

## Youth Partnership

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Partnership between the European Commission  
and the Council of Europe in the field of Youth



# CONTRIBUTION OF PARTNER COUNTRIES TO EU YOUTH WIKI

## Albania CHAPTER VII HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

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## Contents

<b>7.1 General context.....</b>	<b>3</b>
Main trends in the health conditions of young people .....	3
Main concept .....	4
<b>7.2 Administration and governance .....</b>	<b>4</b>
Governance.....	4
Cross-sectoral co-operation.....	4
<b>7.3 Sport, youth fitness and physical activities .....</b>	<b>5</b>
National strategy (ies).....	5
Promoting and supporting sport and physical activity among young people .....	6
Physical education in schools .....	7
Collaboration and partnerships .....	7
<b>7.4 Healthy lifestyles and healthy nutrition.....</b>	<b>8</b>
National strategy(ies) .....	8
Encouraging healthy lifestyles and healthy nutrition for young people.....	9
Health education and healthy lifestyles education in schools.....	9
Peer-to-peer education approaches.....	9
Collaboration and partnerships .....	9
Raising awareness on healthy lifestyles and factors affecting the health and well-being of young people ....	10
<b>7.5 Mental health .....</b>	<b>10</b>
National Strategy(ies) .....	10
Improving the mental health of young people .....	11
<b>7.6 Mechanisms of early detection and signposting of young people facing health risks.....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>7.7 Making health facilities more youth-friendly .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>7.8 Current debates and reforms .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>References.....</b>	<b>14</b>

## 7.1 General context

### Main trends in the health conditions of young people

Albania is one of the youngest countries in the region, with the share of youth as of 2021 being almost 23% of the total population.<sup>1</sup> Although a vivid country in terms of its population, many definitions on youth itself and recognition of youth work were formally established only in November 2019, with the first Youth [Law 75/2019](#) in the country since the fall of the communist regime.

The country has undergone through several positive changes since the early 2000s. Young people have faced and still face several challenges when it comes to health issues, mainly related to physical health, mental health, reproductive health, etc. Based on a study conducted by the National Institute of Statistics (INSTAT) in 2015, there is an increasing trend, observed since 2002, in the percentage of young people that self-assess themselves in good or very good health. As at 2002, 90% of young people stated that they were in good or very good health during 2002-2012. In 2012, 96.5% of young people of the 15-29 age group declared that they were in good or very good condition. Young men generally state more often that they are in good or very good health compared to young women, but this gender difference is very small: 51.5% and 48.5%, respectively.<sup>2</sup>

Smoking issues, domestic violence, and use of narcotic substances such as marijuana are among pressing issues regarding young people's health in Albania.<sup>3</sup> Smoking levels in adolescence and young adulthood are significantly increasing to over 50% in men, while prevalence among women remains lower. For young people aged 15-29, smoking is generally practiced by 30 percent of men and 5 percent of women.<sup>4</sup> Recently, general awareness of well-being and mental health has also increased, triggered by the outburst of the Covid-19 pandemic since early 2020.

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<sup>1</sup> National Institute of Statistics in Albania (INSTAT), data retrieved from [www.instat.gov.al/al/temat/treguesit-demografik%C3%AB-dhe-social%C3%AB/popullsia/#tab2](http://www.instat.gov.al/al/temat/treguesit-demografik%C3%AB-dhe-social%C3%AB/popullsia/#tab2), last accessed November 2021

<sup>2</sup> INSTAT, data retrieved from [http://www.instat.gov.al/media/1731/t\\_rinjt\\_n\\_shqip\\_ri\\_sfidat\\_n\\_koh\\_t\\_q\\_ndryshojn\\_.pdf](http://www.instat.gov.al/media/1731/t_rinjt_n_shqip_ri_sfidat_n_koh_t_q_ndryshojn_.pdf) page 63, last accessed November 2021

<sup>3</sup> Voice of America <https://www.zeriamerikes.com/a/3500251.html>, last accessed November 2021

<sup>4</sup> INSTAT, data retrieved from [http://www.instat.gov.al/media/1731/t\\_rinjt\\_n\\_shqip\\_ri\\_sfidat\\_n\\_koh\\_t\\_q\\_ndryshojn\\_.pdf](http://www.instat.gov.al/media/1731/t_rinjt_n_shqip_ri_sfidat_n_koh_t_q_ndryshojn_.pdf) page 72, last accessed November 2021

