

Conflict Prevention Forum

BEGGING IN KOSOVO AND ITS IMPACT ON PEOPLES' SAFETY

Pristina, January 2014



An EU funded project managed by
the European Union Office in Kosovo

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The Conflict Prevention Forum is a civil society based forum that aspires to address the security and safety related issues in northern part of Kosovo by promoting and advocating for effective policy solutions. The forum presents a task-oriented discussion platform for civil society organizations with shared interest in common dialogue and advocacy on important security issues with responsible authorities. Conflict Prevention Forum is currently comprised of the following organizations: AKTIV, Advocacy Center for Democratic Culture, Centre for Development of Local Communities, Hendikos-Mitrovica North (Mitrovicë/Mitrovica North), Developing Society Center (Leposaviq/Leposavić), and Zdravlje (Zvečan/Zvečan).

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I. Introduction

In December 2013 AKTIV, FIQ and seven local partner organizations mentioned above organized seven community dialogue meetings in Gračanicë/Gračanica, Mamushë/Mamuša/Mamuşa, Partesh/Parteš, Pejë/Peć, Prishtinë/Priština, Ferizaj/Uroševac and Zveçan/Zvečan to discuss the issue of begging in Kosovo and its influence on peoples' safety.

Overall 97 participants have participated in the community dialogue meetings. In addition 6 semi-structured interviews with representatives of responsible authorities and involved entities (such as Caritas Kosovo, Institute for Social Policy, Kosovo Police, Parliamentary Committee on Health, Labour and Social Welfare, Center for Social Welfare in Prishtinë/Priština and Terre des Hommes) have been conducted by FIQ in Prishtinë/Priština, and 1 by Conflict Prevention Forum members (with UNICEF representative) in Mitrovicë/Mitrovica north. The background information obtained during this process has been reviewed through desk research and ultimately resulted in this report

II. Key Findings

The following findings, which have been identified during the community dialogue meetings, will be shared with responsible local, national and international actors and stakeholders in Kosovo, and will be used by partner civil society organizations for targeted advocacy with these actors and promoting fruitful dialogue between civil society actors and respective authorities on security policy and decision-making.

- **Phenomenon**

Begging as a phenomenon is an existing issue in Kosovo, which, as according to the citizens asked during the community dialogue meetings, has never ever been addressed systematically. There is a significant discrepancy between the number of beggars being present in urban and rural areas, whereas in the latter case specific manners of requesting money is being employed, such as pleading or asking for contribution for medical purposes etc.¹ Respondents expressed their sensation of fear in cases like harassment from individual beggars, following by groups of beggars as well as possibility of invading their private estates by people begging "door to door".

- **Beggars**

Beggars are usually identified as the most vulnerable members of the society such as minors, elderly, and women accompanied with children. These are mainly representatives of minority groups such as Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian, as well as foreign state members, predominantly originated in Albania. In the northern Kosovo begging is allegedly also accompanied with addiction diseases (e.g. drug abuse).

- **Main causes**

As the main determinative cause for current situation regarding begging, an adverse economic situation has been ascertained by community dialogue meetings participants. Almost unequivocally, poor economic performance and high rate of unemployment in nowadays Kosovo is being perceived as decisive ground inducing begging activities, while perception of begging as a consequence of trafficking in human beings or a criminal activity itself has been mentioned only marginally. Obviously, popular opinion does not fully mirror the findings of international organizations according to which Kosovo is a source, destination, and possibly a transit country for children subjected to force begging.²

III. Begging in Kosovo and its impact on peoples' safety

This report analyzes the issue of begging in Kosovo and its influence on perceptions and realistic threat of this phenomenon to personal safety of people in Kosovo. It gives a multifaceted angle since it also aims to draw the attention on likelihood of human trafficking, child labour, and misuse of people with special needs in organized begging endeavors and institutional answers to this problem.

The report however does not tackle the issue of prevalence of begging in Kosovo since this would require more substantial resources and massive scale research throughout whole Kosovo. The assumption incorporated in this paper is the one that begging occurs at the scale that requires structured institutional and overall social response. This assumption has been validated through community dialogue meetings where all participants acknowledged the existence and gravity of this problem from their everyday life experience.

