectants as instructed by health authorities.

The decrease in household income related to lockdown and restrictive measures in place can be identified as a significant factor for hardship in food and hygiene supplies. Also, the lockdown was accompanied by stringent rules of movement and service provision, and public transport was banned entirely, therefore making it difficult for R&E communities to access essential services.

Figure 14: The most concerned issues for the families during lockdown in %

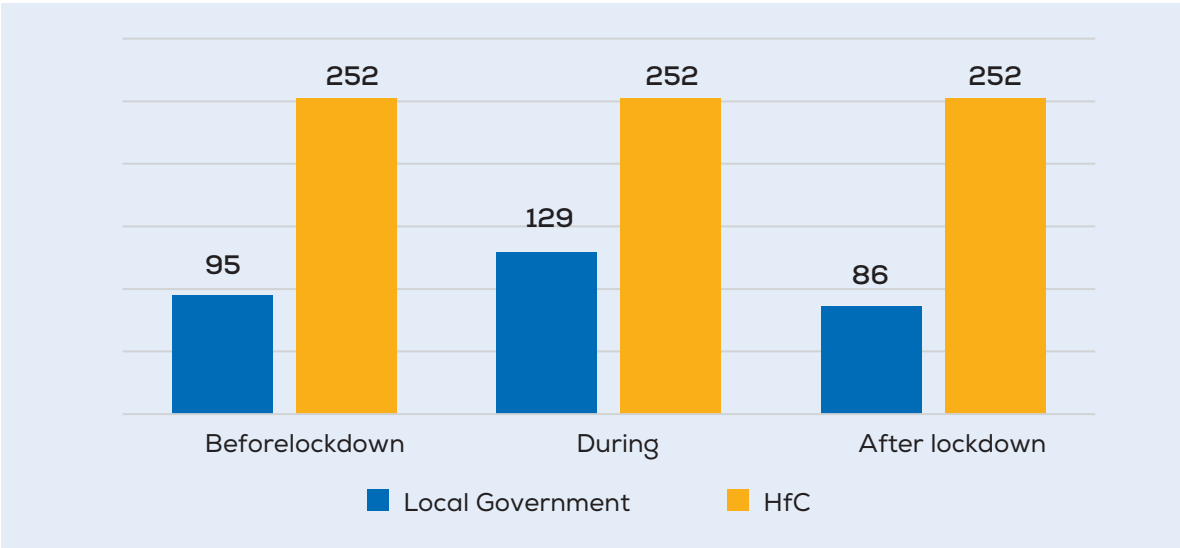


As a consequence of the lockdown, the impacts on vulnerable R&E people are significant in accessing social services. Targeted assistance to R&E communities has not been considered as an urgent issue. There is no dedicated public measure committed specifically to vulnerable R&E populations in response to their emergency needs. While it is mostly agreed that the pandemic and the lockdown affect the marginalized communities and vulnerable groups and those in poverty the most, the government has not introduced specific relief packages for these categories. This study confirms that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected R&E communities in multiple harmful ways.

As shown in figure 15, the social protection system has reacted by increasing the number of beneficiaries and providing double social assistance in cash and disability allowance. However, the system is focusing on the people most in economic need. It is not sufficient to fulfill families' and households' social needs because of public health crises, difficulties in education, and overall lockdown.

