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SDG 1 2030 FOR ENDING POVERTY – CAN ACHIEVE THIS GOAL IN THE BALKAN COUNTRIES?

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Abstract

The eradication of poverty as the main target of Sustainable Development Goal 1 by 2030 is the subject of this paper, which analyzes the national voluntary reviews of the Balkan countries and the data presented in them and which are primarily related to poverty as a multidimensional concept. Further, the paper investigate concept of poverty and gives overview poverty conditions in the region, underlining their complexity and some implications. Education seems to be an important determinant and poverty has also a spatial dimension in all these countries. As part of this paper, the issues of the situation with poverty in the Balkan countries through the prism of the covid crisis are considered, as well as this burning challenge – „inequality virus” for the situation in Macedonia with emphasis on the relevant strategic documents. Poverty moreover affects unemployment and that is why the paper presents the number of unemployed in 2020 in the Balkan countries. In the paper we concludes that governments must act on the urgency to create significant reforms, in redesigning the types and adequacy of social welfare cash benefits and support to the most vulnerable categories.

Key words: poverty, Balkan countries, SDG 1- ending poverty, unemployment.

Jel Classification: I32, I38, J21.

INTRODUCTION

Poverty is a rather complex phenomenon combining several dimensions. The World Poverty Clock in 2020 shows that over 712 million people in the world living in extreme poverty (World Poverty Clock, 2020). In 2019, the number was over 651 million people, which means that the number has increased by 61 million people living in extreme poverty. According to UN WOMEN world leaders have committed to ending poverty by 2030 (UN Women, 2020). But that aspiration can only be achieved by ending the discrimination that traps women in poverty. Globally, 1 in 5 girls are in households living on less than US\$1.90 a day, a sum that leaves them without enough

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food, housing, health care or education. The World Bank Regional Economic Report estimates that, in the absence of government responses, more than 400,000 people in the region could fall into poverty (World Bank Group, 2020). Many of those who become impoverished will not receive social protection support unless programs are expanded, and informal workers who lack access to unemployment insurance and other forms of support are particularly at risk. UNESCO, as the United Nations' specialized agency for education, is entrusted to lead and coordinate the Education 2030 Agenda, which is part of a global movement to eradicate poverty through 17 Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.

In the research article “Youth Multidimensional Poverty and Its Dynamics: Evidence from Selected Countries in the MENA Region” the authors point out that young people in Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries are rarely recognized as a resource in decision-making processes and are systemically excluded from key policy areas on development (Journal of poverty, 2021). Dallin Overstreet from School of Public Affairs, Arizona State University in the research article - Is Minimum Wage an Effective Anti-Poverty Tool? emphasized that many studies do indeed show low-wage workers are pulled out of poverty. But others show that some workers, including the poor, lose their jobs from increases in the minimum wage, creating yet more poverty. Miki Malul in the article “Poverty and Social Policy: Perceptions Versus Reality” point out that public awareness about the issue of poverty is crucial for pushing policymakers to act. The authors Kemal, Asuman and Celik from Turkey in the article “Child Poverty and Youth Unemployment in Turkey” concluded that there is a need for a comprehensive approach, taking into account the needs and problems of the individual at different stages of life as a whole; paying attention to the interdependencies across the outcomes of state intervention in different policy areas; and ensuring policy coordination within and across currently fragmented policy implementation structures in different fields. The paper “Economic Freedom in the Balkan Transition Countries from a Valuable Human Ends Perspective” argues that exercising unlimited economic freedom, as promoted by neoliberal advocates, is in negative correlation with valuable human ends, such as greater wellbeing, healthy environment, and poverty elimination (Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies, 2020).

1. SDG 1 NO POVERTY- THE SITUATION IN THE BALKAN COUNTRIES

SDG 1 calls for 'ending poverty in all of its forms across the world'. One of the areas in which progress should be achieved concerns reducing by at least half the proportion of men, women and children of all ages who are living in poverty according to national definitions by 2030.

