

## Higher Education Training in social work in Albania: insights from the experiences of the T@sk project<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** In March 2020, the European Union decided to open accession negotiations with Albania, candidate country since 2014. In order to achieve this important goal in the long path of European integration, Albania had to pursue a set of requirements. Among them, the centrality of human rights affects the implementation of policies aiming at integrating minorities, as well as at granting social rights to unprivileged citizens (La Cava Nanetti 2000, Solidar 2016). In this scenario, the evolution of the professional expertise of Albanian social workers plays a relevant role. In academic and professional terms, social work has a poor tradition in Albania, as in most of post-communist countries (Hoti 2015). In order to face the difficulties of the professional and academic evolution of social work and to facilitate a process of Europeanisation of the Social Services delivery in Albania, the European Commission has funded the project T@sk Towards Increased Awareness, Responsibility and Shared Quality in Social work (2017-2020). The main aim of the project consists in strengthening the delivery of Social Services in Albania through the empowerment of the Higher Education system in social work. The consortium includes all public universities offering BA and MA courses in social work in Albania – University of Tirana, University of Shkoder and University of Elbasan –, and the University of Florence, the UCM of Madrid, the ISCTE of Lisbon and the Professional Order of Social workers of the Tuscany Region as Higher Education institutions of the program countries. The project operates at three levels: peer-to-peer theoretical and empirical update amongst the project partners; triangulation of knowledge, transdisciplinary cooperation with the societal stakeholders and digital innovation; selection and dissemination of best practices. The project was concluded in December 2020 and it is possible to elaborate on the main theoretical and empirical framework adopted, on the results achieved, and on the challenges to create a favorable environment for the development of social work profession in Albania. The article sheds light in the pattern of evolution of social work practices in Albania, focusing on the social and cultural background of the country, and describing the main achievements of the T@sk project.

**Keywords:** Social work; Social Services; Albania; Higher Education; Capacity Building; Social Change

### [es] La formación en Educación Superior en Trabajo Social en Albania: ideas de las experiencias del proyecto T@sk

**Resumen.** En marzo de 2020, la Unión Europea decidió iniciar las negociaciones de adhesión con Albania, país candidato desde 2014. Para alcanzar este importante objetivo, en el largo camino de la integración europea, Albania tenía que cumplir con una serie de requisitos. Entre ellos, la centralidad de los derechos humanos que afecta a la aplicación de las políticas destinadas a integrar a las minorías, así como a conceder derechos sociales a los ciudadanos desfavorecidos (La Cava Nanetti 2000, Solidar 2016). En este escenario, la evolución de los conocimientos profesionales de los trabajadores sociales albaneses desempeña un papel relevante. En términos académicos y profesionales, el Trabajo Social tiene una escasa tradición en Albania, como en la mayoría de los países postcomunistas (Hoti 2015). Para hacer frente a las dificultades de la evolución profesional y académica del Trabajo Social y facilitar un proceso de

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europización de la prestación de servicios sociales en Albania, la Comisión Europea ha financiado el proyecto T@SK “Towards Increased Awareness, Responsibility and Shared Quality in Social work” (2017-2020). El objetivo principal del proyecto consiste en fortalecer la prestación de servicios sociales en Albania mediante la potenciación del sistema de Educación Superior en la formación de Trabajo Social. El consorcio incluye a todas las universidades públicas que ofrecen cursos de Grado y Máster en Trabajo Social en Albania – Universidad de Tirana, Universidad de Shkoder y Universidad de Elbasan – y a la Universidad de Florencia, la Universidad Complutense de Madrid, el ISCTE de Lisboa y el Colegio (l’Ordine) Profesional de Trabajadores Sociales de la Región Toscana como instituciones de Educación Superior de los países del programa. El proyecto funciona a tres niveles: actualización teórica y empírica entre los socios del proyecto; triangulación de conocimientos, cooperación transdisciplinaria con las partes interesadas de la sociedad e innovación digital; y la selección y difusión de las mejores prácticas. El proyecto se encuentra en su etapa final, y es posible elaborar el principal marco teórico y empírico adoptado, los resultados logrados y los retos para crear un entorno favorable al desarrollo de la profesión del Trabajo Social en Albania. El artículo trata de arrojar algo de luz sobre la evolución de las prácticas de Trabajo Social en Albania, centrándose en los antecedentes sociales y culturales del país y describiendo los principales logros del proyecto T@SK.

**Palabras clave:** Trabajo social; Servicios sociales; Albania; Enseñanza superior; Desarrollo de Capacidades; Cambio social

**Summary:** 1. Albania as a crucial case. 2. The Albanian social services: between past and future. 3. T@sk project as a pathway to reinforce and modernize social services in Albania. 4. The future of Social work in Albania: Opportunities and constraints. 5. References.

