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# Recognising Need: Social Assistance, Gender and Food Ethics in Albania during COVID-19

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# Recognising Need: Social Assistance, Gender and Food Ethics in Albania during COVID-19

**Abstract:** During the COVID-19 pandemic, many governments protected access to food by expanding existing cash social-assistance schemes rather than distributing food. Ethical assessments of such assistance have focused mainly on targeting methods, and much less on how schemes define need in the first place, particularly the needs of women carrying unpaid care. This article addresses that gap. It argues that crisis responses inherit the definitions of need built into the schemes they extend, a dynamic termed *inherited recognition*, so that the fairness of emergency food assistance is largely settled before the emergency. To examine this, the article develops a Recognition-to-Access framework with four stages: recognition of need, translation into eligibility rules, practical access, and ethical assessment. Through a qualitative documentary analysis of 24 coded records, comprising provisions of Albania's 2019 social assistance law, implementing decisions and 2020 crisis measures, and findings from institutional assessments, the framework is applied to Albania's economic assistance scheme. Albania doubled payments quickly and paid them to women, yet extra support reached almost only families already in the scheme. The law sanctions families whose working-age members do not register as jobseekers and allows no exception for unpaid care, which fell largely on women during lockdown, while food in kind was left mostly to charity. Drawing on care ethics and the right to adequate food, I contend that this rule cannot be justified without a care exemption. The article contributes a concept, a transferable analytical framework and stage-specific reforms for future crisis assistance.

**Keywords:** Food ethics, Social assistance, Unpaid care, Gender, COVID-19, Albania

## Introduction

When COVID-19 reached Europe in early 2020, the shelves were, for the most part, restocked within weeks. What many households lost was not the availability of food but the means of obtaining it: wages, informal work, remittances and the support of relatives, all of which were disrupted by lockdowns and border closures. In much of Europe and its neighborhood, the principal public response to this loss was not food aid in the narrow sense but cash social assistance. For this reason the design of such assistance belongs within food ethics, since the rules of a cash scheme determine, in effect, whose inability to secure food is treated as a legitimate claim on public support and whose is not.

In this article, I examine that question through the case of Albania. In March 2020, the government doubled payments under *Ndihma Ekonomike* (NE, economic assistance), the country's main poverty-targeted cash scheme,[1] for families already receiving it and for those who had applied before 10 March, for a period of up to three months (Council of Ministers of Albania 2020a). Some 64,000 households benefited. A month later, families who had applied unsuccessfully since July 2019 received a one-off payment of 16,000 lek, unless they had been excluded under the sanctions provided for in the law (Council of Ministers of Albania 2020b). The response was rapid and administratively coherent. It was also, however, constructed entirely upon the definitions of need, household and eligibility that the scheme already contained.

I take this dependence as my starting point and refer to it as *inherited recognition*. An emergency response that operates by scaling up an existing scheme can, by its nature, reach

[1] *Ndihma Ekonomike* translates literally as "economic aid". I use the abbreviation NE throughout, following the usage of the International Labour Organization (ILO 2022) and the World Bank (2022).

only those forms of need that the scheme already recognises. Where the scheme's categories leave certain circumstances out of view, a crisis does not bring them into view; rather, it increases the support available to those already counted while leaving others outside. If this is correct, then the fairness of emergency food assistance is determined to a considerable extent in ordinary times, long before any emergency is declared.

Gender renders this problem concrete. Albanian law does not exclude women from the benefit itself; indeed, it grants the right to collect the payment to the wife of the head of family (Law No. 57/2019, art. 16(5)). The difficulty lies elsewhere. A family may lose its entitlement if any working-age member is registered neither as an unemployed jobseeker nor as self-employed, and the law makes no exception for those engaged in unpaid care or informal work. Need is, moreover, assessed only for the household as a whole, and the division of a shared household is penalised. During the lockdown of 2020, it was predominantly women in Albania who absorbed the additional burden of care and domestic work (UN Women 2020). The rules that determined who counted as being in need did not count this work.