According to the National voluntary review, Croatia is implementing measures to achieve the targets of the Europe 2020 Strategy and of the European Platform Against Poverty and Social Exclusion, and is determined to make its contribution to the global fight against poverty. In 2018, according to data from the Croatian Bureau of Statistics,

the at-risk-of-poverty rate in Croatia was 19.4%, and the at-risk-of-poverty threshold for a single-person household equalled EUR 4,053 per year and in 2017, the at-risk-of-poverty rate in Croatia was 26%, and the at-risk-of-poverty threshold for a single-person household then equalled EUR 3,794 per year. In addition, according to the data of the Croatian Bureau of Statistics, in 2017 the at-risk-of-poverty rate broken down by age and sex was the highest for people over 65, where it equals 28%. Croatia is implementing the Strategy for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion in the Republic of Croatia for the period 2014–2020, which outlines the situation with regard to poverty and social exclusion and their causes, and provides a social projection as the basis for taking action. The Strategy defines the most vulnerable social groups that are most exposed to the risk of poverty and social exclusion: children and young people, senior citizens and retired people, unemployed and people with disabilities (UN, 2019).

The Republic of Serbia is firmly committed to promoting an accelerated implementation of the 2030 Agenda in the common quest to profoundly transform our world. Children and young people in Serbia face a higher risk of poverty than the adult population (UN, 2019). The at-risk-of-poverty rate for 2017 was 30.5% for children and 29.7% for young people, higher than 25.7% for the total population. During recent years (2014-2017) the risk of poverty decreased for young people (18-24) but the risk for children (0-18) remains the same. Young women face significantly higher risks of financial poverty than young men (32.3% vs. 27.3%). The at-risk-of-poverty and social exclusion rate was also higher among children (38.5%) and youth (39.8%) than in the general population (36.7%) (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2019).

According to the National Organization of the Persons with Disabilities of Serbia (NOOIS), two thirds of families with children with disabilities report the lack of income to provide adequate care and support to their children (NOOIS, 2017). In 24% of families, one of the parents had to leave the employment in order to provide care for the child. The draft of the new National Strategy for Social Protection 2019-2025 is still in the adoption process. The Republic of Serbia has the National Strategy for Youth that recognizes the importance of poverty reduction and social inclusion of young people. The Law on Youth considers persons 15-29 years of age as young people. Serbia does not have an integrated anti-poverty and social inclusion strategy that would address the issue of child and youth poverty and social exclusion in a comprehensive manner.

In its Development Strategy 2030, Slovenia is committed to ensuring a decent life for all generations (UN, 2020). The at-risk-of-poverty rate is 1.4% higher for women, with the number being even higher within the population aged 65 and above (12.9% for men, 22.3% for women). Retired women, tenants and the unemployed are at the highest risk of poverty. Slovenia is applying various policies and actions to reduce the at-risk-of-poverty rate. Namely, in 2019, several austerity measures in the field of family benefits were lifted, and the threshold for obtaining a state scholarship was lowered (thus granting a scholarship to an additional 8,500 secondary school and university students). In 2020, the Government of the Republic of Slovenia raised the minimum wage, giving it a new definition by excluding all benefits. People over 65 years of age

are at the highest risk of poverty, with the risk being 10% higher for women in this age group.

One of the structural problems in Bosnia and Herzegovina is certainly the difference between the rural and urban population. This is reflected in the huge difference in the poverty rate: 11.3 % for the urban population and 20.5 % for the rural population. Regarding the employment status of the head of the household, those households where the head of the household is incapacitated for work were at greatest risk of poverty (38.5%) and those households where the head of the household is employed were at the lowest risk of poverty (11.6%). One in six households in Bosnia and Herzegovina is poor. The poverty rate for the elderly was 19.6 % and 18.7 % of children lived in relatively poor households. The Roma minority is among the most vulnerable groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The social situation of Roma is characterized by poor living conditions, obstacles to education and a lack of income generation opportunities (UN, 2019).