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## 1. Albania as a crucial case

In the complex political and social path to consolidation of efficient and stable democracies, a crucial role is played by the structuring of a well-functioning Welfare System (Titmuss, 1958; Ferrera, 2005). Developments in this field within the Balkan area are attracting a growing academic interest, both in a national and in a comparative perspective (Orenstein, 2008; Bartlett, 2013; Matković, 2017). Scientific contributions are mainly centered on the analysis of the policy making with a country-specific approach. Seminal studies on the developing of “safety nets” in East-Central Europe (Kramer 1997) have been followed by comparative analysis focusing on the Balkan area (Bartlett & Xhumari, 2007; Fetahu, 2017). In this complex and sometimes fragmented scenario, Albania has until now received a relative scarce attention, when compared to the other Western Balkan countries (Hotchkiss et al., 2005; Miluka, 2016).

Scientific research developed until very recently describes the Albanian Welfare State system as grounding on several pillars, structured through social protection programs such as pension schemes, employment promotion programs, and economic aids. An in-depth analysis and multilevel examination of the organization of each of these pillars, of their

concrete functioning, and of the main social and political actors responsible for their management and development is not yet available. Difficulties in carrying out a detailed research on the origins and on the development of the delivery of Social Services in Albania go back to several reasons.

The development of the basis of the Albanian Welfare System has undergone several steps of evolution that were deeply influenced by the political events that marked the new Albanian democracy since the end of Communism and its difficult transition to democracy. The problematic consolidation of the democratic regime – particularly in the mid 1990’s – influenced the development of the Albanian Welfare State (ISSA, 1996).

The creation of a social policy system in Albania is rather recent (Pere and Bartlett 2019). Its functioning has been newly affected by a new lawmaking on territorial decentralization that is going to profoundly affect the distribution of responsibilities in the delivery of Social Services (Dauti, 2015; Dizdari, Troshani & Drishti, 2019).

However, an encompassing description of the state of the art of the Social Services’ delivery in Albania is still missing. Many crucial aspects are still to be defined. These can be summarized into three main questions: i) What model of Welfare System is Albania develop-

ing (if one can talk of a single model (Vampa, 2016); ii) Who are the responsible actors in the newly designed decentralized system of Social Services' delivery? iii) How are the resources for Social Services' delivery assigned to the responsible actors at the national and local level?

Detailed answers to the questions above would permit to make a first step towards the study of a crucial case in the Balkan area. Albania is indeed an essential point of reference in the analysis of Welfare systems mostly for three reasons: first, compared to the other Western Balkan countries, Albania experienced the consequences of a totalitarian regime whose main characteristic was the nearly complete isolation in terms of international relations. Second, external actors that affected the process of democratization also influenced the initial organization of the Welfare provisions in Albania. The traces of this influence are still visible, also in the initial model of teaching in the Schools of social work established since the early 1990's that followed the United States pattern. Third, the limited investment in the creation of a functioning Welfare State resulted in a growing importance played by international NGOs which currently provide Social Services to numerous segments of the Albanian society in an only limited accordance and coordination with the responsible organizations of the Albanian national and local governments. The current situation of political and economic investment in the creation of a functioning Welfare State in Albania is critical. The 2019 Report on Albania produced for the "Communication on EU Enlargement policy"<sup>4</sup> provides an up-to-date state of the art on the progresses made by Albania in the social and economic field. It highlights the still insufficient accomplishments in social cohesion and integration of underprivileged citizens. In particular – despite some progresses made in the areas of children's right and domestic violence – unprivileged women, children, minorities and disabled citizens still suffer from the lack of adequate Social Services and care-institutions. The European Commission explicitly recommends to

Further improve mechanisms for protecting children, protecting victims of domestic violence, guaranteeing gender equality and providing minimum health and social services, especially at the local level and to "intensify the efforts to implement the 2015-2020 social protection strategy, with a special focus on vulnerable groups, strengthening the capacity and resource of local government to assess social care needs in their territory (Programme Rights, Equality and Citizenship- REC-2019).

The heterogeneous distribution of human and economic resources in social work identified by the European Commission, along with the insufficient implementation of Social Service delivery, is a crucial problem for the socio-economic development of the Albanian society. The unequal distribution of the Social Services – predominantly concentrated in the urban areas despite the provisions of the recent law on decentralization – negatively impacts on the creation of a network of Social Services in the peripheral areas of the country.

