

## Evaluating Low Income Families' self Perception of the Economic Aid Program: The Albanian Case

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**Abstract:** *Given the complicated transition in which post communist countries have been going through during their rapid development, it is important to make sure that concerns of the weakest part of these societies are taken into consideration and not left on their own fate hidden in the chaotic transition process. This study is an evaluation of Albanian needy families' perceptions of the public Economic Aid program. Qualitative research was based on ten interviews of Economic Aid recipients, male and female baby boomers. They all had children. The findings showed a huge gap between the Economic Aid amount and their real expenses and needs. In most cases this gap was covered from black market jobs. Recipients felt extremely poor, inferior, hopeless, and concerned about surviving. The lack of trust in the Economic Aid program in specific and the government in general was due to perceived high level of corruption. We recommended a practical framework for restructuring the Economic Aid program in terms of the amount delivered, transparency, employment support, psychological assistance for both parents and children, and better medical coverage.*

**Keywords:** *social services; Economic Aid; Albania; developing countries; temporary cash assistance.*

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### 1. Introduction

Developing countries in South Eastern Europe have been going through a complex transition in terms of political changes, economic stability and social development. Corruption has been an evident unethical phenomenon for these countries accompanying their journey towards development and integration. As a result, the integration process has been complicated.

After Croatia being finally accepted in the European Union as of July 1<sup>st</sup> 2013, Albania is one of the next candidates of Western Balkan whose application is being considered for the membership of European Union (European Union Commission, 2010). It has been twenty years since communism collapsed in Albania and many socio-economic changes have occurred since then. Yet, the efficiency of these changes still needs to be evaluated. The lack of an appropriate preparation of the population to embrace the new capitalistic system and an ineffective legal system to ensure stability prevented from appropriately addressing concerns of the extreme poor class of the Albanian society.

According to INSTAT (Albanian Institute of Statistics, 2011) Albania still does not have an official Living Minimum Standard. However, the public Economic Aid program that supports the needy families with no or not enough revenues and invalids is considered 5-6 times under the assumed minimum standards. In addition, the unemployment rate of 13.8 % (INSTAT, 2009) coexisted with a considerable increase in prices.

The intent of this article is to raise the voice of this class of the Albanian society being the official data extremely ambiguous due to the informal economy and unethical political strategies still operating in this country. In this study we are questioning the reality from people's perspective in an attempt to understand their experience with the public Economic Aid program and issues they have been going through without establishing direct cause – effect relationships. The intent of this article is to identify their main concerns, understand if the public Economic Aid is perceived as an efficient corrector, and how this is influencing their quality of life.

This study can be relevant to needy families as the opportunity to externalize their needs and issues adds value to their voice which hopefully will be taken into consideration for future antipoverty programs. The local regional directories can gain from this research as well. If they start directing the culture of their organizations to being more democratic and open to families' in need feedback, they will be able to come out with more efficient suggestions for their future budgets to be approved by the main directory of the Ministry of Work and Social Affairs. As this ministry adopts a decentralized structure for its local operations, it will be easier for different regions to have a personalized program for the social services they could provide to the needy families as complementary or substitutes to the Economic Aid. In addition, the European Union Commission can gain helpful information to evaluate the membership of Albania and ensure a more transparent integration process. It is crucial for them to know that data observed are a correct reflection of the reality. Other Not for Profit not owned by the government will have a better idea of what to offer to the community in terms of antipoverty programs. By offering the extreme poor families what they really need, they would fulfill the mission of their existence and support a democratic Albanian society in terms of socioeconomic welfare.

## 2. Literature review

‘Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization, through national effort and international cooperation and in accordance with the organization and resources of each State, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality.’

Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Art 22

Many studies have been done to evaluate welfare programs' efficiency. However, there is a lack on studies that consider the recipients' self perceptions on these programs (Nicolas & JeanBaptiste, 2001). Our intent is to explore previous researches and theoretical concepts in order to build the foundations for a grounded theory based on the triangulation process. By digging in the theory out there and analyzing different perspectives provided us a better understanding of the theoretical context of our study. We focused our attention in three main pillars that helped us create support the objectives of our study. First, we explored the concept of human dignity in general and that of needy families in specific and the impact of welfare programs on it. We wanted to understand how to value people as human beings and protect their integrity. Secondly, we examined how developed countries deal with needy families issues in terms of welfare programs and human dignity protection. Last, but not least, we considered other developing countries' realities as they have been going through socioeconomic transition similar to Albania. We mainly focused on how previous researchers approached the Albanian welfare programs in particular and poverty issues in general within their studies.

### 2.1 Humanitarian approach

Most of the previous studies define the welfare based on the humanitarian approach as an instrument to protect human dignity. The protection of human dignity is a way to enhance human development and ensure autonomy. All this leads to human rights protection (Gumbis, Bacianskaite, & Randakeviciute, 2010). These

studies mainly focus in the policies at the basis of human dignity protection. Different policies have different consequences, thus should be taken into consideration very carefully before being applied.

Wax (2003) in his study states that the protection of human dignity is considered not just a government's responsibility, but of all members of a society as well. He argues that no one can take full benefit for what he does and achieves as everything happens in a context which can be the society itself and its institutions. Other studies embrace the same non individualistic approach (Gumbis, Bacianskaite, & Randakeviciute, 2010). According to these studies, no one, as long as they are a part of that society, has the right to be against the distribution of welfare benefits even when they do not receive these benefits due to a lack of need.

Based on these principles, Wax (2003) criticizes the concept of self-reliance by affirming that there is nothing wrong in being dependent as long as the dependence is constructive. Other studies, however, have not such a negative attitude toward the concept of self-reliance. Siegel, Green, Abbott, and Mogul (2007) fear that welfare programs might induce dependency from these programs if not based in appropriate policies. These researchers after analyzing the development process of welfare leavers and returners show that the most efficient programs are the ones that prioritize human development and its attitude toward work, instead of just cash benefits, in order to avoid dependence from the government. This way, people learn how to take responsibilities. These priorities are set up through a requirement of people to work in order to have those cash grants. Similar beliefs are particularly supported from a feminist perspective. Scott, London, and Gross (2007) in their study regarding welfare-reliant women's perspectives on self-sufficiency have shown that women equal self-reliance with independence from the state and marriage. They would prefer to work rather than marry someone in order to be dependent from them. It is important to identify what people need and not simply pretend to know their needs while making welfare policies.

## *2.2 Developed countries approach*

In order for people to be able to know what they need it is important to provide full information of welfare benefits and their impact on human development. Studies show that many people are not fully aware of what is being offered in terms of welfare services. Most of them are familiar with the temporary cash support, but not with the rest of the welfare programs. A study in UK has shown that full assistance through specific advice centers had better results in human development compared to welfare policies with no advice (Adams, White, Moffatt, Howel, & Mackintosh, 2006). People need to be guided while being in critical situations in order to help them overcome those difficulties. Gabel and Kamerman (2006) analyzed twenty one industrialized countries in order to identify the public commitment in investing in programs that support children, help their development and at the same time make life easier to their parents. As the authors state, "changing family structures, particularly among those families headed by mothers living alone, have made families with children increasingly vulnerable to income poverty and its consequences" (Gabel & Kamerman, 2006, p.239). Families with a single parent are now common to our reality, thus adequate governments' policies, other than just cash, would be helpful to single parents who straggle between being a parent and a worker. It is interesting that regardless economic difficulties within the industrialized countries which were under analysis, the government commitment toward these programs did not decrease as one might think. Gabel and Kamerman (2006) found that non cash services provided by governments were intentionally created as the interest of families had moved from cash benefits to finding the appropriate balance between parental and worker responsibilities. This supports Scott et al. (2007) findings about the families with single mothers that do not like to be dependent to state or marriage. Brown's study (2009) done in Australia shows the same findings in terms of people's dependency from the cash benefits provided by the government. In all these studies welfare programs based on cash benefits only would fail to meet all low income families' needs.