Bulgaria is among the countries where the risk of poverty for the population is above the EU average (UN, 2020). In 2018, the poverty line remains the same as in the previous year, and the relative share of the poor has decreased from 23.4% to 22.0%. At the end of 2019, the number of unemployed registered at the Labour Offices was 194,715, which is 6,751 less compared to the same period in 2018 (-3.4%). Long-term and youth unemployment continue to decline on an annual basis.

In Greece national priority is linked to SDGs 1, 2 and 3, and also to the goals of a fair and sustainable development promoted by the National Growth Strategy, as the latter aims at the productive reconstruction of the economy, by creating an inclusive and competitive labour market, and having as an urgent task to reduce unemployment and protect labour rights (UN, 2018). Reforms and policies in the field of social protection, which have been implemented in recent years, aim at fighting poverty, unemployment and social exclusion, phenomena that have increased sharply since 2008, due to the economic crisis and budgetary constraints. In 2015, the proportion of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion was 35.7%, when the EU28 average was 23.7%, but a gradual improvement of the social situation in the coming years is expected due to rising employment and social security system reforms.

In the article “Indebtedness, Socioeconomic Status, and Self-Rated Health: Empirical Evidence From Greece” from the authors Ilias-Ioannis Kyriopoulos, Dimitris Zavras, Antonis Charonis, Kostas Athanasakis, Elpida Pavi, John Kyriopoulos, first published on 16 December 2016, it is emphasized that given that household indebtedness and difficult socioeconomic conditions are quite prevalent in Greece, targeted social policy measures could constitute one of the responses toward a looming health crisis (Journal).

With an employment rate of just 50 percent, the Albanian economy is unable to create sufficient jobs for the population (UN, 2018). The level of poverty dropped from 25.4 percent to 12.5 percent in 2008 but, due to economic factors, increased to 14.3 percent in 2012, while extreme poverty fell to 2.2 percent in urban areas and 2.3 percent in rural areas. However, households with children remain prone to living in

poverty more than do their counterparts, especially those with younger children (0–5 years of age), with an absolute poverty rate of 24.9 percent, compared to the national average of 14.3 percent.

Although data for Kosovo provided by appropriate institutions is missing, the latest published ones for the 2015, shows that 5.2% of people live in extreme poverty (INDEP, 2019). Sustainable development target in this respect is to eradicate poverty as a phenomenon in all its dimension. Besides, another obstacle that evidences that eradicating poverty in Kosovo can be challenging is that the last two years, the social protection scheme has followed a slowly decreasing trend. The data evidences that the number of families receiving social benefits in 2017 was 2,761 and it decreased to only 2,206 in 2018. Further, the average poverty line in EU is 9.8 %, while the latest provided data shows that for Kosovo is at 17.6%. Thus, despite the slow progress (figures following a decreasing trend), the level of poverty continues to remain at an alarming 2 times higher than the average poverty line of the EU countries.

2. BALKAN COUNTRIES AND THE IMPACT OF GLOBAL CRISIS - WHAT IS THE SITUATION WITH THE POVERTY AND UNEEMPLOYMENT?

The goal of the South East Europe 2020 strategy of the Regional Cooperation Council, is to improve living conditions in the region and bring competitiveness and development back in focus, closely following the vision of the EU strategy Europe 2020 (South East Europe 2020 Strategy, 2013).

The article „Global Poverty and Hunger: An Assessment of Millennium Development Goal #1“ focuses specifically on Millennium Development Goal #1, which targets poverty and hunger. Using a systematic review of the literature, the authors examine progress, or lack thereof, that regions have made toward the goal (Journal of poverty, 2012).

But, COVID-19 and containment measures are expected to reverse recent poverty reduction in Albania. The simulations produced estimate that poverty in Albania could go up to about 40 percent in the first scenario and 44 percent in the second scenario. Thus, in the more optimistic scenario, poverty would go back to the 2012 rate and, in the more pessimistic scenario, it would equal the 2005 rate. Since most of the people working in agriculture are already poor, and the simulation assumes no income decrease in agriculture, the increase in poverty is mainly the result of urban people in services losing a significant share of their earnings (South East Europe 2020 Strategy, 2013).