## **2. The Albanian Social Services: between past and future**

Albanian Social workers operate in the context described above. "The foundations of the Albania's social protection system have been established in the Constitution. The initial strategic objectives of Albania's social protection system aim to first prevent any further degradation of the social security in the country, as well as the establishment of an efficient social protection system that will address emerging social problems" (Akesson et al. 2016, 15). New legislation was enacted in December 2014. With a definition largely aligned with the IFSW/IASSW recommendations, the Law No. 163/2014 on *Order of Social worker in the Republic of Albania* establishes that Social work is the professional social activity based on the relevant practice and academic discipline, which promotes social change, development, social cohesion and social justice (see Box.1).

<sup>4</sup> For further documentation, please see: [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries/package\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries/package_en)

**Box 1***The Law on the Order of the Social worker, No.163/2014*

The purpose of this Law is to regulate the organization and activity of the Order of Social workers, as well as the legal and ethical-professional relations of social workers.

Article 4 defines *social work* and *social worker* as follows:

1. "Social work" is a practice-based profession, as well as an academic discipline that promotes change, development, social cohesion and social justice, and the empowerment and independence of people.
2. "Social worker" is a regulated occupation practiced in the field of social work, at macro, meso and micro level, serving individuals, families, groups, communities and central and local-level institutions in the public and private system.

Source: <https://qbz.gov.al>; Rogers et al. 2018, p. 51.

The law comes at a time when social workers are being given a pivotal role in the new social service structures and the responsibility to integrate case management into that system (Tahsini, Lopari, Tasku & Voko, 2013). It also expands the official scope of social work practice to women, children, mental health, probation services, psychosocial services in schools, and reproductive health.

Following these principles, social work is a regulated profession exercised at every level of the social field like individuals and families, groups and communities, in institutions of central and at the local level, in the public and private system. Social administrators who had been primarily managing cash benefits deriving from social protection national provisions

until 2013, should now operate on a case management level, as part of a general systemic approach (Dhembo, 2015).

Some numbers might be helpful to acquire a more detailed view. The 2016 Law on social care and the 2017 Law on child protection specify that "Social workers (with degrees in social work) have to be employed in municipal social services structures in needs assessment and referral units at a rate of 1 social worker per 10.000 population and in child protection units at a rate of 1 social worker per 3.000 children" (Rogers et al., 2018, p. 19).

The services currently active<sup>6</sup> –as reported by official institutional sources (INSTAT 2018)– can be summarized as follow (see also Table 1).

<sup>5</sup> The Law aims to regulate the social work profession in the country by including it on a list of other regulated professions such as medicine, pharmacy, dentistry, and engineering (Akeson et al. 2016). In Albania the Law establishing an order of social work for professional licensing and regulation purposes has, in effect, created a professional body, but UNICEF Albania reports delays in issuing the Decisions of the Council of Ministers that can establish this statutory body. It is not clear from the literature if this body is also expected to advocate for social workers and the profession, or if it plays only a regulatory role. UNICEF Albania reports that there are two associations led by NGOs, formed by representatives of Departments of Social work or Departments of Psychology, called the *Albanian Association of Psychologists* and *Albanian Association of Social workers*, but they have limited influence compared to the statutory professional body outlined in the legislation. They do, however, play a role in providing inputs to the Government and representing these two professions. (Rogers et al., 44).

<sup>6</sup> Current policies and strategies that may affect the planning and development of the Social work or Social Service workforce include the following (Rogers et al. 2018, 50): The National Strategy for Development and Integration (2015-2020); National Social Protection Strategy (2015-2020); National Inter-sectoral Decentralization Strategy (2015-2020); Albanian National Health Strategy (2016-2020); National Action Plan on Persons with Disability (2016-2020); National Agenda for Children's Rights (2017-2020); Strategy on Pre-University Education (2014-2020).

<b>Table 1</b> <i>Legal Frameworks, Agency Structures, and Job Descriptions</i>		
Relevant Legal Frameworks for Social Service Provision	Institutional Structure for Social Service Workers	General Social Service Worker and Child Protection Roles
<p>Constitution of Albania states that “social justice and social assistance are the foundations of this state.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Law No. 163/2014 “On Order of social workers in the Republic of Albania”.</li> <li>• Law No. 7703 “On social insurance in the Republic of Albania”.</li> <li>• Law No. 7710 “On social assistance and care”.</li> <li>• Law No. 10347 (Article 39), “On protection of child’s rights”. requires at least one professional social worker per each established child protection unit (CPU).</li> </ul>	<p>Ministry of Social Welfare and Youth:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• develops legislation to regulate the social work profession</li> </ul> <p>General Administration of Social Assistance and Services (GASAS):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• is responsible for implementing the social care system</li> </ul> <p>State Social Service (SSS):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• is accountable for institutions and staff providing social services at the national level</li> <li>• provides economic assistance, standardization of social services, administration and budgeting of social services, institutional improvements, inspections of social services, licensing of non-profit organizations</li> </ul>	<p>Social Service Worker:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• identifies, assesses, and coordinates interventions based on action plan involving the child and the family</li> </ul>
Source: Akesson et al. 2016, p. 2 (adapted).		

