

Post COVID-19 in Recovery in Informal Settlements in the UNECE Region

Emergency response and building back better

ASSESSMENT REPORT FOR TIRANA (ALBANIA)

Context

In the 1990s, over two-thirds of the population of Albania lived in rural areas. At that time, radical political changes brought about new phenomena, such as internal migration of the population stimulated with an simultaneously dismantling of agricultural cooperatives, causing an abnormal situation and high pressure mostly around big cities. Cities were not prepared to receive the newcomers due to a lack of serviced urban land, or a housing market, as well as other infrastructures. In the absence of affordable or social housing policies, they settled in informal settlements at the urban fringes.

Legal and institutional framework

For many years the property restitution and legalization sector have been subject of an institutional fragmentation prone to several institutions (IPRO, ALUIZNI, AITPP etc.), non-unified information bases (legal and graphical included) and lack of coordination. Because of these dysfunctional instruments measures undertaken did not produced the expected results (based on the specialization/differentiation of each structure), not only towards productivity (none of the processes may be considered completed or towards completion), but, above all, towards the quality of the tasks accomplished. It is already known that the errors/inaccuracies associated with initial registration of properties have resulted in the need for creation of a new “upgrade/update” process of the immovable property registry (which consists in correcting these errors). All this has weakened the trust of citizens in the cadastral and land administration system. However, the new law 111/2018 on the Cadastre merged all the above institutions into the SCA, making it the main responsible actor in the sector. While, the approval of the new law on legalization No. 20/2020 has eliminated many unnecessary links providing fast procedures and simplified documentation, thus easing the bureaucratic burden on stakeholders. At the same time given to the SCA the right to process ex officio, during the initial registration, improvement of the cadastral zone or tracking process of the illegal constructions for which no application or self-declaration has been made possible since the date of entry into force of this law.

Informal Settlement in Tirana

According to Tirana General Local Plan TR030, informal areas in the urban area of Tirana have a reduction to a surface of approximately 175 ha, from 2,512 ha, initially approved by ALUIZNI in 2014. The typology of informal areas in Tirana is characterized of informal structures mostly having a residential function, but not only, and which are organized as a family units of 2 or 3 floors high (sometime even higher) and rarely associated with self-employment small business facilities. Mostly built after 1990s they generally lack land ownership, building permits and proper access to city infrastructure. The road network has an organic matrix, and is weakly related to urban services and other social services. Informal settlements occupy 41% of the total living area in Tirana, while carrying 34% of its population. Most of the informal areas in Tirana are not connected to wastewater collectors, the sewage system for wastewater collection built in the 60's is insufficient to cope with the informal areas developed throughout the last decades. There are also issues regarding the supply with energy and other utilities. Illegal connections to the energy and/or water networks are very common as well as insufficient bill collection for the billed energy and water. Illegal water supply connections mainly come from informal areas that if compared to the total area where UKT operates makes up to over 26% of connections.

Selected Informal Settlement- Lapraka

The Administrative Unit no. 11 otherwise known as “**Lapraka**” has long been known as one of the most problematic areas in the city concerning informal areas. Though being inside the city borders (in a popular language known as the yellow line), before the administrative-territorial reform of 2015, Lapraka was considered mainly a suburban area, with affordable house prices and well connected to the center of the city. Lapraka's population has six folded in 20 years, from around 10,642 in 1993 to about 65,354 today. Urbanization resulted in serious urban problems such as shortages in infrastructure, particularly in housing. Most of the informal housing are built without a project design but rather designed by the needs of the inhabitants who own the houses; the November earthquakes which struck Albania, showed that the quality of construction was very poor especially in the informal settlements, as it was constructed without a building permit and have largely not gone through the

process of verifying the applicability of standards, both during the design and the execution of works, especially from the aspect of seismic risk. Apart from the fast urbanization that has resulted in lack of public or green space in and/or services like playgrounds, non-compliance with proper distances, Lapraka is also one of the most flood prone areas in the city.

As one of the five strategic poles for the development of a Polycentric Tirana, Lapraka has recently undergone some formalization exertions and is experiencing major infrastructure investments especially in its southern and northern part: the bike path and the Great Ring Road; the new green corridor along the river will be the northern part of the projected “Orbital Forest” one of the main strategic projects of the city; improvement works for the riverbed and flooding problems, greening of the riverbanks to create a green corridor throughout the whole river trail and adjoining neighborhoods; new schools are being constructed to improve the situation of this unit to address issues regarding with overcrowded schools, etc.

Challenges and recommendations

Still a high number of objects without legalization permits, which referring to SCA reports account for about 280.000 objects-buildings yet not legalized in Albania and specifically more than 8,000 in Lapraka, pose the challenges of informal settlements that have once again been thrown into the spotlight in the midst of the current pandemic situation. Closer collaboration between the Municipality of Tirana and the SCA is fundamental in order to advance the legalization process in the informal settlements.

There is yet an ongoing need to further escalate urban rehabilitation and *upgrade*, improve infrastructure and services in Lapraka informal settlement, which when addressed will contribute to improve in general the city' equitability, resilience and sustainability. As well as improving living conditions and overall public health, transportation, waste management, access to water and sanitation facilities (in the case of Roma community in this area, rapid installations of temporary, low-cost facilities are a quick solution to providing water and sanitation facilities during the pandemic). With their ownership titles recognized, residents may have more economic stability and better access work opportunities and formal work structures.

Although social protection schemes are among the most effective interventions in the fight against vulnerability; the pandemic crisis has revealed insufficient to provide adequate assistance (as it still end up excluding several vulnerable groups such as those working in the informal sector). The study of World Vision Albania on “Impact assessment of the COVID-19 outbreak on wellbeing of children and families in Albania” shows that 75.5% of the families do not fully meet food needs, 83.3% of them do not fully meet needs for disinfectants and face masks and 71.9% of families do not fully meet needs for necessary hygiene sets which are essential in the time of pandemic. It is important to design specific packages for informal settlements that address meeting the needs to prevent the spread of pandemic (food, disinfectants and face masks and necessary hygiene sets - shampoo, toothbrushes, feminine hygiene products, and other personal care items).

Citizens have still to further gain trust in government to provide security of tenure throughout all this time. *Public awareness and education*, professional capacity building, professional ethics and codes in property ownership related and environmental aspects must be further improved.

The Municipality of Tirana does not have an emergency preparedness or disaster response plan, nor any strategic document approaching crisis management as part of its own function of civil emergency plan. Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic crisis was initially managed solely from the central government. For the local government to fulfil a more significant role in crisis management it is critical that the central government consolidates (i) the institutional framework and provides (ii) the national plans on which local plans may be elaborated.

During the first quarter of 2020 the collected own revenues of the municipality of Tirana have decreased by 14% in comparison to the same quarter of year 2019. According to the most recent study on the local government in the COVID-19 pandemic situation, conducted from of Co-Plan and the Association of Local Autonomy in Albania, generally across all municipalities the collection of revenues is expected to be difficult throughout 2020, which creates further financial insufficiency for the city to fulfill its function on civil emergency plans, therefore support from central government through unconditional or even conditional transfers should be considered to make executing this mandate. In addition, it is important to note, that the inadequacy of local financial resources limits principally the building of local human capacities for strategic planning for civil protection and emergency response.