

## Policy Discourse on Marginalised Youth in Albania: The Constraints of the 'Normalisation' and 'Integration' Policy Approaches for Inclusive Education

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### Abstract

The paper addresses the complex phenomenon of marginalised youth and particularly children in street situation in the Albanian contemporary society. Through a qualitative methodology of critical discourse analysis, the paper investigates the most relevant policy documents on inclusive education for marginalised youth in Albania. The paper is interested in exploring the conceptualisation of marginalised youth, specifically children in street situation, as embedded in policy documents, action plans and intervention programmes for inclusive education. The intention here is to discover the explicit and implicit themes of the policy discourse on marginalised youth in Albania and the how it impacts the approaches adopted by the government to address the phenomenon. The critical discourse analysis on policy framework shows that the discourse on marginalised youth in the public sphere (re)produces and reinforces already existing aspects of social deprivation, marginalization and discrimination. The research shows that there are limited efforts to elaborate the concepts of 'marginalised youth' and 'children in street situation' and that there is confusion in policy regarding the use of the terms. In addition, children in street situation are seen either as victims of socio-economic hardship and endangered by their presence in the spaces of the 'street' or as a possible threat to the rest of the society, i.e. the street criminalises children. The research shows two main policy approaches: (i) correctional or repressive-oriented policy approach that conceives 'street children' as a danger to public order whose features differentiate from mainstream childhood and as such invites intervention programmes that tend to 'normalise' children; (ii) protective or rehabilitative policy approaches, i.e. emphasising children needs and aiming at protecting and re-integrating them in family and mainstream society. The paper takes a critical stance on the current policy discourse and the consequent policy approaches of 'normalisation' and 'integration' and argues for a reconceptualization of children in street situation as social actors based on the notion of childhood as socially constructed. It is thus necessary to link research on the socialisation processes, identity construction and resilience of marginalised youth in the spaces of the street based on their dynamic lifestyles and perspectives with policy development. \*

**Keywords:** Policy Discourse Marginalised Youth Albania Constraints 'Normalisation' 'Integration' Policy Approaches Inclusive Education

### Introduction

This article addresses the complex phenomenon of 'street children' in Albania. 'Street children' face multifaceted deprivation, social, economic, cultural and political exclusion, negative public perceptions and as such are placed at the outer margins of the mainstream society. While 'street children' have been the centre of intensive research at the level of practice and policy, there is relatively isolated systematic research on street children in the academic sphere. Research on 'street children' in Albania has mainly focused on the success and failures of interventions, programmes and strategies designed and implemented by certain governmental and non-governmental organizations. The phenomenon has been seen mostly in terms of social inequalities, human trafficking, economic deprivation, causes of the phenomenon and consequences for child development and society at large. While all these studies are crucial to addressing the phenomenon, they fall short of taking into account 'street children' as active agents in social and identity constructions, the dynamics of

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\* The paper draws from the findings of a research project conducted by the author and supported by the Fellowship Programme of the Open Society Foundation for Albania. The project investigated the intervention programmes designed and developed by the governmental and non-governmental organizations in Albania for the inclusion of street children in education. The methods applied: document analysis and in-depth interviews. The full research project is in publication processes by the OSFA.

the social organization of their lives within the spaces of the street, the complexities of their lifestyles and diversity of their profiles and their 'street identities'. The purpose of this article is to critically analyse the conceptual framework on 'street children' as embedded in the intervention programmes of governmental organisations in Albania in various policy areas such as inclusive education.

This article conceives childhood as a process that is socially constructed and thus it depends on culture, political and historical contexts. In this sense it is the social space that determines how childhood is lived through. It is necessary to appreciate that 'street children' do not form a homogeneous, clearly defined social category; rather they constitute an entity with diverse profiles and complex lifestyles which depend upon dynamic contexts. Drawing from the findings of a regional research project on 'street children' in the Western Balkans [1], the article suggests a need for a re-conceptualisation of 'street children' as agents or capable social actors with their own rights and freedoms and as such 'street children' need to be brought from the margins into the focus of policy-making processes and research.

### **The fluidity of the concept of 'street children'**

The first international legal initiative regarding the rights of the child was the UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child in 1959 and in November 1989 the UN General Assembly approved the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, setting out the concept of the Child, rights and entitlements as well as envisaging the role of families and the government [2]. Given that childhood is socially constructed [3] and the concept of childhood varies across cultures, local contexts and time [4], the power relations concerning the discussion on the best interests of the child is of extremely relevant. The Convention places children at the centre of policy making and as such the government is required to take into account the impact of each policy on children. This entails active consultation with and participation by children in policy-making processes. The Albanian Government has introduced legislation, policies and intervention programmes that draw from the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The adoption and ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and its successful enforcement are two different things and despite the good intent, the phenomenon of 'street children' is still persistent in the Albania contemporary society.