First of all, the beneficiaries of the services are identified through the consultation of Administrative data on Social Protection, or from the analysis of the archives of Social Security Institute, National Employment Service and State Social Service, which contain useful data to identify the population groups in conditions of vulnerability and fragility.

The offer of interventions and services is structured throughout evaluating the national territory in a comparative key. It involves, in a nutshell, the following three fields of action: a) social assistance; b) unemployment benefit; c) urban and rural pensions.

As pointed out by INSTAT (the National Institution for Data and Statistics)<sup>7</sup>, pensions provisions are one of the main sectors of public welfare intervention. Pensions are defined according to Law No. 8932, “For a change in the

Law for Social Insurance”, dated 02.09.1998, and differ by urban and rural area of residence.

Social Assistance is a cash benefit for poor families and it is distributed on a monthly basis. It may be partial or full, according to the family incomes. The amount of partial assistance is calculated as a difference between the full amount of social assistance and the real family incomes.

Referring to perceptions and understanding of the social service workforce it emerges quite clearly how the Law on Social Care of 2016 and accompanying reforms to local authority responsibilities for social services planning has enhanced the role of social worker as case manager (Matković, 2016).

The reformed legal and policy framework gives the social worker a clear mandate for out-

<sup>7</sup> See: <http://www.instat.gov.al/en/themes/social-condition/social-protection/>.



reach work with families and for intervening in child protection and other cases. These changes introduce clarity in the role of the social worker and may have an impact on how the social work workforce is perceived, as well as building trust in the system (Rogers et al., 2018, p. 47).

The general expectation of the last years is that “regulation will have a positive impact on the profession, ensuring more efficiency and professionalism in social service delivery. At the very least, research participants noted that the law will add some legitimacy to the profession.

[...] At the national level, the State Social Service (SSS) is accountable for the institutions and staff providing social services at the national level. NGOs are expected to support and fill the gaps left by the relatively weak SSS. An analysis of the SSS found that the SSS struggles to match their staff to relevant job positions and is faced with an unstable workforce due to high turnover rates (Akesson et al., 2016, pp.15-16).

In Albania there is more than one mismatch between resources, investments and labor forces.

On one hand UNICEF Albania notes that

The lack of sufficient government allocations of funding to support the implementation of legislation are not unique to the social sector, with the health, education and justice sectors facing similar challenges. The Law on Pre-University Education in Albania, for example, makes statutory provision for social workers and psychologists to be hired in education inclusion units, but does not make explicit provision for a budget for salaries (Rogers et al., 2018, p. 27).

On the other hand, many social work graduates are not subsequently employed as social workers: recovering a study on *Child Protection Practices* (Dhembo 2015), Rogers and colleagues note that,

Many hundreds of social work graduates have been in the labor market since the first bachelor degree cohort graduated in 1996 (over 1,500 have graduated from Tirana University alone),

but they continue to account for only a minority of employees. This is the result of issues around employment procedures and of the fragile positioning of the social work professions, among other professions in the country (Rogers et al., 2018, p. 34).

The theme of the recognition of the profession and its professional operators still stands:

Social service workers were viewed largely as government bureaucrats who serve as gatekeepers to financial assistance for vulnerable groups. Although their role in child protection is not well known to the general public, where they are perceived to be involved in child protection, it is as those who take children away from their families (Akesson et al., 2016, p. 11).

The negative perception of social service work often tends to be viewed precisely through the prism of the Albanian social security system: for example, the *ndihma ekonomike* (= economic assistance), that is the core poverty reduction mechanism, “has contributed to an understanding of social service workers as simply municipal employees who administer financial assistance” (p. 11).

To conclude: national and international literature highlights that to date institutional reforms must be completed, including an improvement in the quality of institutions (Imami, Bejko & Shutina, 2018; Pere & Bartlett, 2019).

### 3. T@sk project as a pathway to reinforce and modernize social services in Albania

Academic cooperation, research and social innovation are key elements in the Capacity Building in Higher Education (CBHE) projects. Investing in Higher Education in terms of professionalization, modernization and Europeanization is the main principle at the basis of the cooperation amongst three European Universities, three Albanian Universities and one professional Order of social workers within the framework of the ERASMUS+ Capacity Building Project *T@sk- Towards increased Awareness, responsibility and shared quality in Social work*<sup>8</sup>. The introduction of

<sup>8</sup> T@sk consortium includes: the Department of Political and Social Sciences, Università degli Studi di Firenze, Florence, Italy; the Faculty of Social Work and Social Services, Universidad Complutense, Madrid, Spain; the Instituto Universitário de Lisboa

Social work is relatively new in the Albanian policy arena and its development represents an essential factor for the improvement of society (SSA, 2002). The creation of a professional Order of Social workers in Albania currently under construction testifies of the crucial role of a professionalized approach to the Social Service delivery that the T@sk project recognizes as its main general objective.

