

# Albania Pathway on the Transition From Institutional Care to Community-Based Services

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*Note: This report was prepared by the association Nisma për Ndryshim Shoqëror ARSIS in cooperation with UNICEF Albania. The report is a summary of all the work carried out by the Nisma ARSIS program in collaboration with UNICEF Albania team, the results achieved, the challenges and recommendations for the process of deinstitutionalization of children in Albania, for the period October 2018-February 2024.*



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# Abbreviations

<b>SARPC</b>	State Agency for Child Rights and Protection
<b>De-I</b>	De-Institutionalization
<b>GDHSPP</b>	General Directorate of Health and Social Protection Policies
<b>RDSSS</b>	Regional Directorate of the State Social Service
<b>FCF</b>	Foster Care Family
<b>ITG</b>	Intersectoral Technical Group
<b>TWG</b>	Technical Working Group for the implementation of the national plan of De-I
<b>BIC</b>	Best Interest of the Child
<b>RCI</b>	Residential Care Institutions
<b>AC</b>	Alternative Care
<b>PAC</b>	Professional Alternative Care
<b>SC</b>	Steering Committee for the implementation of the national plan of De-I
<b>MHSP</b>	Ministry of Health and Social Protection

<b>Nisma ARSIS</b>	Initiative for Social Change ARSIS
<b>AU</b>	Administrative Unit
<b>CPU</b>	Child Protection Unit
<b>LGU</b>	Local Government Units
<b>NARU</b>	Needs Assessment and Referral Unit
<b>NPO</b>	Non-Profit Organization
<b>IDP</b>	Individual Development Plan
<b>CPW</b>	Child Protection Officer
<b>NPD</b>	National Plan for Deinstitutionalization
<b>SC</b>	Save the Children in Albania
<b>CCS</b>	Child Care Specialist
<b>LCT</b>	Local Coordinating Teams
<b>SSS</b>	State Social Service
<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations Children's Fund





# Executive Summary

The Albanian Government is in constant efforts to improve the system of care for children, and with special attention to children without parental care placed in residential services in Social Care Institutions.

Nisma ARSIS's journey in the Deinstitutionalization process started in 2018, with the formalization of cooperation with UNICEF Albania within the framework of Call no. TOR-ALBA-2018-021 for "National Institutional Consultancy to support the Ministry of Health and Social Protection (MHSP) to assess children in Public Residential Care Institutions and to plan their family reunification or in other family-based care alternatives". The Albanian Government had already acknowledged that institutional residential care services do not offer children without parental care the best opportunity to grow and develop in a healthy way. The Memorandum of Cooperation signed on November 22, 2018 with no. 6706 prot., defined the terms of cooperation between the Ministry of Health and Social Protection, UNICEF Albania and Save the Children.

It was this national consultancy that aimed to support the MHSP to advance in the first phase of the deinstitutionalization process in the realization of three main objectives:

1. the assessment of children placed in 4 public RCI, (Child home 0-5 years old Durrës, Child Home 0 - 5 years old Vlorë, Children's Home "Lulet e Vogla" Korçë and Youth's Home 16-18 years old Shkodër) and their biological families;
2. Development of individual plans for each assessed child;
3. Consultation with local actors, municipalities and all key partners in this process for the future of care institutions.


As a result of the implementation of the first phase during the year 2018-2019, the Nisma ARSIS team evaluated **68 children placed in 4 public RCIs** and 45 of their families, through a unified methodology approved by the MHSP, which also included the individual development plan and the de-institutionalization plan for each child. It was found that **over two-thirds of the children have their biological parents and family**, and the reasons for separation from their families are related to abuse, mistreatment, exploitation, abandonment or due to economic difficulties. This process continued with Save the Children for the assessment of other children by Nisma ARSIS.

About **70% of assessed children placed in RCI show developmental delays**, which are mainly related to environmental factors and lack of stimulation for development. It also resulted that **children placed in RCI have untreated trauma as a result of their lifestyle before and during institutionalization**. Children **over 6 years of age have spent a long time in RCI**, moving from one institution to another. **Over 60% of the mothers of children placed in RCI have been victims of violence/exploitation/trafficking/abuse and there are significant number of families who have more than one child in RCI.**

During this process, it was also evident that no family empowerment plan had been developed for any child or family case. The structures of child protection or social services for family support considered the placement of the **child in RCI as “a closed case”**, which no longer belongs to them to be considered for the process of reunification. Clear procedures for entering the institution have been identified, but there is a complete absence of a journey towards healthy reunification with the biological family identified during the evaluation. The alternatives of social care services have been few and limited only to services for meeting basic needs and not for the development or strengthening of the biological families.

All the information collected and analyzed in this first phase for each child and family has been managed and forwarded to the structures according to a work protocol prepared by Nisma ARSIS, which also dealt with the method of transfer of evaluation files from the Organization to the MHSP, SSS and RCI. The preparation of the protocol took into account the sensitive and confidential issues of the use of information.

The results of the evaluation process of children and their families in the first phase determined the objectives and priorities of the following steps in the advancement of the de-institutionalization process and



mainly for the continuation with **the second phase**, which belongs to the period November 2019 - December 2021, during which the NISMA team of experts worked closely with the team of MHSP and UNICEF in the evaluation and re-evaluation of 271 children placed in public institutions; in the preparation of the National Action Plan for De-Institutionalization 2020-2022 and its cost. This plan is the first strategic document, specific for the deinstitutionalization of the Government of Albania. The plan was consulted with partners and other public and private institutions

The approval of the National Action Plan for the Deinstitutionalization (NAPDe-I) 2020-2022 of children from residential care by Decision of the Council of Ministers no. 706, 09.09.2020, enabled active cooperation between the central and local governments, the main international and local partners and civil society organizations.

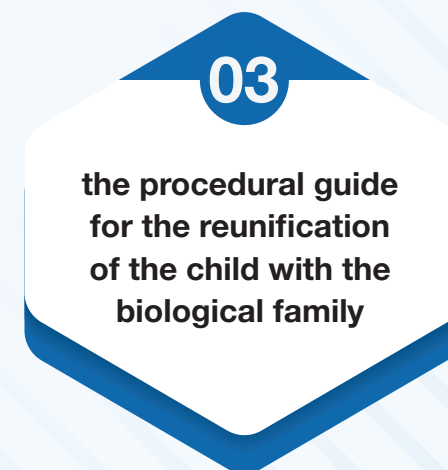
MHSP, UNICEF and Nisma ARSIS agreed to set up a group of experts at Nisma ARSIS which had to follow the implementation and monitoring of the NAPDe-I. Supporting the team was also an International Expert on Deinstitutionalization who works for the UNICEF regional office in Geneva.

The Nisma ARSIS team developed the terms of reference for the De-I National Plan Steering Committee to structure the work organization as the structure responsible for the implementation and follow-up of the national plan. The membership, role and responsibilities of the Steering Committee, Technical Working Group and Local Coordination Teams were clearly reflected in this document. This document was finalized with its approval through Order No. 548 of the Minister of Health and Social Protection, dated October 1, 2020 “On the establishment and functioning of the Steering Committee for the implementation of the National Deinstitutionalization Plan.” Two meetings of the Steering Committee were organized with the technical support of the Nisma

ARSIS team at 2021, during which the results of the activities in the implementation of the plan measures, and achievements of the partners and institutions involved in the De-I process were presented, as well as the presentation of alternative community-based service models centered on the family. The technical group, also serving as the technical secretariat for the Steering Committee, drafted and made available to the MHSP two progress reports on the progress of the implementation of the National Deinstitutionalization Plan regarding 2020 and 2021. The technical group of Nisma ARSIS has contributed to the legal analysis and consultation process for revisions to the **Family Code and Adoption Law**. It has also reflected and forwarded suggestions and recommendations regarding the legal framework for the process of de-

institutionalization of children as **an integrated part of the procedural guide for the reunification of the child with the biological family**. It has also identified the current and missing legal basis for the establishment of new community-based services.

The transformation of residential care institutions into community-based care services started with the drafting of the transformation plan, as well as with the drafting of the evaluation methodology of public RCIs. Following the implementation of the national plan, the Nisma ARSIS team drafted:



All three of these models support the system of care and social protection for children for the establishment of alternative family and community-based services by addressing and offering solutions to the problems and challenges identified in the first phase of the De-I process.

The Nisma ARSIS team worked for the evaluation of the best interest of children placed in RCI which are oriented towards strengthening the family and the relationship with the child, including psycho-social support for children and parents, counseling, parenting skills and family therapy classes, access to community services, legal and administrative support, vocational training, employment support. Efforts to strengthen the system also include significantly improving the protection mechanism and social inclusion.

During 2020, **6 Local Coordination Teams** were established as a structure for the function of piloting and implementing the procedural guide for the reunification of the child with the family, which hold periodic meetings in each of the Municipalities to coordinate the work for the cases of children located at each RCI. **60 meetings of the Local Coordination Teams** have been organized with the logistical and technical support of the NISMA team.

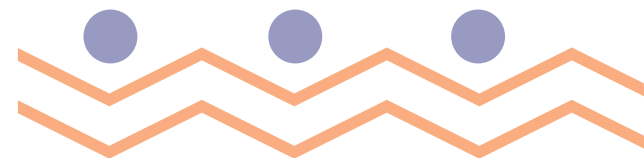
The NAPDe-I was also integrated as a priority in the Social Fund Program 2021-2023 of Albania and in March 2021 the Albanian government supported with a financial package two of the Pilot Municipalities, Vlorë and Korçë<sup>1</sup> to advance the development of services alternative child care and the transformation of RCI into service providers for strengthening the family and preventing the separation of children from the family environment. Nisma ARSIS cooperated with the Korçë and Vlorë Municipalities for piloting the implementation of three new service models through the establishment of integrated for the child and the family support hub.

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<sup>1</sup> The RCIs in the Municipality of Korca and Vlora were in moratorium, meaning that no children were allowed to be accommodated in these two institutions.



The Nisma ARSIS team, with the process of evaluation and providing expertise in the drafting of documents and work protocols for the establishment of services and the development of deinstitutionalization, has contributed to the management of concrete cases by implementing plans for the development of children and the empowerment of their families. The Case Management process has not only addressed the identified needs and implemented intervention plans but has clarified and improved the inter-institutional role & responsibilities of the actors involved.



The **model of financial support (cash assistance) for families** that have been reunited with the child has also been designed and tested, families that have children in RCI have been treated, as well as support for families to prevent the separation or removal of the child from the family environment. 95 families and 194 children have been directly supported in 15 municipalities (Vlora, Durrës, Korçë, Tirana, Pogradec, Elbasan, Ersekë, Dimal, Kamëz, Shkodër, Kavajë, Berat, Sarandë, Lushnjë, Memaliaj).

The Nisma ARSIS team believes that the De-I process cannot be realized without having partners who have a common understanding and a quality intermediate cooperation. The package of trainings offered to the

service providers of RCI, to social services work force in the municipality, to colleagues who have joined the new piloted services have focused precisely on increasing awareness of De-I issues, promoting models of new ones such as alternative professional care, support services for the child and the family, etc. Over **90 employees** have been part of the training packages which, due to the situation caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, have been developed throughout 2021.

The Covid 19 pandemic affected every sector of life, directly affecting the lives of children in every RCI and inhibiting the work of the Nisma ARSIS team with RCI. The austerity measures, isolation and limitation of direct interaction meant that the RCI staff were isolated together with the children for months and deprived of interaction with outsiders, including their parents. In these conditions, UNICEF and the Nisma ARSIS team assessed to readjust the typology of planned activities with the new terms forced by the pandemic situation. Direct communication methods were replaced by telephone and online communication through platforms such as zoom, etc. At the same time, it has facilitated the communication of families with the staff of RCI and has supported these families in their daily life to meet basic needs. The pandemic caused by COVID-19 caused a very large regression in all important processes developed up to that time.

At the end of the second phase, the Ministry of Health and Social Protection, UNICEF, Save the Children, SOS Children's Villages and Nisma ARSIS organized the National Conference "Deinstitutionalization Process in Albania, Achievements, Challenges and Vision for the Future", which was took place on November 18 and 19, 2021. Nisma ARSIS offered technical support for the organization of the conference, coordination between actors and the preparation of topics necessary to be shared and treated as priorities with the participants. 61 participants, representatives from MHSP, partner organizations, municipalities, public

institutions of social care, child care providers, child protection workers were part of the National Conference. The Conference proceedings reported on the progress of the National Deinstitutionalization Action Plan, evaluated and promoted models of alternative childcare services, the work done by selected pilot municipalities and took advantage of professional groups and subject matter experts to advise and support the process.

For the contribution made so far by Nisma ARSIS in support of the commitments of the Albanian Government and international partners such as UNICEF, Save the Children, etc. to be sustainable, it is necessary that the initiatives taken be accompanied by concrete institutional actions which include:

- Improvements to the legal framework that affect deinstitutionalization procedures, parental responsibility, alternative guardianship, social service standards, etc.
- Establishing and improving new social services, such as alternative professional care, family empowerment, prevention, etc.