Studies showed other reasons to have welfare programs not based just on cash benefits, especially considering that parents' unemployment influences also children's quality of life in many aspects. Parents who had less money and more emotional stress had higher probability of mental and physical health

decrease (García Rodríguez, 1998; Jin, Shah, & Svoboda, 1995) leading to an increase of divorce probability (Kraft, 2001). This, in addition to the recession impact on children's quality of life listing children in USA during 2010 at the highest poverty level in twenty years (Land, 2010) was a strong evidence of the necessity for efficient public policies in order to solve the critical situation in developing as well as developed countries.

Studies also showed how parents' wellbeing impacted their children achievements, at least in the short run, especially when parents were just high-school or less educated (Stevens, Huff, & Schaller, 2009). This study highlighted the need for social programs which help parents get a degree, or support their children during the stressful period of their parents' unemployment. While Stevens et al. (2009) talk about a short-term decrease at least from an academic performance point of view, the Foundation for Child Development based on a longitudinal study stated that "research shows that children who slip into poverty, even for a short time, can suffer significant setbacks, even when their families regain their economic footing." (Land, 2010, p.3). Same conclusion was reached in the Australian case study where Brown (2009) stated that:

The personal cost to these children, who grow up without the positive influence of a working parent to teach them about responsibility and discipline and instill them with a sense of ambition and self determination, cannot be underestimated. Family joblessness leads to welfare dependency and child poverty, and inferior health, social, and developmental outcomes for children (p.5).

The Australian welfare and tax policies went through a learning experience. The government realized that people get dependent to welfare if they receive more over the same amount of money that they would take while working. This is the reason why they applied financial and other incentives. As for financial incentives, decrease of taxes or increase of wages was the key solution to make these people earn sufficiently more if working. While in terms of non financial incentives, the Australian government found strict welfare rules to be efficient on getting people to work. People would get punished if they did not go through the process of looking for a job and being part of the programs that help them finding one (Brown, 2009, p. 3).

Research does not consider people's unawareness of welfare services' availability as a reason to fully justify the state of poverty that people face. Many of the welfare systems are not perfect. Roth (2004) in his study shows that the best instrument for change to occur is to raise the voice and make public the inefficiencies of welfare systems. Claiming systems that do not work properly can increase awareness much more than just demonstrating how things should be. On the other hand, it is important to be aware that the attitude of the public towards welfare benefits depends on how much interest they have on those benefits (Blekesaune & Quadagno, 2003). If people are not expecting to be unemployed, they are less willing to accept taxes for the fair distribution of wealth. Similar attitudes were found regarding the Norwegian welfare programs (Pettersen, 2001). Blekesaune and Quadagno (2003) also found that people tend to increase awareness in situational cases, such as when unemployment is high, and they are more aware of the support that public welfare state can give to them in terms of cash or support in finding a job. The advice centers become once again crucial in helping people to overcome these situational moments (Adams, White, Moffatt, Howel, & Mackintosh, 2006).

### *2.3 Developing countries approach*

Speaking of available welfare services, studies have shown how in countries which experience a rapid growth, the public policies were not ready to respond with appropriate policies to protect the human dignity of the poor (Daniere & Takahashi, 1999). The gap between rich and poor increases when there is a rapid economic increase (Ishay, 2010). This is the reality that most of the developing countries have been going through. Thus, an adequate welfare system in these countries becomes even more critical. By adequate we mean that these policies should not just exist, but should also be applied in an efficient way. Hadiprayitno (2010), while analyzing the Indonesian policies about the right for food from a humanitarian approach, found that the Indonesian government was struggling to practice the public policies as they should, failing this way to protect the right for food. As a result the human dignity was not respected. Similar non positive effects of

social assistance in reducing poverty level were founded by Verme (2011) in his attempt to evaluate social services performance in Moldova, the poorest country in Europe, also in transition after coming out from communism. In contradiction with the Indonesian and Moldovan case, Sen (1981) focused his research in four good examples of South Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Taiwan as countries with a rapid, yet quality economic growth in their early capitalism era. Findings on this study proved that the state's commitment is crucial to adopting effective public and welfare policies.