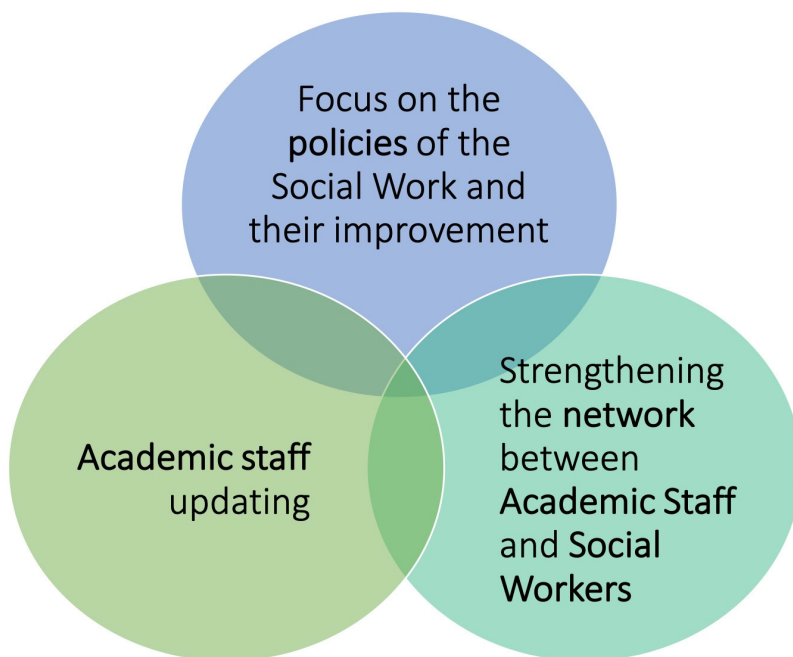
The main aim of the project consists in strengthening the delivery of Social Services in Albania through the empowerment of the Higher Education System in social work. By including all Albanian public universities offering Bachelor and Master degrees in Social work in the Project, T@sk is being able to stimulate a process of modernization of the theoretical and empirical approaches to the delivery of Social Services, with a particular attention to the role played by professional Social workers (Dhembo, Akesson & Cheyne-Hazineh,

2019). In order to meet its ambitious aims, T@sk adopts the recent *Global Definition of Social work* approved by the International Federation of Social workers (IFSW) General Meeting and by the International Association of Schools of Social work (IASSW) General Assembly in July 2014<sup>9</sup> as theoretical benchmark and empirical milestone.

T@sk activities can be described from a double perspective: following its main *levels of intervention* on one side and focusing on the differentiated *fields of action* on the other.

The levels of intervention deal with the practices that aim to promote an increased level of teaching and learning in the Schools of Social work in Albania. The *fields of action* correspond to the set of activities that aim to stimulate – in the long run – social intervention and social change. These levels can be summarized as a triangulation of spheres (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1.** T@sk's spheres of intervention



The *first level* consists in an in depth theoretical and methodological updating of the University staff of all the Albanian public

universities offering Bachelor Degrees or/and Master's Degrees in Social work through a peer to peer approach. Starting from the basic

ISCTE-IUL, Lisbon, Portugal; the Department of Social work and Social Policy of the University of Tirana; the Department of Psychology and Social Work of the University of Shkoder *Luigj Gurakuqi*; the Department of Social Sciences of the *Aleksander Xhuvani* University of Elbasan; the Professional Order of Social Workers of the Tuscany Region.

<sup>9</sup> The current Global Definition of Social work is available on the following page of the IFSW website: <https://www.ifsw.org/what-is-social-work/global-definition-of-social-work/>

concepts of the theory and practices of Social work deriving from the convergent –yet different– models of “Mediterranean Welfare” developed in Italy, Spain and Portugal (Pau & Moreno-Fuentes 2013), the scientific updating covers the main relevant issues in Social work – from its inspiring principles to the practices of social diagnosis and social work intervention (Healy, 2008; Righard, 2018). The digitalization of the teaching and learning activities is a transversal aim in the broader goal of modernization of the future professionals in social work and it is being pursued through the gradual adoption of learning management systems in the curricular teaching and learning activities.