The report also acknowledges different socio-political dynamics that exists between the northern part of Kosovo (municipalities of Mitrovicë/Mitrovica north, Zveçan/Zvečan, Zubin Potok and Leposaviq/Leposavić) and the rest of Kosovo. Process of integration of northern Kosovo institutions into positive legislative framework only started in November 2013 following the local elections. The socio-political context in which this phenomenon has been taking place in post-conflict period is thus significantly different. The reports attempts to reflect on that.

Begging as a social phenomenon has the potential of affecting negatively welfare of a society as a whole, posing considerable threat to its overall safety. Specific and delicate problem in this regard represents child begging. Kosovo is a source, transit, and destination country for children trafficked for forced prostitution and forced begging, whereas female children and children in marginalized RAE communities are particularly vulnerable to trafficking due to the high incidence of poverty and low birth registration rates³. Different media stories and campaigns have been put forward in Kosovo, in order to encourage wide public to stop giving money to children begging on the streets, aiming to reduce the "supply" side of this issue, meaning those who benefit from exploiting these children for their own gain.⁴ However, besides children, there are also other categories of people begging that are visible, such as extremely poor individuals from Kosovo and neighboring countries, drug addicts etc.

² (Refworld, 2011)

³ (Refworld, 2011)

⁴ (OSCE, 2009)

- **Types of begging and beggars**

In discussions with citizens and representatives of central and local institutions dealing with issue of begging in 7 municipalities throughout Kosovo in which this research took place, we identified two dominating groups of beggars: those operating at the streets (including coffee shops, restaurants and similar venues) and those engaged in door-to-door begging (often claiming for the sake of a third person).

The interviewees in the rural areas (Gračanicë/Gračanica, Mamushë/Mamuša/Mamuşa, Partesh/Parteš) agreed upon statement that there are no “classic” forms of begging in these communities in the sense of them being street beggars, but mostly door-to-door activities where the beggars allegedly seek financial aid on behalf of a third person (in most of the cases an ill member of the family, which often turns out to be a false claim⁵). Also in Gračanicë/Gračanica there has been a notice of children members of RAE community begging within the religious complexes and by default when there are occasions with massive participation of pilgrims (or tourist collective visits). In urban areas in which this research took place (Pejë/Peć, Prishtinë/Priština, Ferizaj/Uroševac and Zvečan/Zvečan), citizens reported a notice of greater number of beggars, engaged in both street and door-to-door activities.⁶

Reportedly, in most of the cases, children - most vulnerable members of the society - are involved in such activities as well. According to the participants of the community dialogue meetings, children are in some cases victims of forced labour imposed by their parents⁷, but also by criminal groups that are controlling large number of children begging at the streets.

Unfortunately, statistical data on begging in the north of Kosovo are not existent. In the interview regional UNICEF representative for northern Kosovo made a statement that begging problem does not exist in the northern Kosovo since this phenomenon has been suppressed by comprehensive action of international community focused on improvement of socio-economic position of RAE community.⁸ If one main conclusion can be drawn out of this interviews in the northern Kosovo, that is the noticeable tendency to relate this social problem to particular ethnic community, that is Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians living in the north of Kosovo.

- **Causes of begging and its implications for the society**

There are tangible discrepancies between the perception of the proportion of the problem between responsible institutions and citizens who participated in the community dialogue meetings performed in northern Kosovo. The participants of the community dialogue meetings in the north agreed that this problem is existent and not related to RAE community only, but present with a great number of Kosovo Serbs as well. However, in these cases participants agreed that the problem is different in nature/cause. While most of RAE beggar-activities are poverty driven, among Kosovo Serbs this problem is allegedly related also to alcohol- and drug-addiction.