The future of this process is a very important priority of the Nisma ARSIS team, which contributes with professionalism and the conviction that a quality work done professionally and with passion will be able to:

*"Every child should be able to enjoy a standard of living suitable for his physical, mental and social development, and should grow up in a friendly family environment"*



During 2023, UNICEF, in partnership with Nisma ARSIS, supported the implementation of the NAPDI 2020-2023 in Albania. The support included:

- Assistance to the Ministry of Health and Social Protection (MHSP), Social Services Sector (SSS), and Municipalities, with a team of experts aiding working groups to assess Vlora and Korça Regional Centers of Integrated Services (RCIs) in terms of human resources, infrastructure, and children's needs, aiming to guide their transformation into community and family-based services.
- Initiation of legal and financial analyses of the current operational framework of the RCIs to facilitate their transformation into community-based services.
- Establishment of Children and Family Support Hubs (CFSH) in the Municipalities of Tirana and Durrës, along with a mobile unit providing services for children and families at risk of separation.



- Direct support services, including home-visiting, parenting classes, and psychological counseling, provided for 70 high-risk children and their families identified across the three RCIs in Durrës and Tirana.
- Capacity building activities for 151 professionals involved in the establishment of CFSH, including RCI staff, community center staff, healthcare professionals, educators, child protection workers, and members of relevant committees.
- Support for the development of the new Social Protection Strategy 2024-2030, with a specific objective dedicated to advancing the Deinstitutionalization process.
- Active participation in the De-I Steering Committee and advocacy efforts leading to the inclusion of De-I as a priority in the EU Screening and Progress Reports for Albania, as well as the respective approved Road Map for EU Acquis Chapters 23 and 24.



## Summary way forward

Although at a humble rhythm, the NAPDI 2020–2023 evaluation report noted improvement in this process. The Ministry of Health and Social Protection has been assessing this Plan's development for a while now as a component of a broader reform that will be carried out through the National Strategy of Protection and Social Inclusion 2024–2030.

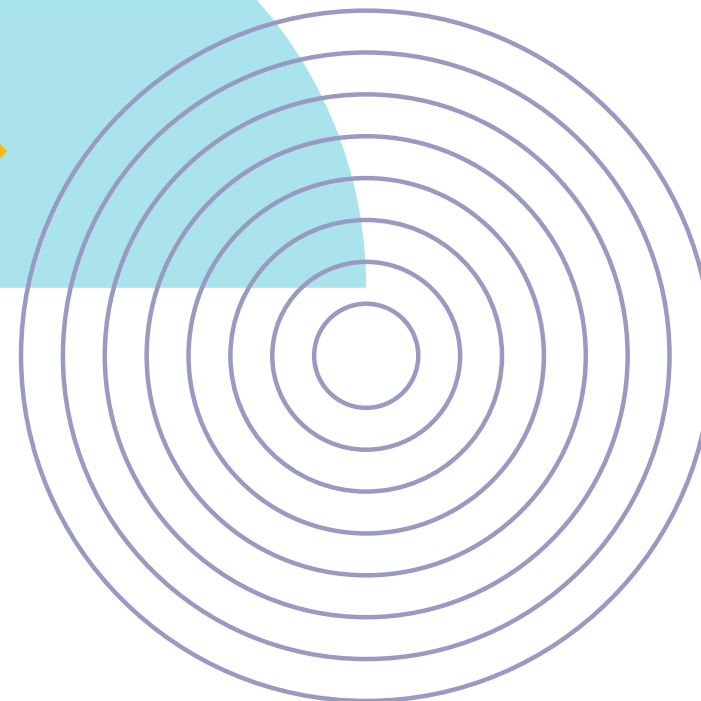
**The political target B of this strategy document, which is currently under approval, promotes the progress of deinstitutionalization and the expansion of integrated, high-quality social services in collaboration with other actors and the local government.**

Specific objective B 4- Advancing the process of deinstitutionalization of the residential system for children, persons with disabilities and the elderly. In the government's plans, De-I is already intended to be extended to the field of disability, including children as well as the field of the third age.

Based on the expertise and capacities of Nisma ARSIS and UNICEF in Albanai can contribute to the targeted activities to achieve the specific and general objectives of the National Strategy:

- Harmonization of the integrated legal, administrative and procedural system, which ensures the implementation of the best interest of the child
- Review of the legal framework of social services, for the protection and care of children.

- Social and integrated services for early intervention and prevention of separation of the child from the family environment through the piloting of the Child Hub in Tirana, Durrës, Shkodër, etc.
- Development and strengthening of the institutional mechanism/s for the prevention of institutionalization of children
- The establishment and operation of community-based psychosocial services on the prevention of child abandonment,
- Supporting the gradual transformation of public IPSH (institutions of care services) into multidisciplinary and multifunctional services for the child and the family), implementing the best interest of the child
- Development and implementation of models of services for the empowerment of families to prevent the separation of the child from the family and the promotion of family reunification, as part of the transformation of IPSH
- Strengthening the implementation of alternative care for all children with a special focus on children 0-6 years old, as part of the IPSH that will be transformed
- Raising the capacities and awareness of public and non-public institutions as well as the general public for the welfare of children and deinstitutionalization
- Part of national level coordination and monitoring of the implementation of the National Deinstitutionalization Plan.



## Introduction

In Albania, there are 9 public Social Care Institutions (SCI) for children, 18 private ones, and five development centers for people with disabilities (PwD). 223 (91 F and 132 M) children without parental care were reported in the residential care in December 2021, is 477 children and 62 in 6 development centers for PwDs. In comparison to past years, the number of children without parental care living in residential institutions has decreased but there is still a concerning phenomenon.

Although 85% of children placed in public RCIs maintain contact with their biological families, their stay in the institution is longer than two years. The duration of court proceedings to determine whether children admitted as urgent cases would stay institutionalized or be returned to their families, as well as the local structures' insufficient efforts to empower the families of these and other children in institutions. Under

the current system alternative family-based care service are represented by informal (unregistered and unregulated) kinship and foster care (few, mainly long-term, cases). Foster care does not provide for a wide range of foster care placements, including emergency, short-term, respite placements, as well as specialised foster care for children with disabilities. In addition, there is no solid secondary legislation (regulations and standards of care) that would facilitate foster care service development at the municipal level. The social norms are still in favour of the care of children in an institutional setting, treating institutions as good solutions for children with special needs, children from vulnerable households, and children from the Roma minority group. Meanwhile, there are incidents of abuse and neglect of children living in residential care institutions.



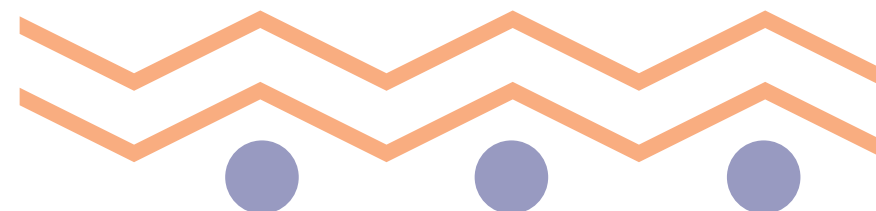
# 1 | Assessment of children placed in Residential Care Institutions and planning for their reunification with families or other alternatives from residential care 2019

UNICEF in partnership with the organization Nisma ARSIS cooperated to carry out the full assessment of children resident in public RCIs, their families as well as to draw up individual plans for each child assessed including plans for reunification with families in cases where this option has been assessed. possible by experts.

The process of evaluating children was carried out during the period January - August 2019, with the signing of cooperation agreements between municipalities, RCI, SSS, and the Nisma ARSIS organization. In total, 68 children and 45 families were evaluated. The evaluation was carried out on the basis of a calculated methodology approved by General Directory of Politics in the MHSP. During the process was carried out the assessment of children and their families in Korçë 0-5 years old, Vlorë 0-5 years old, Durrës 0-5 years old and Shkodër 16-18 years old

preschools. The evaluation process was designed in close cooperation with the employees of public RCIs, local government structures for social services and child protection, as well as with other local actors in direct contact with children and their families. the entire evaluation process is coordinated by the General Directory of Politics in the MHSP.

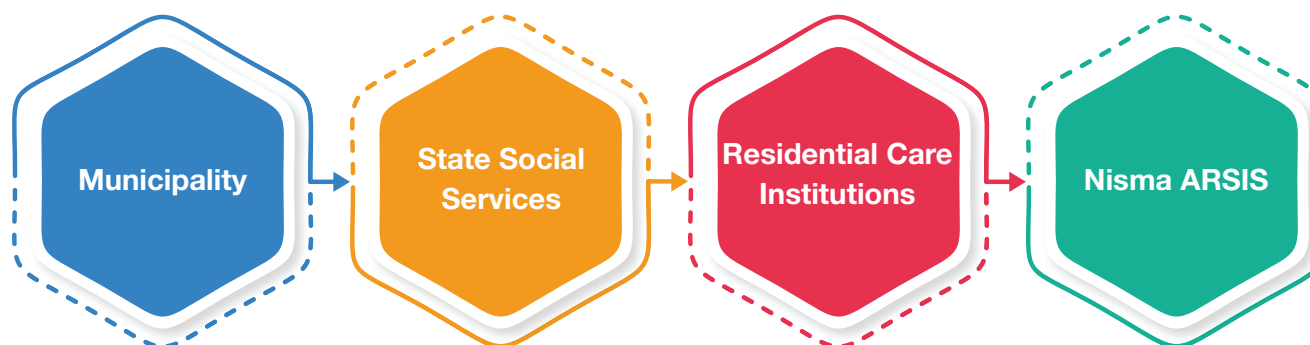
The assessment of the children placed in the RCI and their families has taken into account the protection of data privacy throughout the entire process. For this purpose, the protocol designed for the protection of data during the evaluation process of children in the RCI served as a guide for the evaluators, the technical team and the program managers who would have access to the personal data of the children and the RCI. This document considered data protection and the fundamental rights of interviewees, children and young people.



## 1.1 The assessment methodology

Nisma ARSIS on November 14-15, 2018, presented the assessment methodology in accordance with all the dynamics and processes of an in-depth assessment with a focus on the highest interest of children placed in the RCI in the municipalities of Shkodër, Durrës, Korçë and Vlorë. The methodology proposed by Nisma ARSIS and consulted between the working groups contracted by UNICEF, Save the Children and Ministry of Health and Social Protection within the framework of the cooperation memorandum for the start of the first phase of deinstitutionalization took final shape with some improvements based on comments during the two days of the workshop.

The evaluation methodology included the presentation of the legal basis including the Decision of Council of Ministers (DCM) for the institutionalization of children in RCI updated with DCM no. 518 /2018 known as the Basket of Social Services. Also, the methodology clarified the importance of the inclusion of several institutions (SSS with the relevant regional directorates, RCI, Municipalities, and implementing partner NGOs) in a joint coordinated network for the realization of the child assessment, family assessment, drafting and follow-up of the plan individual development, reunification plan and instrument for the best interest of the child. The proposal to strengthen this coordinating network was supported by the drafting of cooperation agreements between all parties to clarify the role of each institution in the evaluation process.



### The structure of the methodology included:

- The division of the roles of each institution in the process of evaluating children, also defined in the 4-party agreement;
- Preparation of the list of municipalities included in the assessment process;
- Mapping of the data collection system and the family support system in the Municipalities of origin (actors and services);
- Dimensions of child assessment;
- Dimensions of family assessment;
- Child's Individual Development Plan;
- The deinstitutionalization plan.