In addition, studies about Albania showed an interesting factor to be considered while analyzing the quality of life and the poverty level. Carlett and Zezza (2006) found that there is a gap between Albanian poverty measured based on objective instruments and Albanians' perception about their poverty level. This study concluded that Albanians in felt poorer than objective measurement techniques would define their quality of life, reason why we wanted to include the subjectivity factor while evaluating the efficiency of existing policies and considering the introduction of new welfare policies.

The Commission of European Union (2010), in its annual report stated that Albania is in a good way towards getting its membership. Still many more efforts needed to take place before that happened. The political influence in the public administrative system has to decrease in order for this institution to work efficiently. In addition the law has to be enforced so actual public policies can be applied properly. With inefficient public institutions, no welfare system can protect human dignity, enhance human development and increase low income families' quality of life.

Previous studies about the performance of Economic Aid program in Albania, showed its public institution inefficiency. Mangiavacchi and Verme (2009) found that this inefficiency consists mainly in a reaching the real poor. They still could not define if this happens because of the complicated formula which is supposed to target the real poor, or because of corruption and poor decentralization structure of the welfare system. However, the inefficiency of the decentralized system of targeting the poor has been proved in other Alderman' s (2002) studies as well.

Independently from the public institutions efficiency, previous researchers have also included the subjectivity factor while analyzing Albanians welfare. Interesting enough is the fact that Albanians perceive a higher financial satisfaction if they are working in the informal sector, and have a low-positive attitude toward tax payments. In few words, if two people have the same income, but one works in the formal sector, and the other one in the informal sector accompanied by low-ethical attitude toward tax morale, the latter will perceive a higher well being (Ferrer-i-Carbonell & Gërzhani, 2005).

#### *2.4 Summary of the Literature*

As supported from the literature above, the humanitarian approach consists on the idea that human rights are protected if people's dignity is respected and if these people are treated and enabled to live as human beings. In order to achieve this, a constructive dependability is allowed, up to the point where people are still motivated to reach self-reliance. For this to happen, effective welfare programs should exist and full assistance in sharing information should be provided by public institutions in order to support needy families during the process of overcoming their obstacles. Examples of developed countries approach with welfare issues mainly highlighted the high influence of non cash benefits on avoiding the risk of unlimited dependence of needy families on the state support. The relevance of non cash incentives is also enforced by showing which additional non cash problems needy parents have to go through while raising their kids. Emotional stress has a critical impact on parents and children's health and socio development in the short and long term. In conclusion, we analyzed other researches that have been done considering countries which have gone through similar socio economic rapid growth accompanied by a huge gap between rich and poor as happened in the Albania. Findings showed the successful countries had a strong public system which helped to efficiently apply the exiting welfare policies. Mismanagement and corruption were the major causes of the failure of these programs in other countries. Studies analyzing the Albanian reality showed that a critical element of the financial satisfaction and quality of life depends on the fact that needy families work in



the informal job market or not. Even their attitude toward the taxation as an instrument which can influence the Economic Aid changes depending on their participation in the informal job market. This theoretical framework served as fundamentals of our study. They helped us better understand the context of our study while considering different perspectives.

### 3. Methodology

The purpose of this study was to evaluate low income families' self perception of the Economic Aid program and its impact on their everyday life in an attempt to provide a guideline for antipoverty programs. In order to achieve this goal the study focused on five major objectives which helped us build the fundamentals for answering the research question of this study.