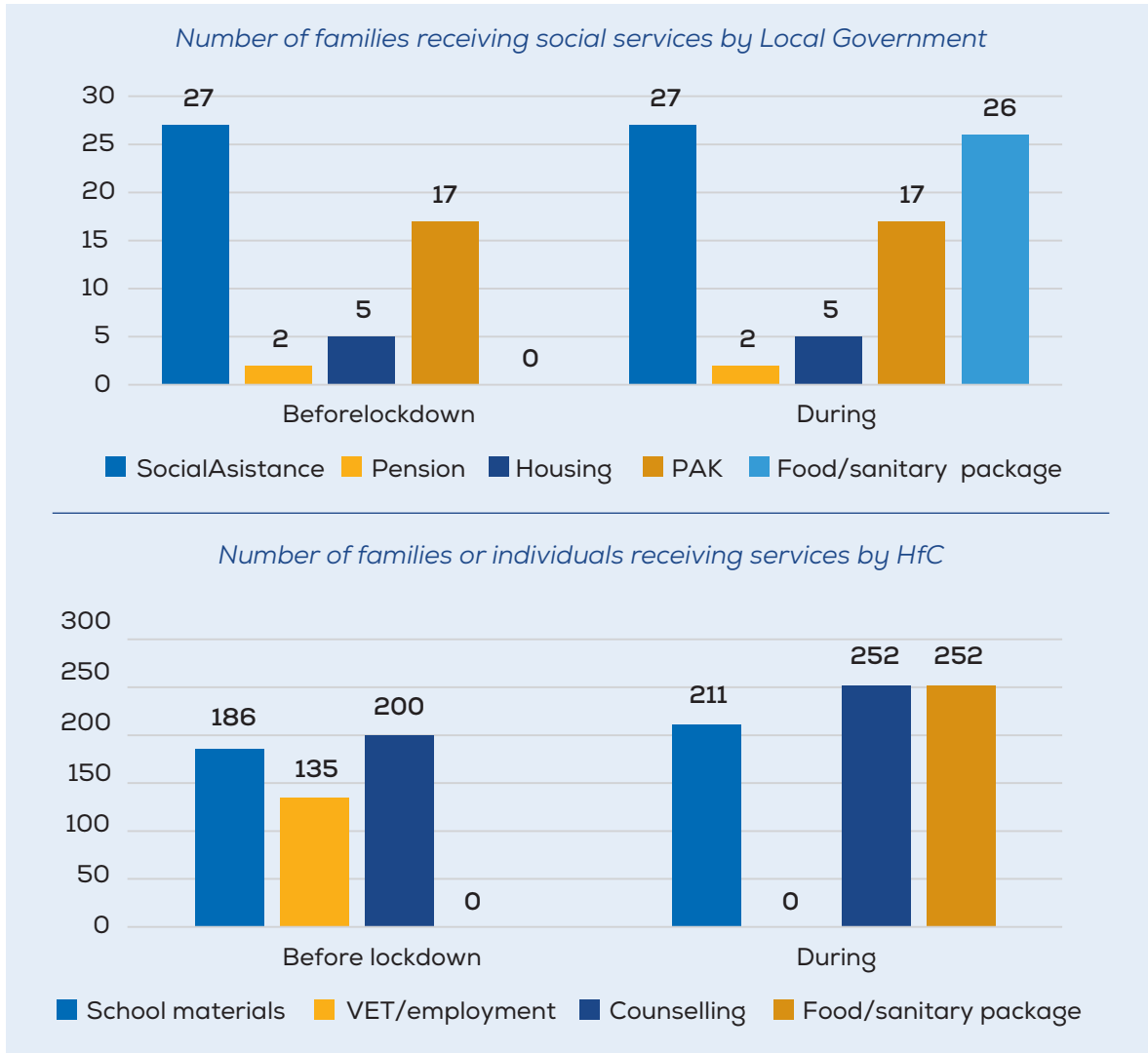
On the other hand, since these are money from the state budget based on long and complicated procedures, "increases of benefit transfers" are likely not adequate to fully cope with the most impoverished population's emergency. The increase of social assistance benefits amount remains too modest and needs to be integrated with care services.

Figure 15: Number of families receiving cash benefits and social services by providers



Data show that the number of households covered by the project's services has been 2.7 times greater than the number of those covered by public schemes.

Figure 16: Social services provided by local government & HfC



As for the project’s services, the number of families supported by the project has not changed. It means that HfC has supported the same number of families both before and during the lockdown. Nevertheless, it is essential to note that in response to the situation caused by lockdown, the number of services provided to the families, including food and sanitary packages, has been several times higher, compared to the period before the lockdown. This was made even more necessary by the fact that local government intervention was slow and delayed, while R&E families were in an emergency.

Social services provided by the project have been significantly complementary to the services provided by the local government. While the local government’s social services have been focused on social transfers, the services provided by HfC-LNB have been focused on resolving the emergency caused by lockdown by offering direct services to the family. Due to the pandemic, the lockdown also exacerbates the challenges that these communities face in accessing social services. HfC has assisted and counseled families to access services in a significant manner during the lockdown.