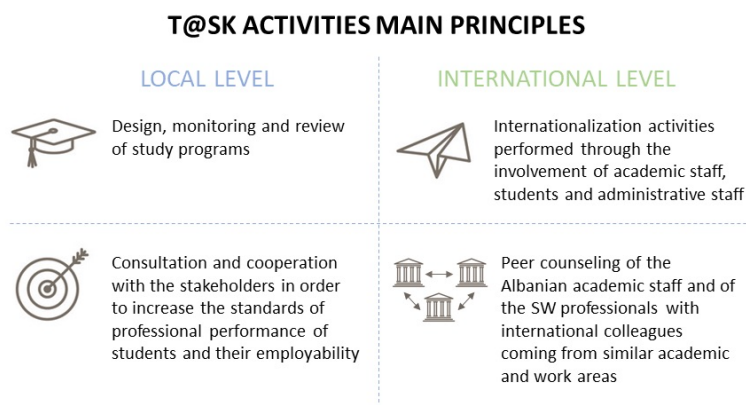
The *second level* consists in the promotion of a constant dialogue between the Albanian Higher Education System and the related social background and working environment in the Social Services. At this purpose, Albanian Social workers and public managers responsi-

ble for the delivery of social services at the local level are being involved in all teaching and updating sessions held in Albania. They provide feedback and stimulate the debate on the possible application of the theoretical models of Social work discussed during the training sessions to the Albanian professional environment (Gasker, 2018).

The *third level* focuses on the analytical assessment of specific *policy areas* (particularly underprivileged and disadvantaged women) within the general framework of deviance prevention and mitigation of detention conditions (Ramon et al., 2019).

Projects’ actions implemented with the aim of modernizing and professionalizing the teaching and learning of Social work in Albania can be placed in a spatial axis that goes from the local environment to the international environment (Gray & Fook 2004; Campanini 2018; 2019), as briefly illustrated in the figure below (Figure 2).

**Figure 2.** *T@sk main intervention outputs in the Local and International environment*

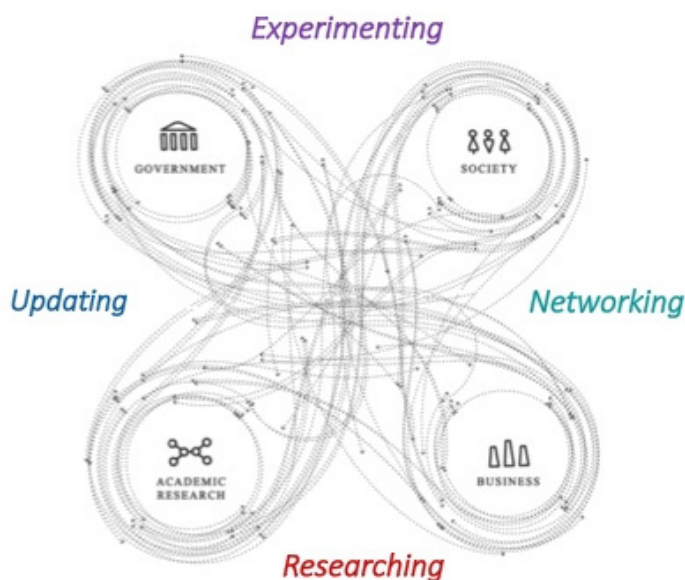


The activities represented on the left side of the figure have a major impact at the domestic level. They are designed to meet the education needs of the future Albanian Social workers. The right side illustrates the requirements of internationalization of the Albanian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and the activities promoted by T@sk in order to meet this goal focusing on a constant exchange of practices deriving from comparable models of Welfare States, as the ones of Italy, Spain and Portugal (Lippi & Tsekos, 2019).

The observation of the T@sk activities from the point of view of the *fields of action* aiming to stimulate – in the long run – social intervention and social change, offers an alternative and complementary vision of the project’s activities. T@sk’s commitment to promote social change is represented in its 4 key actions – *Researching, Networking, Updating, Experimenting*. These actions identify a complex strategy of interventions inspired by the Quadruple Helix, including the involvement of science, policy, entrepreneurship and civil society (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** *T@sk Strategy in the Quadruple Helix Model*  
 Source: Adapted from Schütz, Heidingsfelder, Schraudner (2019).



Since the very early stage of the project creation, research has been playing a very important role. The needs of the HEIs in Social work were identified by the members of the consortium through assessment visits that allowed to identify the necessities of the Schools of Social work and the requirements of social services in Tirana, Shkoder and Elbasan. The integration of research into the study of social work is a necessary step in the process of professional preparation of future social workers (Labonté-Roset, 2005, p. 293). A first step of desk comparative research was conducted on the academic curricula of all institutions involved in the project. This research activity showed that a considerable amount of differentiation coexists at the country levels with the noticeable homogenization of social work programmes (Campanini & Frost, 2004). This is the result of the different traditions of the developments of social work in the countries involved in the project. The second and more ambitious research activity has been conducted by the Albanian academic staff in the assessment of the state of the art of the Social Services in the respective provinces. In order to produce the three detailed reports on the Social Services in Tirana, Shkoder and El-