## 1.2 Assessment process

The evaluation process was carried out by a team of experienced professional evaluators (social workers and psychologists, child development specialists and child protection specialists) (appendix 6), who were familiarized with the entire inter-institutional mechanism of deinstitutionalization before the evaluation. The assessment team prepared a list of staff details and their contacts as well as security details (criminal record and health records, service contract, child protection policies, code of ethics) and a detailed plan of the work and the movement calendar by sharing it with all the parties involved in this process (Detailed information about the assessment process is presented in annex 1)

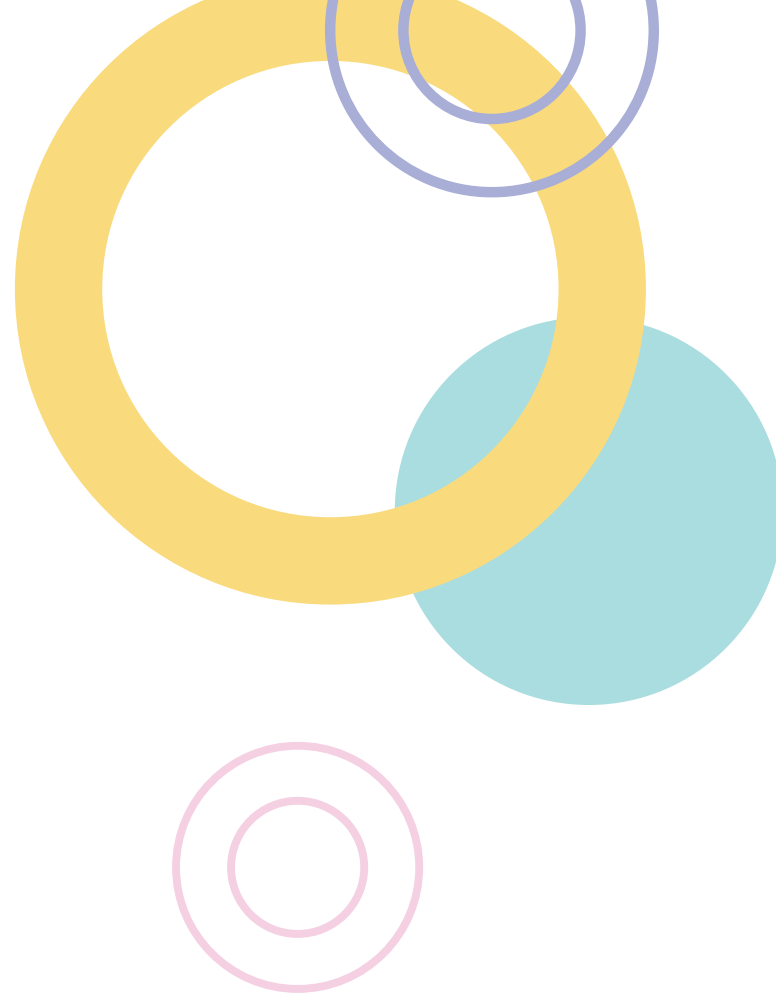
## 1.3 Findings from the assessment

Organizata NISMA realizoi procesin e vlerësimit në tërësi të fëmijëve dhe familjeve të tyre si dhe të planeve individuale dhe planeve të De-I për 4 RCI në Shqipëri. Raporti përfundimtar i procesit të vlerësimit është dorëzuar pranë UNICEF nëpërmjet postës elektronike më datë 30 gusht 2019. Në tabelën 1 janë paraqitur të dhënat e fëmijëve dhe familjeve të tyre të përfshirë në procesin e vlerësimit në formë të përmbledhur për RCI ku janë vendosur fëmijët.

Table 1: Summary data of the assessment processes of children in RCIs in 4 Municipalities

Komponentë të vlerësimit	Korçë	Vlorë	Durrës	Shkodër (16-18 vjeç)
Children assessed	17	24	14	10
Children transferred to other RCI	4			
Families assessed	12	15	8*	10
Individual development plans	14	24	12	10
Completed BIC instrument	14	24	12	10
De-institutionalization plans	2	2	2	2
Children institutionalized after April 2019 (not assessed)	3	2	1	3
Children placed in RCI in August 2019	16	25	14	13
Reunification of the child with the family		1		
Children living independently - 18 years old				1
Adopted children during the assessment process			4	

\*(4 families have 2 children in RCI)



The findings of the first phase of the deinstitutionalization process were presented in a joint meeting between partners on October 9, 2019, “near Hotel Mondial” organized by MHSP, UNICEF, Save the Children, Nisma ARSIS, etc. All the findings of the first phase evaluation served to design and structure the methodology for the second phase of deinstitutionalization.

## Summary of findings from the assessment:

<b>Health</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Most of the children placed in RCI did not have complete documentation regarding health;</li> <li>- The profile of health problems varied from children with a diagnosis of mental health [mainly in the Home for 16-18 year olds (6) and 6-16 year olds (5)], children with epilepsy, with symptoms of the autism spectrum, children with syphilis, with heart problems and with physical disabilities, children with mouth injuries, etc.)</li> </ul>
<b>Psychological state</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Of the children assessed with the Son_R instrument, 76% of children aged 0-6 years in 3 RCI had a slight delay in environmental development;</li> <li>- Language development in children 0-6 years old was below the expected level for their age;</li> <li>- Children aged 0-6 years had difficulties in differentiating the relationship they create with people;</li> <li>- From the psychological evaluations it appears that a significant part of teenagers does not meet the developmental parameters that are characteristic of their age;</li> <li>- The assessments showed that the children in the institution have untreated trauma as a result of the way of life before institutionalization;</li> <li>- Elements such as problematic behavior and mood changes have been identified in children aged 6-18 years.</li> </ul>
<b>Relation with parents/families</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Unnourished relationship; insufficient physical time; missing relationship information;</li> <li>- Lack of parents' interest in children's education.</li> </ul>
<b>Social Relationships</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Bullying present in the institution and outside;</li> <li>- Mercy versus well-being.</li> </ul>
<b>Education</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The 0-6-year-old programs are care programs, not holistic child development programs;</li> <li>- A good part of children does not go to kindergarten. Educators are not trained to work with children placed in RCI;</li> <li>- Children aged 6-15 go to the same school. Children go to first grade even in adulthood.</li> </ul>
<b>Access in the services</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- There is a lack of specialized psychological service for specific help for the cases of children placed in RCI;</li> <li>- Access to tertiary health services or secondary services was assessed as inadequate.</li> </ul>
<b>Capacities/Parental skills</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Very few parents have basic parenting skills, but there is potential for developing parenting skills for many.</li> </ul>
<b>Issues that influence the reunification process</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- For any child, there is no systemic process for plans to prevent the separation of the child from the family, before the decision to place the child in the RCI.</li> </ul>

<b>Psychological assesmenet/Health for the families</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 100% of them need psychological treatment and family therapy;</li> <li>- Over 60% of mothers have been victims of violence/exploitation/trafficking/abuse;</li> <li>- Symptoms of anxiety, depression and untreated trauma are very high;</li> <li>- Many parents need in-depth psychiatric/neurological assessments;</li> <li>- Being uninsured in the Health Care Insurance Fund, they cannot receive services;</li> <li>- Families (parents and children) do not have access to dental health.</li> </ul>
<b>Social support/community support</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Prejudice from the community towards families who have left their children in the institution</li> <li>- Lack of community support network</li> <li>- Families do not trust state structures</li> </ul>
<b>Institutional support/systemic support</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- For no biological family, there are no empowerment plans after the child's placement in the institution;</li> <li>- Municipalities do not have intervention plans and budgets for supporting and empowering families (project based support)</li> </ul>
<b>Observations related to the environment (physical, social, emotional)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Not all residential institutions meet the infrastructural standards to meet the needs of the child;</li> <li>- The staff of residential institutions have a compassionate approach to children;</li> <li>- Children's contact with the outside world is limited;</li> <li>- The organization of staff schedules does not help children's development.</li> </ul>
<b>Profesional profile of staff</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The staff is not prepared to treat children with challenges of different natures (behavioral problems, post-abusive trauma, including emergencies)</li> <li>- The system of initial training and continuous training for staff is missing</li> <li>- The staff is not gender balanced</li> </ul>
<b>Developmental activities, recreative, that promote independence and positive relation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Focus on meeting basic needs, not on special support according to specific needs, or pedagogical support for young children.</li> <li>- The child is institutionalized.</li> </ul>
<b>Mentoring and supervision</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The supervision, mentoring and coaching system is missing</li> </ul>
<b>Professionals</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Psychologists are missing in some RCI</li> <li>- Medical staff is absent in some RCI (specific therapies are administered by non-medical staff)</li> <li>- Specialized professionals for specific needs of children are missing (100%)</li> </ul>

<b>IDP/implementation/ multisectoral cooperation and coordination/case management</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- There is no Individual Development Plan (IDP) before, during and after leaving the institution;</li> <li>- The system does not support RCI;</li> <li>- Municipalities have not met the criteria 1/3,000 CPW standards; 1/10,000 Social Worker for NARU;</li> </ul>
<b>Challenges/gaps in the alternative care system in relation to child protection</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The best interest of the child is not taken into account by the system;</li> <li>- Municipalities have not yet identified foster families, strengthening the capacities of professionals and increasing community awareness;</li> <li>- Multidisciplinary alternative guardianship commissions near municipalities are missing;</li> <li>- The standards of social services for children in RCI do not ensure the treatment of difficult cases inside and outside the institution, as well as the issues of reuniting the child with the biological family.</li> </ul>
<b>Parental responsibility</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Parental right prevails over the best interest of the child</li> </ul>
<b>Parent/family education and family empowerment programs</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- There is no family empowerment program at the local level, to deal with the cases and causes that led to the separation, to improve the role of parenting to enable reunification and the well-being of the child;</li> <li>- Necessary resources;</li> <li>- There is no budget at the central and local level for supporting and empowering families;</li> <li>- The support is implemented on the basis of projects.</li> </ul>
<b>Finding generalised</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The system does not apply the best interest of the child;</li> <li>- The services do not have the child at the center, as a subject involved in the entire process for fulfilling their needs;</li> <li>- Immediate need for the improvement of services to prevent the institutionalization of the child;</li> <li>- Urgent need for alternative custody service in the family from the moment the child is separated from the family.</li> </ul>
<b>Way forward</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Case management for all children (PIZH) and their families;</li> <li>- The National Development Plan finalized and costed;</li> <li>- The need for RCI transformation;</li> <li>- Establishment of other childcare alternatives to residential institutions.</li> </ul>



## 1.4 Administration of data

For each evaluated child, relevant evaluation files have been prepared, which contain the following printed documentation: 1. The child's evaluation report; 2. The family assessment report; 3. Individual development plan; 4. The plan for reunification with the biological family, when this is assessed as possible by the assessment experts, as well as 5. Assessment of the child's best interest.

Given that the information contained in the assessment files was confidential, there were sensitive and private data about the child and the family, as well as to ensure the highest interest of the children and their families, the MHSP supported by Nisma ARSIS has drawn up the administration data protocol. The purpose of this protocol was to ensure that the information contained in the files was protected, was not disclosed to other parties, but was administratively transferred to the MHSP and through it to the public RCI as the institutions responsible for the well-being of the assessed children.

The drafting of this protocol was based on the provisions of the legislation for the protection of personal data, and especially on the Albanian Legislation "Law No. 9887, dated 10.3.2008 On the Protection of Personal Data, revised in Law No. 48/2012" as well as European Union legislation stated in the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Also, this protocol is based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), specifically on one of its main principles, that of confidentiality, law no. SCiA) for child protection policies (Safeguarding Policy).



## Conclusions

### Assessment of children

The findings of the assessment of children in 4 public RCI during the first phase of the implementation of the deinstitutionalization process emphasized:

- A significant percentage of children assessed during their stay in the RCI, who present slight delays in their development, this is also influenced by the lack of environmental stimuli (76% according to the Son-r instrument for children 0-6 years old in 3 RCI);
- The physical environment and infrastructure of some of the RCI do not help children to develop socially, emotionally and physically;
- Lack of developmental activities for children in accordance with their age group and capacities focusing only on meeting basic needs;
- There is a lack of professional staff in some RCI such as psychologists, social workers, doctors, teachers, dietitians, specialists of various disciplines for the treatment of children with developmental delays;
- Lack of supervision or mentoring of professional staff;
- Lack of professional capacities to design and individualize each child's plan in accordance with his/her needs and capacity;
- Marked lack of staff to recognize the instrument of the child's highest interest and take it into consideration for every decision regarding the child;
- Difficulty in handling and managing children's behavioral problems;
- Lack of attention to programs to discover the child's talents or strengths in order to promote them;
- Children of the same family who were accommodated in different institutions;
- Children who passed from one RCI to another and spent a life cycle in them from 7-10 years.



### Assessment of families:

- Parents who are interested in taking the children into the family, but need support services to cover their basic needs and ensure suitable conditions for the children's well-being. The support needed consists mostly of housing insurance, support for income generation, and access to childcare services while they are working. This group mostly belongs to mothers with children/one-parent families (mother-headed households).
- Parents and family members who wish to have their children in RCI until they turn 18 years old. These are the families who have not yet taken any steps to create the appropriate conditions for the return of the child to the family. This group mostly belongs to parents/families who have more than one child in RCI.
- Parents/families of children living abroad. The only contact of the parents/family with the child is through the phone and where the "interest" is very distant in time.
- Parents/families of children who do not have a stable address, who are on the move inside or outside Albania;
- Parents/families with mental health problems (diagnosed or suspected) or disabilities;
- Parents/families that have conflicting dynamics in family relationships that are associated with: domestic violence, alcohol use, drug use, prostitution, exploitation of children, child abuse or involvement in sexual activities, etc.;
- Parents/families who do not cooperate with the team of evaluators or with the system;
- Parents/families whose children do not want to meet the children or have anything to do with them;
- Parents/families who have waived their parental rights/guardianship during legal proceedings;
- Families who continuously placed children in institutions.