The concept of 'street children' as defined by the United Nations refers not only to homeless children, but to children who might be working on the street, school drop outs and extremely poor children. This concept has been criticized since it constructs negative perceptions on children and lacks attention to the interrelations amongst various dimensions of the street children phenomenon [5]. The most commonly used definition is that of the United Nations Children's Fund. UNICEF categorizes street children into children 'on the street' and children 'of the street'. The former maintain family connections but receive inadequate family support, whereas the latter live without family support and spend day and night on the street [3].

This definition categorizes street children based on family connection and intensity of involvement on the street, but it is oversimplified and fails to envisage the complex relations that children have with family and other actors. The definition on street children as proposed by UNICEF and taken by other international organisations is not just a description of a social phenomenon, it is a dominant discourse, socially constructed and employed by UN and UNICEF and other international organisations, to raise awareness regarding the phenomenon of street children and to legitimise their actions and programmes [4]. This discourse has significant implications for 'street children' as it constructs a picture of children and their families as lacking the values of the dominant society and thus reinforces their exclusion and marginalisation. It is widely recognised that children and particularly 'street children' constitute a heterogeneous group and it is very difficult to provide a comprehensive definition, thus we need to accept the fluidity of the term [3] [4].

### **'Street children' as social actors and inclusive education policy in Albania**

The way 'street children' are conceptualised impacts the type of policy and intervention programme being implemented. In addition, the wider policy landscape in a given context, i.e. national strategies on marginalised groups, juvenile justice system and social welfare, including education, housing and health impact concrete action plans to address the 'street children' phenomenon. A recently conducted research project [6] demonstrates that the discourse on 'street children' in the public sphere (re)produces and reinforces already existing aspects of social deprivation, marginalization and discrimination of these children and their families. The complex phenomenon of 'street children' is principally covered within the framework of human rights and children rights legislation and public policy such as social inclusion, health policy, educational policy and protection of children programmes. National legislation is in line with international legal framework on human rights. Concrete intervention programmes for 'street children' are mainly the initiatives of non-governmental organisations in partnership with local actors.

The research demonstrates that 'street children' is understood as a socially constructed category that, in practice, does not constitute a homogeneous population, making the term difficult to use for research, policymaking and intervention design. Terminology has continued to evolve to recognize children as social actors whose lives are not circumscribed by the street. Human Rights Council resolution 16/12 refers to children working and/or living on the street, and the Committee on the Rights of the Child has adopted the term "children in street situations". However, the research shows that there are limited efforts to elaborate the concept of 'street children' and that there is confusion in policy regarding the use of the term. In addition, 'street children' are seen either as victims of socio-economic hardship and endangered by their presence in the spaces of the 'street' or as a possible threat to the rest of the society, i.e. the street criminalises children.

The research shows two main policy approaches: (i) correctional or repressive-oriented policy approach that conceives 'street children' as a danger to public order whose features differentiate from mainstream childhood and as such invites intervention programmes that tend to 'normalise' children as in the case of the National Strategy for Improving the Living Conditions of Roma community in Albania; (ii) protective or rehabilitative policy approaches, i.e. emphasising children needs and aiming at protecting and re-integrating them in family and mainstream society as demonstrated in the National Strategy for Children in Albania. Recent intervention programmes from non-governmental organisations draw from the conceptualisation of children as social actors and attempt to include children in research and development of intervention programmes.

In this regard the socialisation processes and the ways in which children in street situation identify themselves is particularly relevant. For instance, despite the negative connotations of the terms 'street children', research [7] shows that children use it with pride and that they are proud of themselves in that they help their families and peers while working. Children in the spaces of the street demonstrate complex and diverse profiles; males predominate among 'street children', although females are also represented. They fear authorities and being arrested or getting sick. They have a positive image of themselves and are able to communicate their plans for the future, for instance they express their wish to go to school, but then the drop-out rates are very high. Rather than getting knowledge and acquiring skills through formal education, they demonstrate remarkable numeracy skills, communication competencies and negotiating skills which have been acquired through non-formal education and their struggles in the spaces of the street.

Taking their complex and diverse profiles into account, recent intervention programmes from non-governmental organisations in Albania draw from the conceptualisation of children as social actors and attempt to include children in research and development of intervention programmes. This paper suggests that there is a need to link research on the socialisation processes, identity construction and resilience of 'street children' in the spaces of the street based on their dynamic lifestyles and perspectives with policy development. This entails a deconstruction of the limits of discourse on 'street children' and an in-depth and critical analysis of the concept of 'street children' in policy development as well as a conceptualisation of children based on their rights.

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