### **Main concept**

There is no single definition of health. However, Albania is a member of the World Health Organization (WHO) and has aligned several initiatives with its recommendations. Based on the WHO Constitution, ratified in 1946, health is defined as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. It is also considered as a fundamental right.<sup>5</sup>

## **7.2 Administration and governance**

### **Governance**

In Albania, the ministry responsible for public health is [the Ministry of Health and Social Protection](#). [The Institute of Public Health](#) is a governmental agency under the above-mentioned ministry, in charge of implementing strategies and policies with regard to public health. As per [Law 10138/2009](#) on Public Health, the latter is defined as follows. “Public health” is very important to the longevity, preventing disease and promoting the health of all people. With regard to health and sports education, the Ministry of Education and Sports is responsible for pre-university curricula and management of all schools, whether general, vocation or specialised.

### **Cross-sectoral co-operation**

For the implementation and co-ordination of several strategies and initiatives, co-operation between the [Ministry of Education and Sports](#) and the [Ministry of Health and Social Protection](#) is necessary. The latter issues general guidelines on public health, while the former is responsible for adapting the guidelines and implementing them at educational level. The Covid-19 pandemic is one of the main cases to illustrate the relationship above: when the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (as it was known at the time)<sup>6</sup> issued the necessary safety guidelines for schools and pre-schools to follow, in line with general guidelines of the Ministry of Health.<sup>7</sup> Within the new Government of Albania, since September 2021, the newly formed [State Ministry of Children and Youth](#) focuses primarily on young people.

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5. Constitution of World Health Organization [www.who.int/about/governance/constitution](http://www.who.int/about/governance/constitution) last accessed November 2021

6. Prior to September 2021, the Ministry of Education and Sports also included the youth element.

7. Joint Directive of Ministry of Education <http://arsimi.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Document.pdf>, last accessed November 2021

Prior to 2021, the [National Youth Action Plan 2015-2020](#) was the main strategic document on youth and health in the country. More on this follows in the following sections. Currently, a new National Youth Strategy is being developed. Public consultations with stakeholders are expected to start by early 2022.

### **7.3 Sport, youth fitness and physical activities**

#### **National strategy (ies)**

Albania does not have a separate strategic document solely focusing on sport. Sport is, however, a component within the Ministry of Education and Sports, which has also been included in several strategies and laws focusing on education and youth.

The general law regulating sport in Albania is [Law 79/2017](#) setting the main principles in the country. The responsible implementing body is primarily a responsibility of the Ministry of Education and Sports. The [National Law on Youth 75/2019](#) under Article 4, point 2 mentions sports and health as one of the areas where the principle of equal opportunities and guaranteeing the participation of young people in policymaking and decision-making processes must be respected when implementing the law.

Such principles must promote the participation of young people in policy- and decision-making processes in the fields of education, research, financial policy, employment, volunteering, protection of social inclusion, health, culture, sports, environment, tourism, justice, internal and external affairs, integration and defence, information technology, entrepreneurship and other areas that encourage youth development.

The pivotal document promoting youth health and sport in Albania was [the National Youth Action Plan \(NYAP\) 2015-2020](#) (*Plani Kombëtar I Veprimit Për Rininë 2015-2020*), proposed by the Ministry of Social Welfare and Youth<sup>8</sup> and adopted by a decision of the Council of Ministers No. 383 of 6 May 2015. The NAYP included six strategic objectives:

1. enhancement and participation of Youth in democratic decision-making processes, intended not only for creation of appropriate infrastructure for youth support and

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<sup>8</sup> The Ministry of Social Welfare and Youth (*Ministria e Mirëqenies Sociale dhe Rinisë*) existed from 2013 to 2017, when it was then dissolved. Its competences were redistributed to the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports and the Ministry of Health

youth centres, but also for strengthening the structures and capacities of youth organisations and groups;

2. enhancement of youth employment through effective labour market policies, improving staffing, legal support for “start-up” programmes to expand the courses offered by vocational schools and creating contests to promote innovative ideas;
3. health, sport and environment as strategic objectives to preserve and protect the health of young people through integrated health policies, coupled with massive sports culture;
4. education of youth, aimed at improving curricula related to life-long learning; improving and strengthening the education system;
5. social protection, aimed at strengthening the links of this social protection system, starting with capacity building and community interaction;
6. culture and volunteerism, intended to improve the opportunities for young people to organise activities for their leisure time in various fields and topics.