Our objectives were to:

- Define human dignity from needy families' viewpoint.
- Evaluate the efficiency of Economic Aid program from needy families' perspective.
- Identify root causes of the poverty state of low-income families.
- Point out the implications of poverty in general and the Economic Aid program in specific on needy families' lives.
- Explore opportunities for antipoverty programs as complements or substitutes of the Economic Aid.

This study was based on a qualitative research method in order to give value to people's perceptions and experiences. The inductive approach of understanding needy families' context and the implications of it in their lives helped us build a grounded theory.

#### 3.1 Participants

The richness and variability of the data was enabled by using purposive sampling. Information about the respondents was provided by the local public social work entities which distribute the Economic Aid. While selecting our respondents we considered specific characteristics that would provide us with relevant information necessary for reaching constructive conclusions. Major priority was given to characteristics such as: age, duration of the needy state; the size of family; education; geographic area of living. Respondents who fulfilled the characteristics we were looking for were selected while they were present in the public entity. A total of ten interviews were completed. All ten interviewees were from urban area. Six out of ten participants were female. All respondents were baby boomers. None of them had a higher education. This was relevant to our study as this generation had a long experience with the communism and democracy as well. They were all households with children aged five months to twenty-two years. Respondents were long-term needy families having received Economic Aid for more than two years. A personal brief presentation of the purpose of our study was communicated to them. Ten of the twenty two people approached volunteered to be interviewed. Face to face interviews were scheduled on respondents' preferred timing and location.

#### 3.2 Instrument

Data collection was achieved through personal interviews covering thirty six questions among which two open ended questions asking participants to pick the topics. Respondents were not comfortable in talking about their personal issues in a focus group context because of cultural impediments. In the community where respondents lived people were not easily open to group communications. They fear to be judged by other members of the community, or stereotyped because of their low social status. We considered this element as a critical key to our study, thus we decided that personal interviews would protect their comfort zone. In addition, a survey of eleven questions provided us with participants' socio demographic data.

### 3.3 Procedure

The interviews started with a more in depth prescription of our study and the role of the respondents in it. Respondents were presented with the confidentiality policy and anonymity was insured not using their real names and presenting the data in an aggregate form. The session continued with a short socio demographic survey to be filled by each respondent. No reimbursement was provided to respondents for their participation. The interview was guided by the interviewer towards five major pillars coherent with the objectives of our studies. However, the questions had the characteristics of open ended questions in order to let respondents guide the issues that were more relevant to them and the depth of the details they were willing to share.

The trustworthiness of this study was insured in terms of credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). Confirmation questions asked to respondents and peer debriefing and blind coding was used to ensure credibility of the results. Transferability in this study due to the small amount of interviews is guaranteed by providing a detailed and full picture of the context in order to let other researchers and readers evaluate the amount of findings' transferability into their own context. Within this study a purposive sample was intentionally chosen in order to provide various contexts of people having similar Economic Aid support. Our intention was to provide dependability information by showing how changes of a certain context could affect our research differently. In addition, interviews were recorded and notes were taken in order to provide full access to auditors and ensure conformability.

We analyzed our data through a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Statements were codified and grouped into eight categories which led us to our results. The latter was presented through a case study report in order to understand the connection the data with the context of our study and provide information useful for our findings. Themes emerged from the respondents perceptions naturalistically resulting in grounded theory.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 The context

Our intent in this study was to raise the voice of Albanians needy families who deal on a daily basis with poverty while being recipients of the public cash assistance known as Economic Aid program. People who are accepted in this program have to be without income or invalid in order to receive the cash support. Furthermore, they are all registered as unemployed people looking for a job. As soon as they find a job, privately or through the help of public institutions they are no longer considered as cash benefit's recipients.

