



Presentation file for the Albania - Greece programme



Context

Given the considerable increase in information received from countries that intervene in child trafficking and from the media, *Terre des hommes* in 1998 organised a seminar with magistrates, lawyers, police officers, journalists and witnesses on the specific action it is taking as an NGO with respect to this matter. Out of this seminar came a document entitled "*Practical Guide from an NGO dealing with child trafficking*" that provided some practical instruments for the collection and verification of information, the interviewing of witnesses, the comparison of laws and that showed ways in which NGOs could intervene with the police and the courts (without replacing them).

In October 1999, *Terre des hommes* took on Mrs. Nathalie HEPPELL, a former Canadian police officer, to lead an investigation into the trafficking of Albanian children in Greece, in response to information communicated by the Albanian Foundation "NPF", the *Terre des hommes* correspondent in the three Albanian towns of Elbasan, Korce and Berat. The temporary or final disappearance of children from schooling programmes gave rise to a strong presumption that they were victims of organized trafficking.

This document reproduces the chronology of a double-faceted activity that has been under way for 18 months – investigation in Greece and prevention in Albania.

A file of the *Terre des hommes* Foundation, October 2001

1. First phase : Initial investigation

This first report is the result of interviews conducted between October 1999 and January 2000 with about a hundred children, parents, school principals, social workers and other persons responsible for schools, maternity clinics, adoption and rehabilitation centres, police stations, government institutions, NGOs, international organisations, United Nations agencies in Greece and Albania and national and international firms of lawyers. The aim was to confirm or not the existence of a traffic in Albanian children.

More than a thousand Albanian children in Greece

The children are in general between four and fifteen years old and come for most part from the Rom ethnic minority. But there are also many Albanian children, their ethnic group not being the main criterion. They often come from broken families – single-parent families, those with alcoholism or unemployment problems, large or poverty-stricken families.

We estimate that more than a thousand such children have been snatched from their home environment and are working in Greece. This figure can double in summer or during the religious festivals. The majority of the children are from Elbasan and Korce. We also met several that came from the villages to the south of Albania on the Greek border.

When their parents agree to let them leave for Greece, it is on the promise that they will receive 25 to 50% of the child's income. In fact, what they do receive is a pitiful sum. Some children are snatched and taken to Greece by force. Parents are ignorant of their rights and have no idea how to recover their child. In this country, that has been subjected to decades of totalitarianism, there exists a fear of the "all powerful" authorities. Parents often have no photos to help in the search. And for them to seek their child in Greece themselves is as good as impossible, given the discouraging nature of the procedures for obtaining a visa.

The terrible living conditions of the "Robots"

Each day, the children make their way towards Greece over mountain trails. They sleep by day and travel by night to escape the surveillance of customs officers, and they live with the fear of being caught by the police and the soldiers that monitor the customs posts. The journeys on foot last 2 to 8 days and those who cannot keep up are abandoned along the way. Their only food is cheese and water.

Hundreds of Albanian children work in the main Greek towns begging, selling handkerchiefs or flowers, washing car windows, selling religious cards, singing and dancing or simply stealing from shops. They work 12 to 15 hours a day, until they have accumulated the sum determined by their "owners". Their incomes vary between 10 000 and 20 000 drachmas a day, equivalent to between 30 and 60 dollars.

They do not go to school, they work every day, they have no friends, nor leisure, nor education, nor love and or comfort, nor access to health services (unless they are injured in an accident) because their presence is illegal. They wander from one place to another to avoid being noticed. Among themselves, the children called themselves the "Robots".

The daily cruelties suffered

Most of them are accompanied by an adult who exploits them and mistreats them if they fail to earn enough. Many children described to us how their "owners" force them to sleep outside or to swallow a shampoo solution to make them sick, burn them with cigarettes, hit them and insult them ...