basan (AA. VV., 2000), the academic staff developed an intense relationship with professional social workers, policy makers, local and central managers responsible for the delivery of social services –with whom they realized in depth interviews– and made use of the (still insufficient) statistical documentation. This transdisciplinary cooperation made it possible to push forward the *networking* activities that had been already implemented for theoretical updating purposes. The same model of networking was adopted during the field visits carried on in Italy and Portugal<sup>10</sup>. The presentation of the best practices amongst the social services of Florence and Lisbon was preceded and followed by interviews to the societal stakeholders, in order to grasp the possible adaptation of some selected aspects into the Albanian social and political context. The following activities of *experimentation* are being realized in the current phase of the project. They deal with the analysis of the best practices visited abroad, their presentation to social workers and policy makers in Tirana, Shokder and Elbasan by the Albanian academic staff, and with the possible adoption in the near future of selected aspects or inspiring principles. Finally, the Project's in-

<sup>10</sup> The scheduled field visits of the Social Services in Madrid, and the relative selection and the analysis of the best practices had to be postponed due to the Covid-19 lockdown measures. They will take place in the final phase of the Project.

vestment on *updating* activities is expected to activate in the long run the virtuous circle of the quadruple helix model through a convergence of theoretical, methodological and empirical (policy-based) upgrading and renewal of curricular Social work contents, internship

procedures, policy adjustments, and adoption of best practices.

To conclude this overview of the objectives and strategies implemented by the T@sk Project, a detailed summary table of the implemented activities is provided below (Table 2).

**Table 2.** *Main T@sk' Project Key Actions*

<b>NAME OF ACTIVITY</b>	<b>TYPE OF ACTIVITY</b>	<b>MAIN OBJECTIVES</b>	<b>KEY ACTIONS</b>
<b>Management</b>	Internal to the consortium	Planning, organization and coordination in detail of the project activities foreseen in WP plan and socialization of the main aims of the Project	Regular meetings of the steering, scientific and ICT committees, plus face to face events
<b>Observation and Preparation</b>	Internal and External as addressed to all the colleagues and stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increasing the knowledge on the Albanian Social Services system</li> <li>Filling the gap between theoretical and empirical knowledge on the functioning of the Albanian Social Services through the observation activities in Albania by all T@sk institutions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Visit to the Albanian Social Services of the municipalities involved (Tirana, Shkoder and Elbasan)</li> <li>Production of three in-depth reports on the Local Social Services in Albania, with a collective effort of writing and supervision by the entire Project Consortium</li> </ul>
<b>Training</b>	Internal and External as addressed to all the colleagues and stakeholders	Offering focused training on the specific theoretical and empirical needs of Albanian colleagues to be trained in light of the concrete needs at local Social Services level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Holding training sessions directly on site (Albania) focused on main local needs and adapted in terms of partners agenda for better usability and effectiveness.</li> <li>Revision e amendments to the syllabi of Social work courses in the Albanian universities involved</li> </ul>
<b>Quality</b>	Internal to the consortium	Successfully pursue of the Quality Management Strategy, defined through three key processes, namely Quality Planning, Quality Assurance and Quality Control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Satisfaction surveys (both on scientific and management aspects)</li> <li>Timetable compliance</li> <li>Partners' constant networking and cooperation support</li> </ul>
<b>Dissemination</b>	External: addressed to stakeholders	Giving visibility – not only in the academic sphere but more generally in the public sphere – to the project activities, and to the dissemination to the project's societal stakeholders of its results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Interviews and press releases scheduled according to the main training and dissemination activities of the Project.</li> <li>Updating of the Project's website and social media</li> </ul>

#### 4. The future of Social work in Albania: Opportunities and constraints

In March 2020, the European Union decided to open accession negotiations with Albania, candidate country since 2014. During the last six years, the European Commission has been monitoring the development of the country with regards to the fulfillment of the most important conditions for access. Among them, the respect of fundamental rights of citizens and the related implementation of social policies have been observed with particular attention. The 2019 European Commission Report on Albania is particularly severe in the assessment of the condition of social care services described as “currently underdeveloped, underinvested and lacking in many areas” and in the evaluation of the insufficient capacities and resources of the local government units. (EC, 2019, p. 80). The request to establish an efficient network of social care institutions goes hand in hand with the main pre-condition of the respect of fundamental social rights for all Albanian citizens.

The activities currently developed by the T@sk Project fully respond to the needs underlined by the European Commission in terms of adequacy to the political and social context; appropriateness of the methodological approach; investment on the Albanian’s educational, social and political resources.