This was identified as a great safety threat to the population since behavioral begging patterns of substance-addicted people are potentially more aggressive and invasive for the population carrying potential of uncontrolled violent reactions. With this in mind, participants of the community dialogue meetings agreed that proportion, social influence and potential safety threat of this problem requires substantial and coordinated institutional response that would include social services, police, but also center for rehabilitation and treatment of drug and alcohol addicts.⁹

Special dimension of this problem is given by number of mentally challenged persons or persons with disabilities involved in begging. This problem potentially indicates the deficiencies in the social and health care system in Kosovo. Reduced ability to work of persons with disabilities, beyond any doubt, influences their competitiveness at the labour market in Kosovo that is any way affected with high level of unemployment.¹⁰

Having this in mind, it is likely that persons with disabilities are forced to beg for mere survival. Of course, potential response mechanism to begging phenomenon in Kosovo should be flexible enough to envisage different treatment for such persons in comparison to potentially crime -driven begging activities. With mental impairments, the situation of such persons is even more complicated since it potentially involves an element of inability to make independent decisions which makes such persons more prone to organized exploitation. All these cases require proactive engagement of social services and subsequent investigative actions of Kosovo Police.

- **Society responses to begging**

The impact of begging to safety and security of the citizens is not necessarily substantial in its manifestation but nevertheless carries a significant risk potential. The risk from developing deviant behavioral patterns of the individuals and/or groups involved in begging since being left at the social margins, non-integrated into the social and educational programs, is high. Moreover, such a potential is even greater when there is no institutional response to this problem.

Participants of community dialogue meetings concluded that there are no efficient mechanisms in place for removal of children begging at street, or the sanctions against parents that are encouraging or/and imposing such a behavior. Although it seems that there are sufficient human resources within the institutions¹¹, it appears that there is no proactive approach by social institutions that would involve the field work and follow-up of these cases. Such a proactive approach would undoubtedly need to derive from comprehensive and efficient national and local strategies offering a multi-layered response to this complex social phenomenon.¹² However, such a strategy does not exist (yet).

Responsible stakeholders, instead of removing beggars from the street by force should work with them individually and see what alternative solutions could be found for each case. Moreover, taking into consideration that majority of beggars come from Albania, the current Memorandum of Understanding between Kosovo and Albania should be enforced in order to achieve a better coordination to find sustainable solutions for these groups of people.¹³

⁹Woman/52, Community dialogue meeting Zveçan/Zveçan, 6 December 2013

¹⁰(Report for the Study on Typology and Policy Responses to Child Begging in the EU, 2012)

¹¹Interview with Gafur Podvorica, Director of the Department of the Institute for Social Policy (Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare), December 2013.

¹²Interview with Liburn Aliu, Member of Parliamentary Committee on Health, Labour and Social Welfare, Interview, December 2013.

¹³Interview with Vjosa Rogova-Damoni, Project Manager Terre des Hommes office in Kosovo, December 2013

Institutional response

According to the statements of Kosovo Police officers in charge for Prishtinë/Priština region, the Police is engaged in identity clarification for the persons involved in begging under the suspicion of them not being citizens of Kosovo and lack of appropriate identification and residence permits. Available statistical data are poor, at national level in first 6 months of 2013 police has indicted 93 persons involved in begging. In total 45 % of them were women and 35% children. Ethnical structure of indicted also speaks in favor of wide-spread opinion that begging is ethnically and culturally related to one ethnic group, this is RAE community. In total 70% of indicted were members of this ethnic group. The ground for indictment was predominately lack of appropriate identification documents since 70% of them were citizens of Albania.¹⁴

As director¹⁵ of Center for Social Welfare in Prishtinë/Priština stated, every two months the center undertakes some actions with Kosovo Police in order to remove beggars from the road and gives beggars food and explanations of the consequences of their doings. However, there is no institution where the center can send these beggars after that. Especially child-beggars cannot be sent either to prison, treatment nor housing. In center's database there are 75 beggars, of which only 8 are adults, all others are children. Finally, it is very difficult to remove beggars from the roads since their profit amounts to 20 to 60 Euro daily. Even though the beggars claim that they do beg on their own risk and will, it is hard to believe that.¹⁶

Coordinator for community and prevention for the region of Prishtinë/Priština within Kosovo Police¹⁷ stated that all indicted citizens of Albania were imposed with sentence of 1 to 3 year ban of entry in Kosovo. There are no indications, nor claims from Kosovo Police side that such a great number of indictments, especially among the children, resulted with investigations on the ground of human trafficking or/and forceful child labour.