The director of an organisation in Athens told us that one of the boys that had benefited from their services but had disappeared some months earlier had recently been seen in Athens with an arm amputated. They asked him what had happened to him; he answered with bowed head that he had had no choice but to return to Albania and have his arm amputated so that he could earn more money by begging...¹

¹ Interview with Mr. Yanopoulos, Director of Smile of the Child, a Greek NGO, on 23 December 1999.

As they often work at crossroads, they fall victim to many accidents whereupon they are abandoned by their "owners" who thus avoid having to pay hospital expenses. They sleep in the open air or under plastic tents on the outskirts of the towns. They speak Greek very well; it is therefore easy to believe that they are of Greek descent. The deception goes as far as giving the child a Greek-sounding name. They have no proof of identity, which makes them very vulnerable. Some disappear without anyone giving a care.

The dangers of returning to Albania

If they go back to Albania, it is because they have been arrested by the police or soldiers that patrol the borders and whom they fear. All the children who have been arrested tell us the same thing – that they are placed in narrow, crowded cells that they call 'air or pee rooms' because of the lack of oxygen and the sickening odour.² They are often placed in the same cells as adults in violation of article 37 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Once arrested, one of two things can happen. The police hold teenagers of more than twelve years old in police cells until they have collected a sufficient number of Albanians to justify transporting them to the border. There, they are simply released. The traffickers wait for them on the Albanian side to send back them to Greece.

If they are less than twelve years old, they are placed in government institutions until the family is tracked down. The National Centre for the Protection of Children tells us that of 272 cases last year, it had been possible to reunite two children with their families!

A difficult investigation

Many Albanian children in Greece are afraid to speak. We did, nevertheless, manage to collect many testimonies which tallied, once we had established an atmosphere of trust. The Albanian families are also very reluctant to admit that their daughter is a prostitute in Italy and the law of silence still reigns in Albania.

There is a lack of information on disappeared children. In Greece, at institutional level, it was difficult to find the children who disappeared from our programmes, mainly because of the change of the children's identity and because we have no photographs.

The suspicion that those we questioned were involved in corruption together with the general quasi indifference more than once prevented me from making any progress in my investigations.

Conclusions

The conclusions are alarming – the streets of Thessalonica and Athens swarm with Albanian children, often ill-fed and maltreated by their "owners", but "lent" by their parents to increase the family income. We estimate that there must be more than one thousand Albanian children in Greece.

The children have simply been sold. Two young sisters aged three and four disappeared. They were registered at birth with the Registrar's Department but have not been seen again for more than two years! A man bought a boy in Tirana with a view to selling him in Greece. There were complications in the move to Greece and the boy is still living with his 'adoptive' family in Albania.

As for child workers in Greece, they have no protection other than that of their "owner" who has 'trained' them so well that they spy on one another and view any help as threatening and suspicious.

In Greece, these testimonies are only the tip of the iceberg of the distress and violations to which these children are subjected every day. These children are called "Robots", they live far from home with adults who treat them like vulgar merchandise. Some disappear without leaving a trace and no-one cares.

² In this respect, see the public denunciation by Amnesty International on 14 August 1998, 'Inhuman prison conditions in Drapetsona, Athens.' (www.amnesty.org/news/1998)

2. SECOND PHASE :PROGRAMME IN ALBANIA

P.R.A.E.V.E – "Prevention, Reintegration and Assistance for Child Victims of Exile"

This project was implemented in 2001, together with the correspondent association NPF, with the agreement of the Albanian authorities and the support of UNICEF (Tirana), and the OAK Foundation (Geneva). The objectives of this programme are to prevent the risks of exile by making 3000 children of the of Elbasan and Korce regions aware of the problem and, with the support of the schools and parents, to set up a recording and detection system for children at risk, as well as a system of intervening directly to help "high-risk" children.

Various activities are planned to meet the objectives of the PRAEVE programme, such as the production and distribution of material (booklets, posters, videos, etc.) to make people more aware of the problem and the creation of a record card with a photo for each child. Two local exile prevention observatories will be created in Elbasan and Korce. Moreover, teaching material on school dropouts and the risks of street life have been prepared for the attention of teachers.