First of all, with its main aim consisting in the reinforcement of the delivery of Social Services in Albania through a direct investment in Social work education at the Higher Education level, T@sk project directly addresses the still insufficient quality of the Albanian Welfare State. Social workers are indeed drivers of social change (Amaro et al., 2018). Their intervention can promote social innovation, social intrapreneurship and entrepreneurship (Nadan, London & Bent-Goodley, 2015). However, their role in the Albanian society is still largely poorly acknowledged, and their professional conditions are extremely demanding, if one considers the average ratio of the number of social workers per Albanian citizen, the largely unimplemented reform on decentralization, and the scarce central and local financial investment in the Social Services. The professional preparation of Social workers also suffered from the troubled transition of Albania to democracy (Moroni, 2020) which deteriorated the quality of the preexisting so-

cial capital (Holland, 1998) and delayed the reform of the Education and Higher Education System (HEIs) (Bassler, 1995; Papadhopulli & Mico, 2016). All these factors negatively impacted on the development of Social Sciences at the Higher Institution level, and hampered a real investment in the teaching of Social work. Considered together, the limited State financial support to the Social Services – especially in the country’s periphery – the late development of the Social work Schools at the Higher Education level and a very low level of recognition of the professional status, risk to produce a vicious circle for the current and future Social workers in Albania.

Secondarily, T@sk’s aim to modernize, professionalize and getting the delivery of Social Services in Albania closer to a European standard rests on three methodological pillars: peer to peer exchange, transdisciplinary cooperation and digital innovation. These principles are adopted in the framework of capacity building practices, where Social work is considered to be “in a good position to meet the challenge of transmitting theory and applied research” (Poole, 1997, p.165). Since the inaugural activities performed by the T@sk project during the field visits in Tirana, Shkoder and Elbasan, peer to peer professional exchange amongst academic colleagues and professional Social workers granted a circulation of knowledge at the local, national and international level. The assessment of the quality of Social Services in the three districts conducted by the Albanian teachers in cooperation with professional social workers not only allowed to realize the integration of research into the study of Social work (Labonté-Roset, 2005, p. 293), but also enhanced the transdisciplinary cooperation with the societal stakeholders, typical for Eu-funded Capacity Building Projects (Meyer, Zimmermann & O’Grady, 2017). A reinforcement of transdisciplinary cooperation also took place at the level of the European partners’ countries through the selection and the presentation of the social services’ best practices to the Albanian colleagues in Italy, Spain and Portugal. Finally, T@sk project initiated the digitalization of Social work teaching practices through the introduction of online learning management system in the Universities of Tirana, Shkoder and Elbasan. This fulfilment made it possible to rapidly push towards the modernization of the teacher-student relationship (Larsen et al., 2008)

during the unexpected circumstances of the lockdown measures following the Covid-19 emergency.

Finally, the pandemic created a condition “where social workers have been and continue to be at the forefront advocating and leading change in nearly every country” (Truell, 2020). The statement by the Secretary-General of the International Federation of Social workers (IFSW) describes a situation where – for Social workers - being at the vanguard and leading social innovation go hand in hand. This is not only true during times of heavy crisis, but also applies to everyday circumstances. The valorization of the role of all actors involved in the process of the delivery of social work activities – Higher Education teachers, students in Social work, social workers and Social Services managers at the local and central level – allows to initiate the quadruple helix model (Figure 3), that applies well to situation of social experimentation. The setting of a capacity building project offers a unique opportunity to get in line with the ongoing similar development of social work school programmes in almost all European countries (Campanini & Frost, 2004), while at the same time promoting social innovation by encouraging the adoption of new teaching methodologies, boosting the present and future social workers’ (self) reflection on their professional role, stimulating their professional motivation. However, all the

above is not sufficient without a financial and organization investment (Ymeri, 2018; 2019), urgently needed in Albania, particularly at the local and rural level.

T@sk project operates in a social and political environment stretched between opportunities and challenges. The opportunities originated by the long-awaited official opening of accession negotiations with the EU are the final step of a long process of preparation for the achievement of the necessary degree of compliance with the membership criteria, that started in the early 2000’s.

During these years, the Albanian institutions have been making remarkable efforts to draft new and urgent legislations in the field of social policies, territorial decentralization and reorganization of the Social Services. The current situation is characterized by the existence of a legislative framework whose realization is difficult due to the lack of resources and a growing need in expertise.

In this context, CBHE projects in the Western Balkans are likely to have only a limited impact on governmental policies<sup>11</sup>. However, in terms of enhancement of know-how and share of best practices at the European level, the T@sk project is fully inscribed in a context of capacity building whose main aim – the reinforcement of the professionalization of present and future social workers – is successfully under construction.

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<sup>11</sup> European Commission, Regional Cluster Meeting on the impact of Capacity Building in Higher Education (CBHE) projects in the Western Balkans 22-23 October 2019.



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