**During the evaluation process, it was evident that of the parents/families of the children placed in RCI, assessed, there was no case for which the family empowerment plan has been developed. The structures of child protection or social services for family support consider the placement of a child in RCI as "a closed case", which no longer belongs to them to be treated.**

What was identified as challenging during the family assessment process by the assessment team is presented below:

- CPW in some municipalities/administrative units do not share or respond to requests for information, they did not have time to meet with the team of evaluators or participate in family visits;
- During the family evaluation process, it was found that there is a lack of written information about the family, identified or provided by the actors, as well as an analysis of the causes that led to the separation of the child from the family;
- Difficulty meeting the parents/family of children who live abroad and do not have a correct address;
- Some of the parents/families have no interest and desire to meet their children;
- Parents who do not care to maintain an affective relationship or a visible interest in maintaining the relationship with the children, but who use their parental right of interest only when the deadlines were met only once every 6 months, thus keeping the child "hostage" in RCI;
- Each RCI followed different work practices with children and families;
- The process of reuniting the child with the family was seen as a sectoral, fragmented intervention where the involved parties charged other structures with responsibility;
- The pronounced lack of social services which would serve to help the plans of strengthening families and preparations for reunification as well as simultaneously to deal with the causes of separation;
- The decision-making structures were not clear in the procedures they had to follow to treat the child following their accommodation in RCI

## 2 | Technical support for the MHSP for the advancement of the deinstitutionalization process and transformation of RCI into community based services

### 2020-2021

Nisma ARSIS with the support of UNICEF Albania, continued after the evaluation of the first phase, with the second phase of the advancement of the De-I process in Albania in cooperation with the MHSP (November 2019- December 2021), which enabled the provision of technical support for the ministry in support of the development and implementation of the plan and strategy of De-I.

The main intervention in the second phase was focused on six RCI and their respective Municipalities (Tirana, Shkodër, Korçë, Durrës, and Vlorë) with the support General Directorates and Regional Directorates of State Social Services. The approach of following up the activities in the second phase has been replicated in the other three social care institutions in partnership with Save the Children together with Nisma ARSIS.

During the implementation of the second phase, the main areas of intervention by Nisma ARSIS were:

- ✦ Creation of a group of high-level technical experts for the support of the MHSP;
- ✦ Documentation of reunification cases: Cases of children reunited with their biological parents were documented and serve as case studies and standard models to be followed/replicated by local authorities;
- ✦ Development of a cost model for the reunification of children with the biological family;
- ✦ Drafting of budget models for municipalities to use for access to the Social Fund for family strengthening, follow-up and reunification/reintegration services with biological families.

In relation to the support to RCIs and practical and direct work in the field, Nisma ARSIS relied on:

- ✦ Creation of field teams of child care specialists for each targeted RCI;
- ✦ Provision of basic child care training for existing RCI staff and local service providers;
- ✦ Providing mentoring and on-the-job guidance for existing RCI staff as well as assistance during ITG meetings;
- ✦ Establishment and establishment of Local Coordination Teams (LCT) responsible for decision-making on children's cases;
- ✦ Support of all actors in the implementation of the child's individual development plan as well as family empowerment plans.



Photo from the workshop in 8 September 2021

## 2.1 The National De-Institutionalization Plan drawn up, costed and approved by the Council of Ministers

MHSP has prepared the National Deinstitutionalization Plan on De-I 2020-2022 with the support of UNICEF and its partner Nisma ARSIS as a continuation of the needs identified during the assessment process of children placed in RCI during the first phase of implementation.

Expertise at the national level, through Nisma ARSIS's team of experts, supported the finalization of the National De-I Plan, which was revised and costed with the help of all actors, to be approved by the Council of Ministers with decision no: 706 (date, 09.09.2020). This Plan aims to realize the Child's Right to grow up in a healthy family environment, which ensures the development of the child's full individual potential.

In order to advance the De-I plan as well as the full realization of its objectives, meetings were held with the 9 public RCI, the Municipalities where these institutions are located, the State Social Service, and its Regional Directorates for the presentation of the plan of De-I as well as concrete interventions in each RCI.

### Progress in achieving the objectives of the National De-Institutionalization Plan 2020-2022

In the frame of the implementation of this Plan the Nisma ARSIS's team of experts have contributed to:

#### **Objective 1: Harmonization of the integrated legal, administrative and procedural system that ensures the implementation of the best interest of the child**

- ✦ Presentation of comments and suggestions for revision of the Family Code and Adoption Law in matters affecting custody, parental responsibility of parents and declaration of abandonment and written information for the Law Commission on Family Code and Adoption Law;
- ✦ The legal analysis for the deinstitutionalization process referring to the complete package of the functioning of social services and the protection of children's rights;
- ✦ Identification of the needs for revisions of the legal framework for the improvement of the standards of social care for children in RCI and for the drafting of instructions in accordance with DCM 518/2018.
- ✦ Participation in the laws committee in the Parliament;
- ✦ The guide to the procedures for the reunification of the child with the family, the model of alternative professional care and the model of support services for the child and the family have been presented to the SC and consulted;
- ✦ Drafting of the terms of reference for the Steering Committee of the National Plan of De-I, a document which was formalized with the approval of "Ministerial Order no. 548, dated 01. 10.2020 for "Establishment and functioning of the Steering Committee for the Implementation of the National Plan of Deinstitutionalization 2020-2022".

**Objective 2: Social and integrated services for early intervention and prevention of separation of the child from the family environment (including children with disabilities)**

- ★ Direct support for families to prevent the separation of children from their biological family;
- ★ Raising awareness of CPUs and ITGs for the prevention of institutionalization;
- ★ Implementation of the assessment framework for children and biological families who have been institutionalized after 2019, with a unified assessment methodology;
- ★ Assessment of the best interest of the child based on the BIC instrument for new children institutionalized after 2019;
- ★ Coordination of actions in 6 municipalities through LCT meetings.

**Objective 3: Ensuring the highest interest of children (including children with disabilities) resident in public RCIs and Development Centers**

- ★ Piloting support services for the child and family in Korça and Vlorë in the framework of the transformation of residential services into community-based services;
- ★ Contribution to the recruitment process of CFSH employees in the municipalities of Korçë and Vlorë;
- ★ Development of terms of reference for support services for children and families in Vlorë and Korça Municipalities;
- ★ In-depth assessment of the needs of CFSH employees by technical experts;
- ★ Drafting of the draft work protocol for CFSH Vlorë and CFSH Korçë;
- ★ Continuous follow-up of the implementation of the highest interest of children placed in public RCI;
- ★ Consulted decision-making for the welfare of children at every meeting of the LCT in 9 municipalities (60 meetings of the LCT in 6 municipalities);
- ★ Direct support for children placed in RCI and their families

**Objective 4: Capacity building and awareness of institutions and the general public for child welfare and deinstitutionalization**

- ★ Drafting of curricula for the training of Economic and Social Assistance Administrators in Korça District “On social care services in the Republic of Albania” according to law 121/2016 and deinstitutionalization;
- ★ 15 days of training for Social Administrators “For social care services in the Republic of Albania” according to law 121/2016 and deinstitutionalization;
- ★ Curriculum design for parenting classes;
- ★ Training of CFSH employees in the municipalities of Vlorë and Korça, including employees of the Directorate of Social Services of the two municipalities for the training package for parenting classes;
- ★ Drafting of the curriculum and training package for professional alternative caregivers as well as the training of 5 parents and two employees of CFSH;
- ★ Awareness campaign in the Vlorë and Korça Municipalities for professional alternative guardianship
- ★ Drafting of the curriculum for the family care service and replication of the family care service for two families (Municipality of Korçë and Tirana);
- ★ Mentoring the structures of the Korça and Vlorë municipalities for the piloting of support services for children and families.

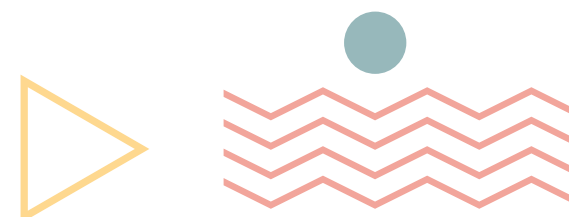






Photo from 15 days of training for Social Administrators



Photos from the awareness campaign in the Vlora and Korça Municipalities for professional alternative guardianship







*Photos from the training of CFSH employees in the municipalities of Vlorë and Korça for the training package for parenting classes*





### **Objective 5: Coordination at the national level and monitoring the implementation of the national De-institutionalization plan**

- ✦ Two meetings of the Steering Committee were held during 2021
- ✦ Periodical meetings of the Technical Working Group have been held
- ✦ Preparation of the progress report for the year 2020 for the implementation of the National Deinstitutionalization Plan 2020-2022 for MHSP;
- ✦ Preparation of the progress report for the year 2021 for the implementation of the National Deinstitutionalization Plan 2020-2022 for the MHSP;
- ✦ Coordination at central and local level for deinstitutionalization.

## **2.2 Transition/transformation plan of Social Care Institutions**

Deinstitutionalization is a process that does not only deal with the removal of children from institutions to other alternatives, but also takes into consideration the care institution itself. For this reason, Nisma ARSIS, in consultation with RCI and SSS staff, has drafted the document that evaluates and proposes the way to transform the service provided. So the issue is not treated as the closing of institutions, but as the transformation of the residential service into a typology of treatment. The drafting of the evaluation methodology of the public RCI was carried out with the aim of analyzing the way of functioning of the public Residential Care Institutions and the way of meeting the needs of children without parental care through a comprehensive assessment not only of the children institutionalized in these institutions but also of human and financial resources, architectural design, services offered to children in RCI, existing services in communities, lines of management and accountability and performance of RCI.

## **2.3 Legal analysis for institutionalization and de-institutionalization**

The Nisma ARSIS team has offered its assistance in the legal analysis and in the report carried out by the legal and contractual expert from UNICEF. The experience while working in the field and the interpretation of legal challenges with concrete cases, has enriched this analysis with suggestions to offer solutions. The team has been part of the consultation tables for issues of child protection and care on an ongoing basis and the analyzes accompanied by the recommendations have been reflected in the supporting documents drawn up by it. More detailed information on the legal analysis of deinstitutionalization is reflected in the following sections.

## **2.4 Model of for the child and family support hub**

This model proposes the establishment of a group of services at the local level, which aim to:

- ✦ Prevention of separation of children from their parents and deinstitutionalization through re-integration with biological families or foster families;
- ✦ Guaranteeing the safety and well-being of children and their families through the establishment of family empowerment services;
- ✦ Provision of specialized services that address emerging needs in terms of physical and mental health;
- ✦ Piloting alternative professional care for children whose parents cannot exercise parental care for a certain time.
- ✦ These services are provided through a specialist support team, psychologists, therapists, support teachers, speech therapists, physiotherapists and other professionals as needed, who provide holistic multidisciplinary support to the child and family.



## 2.5 Professional alternative care (PAC) model, a comprehensive detailed description of the legal basis and modalities for its financing

It is a model aimed at providing care in the family. Professional foster parents are hired based on the assessment of their professional capacity to care for children and youth without parental care, with various needs when they cannot stay in their biological families. This service model meets the needs for additional specialized alternative services, ensuring the best interest of

the child, not only providing a family environment for the child's growth and development, but also giving biological families time to strengthen. The model is approved in the Steering Committee of the De-I in the MHSP but the Albanian legislation does not foresee any legal provision for its implementation for this reason more efforts are needed for making it functional.



*Photos from the training of Professional alternative care (PAC)*

### Putting into practice the established models included in the CFSH

With the expertise of Nisma ARSIS, the Municipality of Korçë and the Municipality of Vlora were supported in their application to the Social Fund 2020 in implementation of the NAPDe-I objectives for deinstitutionalization, in order to pilot the service models included in the Child and Family Support Hub.

By Decision of the Vlora Municipal Council no. 37, dated 27.05.2021 and Decision no. 59 approved by the Korçë Municipal Council on 03.06.2021, the agreements concluded between Nisma ARSIS and the Vlorë & Korçë Municipalities for the implementation of the project “Approving the establishment of support services for the child and the family in the framework of the transformation of residential services into community-based services”. In both municipalities, the relevant structures consisting of a Supervisor, 2 Psychologists, 2 Social Workers, 2 Caregivers and 1 Sanitarian have been set up.

CFSHs, through the services provided, have carried out the assessment of families with children in RCI, children at risk of institutionalization, children with AK, families with members with different addictions and in need of different social services. During this period, individual and administrative empowerment services were provided. Both services have also functioned as resource and referral centers for evaluated cases towards other support services at the local or central level. The process is based on work plans for all supported individuals or families. Relations have also been established and maintained with all key persons of the municipalities and other institutions at the local and central level so that the process continues according to the action plan, in order to address many challenges in understanding this process, since the

publication of the calls of CFSH employees, their selection and the definition of an environment where this service would be established. A special care has been shown in the establishment and functioning of a stable functional mechanism for the continuity of the transformation of residential services into community-based ones.

In the framework of setting up CFSHs and raising the capacities of the relevant staff, the Nisma ARSIS Team has designed training modules for:

- ✦ The Parenting Program
- ✦ Family care services
- ✦ Service in professional alternative care

And offered a training package related to:

- ✦ The Legal Framework for the National Education and Training Plan and its implementation (2 days)
- ✦ Procedures for setting up support services for the child and the family (2 days)
- ✦ Presentation of new models for alternative professional guardianship (2 days)
- ✦ Work Protection Policies and Work Ethics (2 days)
- ✦ Legal framework for child protection and case management (2 days)
- ✦ Parenting Program (7 days)
- ✦ Professional Alternative Guardianship Program (15 days)

The number of professionals who have received the full cycle of training is 20, where in addition to 14 SHMFF staff (7+7), the heads of the Directorates of Social Services, child protection workers and coordinators for issues of violence have also taken part in family relationships. The innovation was the identification of the parents who were involved in the training for Professional Alternative Care (5 professionals), where two of them are actual care staff of the “Little Flowers” Korçë Baby Home.