In addition, the slowdown due to the global COVID-19 outbreak, and the associated potential loss of jobs and earnings, will likely have a short-term effect on poverty. The latest available Bosnia and Herzegovina poverty data are for 2015, when poverty was an estimated 16 percent, very close to the 14 percent poverty rate estimated for 2007. Simulations show that consumption will likely fall by 3.5 to 6.7 percent across the entire distribution, so poverty is predicted to rise from about 11.8 percent in 2019 to 12.9 to 14.6 percent in 2020. Depending on whether the crisis lasts one or two quarters,

about 35,000 to 85,000 individuals are likely to fall into poverty. Among workers in the most affected sectors before the pandemic, poverty was about 9 percent. However, that rate will likely increase to 11 percent in scenario 1 and 15 percent in scenario. It is worrying that more than 60 percent of those likely to fall into poverty due to the COVID-19 crisis are currently not covered by any social protection program. The impacts of COVID-19 on poverty are likely to be substantial, as economic activity in Kosovo has been brought to a standstill and remittances plummeted. A significant number of people are likely to lose their jobs, especially those on fixed-term contracts, seasonal workers, and those working in the informal economy. Kosovo has a large construction sector, which is particularly sensitive because it is an important source of income for the urban poor and vulnerable. Indeed, the simulation conducted for this note suggest that 57,000–148,000 people could become poor, while the middle class could shrink by as many as 100,000 people.

Also, the COVID-19 pandemic could raise the poverty rate in Montenegro depending on whether the crisis lasts one or two quarters, but most of the new poor may be unprotected. The result would be to reverse the past 4–6 years of poverty reduction, bringing poverty back up to the 2015, or even 2013, level. From about 9,000 to 20,000 citizens could fall into poverty due to the economic shock. Serbia's recent poverty reduction could be partly reversed in 2020: depending on the crisis duration, 125,000 to 327,000 citizens could fall into poverty due to the economic shock. The share of the population considered vulnerable (not poor but also not economically secure) is estimated to go up from about 31 percent to 33–35 percent. Many of the new poor may be left without social protection support unless the government revises benefit programs. About 66 percent of those Serbians who could become impoverished because of the COVID-19 crisis currently receive no social protection benefits. About 25% of the population of Albania live with less than US\$ 2 per day. More than half the population also lives in rural areas, where the poverty rate is 66% higher than in the capital – Tirana. According to the World Bank, more than 15% of the population in Bosnia and Herzegovina lives under the poverty line. Despite being an EU member, Croatia is confronted with acute poverty problems. Thus, the poor represent about one fifth of the population. Poverty is a widespread phenomenon in Kosovo, affecting 30% of the population. One third of the population of Macedonia lives in poverty. Less than 10% of the population of Montenegro lives in poverty. When compared to other Balkan countries, in terms of social welfare, Montenegro occupies an enviable position. However, there are disparities between regions. One fourth of the population of Serbia is seen as poor. Moreover, poverty is the highest (four times higher than what is observed in Belgrade, the capital city) in the south eastern regions because of recurrent natural disasters, namely floods.

Due to Covid – 19 by June, the unemployment rate in the region had risen by 0.5 pp, 139,000 jobs had been lost, and employers struggling with the challenges the pandemic presented have reduced employee work hours (World Bank Group, 2020). In the last report from World Bank Group it is pointed that though 40 percent of all private sector employees in the Western Balkans (2.1 million) were covered by wage

subsidies, the average unemployment rate in June 2020 was an estimated 15.9 percent, up 0.5 pp from June 2019, although Serbia had avoided a rise in unemployment. In Macedonia, despite government support to protect the labor market, the unemployment rate was 16.7 percent, the first increase since 2011. Although Serbia's unemployment rate hit a record low of 7.3 percent in June, the decline was due to more inactivity rather than more employment; the Serbian labor force had shrunk by 120,000 people, mostly from the destruction of informal jobs.