### **Promoting and supporting sport and physical activity among young people**

Strategic Objective 4 of the NYAP aims to ensure and protect the health of young people through integrated health policies, coupled with the dissemination of a sports culture as an important element for the training of the physical body and the protection of the environment, which are the main factors protecting the population from various chronic and fatal diseases.

As the action plan reiterates, massive introduction of sports culture among young people is one of the main objectives of this plan and, in this framework, a series of activities have been foreseen. Initially, the establishment of sport classes has been put in focus, along with the improvement of sport infrastructure in schools and the community and the organisation of regional and national sport tournaments. The plan pays special attention to the organisation (biannually) of "paralympic" games for people with disabilities.<sup>9</sup>

Specific Objective 3.5 of the NYAP, Strengthening and Spreading the culture of Sports, provides enhancement of financial support for sports with the aim of spreading sport culture

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9.National Youth Action Plan 2015-2020  
[www.un.org.al/sites/default/files/plani%20kombetar%20i%20veprimit%20per%20inine%202015-2020\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.un.org.al/sites/default/files/plani%20kombetar%20i%20veprimit%20per%20inine%202015-2020_ENG.pdf) pg.30, last accessed November 2021

among young people. The indicators for this activity are set as following: “Increase of financial support for national and international activities”, “Establishment of conditions leading to revision of Sport Club organization and functioning” and “Financial support for the activities of sport clubs representing schools in various disciplines to establish grassroots”. Nevertheless, the NYAP expired in 2020 and, as yet, no evaluation report has been issued by the government nor the supporting donors.

### **Physical education in schools**

Physical education in Albania is one of the subjects present from primary education up to high schools. Besides having it as a subject in school, the opening of dedicated classes with a profile in sports was realised in support [of law 69/2012 “On pre-university education in the Republic of Albania”](#), amended by [law 79/2017 “On sports”](#), amended, and through order No. 440, dated 2 May 2018 "On the opening of profiled classes in sports in the schools of basic education of the pre-university system". Moreover, through law 79/2017 “On sports”, the subject “Physical education, sports and health” in the education system is given a broader definition, providing for an increased number of hours in its teaching load in pre-university education.

With regard to higher education, some faculties at university level offer it as an elective course too, while at university level, Albania has a dedicated [University of Sports in Tirana](#), while other general universities, such as [University Aleksander Moisiu Dures](#) or [European University of Tirana](#), also offer sports-related degrees.

Following the [National Youth Action Plan \(NYAP\) 2015-2020](#), promotion of sports and physical education in schools is one of the main activities within the strategic objective on health, sports and environment. Within the NAYP, the activity 3.5.2, Strengthening of the continuous sport classes and clubs system in the high-school education system, has been envisaged to be implemented at a total of 384 high-school institutions and the estimation for the realisation of this indicator has been based on the expense estimation of the government to cover the establishment of these teams.

### **Collaboration and partnerships**

The Ministry of Education in Albania has recently promoted the collaboration and partnerships of several organisations with schools, in light of community projects to promote

extracurricular activities in schools, with a focus on sports education.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, sports culture in Albania is not very well developed, and many young people do not undertake extracurricular activities dedicated to sports in their leisure time. Only few do so; this can be attributed to several factors, such as a lack of public facilities, expensive courses and generally low awareness, although this general mindset is improving at a slow pace. However, several international programmes, such as Erasmus+, are supporting the promotion of sport through non-formal education, as well as student mobilities for those pursuing a sports career.

## 7.4 Healthy lifestyles and healthy nutrition

### National strategy(ies)

Nutrition and awareness on its importance in Albania among youth has not been very well developed. The development of nutrition-awareness campaigns is still at an early phase. Public schools (at elementary and secondary level, in addition to public universities) do not offer any canteen facilities. Some private schools and universities offer such services for children.

Supported by WHO, the Government of Albania has implemented an [Action Plan on Food and Nutrition 2013-2020](#). The action plan includes awareness-raising and informative campaigns in schools on the importance of nutrition, eating disorders, etc. One of the initiatives that this action plan aims to promote is the European Initiative for Schools with Physical Activity and Healthy Nutrition.

Nevertheless, as stated in the first section of this chapter, positive trends have been observed in the country, although at a slow pace. In December 2017, the model of healthy nutrition in schools was piloted first, in four schools across the country. This was an initiative of the [Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development](#) in partnership with the [Ministry of Health and Social Protection](#), the [Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports](#), and with the five main municipalities in the country. These authorities signed in 2017 an agreement on food safety, education and healthy nutrition of children.