All in all, institutional response is triggered solely in the case when some of beggars commit a felony or crime that qualifies him/her for investigative-penalty procedures. Deprived of this pre-requisite, cases are not being investigated. There are no actions by relevant institutions that would determine whether there is a forced labour, extortion or even organized crime behind the cases of child-beggars in place. Manifestly, the pressure on institutions to deal with this problem in more structured and responsible manner should come from the civil sector or/and international and local organization working on protection of human/children rights. The same address should stand behind the initiative to create national strategy that would respond to these challenges.

Even though Kosovo is not a signatory of the Convention on the Rights of Child¹⁸, endorsed under the United Nations auspices, its continuous endeavor towards obeying international human rights standards requires it to adhere to the rules and principles stated thereby. Namely, this convention obliges it to protect children "from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education, or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development."¹⁹ and "against all other forms of exploitation prejudicial to any aspects of the child's welfare."²⁰

¹⁴ Interview with Faik Fejzulahu, Coordinator for community and prevention for the region of Prishtinë/Priština within Kosovo Police, December 2013.

¹⁵ Interview with Vebi Mujku, Director of Centre for Social Welfare in Prishtinë/Priština, December 2013

¹⁶ Interview with Vebi Mujku, Director of Centre for Social Welfare in Prishtinë/Priština, December 2013

¹⁷ Interview with Faik Fejzulahu, Coordinator for community and prevention for the region of Prishtinë/Priština within Kosovo Police, December 2013.

¹⁸ Convention on the Rights of Child (adopted 20 November 1989, entered into force 2 September 1990) No. 27531 (Child Convention)

¹⁹ Child Convention Art. 32 par. 1

²⁰ Child Convention Art. 36

Investigation over possible extortion, forced labour and other forms of child misuse in the cases of child-beggars should be a job performed by Kosovo Police. Begging as a phenomenon is not defined as a criminal offence in Kosovo's positive legislation, and nor it should be. Instead the Criminal Code of Kosovo²¹ mentions that begging is sanctioned solely when related to "exploitation" of children (people). This fact should not vindicate the police for not taking investigative steps and fail to act upon reasonable doubt that child begging is likely related to different forms of children abuse.

Finally, the same applies with tendency to relate, justify and tolerate begging as "traditional" customary behavior within one ethnic group (in this case RAE).²² This widespread perception should not deprive Kosovo Police of the responsibility to act proactively. It is especially important since there are firm indications that behind this social phenomenon stand various forms of organized crime; children abuse and forceful labour of juveniles.²³

Civil society sector response

Reactions of civil sector, although existing, are far from sufficient. There are registered cases of civil interventions focused at public awareness increase.²⁴ Nevertheless, such interventions are rather isolated examples than reflection of actions upon clear, long-term strategy for dealing with this problem. The very same civil society organizations that have been involved in these areas deemed structured work in these programs as impossible due to the absence of sustainable available resources. This indicates certain negligence of this social phenomenon and its implications caused by grave socio-economic conditions in Kosovo at this point of time.

Furthermore, comparative analyzes of social response to begging issue in developed countries of EU and the region concludes failure of civil society sector to engage in substantial element of this problem, that is advocacy activities. Such an action should be focused at law-makers, national level institutions and on creation of comprehensive strategies to tackle the roots and most malignant manifestations of begging in Kosovo, but also would explore the possibilities for legal regulation alternations or/and enforcement of law-implementation regulations that would oblige the law-enforcement agencies in Kosovo to perform preventive investigative efforts in cases when children are involved in begging.

Another conclusion of this research, when it comes to civil society involvement in the efforts to eradicate begging, is a lack of networking and objective-based partnerships between the organizations whose portfolio begging falls under (e.g. organizations protecting the women and children's rights). The effects of the efforts directed at advocacy for national strategy for prevention of child begging beyond any doubts would be greater if larger number of local and international organizations would engage together in respective organized and structured intervention.