Lockdown impact on education

Teachers who participated in FGD in three sites highlighted various concerns related to remote learning as shown by their direct quotes below:

While remote learning aimed to ensure continued learning for all children, we knew that not all children from R&E families would be able to access this opportunity. Our evidence shows that except for the first grade, other students attended remote learning at a rate of 80-85%.

They also pointed to the challenges that parents faced in this situation:

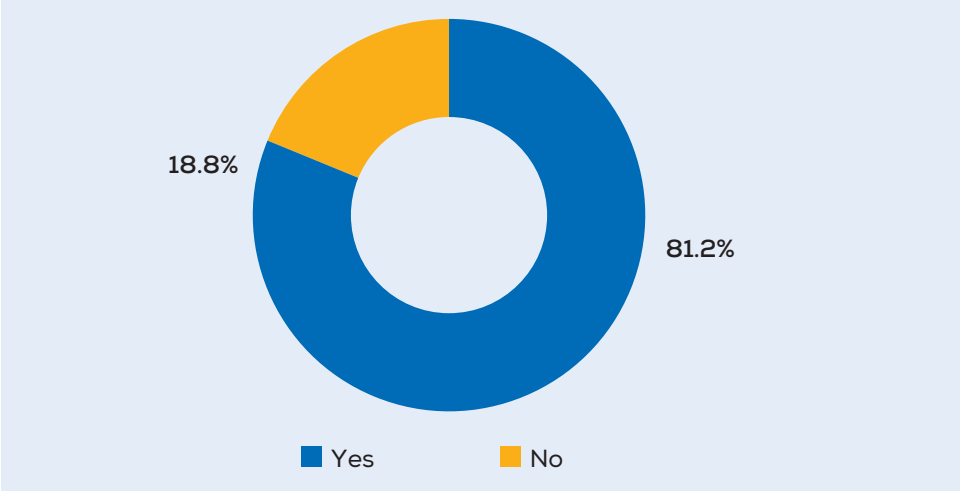
As we scrambled to implement “remote learning,” parents were handed over the responsibilities of providing their children with smartphones as well as supervising their education from home, tasks that few were prepared for. So, after two- or three-weeks exercising remote learning, many of the R&E students sent me messages apologizing for not turning in the work teacher assigned, and for not responding to the many WhatsApp messages they sent.

Also, particular challenges were posed for children with special needs:

In our schools, there are students who have special learning needs and often need more intensive support from the teachers. In such cases, the direct relationship between teachers and students is the core of their progress. Parents cannot cope with the difficulties that their children with special needs have.

RNA data confirmed the same. For several children, education has also been disrupted due to the lack of an enabling environment for learning and inadequate remote and online learning tools.

Figure 17: Percentage of students attending remote learning

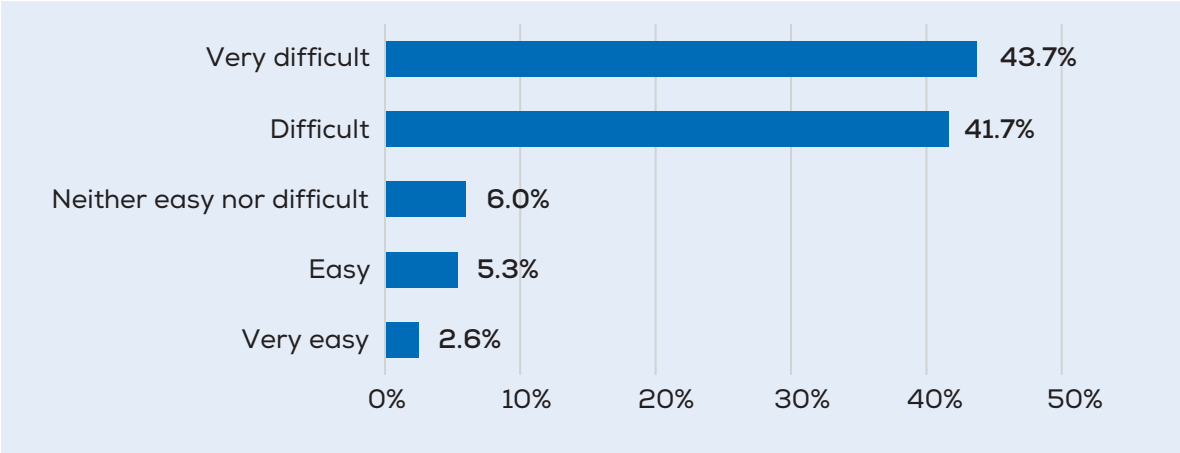


Challenges of remote and online learning

The school’s closure due to the outbreak of COVID-19 led to an unprecedented impact on education, especially for children of low-income R&E families.