This year as the labor market weakens, uncertainty about job security and wage growth prospects are likely to deter consumption. In the months ahead, as labor market support measures expire or are rolled back, unemployment may rise, further weighing on consumer sentiment. The approaching end of fiscal stimulus programs may also discourage consumption and investment.

3. SDG 1 – THE SITUATION IN MACEDONIA AND RELEVANT STRATEGIC DOCUMENTS

Macedonia's poverty has been on a decreasing trend over the last decade (UN, 2020). The poverty rate declined from 27 percent in 2010 and 24 percent in 2013 to 22 percent in 2017, whereas the Gini coefficient³ has decreased from 37 percent in 2013 to 32 percent in 2018. Increased employment, salaries and access to pensions have reduced poverty levels. Poverty is concentrated among vulnerable groups. Every fifth citizen and every third household with children are poor. The country has a high youth unemployment rate and one of the largest gender gaps in workforce participation among European and Central Asian countries.

The State Statistical Office, based on the Survey on Income and Living Conditions, which is carried out in accordance with European Union recommendations, calculated Laeken poverty indicators for 2019. According to the data, the at-risk-of-poverty rate in the Republic of North Macedonia in 2019 was 21.9%. Analysed by household types, the at-risk-of-poverty rate in households of two adults with two dependent children in 2019 was 19.5%. According to the most frequent activity status, the at-risk-of-poverty rate for employed persons was 8.8%, while for pensioners it was 7.8%. The Gini coefficient (measure of income distribution inequality) was 30.8% (State Statistical Office, 2019).

The last Strategy on poverty reduction and social exclusion was made as a document which reflects the intention of Macedonia for balancing the degree of inclusion and welfare in all social levels (Ministry of labour and social policy, 2010). The main strategic objective for poverty reduction and social exclusion in the Republic of Macedonia is: reduce poverty and social exclusion in the Republic of Macedonia through a better use of disposable human and material resources, improve conditions for living, working and social conditions for all citizens, system and institutional co-activity in the function of accelerated development, higher standard and better quality life. In the Strategy conclusion, it has been assessed that it is more adequate that the social inclusion policy is implemented through measures and opportunities for a more

universal approach to social services and achievements, rather than focus only on some target vulnerable groups.

Although the Law on Social Protection allows the process of pluralization in the provision of social services, in practice, these are mainly provided by the state (Law on Social Protection, 2019). There is a lack of initiative from municipalities to establish institutions for institutional or extra-institutional social protection, as well as greater activity and involvement of the local communities in the implementation of policies in these areas, coordination at the local level between relevant stakeholders and their greater cooperation with institutions at the national level (Ministry of finance, 2019).

In Macedonia the combined effect of lower labor incomes and lower remittances due to COVID-19 will likely increase poverty to pre-2017 or even pre-2015 levels, depending on the duration of the crisis. Simulations predict the poverty rate to rise from about 17 percent in 2019 to about 20–23 percent in 2020, and from 55,000 to over 130,000 Macedonians (depending on whether the crisis lasts one or two quarters) would fall into poverty. Before the pandemic, poverty was only 4 percent among workers in the most affected sectors, but the rate is estimated to hit about 8 in scenario 1 and 15 percent in scenario 2. Moreover, more than 75 percent of those who are likely to fall into poverty are currently not covered by any social protection program.

In Macedonia according to the data of the State Statistical Office, in 2019, the labour force in Macedonia numbered 964 014 persons, of which 797 651 were employed, while 166 363 were unemployed persons. The activity rate in this period was 57.2, the employment rate was 47.3, while the unemployment rate was 17.3 (State Statistical Office, 2020). According to the data of the State Statistical Office, in the I quarter of 2020, the labour force in Macedonia numbered 967 733 persons, of which 811 106 were employed, while 156 627 were unemployed persons. The activity rate in this period was 57.4, the employment rate was 48.1, while the unemployment rate was 16.2 (State Statistical Office, 2020). According to the data of the State Statistical Office, in the II quarter of 2020, the labour force in Macedonia numbered 953 039 persons, of which 793 416 were employed, while 159 623 were unemployed persons. The activity rate in this period was 56.5, the employment rate was 47.1, while the unemployment rate was 16.7 (State Statistical Office, 2020).