## 2.6 Guide to the procedures for reuniting the child with the biological family

The need for the drafting of this document was identified during the evaluation process of the first phase. From the daily work with the institutions of social care and the knowledge of the Albanian legislation that clarifies the procedures for the institutionalization of the child, it was evident that there is no clearly defined journey for the return of the child to the biological family.

Assessing at the same time the typology of the causes and reasons for the separation of the child from the biological family, the procedure guide has treated the reunification of the child with the biological family not as a single and isolated event, but as a long process that includes a number of institutions, local units, children and families and where considerable preparation is required not only in working with the family but also with the system itself. Each step provided in the guide requires quality time, serious commitment, budgeting, qualified human resources and integrated and sustainable services.

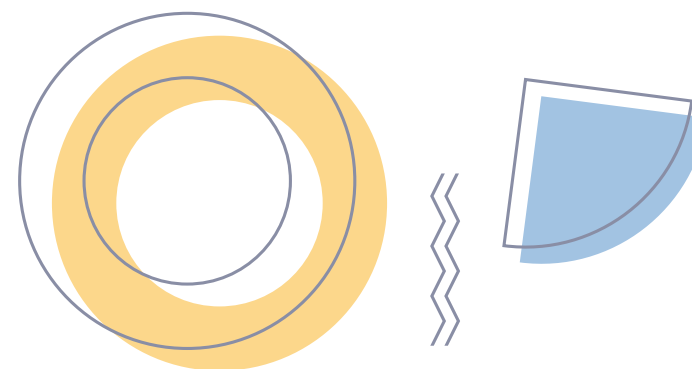
This guide is accompanied by:

- ✦ The working methodology of the team that deals with the process of reuniting the child with the biological family;
- ✦ The package of formats or instruments needed by the structures of RCI and the local unit to carry out the reunification process;
- ✦ Checklist of legal documentation;
- ✦ Analysis of the legal framework and recommendations for the revision of the Family Code, the necessary revision of the standards of services for children in RCI and the drafting of by-laws that regulate reunification procedures;
- ✦ Analysis of budgeting or the ways in which reunification plans

and services can be budgeted. The institutional practice of the process of reuniting the child with the family presented in the guide has served as a draft proposal for the establishment of local coordination teams that were formalized with the Minister's Order no. 548 of October 2020.

To put the guide into practice, the Nisma ARSIS team has:

- ✦ continuously replicated through its own institutional engagement in every meeting of the local coordination teams since November 2020 and currently;
- ✦ presented at the meeting of the Steering Committee for the implementation of the national plan of De-I;
- ✦ introduced and recognized all the leaders of the RCIs, the Directorates of Social Services in the Municipalities where the PISHs are located and the children's biological families;
- ✦ organized a workshop with frontline professionals who work with children and families - September 2021;
- ✦ presented and addressed in the proceedings of the National Conference on Deinstitutionalization November 18-19, 2021.



## 2.7 Drafting of the methodology for the evaluation of public RCI

The purpose of this document is to analyze the functioning of public Residential Care Institutions for children without parental care through a comprehensive assessment of the children institutionalized in these institutions, human and financial resources, architectural design, services offered to children in RCI, existing services in communities, lines of management and accountability and performance of the RCI. This evaluation was undertaken within the framework of the National Action Plan for Deinstitutionalization, the purpose of which is to carry out the process of transforming residential services into alternative care services, respecting the best interest of the child.

The specific objectives of this document are:

- ✦ Evaluation of children and families of 9 RCIs for children and youth without parental care:
    - Characteristics of the different groups of children and young people accommodated there and their families
    - Assessment of the process, reasons and dynamics of placing children in institutions as well as their exit from the residential institution, including: factors influencing such practices, factors that lead to the institutionalization of children, and gaps / barriers affecting the deinstitutionalization of children.
  - ✦ Assessment of existing human resources in terms of number of staff, structure, competencies, qualifications and readiness to accept change.
  - ✦ Assessment of existing financial resources, including those budgeted and spent, expenditure categories, funding sources, cost per child, etc.
  - ✦ Architectural design – property rights, architecture, internal infrastructure, level of maintenance, emergency needs.
  - ✦ Evaluation of the services provided by RCI, through the review of documentation according to the standards and regulations of the operation of RCI.
  - ✦ Assessment of existing services in the community thanks to the map of services developed based on the UNDP study “Assessment of the Need for Social Services in the 12 Counties of Albania”
  - ✦ Assessment of lines of management and accountability which will be assessed based on institutional structure and dependency, internal regulations and service monitoring mechanisms.
  - ✦ RCI performance evaluation.
- ix. The drafting of recommendations for the transformation of RCI for children without parental care and their deinstitutionalization, for the realization of the child’s right to live in a healthy family, which uses the available resources, the social protection system, as well as the strengthening of social policies regarding children and youth without parental care and their families.

## 2.8 Drafting terms of reference for the Steering Committee of the National De-I Plan

The drafting of the terms of reference was developed as a document following the work on drafting the National Plan for Deinstitutionalization 2020-2022, which aimed to structure the work organization of the Steering Committee as the structure responsible for the implementation and follow-up of the national plan. The membership, role and responsibilities of the Steering Committee, Technical Working Group and Local Coordination Teams are clearly reflected in this document. This document **was finalized with its approval through Order No. 548 of the Minister of Health and Social Protection, October 1, 2020** “On the establishment and functioning of the Steering Committee for the implementation of the National Deinstitutionalization Plan”. During the replication of this document tested in the two meetings of the Steering Committee throughout the year 2021 as well as in the organization of the monthly meetings of the local coordination teams at the local level, it resulted that the terms of reference were drawn up in accordance with the role and institutional responsibilities of each structure of included.

## 2.9 Inter-institutional coordination at national and local level

### i. Support for the organization of the first meetings of the Steering Committee of the Action Plan for Deinstitutionalization

In order to enable a joint and comprehensive leadership of the De-I process in order to implement the National Deinstitutionalization Plan 2020-2022 and ensure institutional support at the central level for addressing the problems during its implementation, it was proposed and the establishment of the Steering Committee (SC) was approved. SC is responsible for the validity and advocacy/promotion of legal changes and drafted policies.

The first meeting of the Steering Committee was held on 13.01.2021, in which the progress report for the second 6 months of 2020 about the implementation of the Del Plan was discussed and agreed upon. During the first meeting of the Steering Committee it was discussed:

- ✦ Development of the Transformation Plan of Social Care Institutions;
- ✦ Presentation and consultation of new models of services for strengthening the family and preventing the separation of the child from the family;

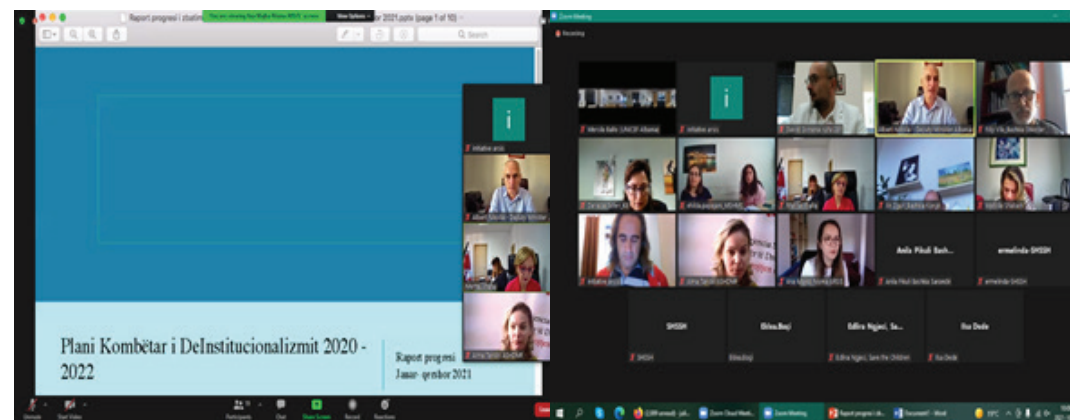


Photo from the second meeting of the Steering Committee for the National De-I Plan

The second meeting of the Steering Committee was held on 05.10.2021 in which the progress report for the first 6 months of 2021 about the implementation of the Del Plan was discussed and agreed upon.

The Technical Working Group (TWG), which serves as the secretariat of the Steering Committee (SC), is tasked with implementing the activities of the SC, where the Nisma ARSIS team was also a part. The first meeting of the TWG was held on 14.04.2021, the purpose of which was to discuss the roles and responsibilities of each member in the function of implementing the National Deinstitutionalization Plan. The meeting also discussed the sharing of comments for each of the service models within the transformation of residential services. Participants in the meeting were representatives of key responsible institutions in the implementation of the Del process.

**ii. The creation of a coordinating structure with technical experts, representatives of institutions, CPW, SSS, etc. who provide all the necessary information for the successful implementation of individual development plans and those for the reunification of the child with the family**

During the year 2020, Nisma ARSIS established and made functional 6 Local Coordination Teams which hold periodic meetings in each of the Municipalities to coordinate the work for the cases of children located near each RCI. The Local Coordination Teams (LCT) are composed of the Director of the Special Structure for Social Care Services of the Municipality, Head of RCI, Head of the Social Sector in RCI, CPW, Nisma ARSIS staff and other professionals depending on the case being treated. Each of the established structures provides technical support throughout the Deinstitutionalization process.

The main focus of each meeting has been the discussion of specific cases that may be potential to start the reunification process, developing family assessments, following steps according to court procedures, case management, support of RCI staff and social service professionals, the development of the individual development plan for each child, the promotion of cross-sectoral meetings according to the need of each case, and the provision of the necessary support services.

In order to provide dedicated support to the De-I process and the establishment of local coordination structures for De-I, Nisma ARSIS has dedicated staff at each RCI in the role of Local Child Care Worker. The task of each of the employees was to support the RCI staff in raising their professional capacities, facilitating and supporting local workers in reuniting the child with the biological family, preparing the necessary administrative procedures, supporting the development of child empowerment plans and family, child deinstitutionalization plans as well as development plans. These workers have served as focal points in the liaison of all actors involved in case management as well as in the coordination of practical work in the field for cases of potential children to be joined or empowered.

## 2.10 Improving the capacities of the staff at each RCI

Improving the capacities of the staff at each social care institution has been and remains one of the most immediate needs to be addressed, but as an activity planned to be implemented during 2020, it was not possible to be realized. The Covid 19 pandemic, like every sector of life, affected and inhibited the work of the Nisma ARSIS team with RCI. The austerity measures, the isolation and the limitation of direct interaction with the RCI staff due to Covid-19, forced the Nisma ARSIS team to, in collaboration with UNICEF, readjust the typology of planned activities to the new terms forced by the pandemic situation.

Despite the impossibility of carrying out the planned trainings, the Nisma ARSIS team has provided mentoring to the social teams of RCIs during every meeting, monthly meetings of the local teams of coordination and treatment of children and families plans.

## 2.11 Support in the implementation of individual development plans

Support in the implementation of individual development plans was provided for each child through a local child care specialist in each municipality, who guided staff in the implementation of the plan. The local child care workers (LCW) placed by Nisma ARSIS near each RCI in Tirana, Korca, Vlora, Durrës, Shkodër together with technical experts have provided and made possible the implementation of individual child development plans and drafting of reunification plans. Despite the pandemic situation and the imposed restrictions, the employees continued the work on the evaluation of new cases placed in RCI after April 2020 and have updated the assessments carried out in the first phase. The challenge encountered in this process and the delayed transfer of files from SSS to the relevant residential care institutions.

Throughout the pandemic, it focused on providing psychological support through online counseling, meeting the needs that arose for any child or isolated staff while respecting every measure taken for their safety. The mentoring process has continued through online communication (albeit with great challenges for adapting staff to the new ways of online interaction) for the RCI social teams during each meeting, monthly meetings of the local coordination teams and dealing with children's plans and families.



## 2.12 Documentation of family support package delivery, use and impact

Following the achievement of the project's objectives, the Nisma ARSIS team has worked intensively to identify all real possibilities for further progress in the process of reuniting children with their biological families, supporting families in fulfilling the conditions for the well-being of child and preparing the child for his return home. For this purpose, Nisma ARSIS has documented the entire progress of the reunification process with all its dimensions and has produced a report which considers the progress of the process, achievements and challenges that need to be addressed with proposals for concrete solutions.

According to this report, the work was developed in parallel in two directions:

- ✦ In the organization and coordination of all local structures to realize joint decision-making and ensure a sustainable intervention through the creation and operation of Local Coordination Teams in six municipalities, where RCI are located;
- ✦ In the intervention with concrete actions, case by case, for each child or family to support the reunification and/or prevent the institutionalization of other children in their biological families.