However, non-governmental sector plays an important role in educational and public awareness activities, especially towards general public, on behavior and actions discouraging begging. All interlocutors from the interviews with local institutions, international organizations, civil representatives etc. stressed that act of

²¹ Criminal Code of Kosovo, Article 171.

²² Interview with Faik Fejzulahu, Coordinator for community and prevention for the region of Prishtinë/Priština within Kosovo Police, December 2013.

²³ Interview with Jakup Sabedini, Chief of Sustainable Development Sector CARITAS KOSOVA, December 2013

²⁴ Interview with Jakup Sabedini, Chief of Sustainable Development Sector CARITAS KOSOVA, December 2013

giving money to beggars (no matter of what motive or feeling of generosity it invokes) actually encourages such a behavior and sometimes it is likely placing the ordinary people with best intention into the chain of organized crime activities, exploitation of children and people with special needs as well as the other vulnerable social groups. Organized campaign in this respect, would gather significant number of civil society organizations but also assure broader institutional engagement (Kosovo Police, relevant ministries etc.), thus seems as a necessity.

IV. Recommendations

Considering complex nature of social phenomenon of begging, the answer by responsible actors shall be systematical and well-targeted. As the accountability for this problem lies with all levels of public governance, i.e. central and local likewise, clear and feasible goals should be set in order to bring betterment to current state of affairs. Besides leading idea, i.e. to create employment opportunities and hereby interfere with wellbeing of citizens in general terms, following steps addressing following entities have been suggested;

Kosovo Government

- Government should provide effective strategy to tackle the roots causes of begging, particularly discrimination on the ground of ethnicity and poverty. This strategy should identify plausible instruments for assistance to children who work on the streets to overcome the barriers in access to education and assist them and their parents to re-enter the schooling system, introduce the support programs to reduce poverty and inequality faced by RAE community and similar.
- Special imperative of the strategic approach of Government would be to identify the framework (protocols) of institutional cooperation between the social services, Kosovo Police, health institutions, civil society organizations and other relevant actors who can respond to this complex and multi-layered social phenomenon in mutual cooperation. Inter-ministerial cooperation, that would include the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, the Ministry of Education and Science, the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Health – is essential pre-step for the design of credible and operational strategy.

Local municipalities

- In line with the government strategy to-be-produced, local implementation of the action plans should create and put in use the instruments/mechanisms for implementation of systematic measures aimed towards reduction of children's involvement in begging and forced labour. Essential focus should be put in efforts to increase inclusion of children at social margins in schooling system and informal education programs, as well as in managing efficient outreach to families with children.

- The ownership of these initiatives should remain at the local/municipal level since this would enable channels for continuous support and coordination with central level relevant institutions but also enable local municipalities to reflect on specific circumstances/needs existing in their local communities.

Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)

- CSOs in Kosovo should be more proactive in public awareness actions aimed at reducing the “demand” for child begging through discouraging people from giving money to children who beg. The awareness campaign(s) should enfold on national level, but should be adjusted to ethnic/social and economic features of its occurrence too. The campaign action(s) should be all-reaching and long-lasting with the objective to introduce the overall population of the context of begging in Kosovo and especially implications of actual support of individuals through small donations. These campaigns should spread the message that citizens should not give money to beggars, especially children, as it only feeds child trafficking.
- CSOs should explore possibilities of establishing the network/forum of organization that would take a lead in long-term efforts to eradicate (or suppress at least) begging in Kosovo.

Kosovo Police

- Kosovo Police should investigate forced labour and economic exploitation of children and alleged cases of human trafficking related to begging in general. Preventive investigation actions concentrated on ruling out children abuses should be part of the protocol dealing with the cases of child-beggars.
- Kosovo Police should establish vivid and effective cooperation with neighboring countries counterpart police units in order to follow-through cases of deportation and assure inclusion of these people in educational/social programs organized within the country of their origin. This measure can contribute prevention or re-engagement of such persons in begging.

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