In the short report published from OECD on 31 October 2020 it is pointed that despite a 17.5% unemployment rate in 2019, the figure has been decreasing in recent years (average annual decrease of 1.7% since 2015). In Q2 2020, it increased by 2.7% (State Statistical Office, 2020).

According to data published by Trading Economics, unemployment Rate in Macedonia increased to 16.70 percent in the second quarter of 2020 from 16.20 percent in the first quarter of 2020.

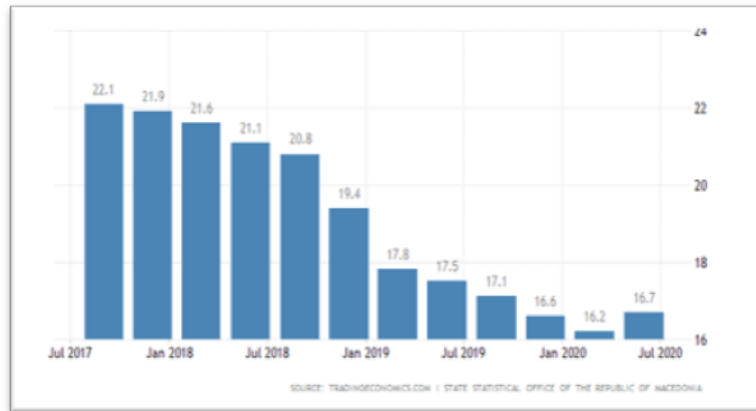


Figure 1. (Trading economics, 2020) (unemployment rate in Macedonia – the figure 1 published by tradingeconomisc.com)

In the Policy brief number 43 from Finance Think it is pointed that Covid-19 crisis relatively equally affected relative poverty dependent employment status, for all three job statuses her increase is up to two percentage points, while observed according to absolute poverty (5.5USD), the effect of Covid-19 is most unfavorable for the unemployed (Trading economics, 2020).

The Macedonian government adopted a series of implementation measures within the 4th package of measures aimed at mitigating the negative impact of the pandemic, mainly: establishing an interest-free credit line with a grant component intended for micro and small enterprises affected by COVID-19; amending the law regulating the Financing of Local Self-Government in order to provide the municipalities with stable revenues during the COVID-19 crisis; presenting a bill regulating the Financial Support to Employers Affected by the Health and economic Crisis Caused by COVID-19; reducing VAT in different fields (exemption for donations, 10% for food and beverage for onsite consumption and catering services starting 1 January, etc.), extending the monthly financial support of MKD 17,410 (~EUR 282) for the self-employed during the months of October, November and December 2020 (OECD, 2020). What will be the effects of the implementation of all measures taken by the Government, it is necessary to be the subject of research in subsequent reports, papers and studies.

CONCLUSION

Most Balkan countries are lacking resources to address all the needs of poor people. In such a context, international assistance can be seen as very relevant, focusing on fields that do matter for poverty reduction and containment. However, considering the scope and the persistence of poverty, there seems to be a need for reassessing transition policies and strategies in the region. The creation of jobs must also be a top priority to provide more incomes to poor families.

In Macedonia the poverty and inequality are high when compared with other countries with similar levels of development in the region and there are concerns about the sustainability of the recent gains in poverty reduction.

Almost all Balkan countries, through their national plans and programs, have marked employment growth and job creation as the most important single mechanism for exiting poverty. The second priority is an increase of education coverage and improving the quality of education, although reduction of poverty and social exclusion presupposes improvement in the areas of developing appropriate social safety nets, health care systems, securing adequate housing, participation in decision making and protection of human rights. Bearing in mind the commitment of the Western Balkan countries to meet the globally agreed goals, it is of the utmost importance to explore the synergies between these agendas to ensure that the processes reinforce each other.

Significant reforms are necessary, among other things, in redesigning the types and adequacy of social welfare cash benefits as assistance and support to the most vulnerable categories for dealing with poverty.

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