The interviews were done at the respondents' houses because they felt more comfortable there. This helped us realize even better the reality of their lives. Their houses were extremely simple and clean. The respondents were baby boomers, having had hard time to adapt to the transition of going from communism to democracy. The downsizing of organizations owned from the government during communism, found these people unprepared to the new capitalistic model during democracy. During the communism era people had few opportunities to have a higher education, and the government was the only provider of jobs as corporations were all state owned. With the fall of communism in 1991, the majority of the public corporations shut down, having as a result a high increase in unemployment. The rapid economic change toward capitalism made the job market require for higher education. Jobs were neither enough nor insured by the government as they used to be during communism. The change of governments every four year came along with high turnover. Thus the weakest part of the society became even weaker.

Data from INSTAT (2011) show that employment in the public sector during early democracy (1995) was mainly focused in secondary level of education, while it had shifted rapidly to higher education with a decrease of employment for people with a lower education level, which is mainly composed by the communism generation known as baby boomers. It is in this context that the Economic Aid program was adapted. Recipients of this cash support depending on individual circumstances take on average a monthly

payment of 4,500 ALL<sup>1</sup> (around forty dollars). This amount did not change a lot during the years, while the minimum average salary in the public sector has changed from 3,400 ALL in 1995 to 20,000 ALL in 2009 (INSTAT, 2011). This shows an increase of 500% of the minimum wage in fifteen years while the Economic Aid for needy families represents only 25% of the minimum wage. In our findings section we will respond to our four objectives while the last objective will be covered in the conclusion.

#### *4.2 Define human dignity from needy families' viewpoint*

The findings of our study suggested that human dignity is not a definition we could generalize. Every human being has his own perception of what dignity means to them and how they pretend to be treated in order for their human dignity to be respected according to their expectancies. Their definitions change based on their background and the context they belong. In general human dignity to them is not just how the society sees them, but also how they see themselves, intrinsic versus extrinsic. People who had a difference in identifying their dignity based on the position that they have within the society versus the consideration that they have about themselves, showed a difference in their perception of feeling treated as human beings or not. One of the respondents stated: "No, I don't feel treated as human being. The Economic Aid is insignificant and doesn't allow me to support my children. Working in the black market makes me feel not treated as human being" (R1). This same respondent considered dignity as the position that she had within the society. On the other side people perceiving human dignity from an intrinsic perspective had different perception about feeling treated as human beings while stating: "Yes, I feel treated as a human being. I never argued with someone." (R2).

In terms of responsibility 80% of the respondents seem to agree in the fact that they see the government as responsible to their quality of life (R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6, R8, & R10). They were very emotional while talking and describing their lives' conditions, and provided as main responsible the government. Other respondents felt oppressed by the reality and inferior, although their tendency was to hide this feeling in front of their children. "I try to not show how I feel, even though it is very hard for me. I really want to have my own personality and not feel inferior" (R1).

In addition, we noticed a common altruistic value among our respondents while considering not just their own human dignity, but that of other members of their community as well. They would be willing to be helpful to other people in order to support their human dignity. However, they showed a difference in their potential level of involvement, active versus passive behavior. Respondents that were community oriented, and perceived human dignity based on the position and respect that they had among other members of the society, perceived that all members of the society should be responsible for the fair distribution of richness. They would agree to have an increase in taxes, in case they worked, in order for other needy members of the society to receive a greater Economic Aid (R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6, R8). On the other hand, other people had a more individualistic approach. "If I worked, I would not accept to have an increase in taxes, because everyone has its own difficulties in life and works for that" (R2). These people learned from their experiences that they can't depend on any one, not even on the government as such, they expect others to see it the same way (R10). However, the non acceptance of the increase in taxes was explained also as an inefficient solution towards the community welfare improvement. They believe that more taxes mean higher prices (R7, R9).