### Home support services

#### Case study

*The case concerns the success story of Home Support Services for M and K, parents of four children, including a 2-year-old boy placed in a residential care institution. The family resides in their own apartment with inadequate living conditions due to hygiene and lifestyle issues, compounded by mental health problems of both parents. Their income is derived from payments for disability allowance and an Economic Aid program totaling approximately 27,000 lekë (250 EUR) per month. Despite mental health challenges, both parents grew up in unstimulating family environments, resulting in low caregiving abilities.*

*In May 2020, Nisma ARSIS and social services in Korçë Municipality initiated an assessment of the family and planning steps to improve their situation, empower the parents, and enhance their parenting skills. The intervention aimed not only to benefit the institutionalized child but also the other three children at home. Home support services commenced in December 2020 and continued until December 2022, involving daily visits by a social worker and weekly monitoring by a childcare specialist from Nisma ARSIS and local actors.*

*The social worker's intervention focused on activities to help adult family members meet their basic needs, promote well-being, and encourage independence. The family was engaged in drafting an activity calendar, enhancing their participation throughout the process. They identified challenges requiring intervention, such as societal marginalization and lack of decision-making autonomy.*

*Initially, the parents were informed of their rights to access various services equally and in a language they understood. Their high motivation stemmed from the intervention's potential to expedite the boy's return home. Over four months, the family's home became clean and orderly, with the mother gaining independence in household management. All family members improved personal hygiene despite resource constraints.*

*The children attended school/nursery with improved hygiene and suitable clothing, fostering greater social acceptance. With a new daily routine established, all meals were consumed regularly, and a positive atmosphere prevailed. The parents independently managed their income, with ongoing efforts to enhance caregiving skills and fulfill children's developmental needs. After 12 months of dedicated support, including infrastructure improvements, the family received positive assessments and initiated procedures for the boy's reunification. In July 2021, the court ruled in favor of the family, and the boy rejoined them. Continuous support from Nisma ARSIS, monitoring from CPW, family services, community, and other stakeholders ensures ongoing assistance and integration into normal life for the family.*



## 2.13 Children placed in RCI and those at risk of separation from their families, received direct support services

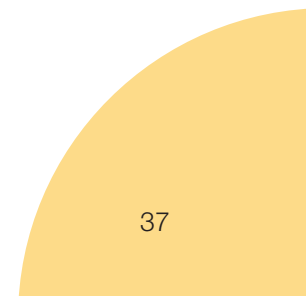
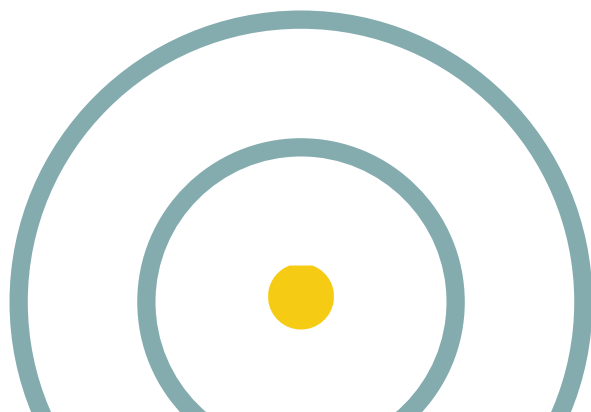
Based on all the assessment processes carried out for children and families, the Nisma ARSIS team has continued to implement individual development plans and family empowerment plans to enable reunification and at the same time to prevent the separation of children from their families. During the work in the field and in direct contacts with families, Nisma ARSIS has also assessed the intervention with direct services for families as very important in addition to capacity building for professionals.

**95 families and 194 children** (where 36 of the children have been separated from their biological families and 158 of them have been at risk of separation from their families) have been supported with direct services in accordance with their identified needs and empowerment plans in 15 municipalities (Vlora, Durrës, Korçë, Tirana, Pogradec, Elbasan, Erseke, Dimal, Kamëz, Shkodër, Kavajë, Berat, Sarandë, Lushnjë, Memaliaj).

Direct support includes: Administrative and notarial services and judicial procedures; Furniture for the apartments where the biological families of the children living in the RCI lived; Household appliances; Rent payment; Clothing for children who were living in biological families; Didactic materials for children who lived with the biological family; Food and sanitary packages; Medicines and medical visits; Financial support for cost payments, daycare, etc.; Economic empowerment for parents and young people through professional courses and support of business opening initiatives; Psychosocial activities such as summer camps; Specialized long-term education such as courses for the development of digital skills for institutionalized children and family care services.

The continuous cooperation with 40 child protection professionals and 60 professionals (from the social sector in 6 RCI, in the social services directorate in the municipality, the regional directorates of SSS) has helped in:

- ✦ creation and follow-up of interventions and empowerment or monitoring plans for 75 families and this process was implemented through 126 visits.
- ✦ 74 meetings of the Intersectoral Technical Group to prevent the separation of children from their biological families and to discuss the progress of family empowerment.
- ✦ 60 meetings of local coordination teams.
- ✦ 14 children reunited with their biological families.



## 2.14 Public officials have improved their capacities to exercise their social work functions in the community

Based on the needs identified in the Korçë district, such as the pronounced lack of professionals with the profile or position of a social worker, a 15-day training cycle was developed for “Raising the capacities of Social and Economic Assistance Administrators who exercise the functions of social workers in Korçë District” which was attended by 58 participants, employees of Korçë, Devoll, Pustec, Maliq, Kolonje and Pogradec Municipalities (specifically: 31 social administrators, 12 economic assistance specialists, 6 PWD specialists, 6 social workers, 2 protection workers Children, 1 Local coordinator for gender-based violence).

The main objective of the training cycle, based on the module designed for this purpose, was to ensure the provision of quality social services and increase citizens’ access to these services, through:

- ✦ achieving a reconceptualization of the profession of social administrator by reviewing their duties and re-evaluating the importance that this profession enjoys.
- ✦ Raising the capacities of employees by sharing experiences encountered during daily work in the region and analyzing these experiences in the logic of identification-referral-management.





## 2.15 National Conference on Deinstitutionalization

The Ministry of Health and Social Protection, UNICEF, Save the Children, SOS Children's Villages and the Nisma ARSIS, organized the National Conference "Process of Deinstitutionalization in Albania, Achievements, Challenges and Vision for the Future", which took place on the 18th and 19th November 2021 at MAK Hotel Albania, Tirana, Albania. 61 participants Representatives from MHSP, partner organizations, municipalities, public institutions of social care, child care providers, child protection workers were part of the National Conference.

The main issues discussed during the sessions were:

- ✦ To inform all responsible persons, professional groups and the general public about the importance of Deinstitutionalization and the measures taken under the direction of the Ministry of Education and Culture for the advancement of this process;
- ✦ To clarify the roles and responsibilities of the institutions involved in the deinstitutionalization process;
- ✦ Creating conditions for the involvement of public and private actors, to support efforts, to exchange positive experiences and to ensure further coordination;
- ✦ To identify difficulties and ways to address them throughout the deinstitutionalization process;
- ✦ Introducing and promoting new childcare services, focusing on the process of transforming them into true community-based services;
- ✦ To share information on the most positive practices of child-famgur union, the foundation for the integrated approach of local self-government structures and social care institutions;
- ✦ Submit to the judicial system, law makers and other relevant policy makers a series of more urgent legal changes and adjustments that are necessary for children to stay and grow within the family care environment.



The conference reported on the progress of the National Deinstitutionalization Action Plan, evaluated alternative child care service models from selected pilot municipalities, and used the opportunity for professional groups and subject matter experts to advise and support the process.

The Deinstitutionalization process pays special attention to preventing the unnecessary placement of children in institutional care, transforming residential care services into community-based services that have the child's and family's interest at the center of its services, achieving the ultimate goal: Interest the highest of Children in Albania.



During the proceedings of the conference, the cooperation of Nisma AR SIS in partnership with UNICEF was promoted with the Municipality of Korça and Vlorë for the Piloting of Children and Families Support Hubs financed by the Social Fund where each municipality has applied based on the objectives defined in the respective Social Plans for raising

the basket of services based on Decision No. 518, dated 4.9.2018 “On community and residential social care services, criteria, procedures for their benefits and the amount of money for personal expenses for the beneficiaries of the organized service”.







Një proces i titit reformues në sistemin e mbrojtjes dhe kujdesit ndaj fëmijës ka të nevojshëm:

- Burimet financiare dhe njerëzore aktuale të Institucioneve të Përkujdesit Shqiptar rezidenciale të rielokohen për t'ju përshatur shërbimeve të kujdesit alternativ me bazë komunitare;
- punonjësit e sektorit të shërbimeve shqiptare të trajtohen me qëllim ngritjen e kapaciteteve dhe pozicionimin në strukturat e reja statusore;
- zhvillimin dhe ngritjen e shërbimeve për fëmijët dhe familjen;
- transformimin gradual të shërbimeve rezidenciale drejt shërbimeve me bazë komunitare.

Procesi i transformimit ka përqendrimin e aksesit ndaj shërbimeve për parancat e lindarjeve të cilat nga tani do të jenë të përbashkëta me të gjitha familjet në prirje të përbashkët.

FUNKCIONALIZIMI  
fëmijë  
kon  
familje







# 3 | Advancement of the Deinstitutionalization process and transformation in Korça and Vlora Municipalities and in two other Municipalities Tirana and Durrës

2022-2023

UNICEF and its partners dedicated the first part of 2022 to the comprehensive reflection, validation, and documentation of the De-Institutionalization (De-I) process in Albania, covering the period of 2019-2021.

The conference was followed by preparing an overarching De-I report for multiple strategic purposes. The document was finalized and submitted to the Ministry of Health and Social Protection. In the same framework UNICEF with its partner Nisma ARSIS has been supporting the monitoring of the De-I National Action Plan 2020-2022, an exercise that reflected what was achieved, the impact of this process, the measures that have not been implemented yet as well as will allow an in-depth reflection on the De-I process and pave the way for evaluating the current and development of new set of actions of the De-I National Action Plan in the country integrated in the new Social Protection Strategy 2024-2030. UNICEF and its partner Nisma ARSIS has been supporting to the actual implementation of the alternative care models in the two pilot Municipalities of Korça and Vlora focused on supporting the drafting of the **Plan of Transformation of the Residential Care Institutions in Family-based Community Services**. The approval of the transformation plan from the De-I Steering Committee was followed

by a series of tailored trainings for the frontline professionals working in the Residential Care Institutions. As a result, 55 professionals were trained by Nisma ARSIS with UNICEF financial and technical support in close coordination with the Ministry of Health and Social Protection and State Social Service.

During 2023, UNICEF in partnership with its Implementing Partner Nisma ARSIS have supported the implementation of the National DI Plan 2020-2023<sup>1</sup>.

As a result, it has been provided:

- ♦ Support to the MHSP, SSS and Municipalities with a **team of experts to support the working groups established to assess Vlora and Korça RCI's** on three different components:
  - a) human Resources,
  - b) infrastructure,
  - c) children need (including their deinstitutionalization plans) aiming to guide the transformation of both RCI's in community and family based services for children and families;

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<sup>1</sup> The MHSP in the end of 2022 extended the timeline of the implementation of the existing NAPDE-I 2020-2022 until the end of 2023 with the purpose to integrate this plan in the new Strategy on Social Protection 2024-2030.

- ♦ **Support to start the legal and financial analyses of the current operational framework of the RCI's** to guide the needed changes for transforming these structures in community based services for children and families
- ♦ **The establishment of Children and the Family Support Hub (CFSH) in the Municipalities of Tirana and Durrës**, including the establishment of a mobile unit that is available to provide services for children and families at risk of separation;
- ♦ **Direct support with services like home-visiting, parenting classes, psychological counselling provided for 80 children and their biological families**, identified at high risk of institutionalization and already in the three RCI's of Durrës and Tirana. Form the total number 52 are boys and 28 girls while 28 children are from 0-5 years old, 21 children are from 6-9 years old, 25 children are from 10-14 years old and 7 children are from 15-17 years old. During the parenting classes and from the shared experiences of mothers, there does exist some differences in parenting styles that mothers and fathers have regarding their children's needs and behaviours. Mothers tend to be

more emotionally mature and try to understand the underlying needs of the child, without being too harsh on them whereas fathers tend to be more authoritarian and are more solution oriented, hence only one father attended the parenting classes. There are various factors that impede the participation of fathers in these classes such as mothers being the primary figure for their children and the ones who are in direct contact with their needs/problems while fathers take the role of the provider and supporter and generally spend long hours working.

- ♦ **A series of capacity building activities was provided to 151 professionals engaged with the establishment of the CFSH** in Tirana and Durrës including 70 RCI staff (8 males and 62 female), 22 community centers staff (2 males and 20 female), 21 health care centers and hospitals staff (3 males and 18 female), 6 education system staff (1 male and 5 female), 28 child protection workers (2 males and 26 female), 2 State Social Services staff (2 female), and 2 Albanian adoption committee staff (2 female). The modules are officially accredited from the Agency for Quality Assurance in the Health and Social Sector in the MHSP.