At the same time, the *Terre des Hommes* Delegation in Albania acts as co-ordinator between national and foreign NGOs working on child trafficking. Given the proportions of the phenomenon, it is essential that every NGO know the expertise, means, objectives and territories of the others and that, globally, the standards used for detecting, registering, repatriating and reintegrating the children be harmonised.

3. THIRD PHASE : NEW INVESTIGATION IN GREECE

The TdH and NPF teams returned to Thessalonica and Athens in May and June 2001 to take stock of the situation for a second time. We noticed a considerable reduction in the number of children in the urban centres. Nevertheless, we did find several of them in the places frequented by tourists, selling flowers or handkerchiefs. It is estimated that their numbers in the towns were down to less than 20% of the total number in 1999. The begging and torn, dirty clothes have disappeared making way for better cared for and better clothed Albanian boys and girls. Yet, the report of this reduction in the number of begging children in Greece is in contradiction with the reports on the spot in Albania, from where children continue to leave for Greece.

The children in Greece are for the most part from the same regions of Albania. Most of them are new faces. Many children now pass through Macedonia on their way to Greece because the crossing is easier (fewer mountains). We also observed a large number of children of various nationalities such as Iraqi (Kurdish), Greek, Afghan and Russian.

A better organised network

Nowadays, the network is better organised. The children work in groups of 4-5 under the close surveillance of a slightly older teenager who directs them and makes sure that they do not hang around to answer questions from over-curious customers. As begging is still an offence in Greece, they sell flowers, handkerchiefs and balls or play music at tables in restaurants.

These children no longer speak so freely. It is only after several meetings that they admit that they are with an 'aunt', a term used to designate their "owner". They survive by lying. They say they are Greek, that they are with their family and that they go to school. They themselves are duped – they believe that the street educators and the police are their enemies or that their family will not receive any money if they are caught.

Greece, a country of transit

Greece is a country of transit and destination for the child traffickers. We noted a massive movement of children as 80% of them are no longer there today. At the same time, there is a new phenomenon – they are arriving in Athens by clandestine boats carrying a number of unaccompanied children. They come from several countries of Africa, Asia and Eastern and Central Europe (Sierra Leone, Eritrea, Kashmir, Iraq, Turkey, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Romania, Albania, etc.). Several boats carrying asylum-seekers, refugees and traffic of all kinds are of Turkish origin. The cost of the trip is about 1500 USD. The network prepares the unaccompanied child sent to Greece in advance by telling it what to say, what to ask and where to live. An unaccompanied child elicits more sympathy from the authorities. Once its situation has been legalised, the child asks to be reunited with its family.³ The danger is that the child will remain alone and therefore vulnerable to trafficking.

A girl is more valuable

Between 17 and 29 November 2000, the most advanced survey to date of the phenomenon of street children, was conducted by the Greek UNICEF Committee. This survey estimates at more than 5800 the number of children (60% boys) working at traffic lights in the Athens region.⁴

It teaches us that 30% of the street children in Athens are Albanian, that 75% of the children are aged between 2 and 12, that only 20% of them regularly go to school and that 83% are apparently here with at least one parent. But experience has shown that the children conceal the truth about their identity and their living conditions in order not to be discovered.

Nearly 20% of the children say that they live in abandoned houses, tents, temporary dwellings or are homeless and close to 25% say that they live in old houses. Half of them work from 8 to 20 hours a day.

We can estimate, from these studies, that between 30 and 50% of the street children in Athens live in extreme cases of exploitation. It should finally be mentioned that it is more difficult to rescue girls than boys. A girl has a higher market value because, after working the streets, she can be sold off to a prostitution network. The owner therefore ensures that his girls do not go off to seek help.

The disappearance of Albanian children

There are various theories about the disappearance of the children identified more than one year earlier. Firstly, the summer is a low season for work in the urban centres and it is plausible that the children migrate to the country to help with fruit harvesting or to other tourist places.