#### *4.3 Evaluate the efficiency of Economic Aid program from needy families' perspective.*

While our respondents considered the government as the main responsible for their human dignity's damage, they did not consider the Economic Aid program as a solution at all. "For me the Economic Aid is nothing, is

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<sup>1</sup> Lek is the Albanian currency (ALL)



insufficient. My younger son has diabetes, and I cannot even afford to buy his medicines." (R2). There was a huge lack of information about this program even though the criticism towards it was high. They came to know about this program mainly from families and friends. Only two of them went to ask for help on their own and learned about the program (R5, R6). Others that used to work before, when they lost their jobs they were given a form to fill for the application process and they did not know how much they would receive in terms of cash. All respondents had higher expectations about the monthly cash amount they would have been receiving (R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6, R7, R8, R9, R10). Eight out of ten respondents suggested that minimum cash needed to cover basic monthly needs was 3,000 ALL (300\$), however they were spending around half of this amount even though their Economic Aid provided them with one third of what they were spending. With that amount they could barely afford to buy two pounds of bread a day, considering a family with an average of four members.

Many of the respondents work in the black market, and still struggle to cover their basic needs. The more we focused in understanding their perceptions about their Economic Aid, the more they continue to talk about their extreme difficulties, and they became emotional, or avoided some of the questions. We did not find any element of dependency from the Economic Aid program, as we found during our theoretical researches. Respondents never stopped looking for a job. They could not depend on the Economic Aid they were receiving. Even though some of the respondents did not stop looking for a job (R2, R4, R7, R8, R9), others stopped looking for a job through the public institutions, due to the fact that they lost their trust in the government and they figured out that there was no job for them (R1, R6, R10).

I have been working in the black market selling coffee in the streets for twenty years, since the communism fell, and I lost my job. Public institutions told me that there were some vacancies only for women under age 35 in the tailoring industry, but I was a man, and not that young. Thus I stopped looking for a job through them. I do not want to know anything about the Economic Aid program. All I want is to take care about my own difficulties. I depend only on myself, and try to protect myself. (R2).

In addition respondents talk about corruption within the public institutions. Four out of ten, admitted the existence of corruption and unfair distribution of the Economic Aid, however, information was vague (R1, R6, R7, R8).

#### *4.4 Identify root causes of the poverty state of low-income families.*

Our respondents did not have a higher education and they were poor for almost twenty years, since the fall of communism. As mentioned above, these people also did not have a great support in how to find a job, and how to improve their skills in order to fit to the new job market requirements which had been continuously changing during the transition period. We found that our respondents blamed as the cause of their poverty the political system leading to unemployment as well as the lack of proper education. However, they did not consider their low level of education as a direct cause of their unemployment (R7). All respondents were always willing to work even more if job opportunities were available.

#### *4.5 Point out the implications of poverty in general and the Economic Aid program in specific on needy families' lives.*

Respondents perceived to be extremely poor and hopeless. While all their talk goes around their concerns about their children, they feel that they cannot have the luxury to think about themselves even though they would like to. However, they try to hide their emotional feelings as much as they can from their children. They are open only to their partners (R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6, R9). Mainly their children do not judge their parents about their standard of living, even though they are aware of it with the exception of some cases where kids would blame them for what they can't have in comparison with other kids of their age. However these mixed feelings would last only in a short term (R1, R8). The respondents would eat less and satisfy their children's

needs rather than let them feel inferior to their friends (R1). As much as our respondents try to protect their children, there were circumstances where they had no choice. One of our respondents stated: "I got my daughter married at age fifteen and my son emigrated" (R10). However, their children did not have problems with school, drugs or other social problems. It seems that they were actually motivated to go to school and achieve what their parents could not.

In terms of children-parent relationships, most of the respondents had really good and open relationships with their parents (R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6, R7, R8, R9). Others not that good, however we don't know all the reasons behind it. In general, the respondents perceive appreciation and respect from their children who explicitly show it. A respondent stated: "My nine years old son is sick and I do all I can to take care of him and cover his medical expenses. He has been telling to my neighbors how much he loves and appreciates me." (R2). Nine out of ten of our respondents stated that they did not notice any difference on the respect given to them from their children based on who works in the family and who does not (R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6, R8, R9, R10).