None of this is to suggest that the rules in question are arbitrary. Each protects something of value, and these values can conflict. The job-search condition expresses a commitment to work and self-reliance, whereas the recognition of unpaid care expresses a commitment to meeting need where it actually arises. Household-level assessment keeps the scheme administrable and guards against fraud, but it may conceal the need of an individual member. In an emergency, a further tension emerges between speed, which favours relying on the scheme as it stands, and fairness, which may require opening it to new claimants. As I understand it, the ethical task is to ask, rule by rule, whether the balance struck can be justified. The question is not confined to COVID-19. It seems likely that future food-price shocks, energy crises and climate-related disasters will be met in the same manner, by expanding existing schemes, and that they will reproduce the same omissions unless these are addressed beforehand.

The choice of Albania is deliberate and reflects my wider research, which centres on the country. Compared with countries of the Global North, Albania has received little attention in food ethics and in research on social protection, although its welfare system offers an instructive case: NE was introduced in the early 1990s as one of the first poverty-reduction programmes in a post-communist economy and has since been reformed several times (ILO 2022; Mangiavacchi and Verme 2013). The research that does exist tends to approach the problems examined here through separate lenses. Food security is studied as a question of supply and household consumption, poverty and social assistance as questions of targeting accuracy and welfare effects (Mangiavacchi and Verme 2013), and gender as a question of time use and labour-market inequality (Aga 2019; UN Women 2020). Each of these lenses describes a part of the problem, but none asks the ethical question that connects them: why a particular rule was chosen, and whether the reasons for it can justify its consequences for those it leaves out. Before a policy can be judged right or wrong, the reasons behind it must be made explicit and weighed. This is the gap the article addresses. Where a country is not studied in this way, we do not know who faces which problems, or whether the rules that shape their access to food can be defended.

The research question guiding the article is: *How ethically adequate was Albania's COVID-19 social-assistance response in recognising and addressing women's food-related needs?* To answer it, I develop what I call a *Recognition-to-Access framework*, which separates the recognition of need, its translation into rules, practical access to support and the ethical assessment of the result. Addressing these questions in sequence makes it possible to identify the point within a scheme at which an ethical problem arises. It also helps to avoid two opposite errors: treating every exclusion as an injustice and treating rules that apply equally to all as sufficient evidence of fairness.

The article makes three contributions. First, it introduces the notion of inherited recognition and argues that an ethics of emergency food assistance must attend to the categories of need

established before the emergency. Second, it offers the Recognition-to-Access framework as a practical instrument for locating ethical problems within a particular assistance scheme, complementing more general ethical assessments of targeting (Galtier 2026). Third, it applies both to a documented case, from which it derives recommendations for crisis assistance that takes unpaid care seriously.

I begin by situating the argument in relation to food ethics, the ethics of targeting and the ethics of care. I then set out the framework and the evaluative standard it applies, before describing the Albanian case and the documentary method used to study it. The subsequent sections present the findings and discuss their ethical implications, and the article closes with a set of recommendations and reflections on their wider relevance.

## Food Access, Targeting and the Household

### Food Access as an Ethical Concern

It is by now well established in food ethics that hunger is rarely a simple matter of insufficient food. Sen's (1981) analysis of famine demonstrated that people starve when they lose command over food, through the collapse of the wages, prices, transfers or production on which their entitlements depend, even where aggregate supply is adequate. On this view, the ethically salient question in a crisis is not only whether food is available, but whether people retain the means to obtain it. Public transfers constitute one of the principal ways in which a society underwrites those means, and their design accordingly falls within the scope of food ethics even when the transfer takes the form of cash rather than food. Food assistance has already been examined as an ethical question in its own right, for instance in the argument that expanding it is an ethical obligation rather than a policy preference (Miller and Thomas 2020). Such debates have, however, concerned how much assistance is provided and in what form, rather than who is recognised as eligible to receive it.

The same insight runs through the human right to adequate food. The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights holds that the right is realised when everyone has physical and economic access to adequate food or the means for its procurement, and that states are obliged to provide for those who are unable to secure it for reasons beyond their control (CESCR 1999). Cash assistance is among the most important means by which states discharge this obligation. In effect, its eligibility rules are rules about who is to be regarded as unable to secure food "for reasons beyond their control".