Secondly, a move to Western Europe is considered a possibility (Belgium, Italy, Switzerland, Germany, Britain) for the purpose of sexual exploitation or other illegal activities. Many reports by governments and non-governmental organisations, including those of *Child Focus* (Belgium) and *Save the Children* (UK) confirm the presence many Albanian children in Western Europe. The *Save the Children* survey of the situation of separated children in Western Europe was conducted in five destination countries and in Albania (source and transit). There are apparently more than 30'000 Albanian prostitutes in Western Europe,⁵ of which 5% are minors.⁶ According to the Belgian police, Albanian girls between 14 and 15 constitute close to half the foreigners in Belgium forced into prostitution.⁷ Italy has more than 25'000 prostitutes on its territory and minors account for close to 9% of the total. Albanian girls would account for close to 41% of these minors.⁸ The *Save the Children* report on Albania advances the number of 6000 Albanian prostitutes in Greece.⁹

³ These are known as "anchor children".

⁴ "The traffic-light children of Athens" made by the ALKO company for the Greek UNICEF Committee in November 2000. The information section told me these figures were right.

⁵ Wendy Ayotte. 'Separated children coming to Western Europe'. Save the Children, 2000

⁶ German Federal Department of Criminal Investigation. Percentage for Germany.

⁷ The Protection Project: Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Women and Children: A Human Rights Report. Albania. January 2001.

⁸ Italian Government Census 1998.

⁹ Save the Children, Albania. 'Child Trafficking in Albania'. Daniel Renton, March 2001. No figure is given for the number of minors.

The third theory is that a number of children might be in Greek institutions, transit or detention centres, police stations, shelters or orphanages. Close to 700 children were collected by the police between October 1998 and December 2000 and placed in national institutions. However, they all seemed to have escaped, with the exception of two children who were taken back to their parents in Albania.¹⁰ According to the same source there are 41 Albanian children under the authority of the Health Ministry¹¹ and 340 minors in the correction centre for youngsters between 15 and 21 years at Avlona, of which about a hundred are Albanian.¹²

There is also the possibility that children return to Albania. But on the contrary, there is a fear that some children completely disappear, are sold off and sent elsewhere or are killed in an accident or voluntarily. The Italian Home Ministry reported 168 foreign prostitutes murdered in 2000, most of whom were Albanian! The violence of this network has been deplored time and again.

4. REPATRIATION PHASE

Since our two visits to Greece and with the close co-operation of the Filoksania company of Thessalonica, more than ten children have been repatriated to their families in Albania and have now benefited from our programmes.

Since this survey, the children and families, beneficiaries of our programmes in Albania, will henceforth all be photographed so that they can be identified in case of disappearance.

The repatriation of Albanian children, victims of cross-border trafficking is however extremely complex for various reasons:

- All Albanian families have one or more members abroad, back from abroad or preparing to go abroad. Expatriation is a collective phenomenon.
- It is essential that all repatriation be conducted according to procedures accepted by the authorities of the two countries concerned.
- It is essential that the children want and accept this repatriation to be with their families, because for some of them, the prospect of a return is no more attractive than remaining in Greece.
- All repatriation presupposes reintegration and that the family is motivated, failing which the child – with or without its consent – will drift back into trafficking.

So the work being done by *Terre des Hommes* therefore consists in encouraging the Albanian authorities and NGOs to meet the Greek authorities and NGOs over this phenomenon of child trafficking so that they can co-operate on the criteria for analysing the situation of child trafficking victims, on the procedures accepted by the two sides and on the financing of repatriation, in compliance with their respective laws and international standards.

¹⁰ Social workers considered this operation a fiasco because the aim of the police was "to clean up the streets" and not to cope with the problem.

¹¹ Interview with Mrs. Krysoula, National Welfare Organisation, on 5 June 2001 in Athens. This fairly small number is explained by the fact that they escape from the institutions, often with the help of their "owners".

¹² Interview with Mr. George Moschos of the NGO ARSIS, Athens, June 2001 (unofficial figures)