Although the parents report that their children (81 %) attended the school, many pointed out struggling with supporting home schooling through remote and online learning. Almost 85,4% report that they find it hard or very hard to support their children’s learning (Figure 19). Nearly half of parents are dissatisfied with their child’s progress and development since lockdown. Many children are bored, lack motivation, and parents are worried about a set back in their education. Parents do not believe that children have learned well during remote learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is more a perception than proper evaluation given that the majority of parents have a deficient level of education or are illiterate.

Figure 18: How parents perceive remote learning in %



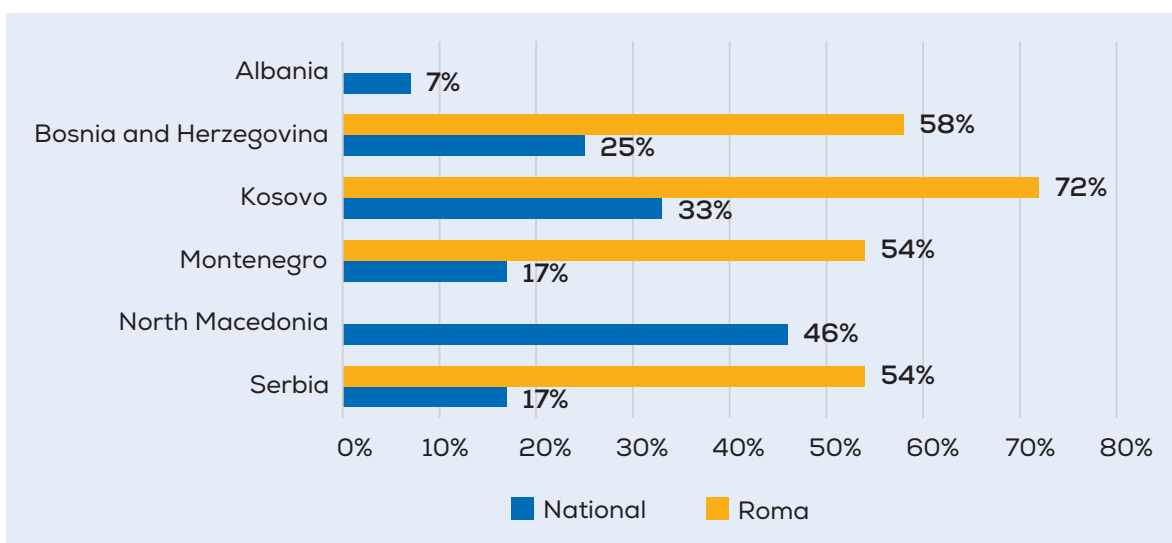
One of the teachers who participated in the FGD in Lezha noted:

I do not think remote learning serves my students of R&E communities, well. Teachers of our school are working on different ways to build effective communication with R&E parents. Nevertheless, it is challenging to replace regular communication with a virtual one, especially given the difficult economic conditions of their families and education capacities of parents."

The first two weeks were chaotic because schools were inexperienced and unprepared to provide remote and online learning. Remote and online learning are even more challenging for Roma children because their families do not have smart technology opportunities, and they usually lack access to the internet. After the third week, teachers started communicating with children even with non-smartphones; children started attending classes through RTSH, and improved Roma children’s inclusion in the remote and online learning was noticed. This situation has led to children losing trust in the school, which can be regained but requires a lot of work and collaboration on the school, municipality, and project.

According to a UNDP study in 2017, the number of Roma families who have a computer at home is the lowest in the region (Figure 20). This study confirms that the number of parents who reported having a computer at home is nearly 0% (only one parent reported that they have a computer). Regarding the internet, 90% of respondents accessed it only by mobile companies.