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<sup>10</sup> Projects and Activities at School of the Ministry of Education and Sports <http://arsimi.gov.al/aktivitetet-sportive-ne-shkolla/>, last accessed November 2021



### **Encouraging healthy lifestyles and healthy nutrition for young people**

In October 2021, the [Ministry of Health and Social Protection](#) and the [Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports](#) banned the advertising of unhealthy foods on the premises of elementary education institutions. In the framework of the fight against malnutrition, this regulation aims to protect the health and well-being of children from information and materials that harm them.

### **Health education and healthy lifestyles education in schools**

Health and sexual-reproduction education in Albania became part of the school curriculum from 1995. This dimension of education was extended to the third grade of elementary school as part of the subject “natural science” and to grades 5-8 of middle school, as a separate subject. This timeframe marks the highest point of political decision-making in the education system. This period also marks the institutionalisation of health and sexual education as part of schooling in Albania. Later, the topic was incorporated into the subject of “life skills”, where sexual behaviour and development, sexuality, consequences of unhealthy sexual behaviour, sexually transmitted diseases, etc., were included.<sup>11</sup>

### **Peer-to-peer education approaches**

The National Youth Action Plan 2015-2020 foresees, within Activity 3.3.3, the promotion and strengthening of peer educator and health educator groups (in the education system, youth organisations and for youth serving sentences in penitentiary institutions). Moreover, the National Youth Action Plan 2015-2020 foresees, within Activity 3.3.4 Creative activities in schools and outside schools, to address social and health issues, healthy living and behaviour and the decrease of risky behaviour in youth and other groups. Nevertheless, as explained above, no evaluation report is available yet for the public.

### **Collaboration and partnerships**

The Government of Albania has co-operated with United Nations Populations Fund (UNFPA) on the development of curricula, teacher training and production of didactic materials for teaching with regard to health and sexual health education.<sup>12</sup>

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11. Inclusive Sexual Health Education [https://albania.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/cfare\\_ka\\_ndryshuar-edukata\\_seksuale\\_gjitheperfshirese.pdf](https://albania.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/cfare_ka_ndryshuar-edukata_seksuale_gjitheperfshirese.pdf), last accessed November 2021

12. See the guidelines issued by the Ministry of Education and Sports for the organisation of school year 2021-2022 and the implementation of memorandums with international parties such as UNFPA <http://arsimi.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Document.pdf>

### **Raising awareness on healthy lifestyles and factors affecting the health and well-being of young people**

the National Youth Action Plan 2015-2020 also provided for promotion and awareness raising on the importance of healthy behaviour, including nutrition. More precisely, these are tackled by Activity 3.3.2 Awareness campaigns on healthy living and decrease of risky behaviour (unprotected sexual relations, smoking, alcohol consumption, use of narcotics, gambling, nutrition, physical activity, etc.) and existing social and health services.

However, as stated in the indicators, two national awareness-raising campaigns annually on the occasion of International Days are foreseen by this plan, together with an unspecified number of regional awareness activities in line with specific features. Grouping nutrition with such a wide array of topics and reducing activities to two national campaigns again shows the lack of general awareness that Albanian citizens have in terms of nutrition and healthy habits.

## **7.5 Mental health**

### **National Strategy(ies)**

The [National Strategy of Health in Albania 2016-2020](#) pays attention to mental health of the citizens too, including young women and men in the country. The principles on which the strategy is based are those of high standards that recognise health as a human right that is ensured through effective and efficient, well-governed healthcare and that provides equal access, solidarity, integrity, transparency and accountability.

The [National Strategy of Health in Albania 2016-2020](#) has a strategic vision and direction, in line with the [National Strategy for Development and Integration](#) and the government programme, which aims promotion and advancement of health in accordance with WHO, European Policy Framework for Health and Welfare “Health 2020”, the UN Agenda 2030 Sustainable Development Goals and the requirements of EU accession.

Specifically, mental health is tackled under Strategic Objective 3.5 on encouraging the opening and development of community health services throughout the country in partnership with government and local partners. The aim is the establishment of community care centres throughout the country to co-ordinate and provide mental health support services, palliative care, youth-friendly services and substance abuse control programmes. This objective shall be fulfilled through activities as follows:

- implementation of the 10-year programme for the development of mental health centres
- palliative care centres
- youth-friendly services
- elderly-care centres
- rehabilitation centres
- alcohol and tobacco control programmes.