The pandemic made this connection unusually visible. Contributions to the present collection have examined how the crisis exposed weaknesses in food systems and in the institutions intended to protect access to food. Spring et al. (2022) traced the transnational expansion of foodbanking and the tendency for charitable provision to stand in for public entitlement, while Kaiser et al. (2021) called for more deliberative and value-explicit forms of food-system governance. The present article extends this line of inquiry from the provision of food to the social-assistance rules that determine who may secure food through public support.

**The Ethics of Targeting**

Most cash assistance in middle-income countries is targeted at households deemed to be poor. The development literature has documented the trade-offs involved in considerable detail: means tests and proxy indicators lower the cost of reaching the poor, but they also produce exclusion errors, incur administrative costs and may, in some instances, stigmatise recipients (Coady et al. 2004). Galtier (2026) has recently brought these findings into food ethics, offering a systematic ethical assessment of targeting methods for food aid and anti-poverty transfers from welfare-based, capabilities-based and Rawlsian perspectives. His analysis shows that whether and how to target cannot be decided on grounds of cost-effectiveness alone, since the benefits of targeting and its collateral harms are not commensurable on a single metric. For

Albania specifically, econometric evaluations of NE have found weak targeting and only limited effects on household welfare (Mangiavacchi and Verme 2013), a finding consistent with the later concerns of the ILO (2022) about coverage and benefit levels.

The present article is complementary to this work, but it addresses a different question. Whereas Galtier evaluates targeting *methods* in general, I examine a single scheme and ask how it defines the need that targeting is subsequently meant to serve. Before any household is included or excluded, a policy has already determined which circumstances count as need, which unit of assessment applies and what evidence a claimant must provide. These prior decisions shape the distribution of support no less than the choice of targeting method, and it is here, I suggest, that gendered effects are most likely to originate.

**Gender, Care and the Household**

Feminist economists have long shown that the household is not a unitary actor with shared interests. Resources, decisions and unpaid labour are distributed within it according to bargaining power and social norms, frequently to the disadvantage of women (Agarwal 1997). A scheme that assesses need only for the household as a whole may therefore judge a household to be adequately provided for even when one of its members is unable to secure food on her own terms.

The ethics of care adds a second, related consideration. Tronto (1993) argues that care is a fundamental activity of every society and that it has been systematically undervalued, in part because it has been assigned to women and to other less powerful groups. Kittay (1999), for her part, shows that those who care for dependants become dependent themselves, since while they are engaged in care they require another person, or some institution, to provide for them. A just system of support must, on this account, recognise the dependency of carers rather than treat it as a refusal to work. For food assistance, the implication is direct. A rule that classifies an adult

caring full time for children or older relatives simply as “not seeking work” fails to register the reason that adult cannot earn, and thereby fails to register the need that follows from it.

Fraser (1994) draws the institutional consequence of this argument. She contrasts a welfare state built on a “universal breadwinner” model, which promotes gender equity by bringing women into paid employment, with one built on a “caregiver parity” model, which supports informal care through public payments, and she argues that both fall short. Her preferred alternative, the “universal caregiver” model, would organise social policy around the assumption that everyone combines paid work with care. Albania’s job-search rule follows the breadwinner logic in its purest form: it recognises paid employment, or the search for it, as the only acceptable contribution of a working-age adult. Fraser’s analysis suggests why such a rule disadvantages women in particular, and why the remedy lies in recognising care alongside paid work rather than in exempting women as a special group.

These points were already relevant to Albania before the pandemic. National time-use data from 2010 show that Albanian women carried a heavier load of unpaid work than women in neighbouring Serbia, and that higher education did not lead Albanian men to take on a greater share of it (Aga 2019). A later UN Women policy brief reports that Albanian women spend 21.74% of their day on unpaid work, compared with 3.47% for men, and that around 61% of employment is informal (Vaidya 2022). The pandemic then sharpened both points. In a rapid gender assessment of 1,300 respondents, 76% of women and 66% of men reported spending more time on unpaid domestic work during lockdown, and only 46% of women, as against 67% of men, reported receiving help from their partner (UN Women 2020). These findings indicate that the burdens of the pandemic were unevenly distributed between women and men. They do not, however, tell us whether the social-assistance response took those burdens into account, or whether any failure to do so was ethically unjustified. The present article addresses this question.