*Photo from capacity building activities*



At policy level, the development of the new Social Protection Strategy 2024 -2030 has been supported including a dedicated specific objective to advance the De-institutionalization process; UNICEF has actively participated to the work of the De-I Steering Committee and UNICEF strong advocacy led to include De-I as a priority both at the EU Screening Report and Progress Report for Albania and respective approved Road Map for Chapter 23 and 24 of the EU Acquis.

### 3.1 Establishment of Child and Family Support Hub in two new Municipalities Tirana and Durres

The piloting of support services for the child and the family in two new municipalities such as the Municipality of Tirana and Durrës is serving for establishing a model which has proved to be successful in the municipalities of Korca and Vlora, ensuring the prevention of the separation of the child from the family, as well as supporting the reunification of children with biological families. With the approval of the procedures for implementing the child and family support hub model

by the Steering Committee, this model is being replicated in other Municipalities. The program also proposes to continue the technical support to the MHSP to further advance the deinstitutionalization process and implementation of the National Action Plan on Deinstitutionalization.

**Establishment of the Child and Family Support Hub (CFSH) in Tirana Municipality** (Establishment of the CFSH at the community center “House of Colors” operated by the organization Nisma ARSIS)

To enhance support for families in Tirana Municipality, mobile units have been established to provide children and family strengthening services. This initiative responds to a critical need, as nearly 80% of families with children placed in Residential Care Institutions across six municipalities in Albania reside in Tirana Municipality.

The establishment of Children and Family Support Hub (CFSH) services in Tirana is essential due to the concentration of families facing challenges in this area. By deploying mobile units, these services can effectively reach families directly within their communities. This approach ensures accessibility and convenience for families who may otherwise face barriers in accessing support.



These mobile units provide a range of services aimed at strengthening family bonds, promoting child well-being, and addressing the underlying issues contributing to placement in residential care. By providing support directly to families where they live, the mobile units facilitate early intervention and preventative measures, ultimately reducing the need for institutional care placements.

Moreover, by focusing efforts in Tirana Municipality, where the majority of families with children in residential care reside, the CFSH services can have a significant impact on a large portion of the population in need.

This targeted approach allows for more efficient allocation of resources and maximizes the effectiveness of interventions, leading to better outcomes for children and families in the community. The Mobile unit of the House of Colors Center serve as the core professional team for supporting the establishment of CFSH in the other 5 community social public centers of the Municipality of Tirana. The mobile unit engage to provide capacity building for the staff of 5 community social public centers of the Municipality of Tirana and to develop the approach of the CFSH services in these centers.



*Photo from parenting classes activities*







*Photo from capacity building meetings with psycho social staff from Tirana Municipality community centers*











*Photo from capacity building meetings with psycho social staff from Durres Municipality community centers*

The proximity of the support hub to the Residential Care Institution is particularly significant as it allows for targeted intervention and support for families whose children may be residing in the institution. The Child and Family Support Hub serves as a focal point for various programs and initiatives aimed at promoting family stability, enhancing parenting skills, and addressing underlying issues contributing to family challenges. Services may include counseling, parenting workshops, educational programs, and referrals to additional resources and support networks.





## 3.2 Capacity Building Program in De-I process

A comprehensive package of training programs was implemented to enhance the capacities of various professionals involved in the process of deinstitutionalization. This initiative aims to equip key stakeholders with the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively support the transition towards family-based care and ensure the well-being of children at risk of separation from their families. The training programs included:

- ◆ Capacity Building for State Agency for Child Rights and Protection (SAPRC) Staff: Staff members of SAPRC were part of a specialized capacity-building program tailored to their roles in facilitating the process of deinstitutionalization. This training focused on relevant policies, procedures, and best practices to effectively oversee and implement the transition to family-based care.
- ◆ Capacity Building for State Social Services (SSS) Staff: Similarly, staff members of State Social Services received training to enhance their understanding of the deinstitutionalization process. This program provided them with the necessary skills and knowledge to support families in transitioning from institutional care to community-based alternatives.

- ◆ Capacity Building for Child Protection Workers: Child protection workers, in collaboration with SAPRC and SSS, were part of specialized training to strengthen their capacity in managing cases related to deinstitutionalization. This program emphasized the importance of family preservation and reunification, as well as effective case management practices.
- ◆ Capacity Building for Local Coordinating Teams and Multidisciplinary Commission Members: Members of Local Coordinating Teams and multidisciplinary commissions at the municipality level participated in capacity-building programs tailored to their roles in coordinating and overseeing the deinstitutionalization process within their communities. This training focused on collaborative decision-making, community engagement, and ensuring the successful integration of children into family-based care settings.
- ◆ Training for Psychosocial Teams in Healthcare and Education Systems: Psychosocial teams in healthcare centers, maternity wards, hospitals, crèches, kindergartens, and schools received specialized training on identifying, intervening early, and referring children at risk of separation from their families. This training emphasized the importance of early intervention and collaborative approaches to support families in crisis.





### 3.3 Training about child safeguarding policies

The staff working in Residential Care Institutions participated in specialized training focusing on safeguarding policies. This training was designed to equip them with the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively implement policies aimed at safeguarding the well-being and rights of children under their care. The training covered various aspects of safeguarding, including identifying signs of abuse or neglect, understanding legal frameworks and reporting procedures, and implementing preventive measures to create safe and supportive environments for children. Additionally, the training emphasized the importance of maintaining professional boundaries, promoting child participation and empowerment, and fostering a culture of accountability and transparency within the institution.



*Photo from the training*



### 2.4 Technical Support to the Ministry of Health and Social Protection (MHSP) for advancing the deinstitutionalization process

Nisma ARIS has assisted the MHSP to advance with the assessment of the three main components (infrastructure, employment and children) as a starting point for the transformation process.

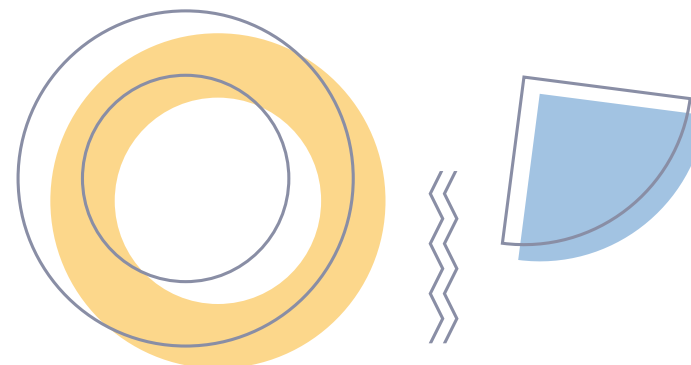
The assessment process has been finalized by the experts hired and engaged for the purposes, of preparing the individual reports for each child, as well as each staff of RCIs and their infrastructure. The process has been coordinated closely with the SSS and the MHSP. Also, Nisma ARIS worked in 2023 for the submission of the training materials for approval to the National Agency for Accreditation. In November the team submitted the package of documents and has accredited the module of introduction in the deinstitutionalization of children. Continuing the initiative, the Ministry of Health and Social Protection (MHSP) has tasked the development of a transformation methodology for the Residential Care Institutions in Korca and Vlora Municipalities. To achieve this, a consultant has been engaged to collaborate with the Social Services Sector (SSS) and the respective municipal social services departments. A meeting convened at the MHSP, chaired by the Deputy Minister, aimed to consult on the methodology's procedural steps. Following collaborative efforts, a preliminary methodology draft was produced by the end of February 2024.

# 4 | Recommendations:

## General recommendations:

- **Review and expand membership of the steering committee:** It is advisable to review the composition of the Steering Committee to enhance the inclusivity of stakeholders contributing to the National Plan's implementation. This could involve inviting additional entities such as the Albanian Adoption Committee, etc., to ensure diverse perspectives and expertise.
- **Enhance engagement of responsible structures:** It has been observed in project implementation phases that there is a need to increase participation and awareness among the relevant structures responsible for addressing Deinstitutionalization (De-I) issues. Strengthening engagement in their roles is crucial for effective execution.
- **Specify legal changes or improvements:** Clear delineation of proposed legal changes or enhancements during the two implementation phases of the national deinstitutionalization plan is essential. This clarity will facilitate smoother execution and adherence to the plan's objectives.
- **Ensure sustainability in family services:** Emphasize the sustainability of services provided to families, ensuring continuity and long-term support. This involves strategizing and allocating resources effectively to maintain the quality and accessibility of services over time.

- **Establish and strengthen support services:** It is imperative to establish and reinforce support services for both children and families at the administrative unit level. Strengthening these services will enhance the well-being and stability of families, contributing to the overall success of the deinstitutionalization efforts. Expanding the existing model of child and family support hubs in other Municipalities where the RCI are placed like Shkodra and Saranda.
- **Collect and utilize available data and indicators:** Utilize available data on children in alternative care and incorporate relevant indicators to measure progress and outcomes effectively. Evidence-based decision-making and monitoring are crucial components of child rights policy implementation, and leveraging existing knowledge can inform and enhance national-level efforts.





#### Recommendations from UNICEF Albania to the Government of Albania

- Make every effort to speed up de-institutionalization. Continue to shift toward community-based and family-based alternative care settings.
- Maintain the good example of twin-track financing of the De-Institutionalisation Action Plan implementation by supporting national services and facilitating support to local government units, to ensure every child thrives in a family-type environment.
- Increase the shift in funding from institutional to community-based care.
- To continue to ensure a proper implementation of childcare services (family support and alternative care services), where each local authority should be obliged to have in place (and financed from the Social Care Fund) to prevent unnecessary separation of children and provide appropriate family and community-based care where children are separated.
- Set up a sustainable, professional, and efficient foster care service in compliance with best international standards. Develop a foster family recruitment policy and help shift social norms concerning the role of foster and institutional care.
- Urgently strengthen safeguarding mechanisms, through Needs Assessment and Referral Units (NARU) to prevent unnecessary child-family separation, particularly in the instances when the root cause is of economic nature.

#### Concluding observations on the combined fifth and sixth periodic reports of Albania (17 October 2023 - Committee on the Rights of the Child)

Family environment and alternative care (arts. 5, 9–11, 18 (1) and (2), 20, 21, 25 and 27 (4))

##### *Family environment*

29. While noting the establishment of the Social Fund and the measures taken to increase cash transfers, the Committee is concerned about the lack of positive parenting programmes, limited financial assistance and support for parents and family separations due to migration. The Committee recommends that the State party strengthen its efforts:

- a) To increase social assistance benefits and implement positive parenting programmes;
- b) To strengthen the availability of affordable childcare options for working parents, including by significantly increasing the resources allocated to childcare;
- c) To ensure protection for children whose parents are working abroad.

### *Children deprived of a family environment*

30. Drawing the State party's attention to the Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children, the Committee recalls its previous recommendations and recommends that the State party:

- (a) Speed up deinstitutionalization by shifting planning and budgetary allocations from institutional settings towards community-based and family-based alternative care settings;
- (b) Adopt regulations to incentivize municipalities to provide a minimum package of childcare services and prevent the unnecessary separation of children, paying particular attention to low-income families and families with children with disabilities;
- (c) Ensure sufficient alternative family-based and community-based care options for children who cannot stay with their families,

including by allocating adequate financial resources for foster care and adoption, regularly reviewing placement measures and facilitating the reunification of children with their families, whenever possible;

- (d) Ensure that financial and material poverty – or conditions directly and uniquely attributable to such a situation – are never the sole justification for decisions relating to the removal of a child from parental care, the referral of a child to alternative care or reintegration;
- (e) Set up a sustainable, professional and efficient foster care service and address social norms that favour institutional care over foster care;
- (f) Provide specific support to enable children leaving institutional care to move towards independent living.

# Annex 1: Assessment process of children in RCIs in Albania in 2019

The team carried out the assessment process of children and families in the field through face-to-face meetings with children, their guardians, children's parents/legal guardians and other family members, community members, representatives of social services of the municipality, CPU, etc.

The evaluation process included several institutions which, according to the approved methodology and the roles defined in the agreement, undertook under the coordination of Nisma ARSIS for the implementation of the methodology:

## MUNICIPALITY

The Directorate of the Responsible Structure for social services in the Municipality, under the supervision of the Child Protection Unit, served as the support structure of the evaluation process (the child protection employee was the contact point for the evaluation process).

- Representatives of the Municipality participated in coordination meetings at the local level to follow the challenges and difficulties of the assessment process.
- Child Protection Workers / Social Administrators facilitated family visits for families of origin of children placed in Social Care Institutions (who are residents of this municipality).
- The Directorate of the Structure responsible for social services in the Municipality provided information on the services that benefited at the time of the evaluation and had previously benefited the families of origin of the children placed in RCI (who are residents of this municipality).
- Representatives of the Municipality provided the list of possible families identified as kinship / foster families in each administrative unit within their territory.

## RESIDENTIAL CARE INSTITUTIONS (RCI)

RCI contributed to the preparation of the list of children who were placed in RCI. RCI prepared the list of children's families, with detailed data of family members, relevant contacts, locations according to civil status, based on the information they had from documents and contacts. RCI psychosocial staff facilitated the first meetings with the family members (biological parents/legal guardians) of each child, whenever possible, which took place in the premises of the institution, with both parents, institution staff and NISMA representatives, after the process of assessment of the children was completed and before the field assessment of the families began.