Another important document on youth and mental health in Albania is the [Action Plan for the Development of Mental Health Services in Albania 2013-2022](#). This document is a 10-year action plan, towards implementation of the Development of Mental Health Services in Albania Public Policy (2003), reflecting the objectives and key strategic points set out within it. The drafting of this document is based on the Action Plan for the Development of Mental Health Services in Albania 2005-2010.

### **Improving the mental health of young people**

The [National Youth Action Plan 2015-2020](#) provides provisions of mental health activities within Specific Objective 3.2. Enhancement of health education in the education system chain, more specifically under Activity 3.2.3. Periodic and accredited training (National Centre for Continuous Education) for social-subject teachers, physicians/nurses and psychologists/social workers on sexual and reproductive health topics, sexually transmitted infections, mental health, narcotics, smoking, alcohol consumption, addiction to gambling, communication methods, behavioural changes, etc.

Support for mental health has also been provided in schools through counsellors. However, a report issued in 2019 by the [fact-checking NGO Faktoje.AI](#) states that Albania has 520 759 students from kindergarten to high school but only 413 psychologists and social workers, including those in private educational institutions. The simple report shows that a psychologist covers about 1 260 students, a fact that confirms the concern of school psychologists about the high workload.

During the Covid-19 lockdown, an increased awareness towards the importance of mental health was observed. Several NGOs offered online counselling services to young people, filling the gap created by the lack of services due to limited capacities and

infrastructure by public school counsellors. One of the most popular was the portal [nukjevetem.al](http://nukjevetem.al), provided by Foundation Together for Albania with the support of UNICEF. Other humanitarian organisations such as Terre des Hommes, World Vision Albania, Save the Children, etc. offered support to marginalised and vulnerable youth during the Covid-19 pandemic and the aftermath of the devastating earthquake of November 2019.

## **7.6 Mechanisms of early detection and signposting of young people facing health risks**

The health system in Albania is a public one. The state provides most of the services to the population in the field of promotion, prevention, diagnosis and treatment. The Ministry of Health addresses the general public health concerns. Following the organisation of the health system in the country and routine protocols, especially for children and adolescents, family doctors are the first signposting units in case of any health risks. Their role then is to refer the case to a more specialised doctor or other relevant bodies, such as counsellors, shelters, rehabilitation centres, etc., depending on the specific issue.

Second, schools both public and private are obliged to provide counselling support when it comes to mental health issues, as per [Order No. 313, dated 20 October 2020](#). Besides family as the primary detection unit, educational institutions and public health clinics can signpost and detect situations of health risks in young people.

## **7.7 Making health facilities more youth-friendly**

Youth-friendly facilities are being promoted through several strategies and action plans, such as the [National Strategy of Health in Albania 2016-2020](#) and the National Youth Action Plan (NYAP) 2015-2020. The NYAP provides for promotion of more youth-friendly facilities.

This is foreseen under Specific Objective 3.4 on Youth-friendly services. This objective includes the following activities.

- Activity 3.4.1 Reopening of youth-friendly centres, based on the Youth-Friendly Services model, a service successfully piloted many years ago by UNICEF, which will provide information, counselling, preventive activities and referrals related to prevention of youth risk behaviour. The main output here is to establish at least one “Youth-Friendly Services” Centre in each Prefecture.
- Activity 3.4.2 Strengthening of Health Counselling Departments in each school of the pre-university education system. These departments will be completely staffed with

social and health personnel and will also serve as information, counselling and referral departments to other, more specialised services. The main output here is related to the establishing of Health Departments in each pre-university system school.

- Activity 3.4.3 Strengthening of regional family planning centres and resting and voluntary counselling centres on HIV/AIDS, with the aim of promoting young people to get the social and health services provided by these centres.
- Activity 3.4.4 Establishing of community centres (rehabilitation), which will provide counselling and treatment in cases of alcohol abuse, narcotics use and addiction to gambling. The main indicator of these activities foresaw the establishment of two regional centres in 2017 and 2018.

## **7.8 Current debates and reforms**

The year 2020 raised global concerns about health and well-being, due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Albania is not excluded from the ongoing debates and reforms to mitigate and address the consequences caused by the pandemic. While, initially, much research and many projects were undertaken primarily by the civil society sector given that the government focused more on the macro level and crisis management, it is now being increasingly debated on the importance of youth health, especially mental health and well-being. Currently, several government strategies are being drafted, including the National Strategy of Youth, where health and well-being are expected to play an important part.

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