Figure 19: Households with Computers (in %)



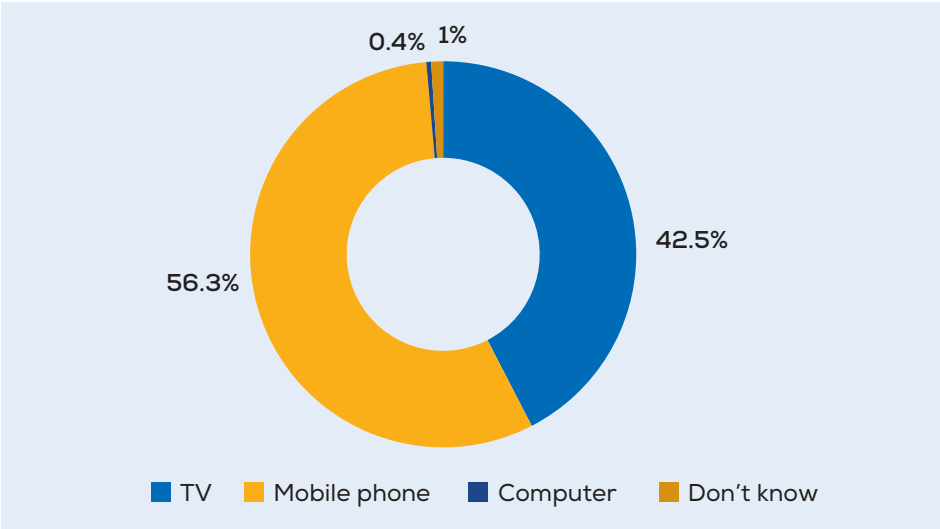
(Source: UNDP Regional survey 2017)

Digital devices have also played a key role in remote and online learning. Nearly all parents who responded to the survey said that they do not have a computer at

home, while one in five declared that they have limited access to the internet. 90% of respondents access the internet through mobile, not broadband, despite their location.

Although remote and online learning classes were broadcasting since the middle of March 2020 daily on the Public Television (RTSH), only 42,4 % of primary school children used this opportunity. Most students received lessons and homework from their teachers through text messages or WhatsApp.

Figure 20: Devices mostly used for remote learning

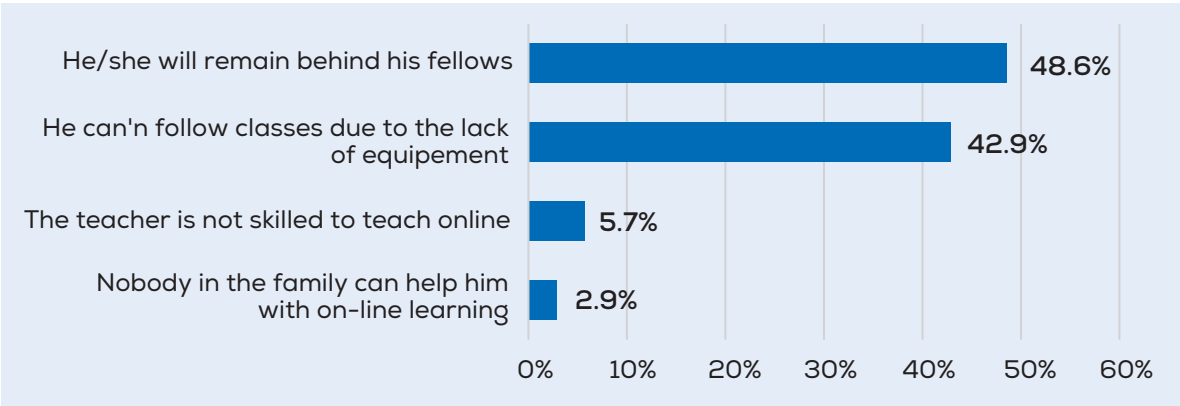


Long term concerns regarding education

Over the long term and while disruption continues, parents of children were more worried about the long-term adverse effects of their child’s performance.

The concerns are different as respondents cite that children do not take remote and online learning seriously; the child does not have a laptop, a smart phone, or internet connection; the teachers are not prepared and skilled enough to operate remote education, and there was no available TV.

Figure 21: Concerns of parents about remote and online learning



When asked to comment on the innovations ideas that schools could use for teaching during the lockdown, the survey respondents mentioned recovering lessons during summer by creating small groups of children in schools where teachers can interact with their children.