## 5. Conclusion

First of all our findings highlight a huge gap between what people receive in terms of Economic Aid, what they actually spend for living, and what they perceive they need in order to cover their basic needs and feel treated as human beings. There were no discrepancies regarding the perception of the Economic Aid's inefficiency among the respondents. However, their approach to poverty showed some differences. Below we are highlighting the main effects of poverty.

This study showed symptoms of inferiority among needy families, more in households than in their children. Inferiority was not only related to how people consider themselves compared to other members of the society, but also how people consider themselves. These findings further support our theoretical findings which showed both an individualist and a communitarian approach. Respondents who were more social oriented were people who criticized the government in general and the Economic Aid program in specific, however, they still hoped in change. They were people who were willing to offer their services to the community if that would have helped them improve their quality of life. These were people who were helped by their relatives to overcome obstacles. Other people had a huge lack of trust in the government, including the Economic Aid program which they did not even consider as a source of income. These people had the tendency to not offer their services to the community. They would not pay more taxes if eventually working. However, none of these people did show any sign of dependency on the Economic Aid as some of the literature research showed. Needy families have been depending on their own, they did not stop working even though on the black market. Our conclusion to these facts was that the economic Aid was so small that it was impossible for these people to rely on it and create some sort of dependency on this program.

We also concluded that the perceived inefficiency of the Economic Aid program was sometimes leading people to unethical behavior. First of all, our findings showed elements of perceived corruption within the government in general and the public institutions of the Economic Aid provider in specific. These examples of corruption, in addition to the insufficiency of the monthly Economic Aid, left people with no other choice than working in the black market when possible. Even though, needy families perceive that not paying taxes is unethical, some of them did not have a choice. Thus it is critical to understand that indirectly pushing people to work in the black market has many side effects. First, we should consider the fact that these needy families are mainly baby boomers generation, with no guidance to entrepreneurial skills, as they have been educated under Marxism-Leninism principles during communism. Letting them on their own fate struggling in the new capitalistic market is not just a cash flow deficit in terms of taxes for the government, but also a high probability of entrepreneurship failure for these people, which will lead to increased poverty, and increased social issues for the entire country. Our theoretical research showed case studies where the most efficient welfare programs were the one with incorporated non cash support and full guidance.

Based on our theoretical and empirical findings, we recommend a framework that takes into consideration the main issues revealed by our study. This way we move toward our last goal focusing in exploring opportunities for antipoverty programs as complements or substitutes of the Economic Aid.

## 6. Framework for potential implementation

1. Reevaluate the amount of the Economic Aid. It is important to have coherence among the changes in prices, the real purchasing power, and the minimum wage salaries while considering the appropriate amount of Economic Aid. In order to do so it is critical to have an official minimum standard of living as a reference.
2. Control all documentations of the existing recipients of the Economic Aid in order to make sure that elements of corruption will be eliminated. This will require a restructure of the public institutions, and their depoliticization.
3. Increase the public support on the job searching process. Strengthen collaboration with the local business in order to diminish the job hidden market. Do job market research in order to see what skills are required in the current and future job market and create training programs that help needy families achieve those skills.
4. Revise medical support for members of needy families. Households are not able to cover their food expenses. The partial current reimbursement is not enough for these people. A full coverage would avoid health deterioration because of malnutrition and untreated disease.
5. Public psychological assistance. Long term poverty and perceived inefficient support from the government, has made needy families go through mix feelings, such as; inferiority, stress, disappointment, hopeless, insecurity and much more. During the interviews, we perceived an extreme need of these people to talk about their feelings and to truly being listened from someone. Psychological support should be available to parents and children as well.

## 7. Limitations

Our study was focused on the perceptions of needy families, thus we considered as more appropriate a qualitative research method. It is hard to quantify and standardize the perceptions through a quantitative research. Another limitation is the fact that interviews were held in Albanian, thus, the power of the responses might have lost some of its strength due to their translation in English. In addition, respondents were very unfamiliar with studies as ours, thus privacy concerns related to topics such as corruption, or simply a limited tendency to openly talk about personal feelings, might have influenced their responses.

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