RCI staff also sent the evaluation team:

- List of children whose legal guardians are RCI;
- The list of children who had constant contact with their parents and the list of those children who had no contact with their parents;
- List of children who were abandoned by their biological parents and who were in the process of adoption.

RCI provided a friendly environment to conduct individual meetings/assessments of children as well as group meetings. Access was provided for the assessment team to conduct observations during the children's routine activities within the institution as well as information regarding the health status, mental and physical health updated for each child placed in the RCI.

### STATE SOCIAL SERVICE(SSS)

SSS assisted the assessment process by notifying each new child placed in RCI during the implementation of the assessment process by the assessment team. The representatives of the Regional Directorate of the State Social Service were a supporting part of the assessment team throughout its process, part of the technical tables and sharing expertise as needed. The State Social Service supported the assessment of children's families with information and expertise, especially in cases where inter-municipal cooperation was needed.

### Nisma ARSIS

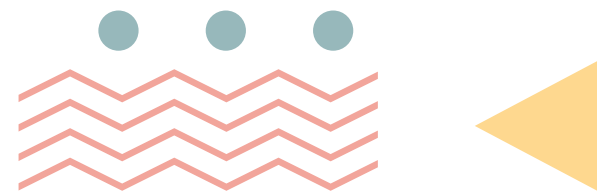
Nisma ARSIS, had a coordinating role and at the same time as an evaluator, ensured the implementation of a series of policies to protect children's data and confidentiality throughout the evaluation process. Monthly coordination meetings were held between the 4 parties involved in the agreement to share challenges and difficulties during the assessment process of children and families. Throughout the process, Nisma ARSIS focused its attention on addressing every challenge by the group set up in the MHSP with representatives from MHSP, UNICEF, Save the Children, with the aim of addressing them and achieving positive results. Detailed reports were developed for each case of children who during the evaluation process were suspected or identified as victims of violence, abuse, neglect, etc., or were evaluated with undefined or previously known diagnoses.

### Preparation of the list of municipalities included in the assessment process

The evaluation process included the mapping of the municipalities of origin where the child or their family belonged. The evaluations showed that a **significant number of the children accommodated in the Durrës, Vlorë, Korçë and Shkodër RCIs belonged to the Municipality of Tirana, Durrës, Vlorë, Korçë, Administrative Units, Lushnje, Librazhd, Fier, Kamëz, Burrel, Devoll, Sarandë, Pogradec, Maliq, Erseke, etc.** The preparation of the list helped in the evaluation process of the families, but also of the local structures that have the task of empowering them. The collected data served as findings for the planning of the second phase of the deinstitutionalization process.

### Mapping of the data collection system and the family support system in the Municipalities of origin (actors and services)

The mapping of the data collection system according to the respective municipalities or administrative units of origin of the children and their families has helped in the process of evaluating the families, but also the system of service providers or the types of services possible for the support or empowerment of child and family.



## Assessment of the child

The assessment of children placed in RCI was an in-depth process, which was based on:

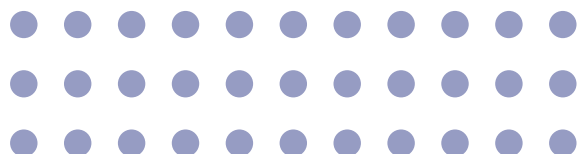
- a) Evaluation of the documentation in the physical file of each child in RCI;
- b) Interviews with the psychosocial staff for each child;
- c) Interviews with educators and caregivers for each child;
- d) Interviews with the medical staff for each child;
- e) Clinical interviews with the child himself;
- f) SON-R and Griffiths tests;
- g) Direct observation of children in their environment;
- h) Checklists in accordance with the age of the child.

The evaluation process of children placed in RCI was based on a methodology consulted with all the partners who have contributed to the implementation of the first phase of deinstitutionalization (Nisma ARSIS, Bethany Social Services). The teams of professionals involved in this process have profiled their experience in working with children and have been subject to professional supervision during the implementation and administration of the instruments contained in the child assessment package. A social worker and a psychologist have been part of the assessment team in the first phase for 4 public RCI, respectively in the Durrës, Korçë, Shkodër and Vlorë Municipalities. In the meantime, the

developmental pediatrician has performed the assessment of children aged 0-3 years and for any child, who had doubts about diagnosis by the relevant specialist. RCI youth aged 16-18 who, after the evaluation of the Nisma ARSIS team, were considered for specialized evaluation, the process of referral to adolescent psychiatry took place at the relevant specialty services in Shkodër Municipality. The child's assessment process has focused on two main pillars which include:

- ✦ Assessment of the child's condition in all dimensions of development such as social, linguistic, cognitive, emotional and the family history of the child's institutionalization;
- ✦ Technical expertise to the RCI staff in revising and completing the child's file in the most professional manner, drawing up an individual plan in accordance with the needs of each child, avoiding their block treatment.

The in-depth individual assessment of the child at RCI was developed at the same time as the in-depth assessment of the biological family, coordinating the work with all relevant structures that have helped in this process. Child protection workers in each municipality where the child has a biological family assisted with the assessment team to carry out a more objective and comprehensive assessment in the further process of drafting family empowerment plans. After the assessment of the child and the family, the assessment team has drawn up **the individual plan** of the child in accordance with the needs identified by the carried out assessment and **the deinstitutionalization plan** of the child which has been drawn up in accordance with the current assessment of the biological family and the opportunities provided for empowerment further family for reunification with the child. A very important instrument in the entire evaluation process has been the determination of the child's best interest.



## Family assessment

The evaluation of the families of the children who were in Residential Care Institutions was carried out by the same team of evaluators that evaluated the children. The evaluation started after the team became familiar with the file and the history of the institutionalization of the children.

The assessment contains several main components such as:

- i. Assessment and analysis of the situation in which the family of origin (biological family) is located, including:
  - ✦ Assessment of the causes that led to the institutionalization of the child;
  - ✦ Psychosocial assessment for all family members, emphasizing the developmental needs of children living in the family and parental skills for child care;
  - ✦ Assessment of the legal situation or administrative procedures of the family;
  - ✦ Assessment of the family's economic conditions and employment opportunities;
  - ✦ Assessment of the mental, psychological and health status of family members;
  - ✦ Psychological assessment for parents includes:
    - Core-OM instrument application
    - Application of the Alabama instrument - parenting styles
  - ✦ Social investigation and criminal history of family members;
  - ✦ Any other necessary information.

## ii. Assessment of the extended family:

This assessment included the same components as in the assessment of the members of the biological family, especially in cases where it was assessed that family members of the extended family can be an alternative for the care of the child who is in the RCI.

## iii. Data mapping for the purpose of family support

The assessment team, in cooperation with other structures operating in the territory where the family is located, identified all the possible resources that the family needed to support and was oriented during the implementation of the empowerment plan and the change of the current conditions with the aim of reunification with the child.

## iv. The assessment also includes the following steps:

- ✦ Review of files in RCI;
- ✦ Information collected by RCI staff;
- ✦ Information collected by the NJMF or other actors in contact with the family;
- ✦ Family visits in cooperation with the MUMF or employees of the administrative units, the needs assessment and referral unit, etc.





## Individual plan of the child

Children's individual plans were drawn up taking into account the needs that were identified during their assessment phase. The purpose of designing and implementing individual development plans was to fulfill the needs of the child in the appropriate time frames and in accordance with his/her development. The plan contains possible alternatives that have been consulted by all actors involved in this process, facilitating the staff of the institution to implement the steps that must be taken in the best interest of the child.

The plan contains the desired results for each identified need, concretizing it with activities, defined deadlines and the persons responsible for their realization. The indicators defined for needs such as health, development, education, social relations, family relations, interests/hobbies/preferences, legal needs, needs for specialized services are also reflected in the monitoring process carried out by the persons responsible for the implementation of the individual plan. of development. Throughout the process followed in the framework of de-institutionalization, the child's individual plan has been presented to all actors participating in the cross-sectoral technical groups where children's cases have been handled for prevention or reunification with the biological family. At the same time, this instrument, now unified in all 9 RCI, facilitates every employee of the institution to plan the interventions proposed for each child.

## The child's family reunification plan

The development of the plan ensured that each person involved in the reintegration process had realistic expectations and that all family capacities and commitment were taken into consideration.

Following the assessment of the families and depending on the unfulfilled needs that hindered the deinstitutionalization process for the children, the reunification plans focused on addressing the needs of the family members, the children and coordinating with other service providers to ensure sustainable and systematic solutions to address these needs.

The reunification plan has its beginnings in the child's development plan from the moment he is accommodated in RCI and is based precisely on the success of the family empowerment plan after separation from the child, which CPU/NJVNR follows closely. After the child, family and system take the necessary time to come to an agreement on assessment and reunification, a plan is drawn up to reunify the child with the family. For more information on the contents of the reunification plan, refer to the document for the Guide to the procedures for the reunification of the child with the biological family.

The fact that at the end of all family and child assessments, only 8 plans for reunification were drawn up highlighted that the system and families were not ready for this process. The identified difficulties were included in the work methodology in the following phases.

## Best interest of the child (BIC)

The child's best interest was documented and completed using a standardized form (Child's Best Interest, Save the Children Checklist) by the assessment team for all children accommodated in RCI. This document prioritizes the highest interest of the child and the provision of the best alternatives to guarantee compliance with this important principle. Scoring of defined areas includes assessment of the family's past, present and future situation; the social aspect in the past, currently and in the future; the alternatives for proper care considering the best interest of the child as well as the actions undertaken in implementation of the ILF insurance.

## Annex 2: Corresponding objectives and activity of the DI Action Plan of the interventions foreseen in the phase 4 (2023)

**Objective 2. Integrated social services for early intervention and prevention of separation of the child from the family environment (including children with disabilities).**

**2.2 Development of the institutional mechanism/s for preventing the institutionalization of children.**

c) Revision of the standards of residential services for children 0-6 years old and their approval

**2.3. Construction and operation of community-based psychosocial services on the prevention of child abandonment, including children with disabilities**

b) Expansion of daily community/mobility service, as well as opportunities to support the family, specialized service for children (Tirana, Durrës)

**Objective 3. Ensuring children best interest (including children with disabilities) resident in public RCI's and Development Centers.**

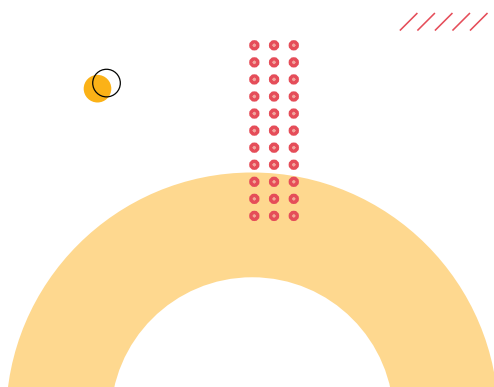
**3.1 Assessment of children best interest in the RCI's and Development Centers and the implementation of individual development plans for every child.**

f) Supporting identified cases for reunification with the biological family

**3.5 Strengthening the implementation of alternative care for all children with a special focus on children 0-6 years old, as part of the R that will be transformed**

a) Support to 4 local government units to develop and integrate alternative care services into their social plans (local social care plans) (referral planning, care model, assessment, training of families, decision-making for institutionalization of children, contract conditions, etc.) prioritizing children 0-6 years old.

b) Support of local government units to set up the necessary institutional structures, which will enable the provision of alternative care services (see more details in the objective for the transformation of RCIs and alternative care). Setting up alternative service in 4 current RCI (some of them supported by UNICEF in the pilot period).



**Objective 4. Capacity building and awareness of institutions and the general public for children's welfare and deinstitutionalization**

**4.1 Capacity Building of State and Private Institutions for Continuous De-Institutionalization**

- a) Presentation of good practices for de-institutionalization for the Municipalities.
- c) Development and accreditation of training programs, to ensure the implementation of new service approaches and models.
- e) Raising the capacities of municipalities to implement programs for family empowerment (planning, budgeting, and mobilization of community resources).
- h) Presentation and orientation of the training program for social workers and psychologists. Raising the capacities of all actors involved in the prevention of child abandonment, through information sessions, initial and ongoing training, development and provision of supervision and professional mentoring.
- i) Training of the staff who will provide the services, as well as retraining of the current staff of the RCIs (child development, change management, provision of new services).
- k) Drafting of a practical guide and increasing the capacities of the State Social Service for the monitoring of social care services.

**Objective 5. Coordination at the national level and monitoring the implementation of the national de-institutionalization plan**

**5.1. Coordination of all State structures for the De-Institutionalization of children from Public Institutions (including children with disabilities) and monitoring of the plan.**

- a) Meetings of the management committee
- b) Meetings of coordinating structures at the local level every month
- c) Periodic meetings of the high-level technical group for De-Institutionalization
- d) Inter-institutional coordination case by case as needed