Domestic Violence

Evidence from most recent studies (national and local) confirm that physical and sexual violence toward women or children, especially in disadvantaged settlements, intensify during crises. 19 % of respondents reported that domestic violence had increased during the lockdown due to financial and social stress. One must be cautious of this figure, considering that the respondents might not disclose such information.

R&E communities' knowledge, attitudes, and practices to COVID-19

To mitigate the outbreak of COVID-19, the government of Albania imposed drastic lockdown measures. A section of the questionnaire conducted with households revealed that 82 % of respondents held positive attitudes toward government measures. Most participants admitted that they were taking precautions such as avoiding crowds and family events (73.2%); 87.8% of households reported that they practice proper hand hygiene. However, the wearing of face masks was less common (30%).

Two-thirds of respondents (65 %) agreed with the statement that their duties, including housekeeping, childcare, and disabled people responsibilities, increased during the lockdown. This is due to the closure of kindergarten and schools, and adults' inability to go out. A higher share of women (74 %) than men (59 %) reported that their duties increased within the family. The burden of women and their unpaid work within the household increased during the lockdown.

Traditional gender roles, which see women as caregivers and men as breadwinners, became more visible, pushing them further into domestication. Homemakers had challenging times, but even working women had a tough task with household duties.

More than 50 % of respondents consider "high risk" another lockdown soon, the decrease of family incomes, job loss; hardships in providing food for the family; stress caused by the crises. Another lockdown would be devastating for the economic situation of the R&E communities, who would find themselves in challenging economic conditions and minimal access to services, including education and health.

Women perceived COVID-19 to be more prevalent than men. They were more pessimistic than men when asked to make a forecast for unemployment. They were more likely to think another outbreak or lockdown was inevitable by the end of 2020 and were also more concerned about spreading the virus.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This part summarizes critical RNA findings and recommendations on particular matters related to the COVID-19 crises on R&E families in three sites. The chapter also addresses general issues related to the lockdown, providing a case of adequate services delivered for R&E in Albania.

Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on every aspect of R&E lives. It highlighted existing socioeconomic inequalities in living standards (referring to essential food supplies, income, education, employment, and services).

The primary impact of the pandemic and the lockdown has been a limited supply of essential goods and services, including but not limited to, food security and nutrition support, sanitary means, and other basic supplies.

88% of R&E households had to cope with a decrease in their incomes, particularly for those groups that are in low-wage jobs, the self-employed, or informal status of employment. This decrease is accompanied by other critical implications such as limited commitment to children's education, increased anxiety and insecurity, increased domestic violence, and low level of trust in the government's ability to support and assist communities in crisis times.

Only 11% of households reported accessing their right to receive doubled social benefits in cash. Results show that 67% of employed people before lockdown have stopped working since the pandemic outbreak. The COVID-19 crisis and the lockdown expose youngsters to inequalities and exacerbates their situation concerning employment. Those that are more affected by the lockdown situation concerning employment are R&E under 34 years old and those working informally.

The RNA results show that nine out of ten R&E families did not have enough money to cover basic food needs during the lockdown. Results show that 90% of households have been unable or faced difficulties in fulfilling basic food needs. 81 % reported that they did not fully meet the needs for hygiene supplies such as face masks and disinfectants as instructed by health authorities.

Although the social protection system has reacted by doubling the social assistance benefits (social assistance in cash and disability allowance), they are still limited.

R&E working informally does not benefit from these supporting schemes. Also, these schemes are not fully integrated with other social care services.

Targeted assistance to R&E communities lacks with no proper public measure committed specifically to vulnerable R&E populations in response to their emergency needs. Even though the pandemic and the lockdown affect the marginalized communities and those in poverty the most, the government has not introduced specific relief packages for these categories.

100 % of young people interviewed reported that lockdown had disrupted their life and work activities. Complementary services tailored to their social needs from the local government or school have been missing. Attending VET courses is a vital tool to ensure R&E youngsters access in the labor market and income generation. Nonetheless, the lockdown has made it impossible for them to attend such courses, and if soon, VET courses will be organized online, R&E youngsters are at risk of being further marginalized.

The school's closure due to the outbreak of COVID-19 led to an unprecedented impact on education, especially for children of low-income R&E families. Concerning education, 85,4% of the parents reported they could not support their children with remote and online learning devices. Nearly half of parents are dissatisfied with their child's progress and development since lockdown. Education has also been disrupted for R&E children due to the lack of an enabling environment for learning and inadequate remote and online learning tools.

Other, non-material aspects of R&E families' well-being were also affected by the lockdown. Considering that culturally R&E people's relationships provide a vital lifeline in terms of living in large families, helping each other's, conducting many social and cultural activities together, social isolation deprived them and placed a further burden on their well-being. 19 % of respondents reported that domestic violence had increased during the lockdown due to financial and social stress.

Recommendations

This RNA highlights how R&E households and young people encounter specific challenges related to COVID-19, which need to be addressed.

The participatory approach (applied by the HfC project when working with R&E communities) of collaborating closely and designing interventions in consultation with R&E community members, as direct target groups facing pandemic consequences, is also recommended for local government and other local actors. This approach ensures a high level of acceptance and ownership and effective, sustainable results that respond directly to the needs and conditions of R&E communities. It is crucial to continue to support these communities in terms of public information and explain government regulations/orders and other measures so that they are understood and accepted rather than imposed.

While providing essential food supplies is essential and suitable in emergency times, it is not a sustainable solution and does not help families in the long run. Further strengthening opportunities for income generation, employment, and education are highly recommended for R&E communities.

Responsible actors – central and local government, non-governmental organizations providing social services, education institutions, donors, and other stakeholders – must work together, coordinate their efforts and scale up the support provided for R&E communities bearing in mind their particular hardship and conditions in times of crisis. Increasing funding for dedicated support and emergency relief measures for R&E communities is needed and better preparedness of local government, in particular, to cope with a crisis.

Government, social partners, and other public and private institutions must work hand in hand with R&E communities to provide assistance and to cope with emergencies. Building a coalition between public social services providers and civil society organizations in the area can be beneficial to improve the quality, frequency, and reach of social services for R&E communities.

In lieu of the COVID-19 pandemic reality and its implications, connecting to the Internet, having necessary technology (smartphones, PCs, tablets, laptops, or other devices), and developing digital skills are becoming fundamental predispositions for accessing education, employment, generating income, and having equal opportunities in all aspects of life. In this light, R&E communities, who currently lack behind in all these aspects, must be supported to have a connection to the Internet, be adequately equipped to be able to attend remote and online learning, and they need to be supported to develop their digital skills. Public social services providers, local government, NGOs, donors, and other actors must work together and coordinate their efforts to build up and strengthen R&E communities' digital access and skills, particularly youth. Another way would be to facilitate broadband connection through cooperation with internet companies that can offer this part of their corporate social responsibility program.

Public social services providers, local government, NGOs, donors, and other actors

must work together and coordinate their efforts to provide training to teachers to develop remote learning with a focus on pedagogy and learning, given the recently adopted competency-based curriculum (which emphasizes knowledge, skills, and attitudes) rather than technology. Teachers should be central to mitigating the impact of remote and online learning to make the best of their skills in remote teaching and when schools re-open.

Public social services providers, local government, NGOs, donors, and other actors must work together and coordinate their efforts to provide innovative solutions for remote learning that are appropriate to R&E children such as getting children together in small groups to access internet and devices.

Given the fact that VET services were interrupted entirely during the lockdown, provision of employability support through online counseling and mentoring and offer referral services for R&E youth must be provided by both governmental bodies and NGOs in order to make them able to find a job, generate income and access labor market.

Considering that the lockdown has proven particularly hard for women and girls with increased housework burden and even domestic violence, stakeholders' cooperation is needed in order to implement a multi-sectorial response that applies a gender lens for R&E communities and relevant intervention and programs.

Communication and outreach activities suitable for R&E communities are also essential. NGOs and other actors need to disseminate information about available assistance, services, health information, and recommendations on supporting families with virtual studying for their children via WhatsApp and social media.

Other alternative ways of engaging R&E youth need to be developed in light of the COVID-19 pandemic reality with online engagement and volunteering opportunities for R&E youth being an example that can allow them to contribute and have some positive impact on their community in the lockdown.

In this regard, education and social protection systems must be well-funded and closely interrelated. Additional efforts are needed on the government's side to prepare the youth workforce, tackle education inequalities, and boost participation in the labor market.