## Recognition

The concept of recognition carries a well-developed philosophical meaning. For Honneth (1995), recognition concerns the forms of respect and esteem through which individuals come to understand themselves as full participants in social life, while for Fraser (1995), misrecognition constitutes a status injury produced by institutionalised patterns of cultural value that deny some people parity of participation. The 2025 EAT–Lancet Commission builds on the same tradition when it distinguishes distributive, representational and recognitional dimensions of justice in food systems, and treats recognitional injustice as the failure to attend to the different situations of women, men and other social groups (Rockström et al. 2025). The Commission also grounds its account of fair treatment in human rights, including the right to food, and lists social protection for mothers, people on low incomes, older people and disabled people among its proposed solutions. My concern here is with one specific way in which recognitional injustice can arise, through the categories of a social-assistance scheme. I draw on this tradition for one claim only: that being left uncounted by public institutions can amount to an ethical wrong and not merely a technical oversight. The concept of recognition I employ is narrower and administrative in character. A policy *recognises* a circumstance when its categories and rules take that circumstance into account in determining who is in need. Defining recognition in this way keeps the analysis tied to what documentary evidence can establish, while retaining the normative point that the categories through which a state perceives need carry moral weight.

## The Normative Framework

Taken together, these strands form the normative framework of the article. The right to adequate food defines the purpose against which assistance is judged: securing people's capacity to obtain food when their ordinary means fail (CESCR 1999). The ethics of care identifies what

conventional social policy tends to overlook, namely the dependency of carers and the social value of their work (Kittay 1999; Tronto 1993), and Fraser's (1994) universal caregiver model indicates how welfare institutions could take this into account. Recognition, in the administrative sense defined above, connects these normative commitments to the empirical analysis, since it locates the point at which a policy's categories include or omit a given form of need. Finally, the principle of reciprocity (White 2003) supplies the strongest argument for work conditions, which the article considers seriously before reaching a judgement. The framework presented in the next section translates these commitments into a set of questions that can be applied to legal texts and institutional evidence.

**The Recognition-to-Access Framework**

The framework is intended as a means of identifying where, within an assistance scheme, an ethical problem arises. It draws on two existing bodies of work. From research on access to services, it takes the insight that support reaches people in stages, such that a service may exist in principle and yet fail people at a later point (Tanahashi 1978). From the ethics of targeting, it takes the principle that every exclusion must be justified with reference to the purpose of the scheme and the constraints under which it operates (Galtier 2026). To these, it adds a stage that precedes both and asks whether the policy recognises a given form of need in the first place.

This first stage assumes particular importance in a crisis. Because there is seldom time to design new instruments, emergency responses are typically built upon existing ones. The stage of recognition is therefore fixed before the emergency arises, and whatever it omits is carried over into the emergency response. The framework is designed to make this inheritance visible.

**Stage 1: Recognition.** Which circumstances does the policy treat as generating need? This stage concerns the categories written into law and strategy, including which sources of income are counted or disregarded, which groups are named as vulnerable, and which forms of

dependence or care are acknowledged. A circumstance that is not recognised at this stage can be addressed at later stages only by chance.

**Stage 2: Eligibility translation.** How is recognised need converted into rules? This stage covers the unit of assessment (individual or household), the means test and its treatment of irregular or informal income, the designation of applicant and payee, the duration of support and the documentation required. A need may be recognised in principle and nonetheless be lost at this stage, for example where it is assessed only at the level of the household or where the evidence demanded is difficult for some claimants to produce.

**Stage 3: Practical access.** Could people in practice obtain the support the rules provide? This stage concerns procedures and implementation: how and where applications are made, reporting obligations, the processing of claims, and documented barriers or exclusions. In a crisis, it also concerns whether emergency measures reached new claimants or only those already receiving support.

**Stage 4: Ethical assessment.** Can the resulting pattern of inclusion and exclusion be defended? This stage evaluates the evidence assembled at the first three stages against the standard set out below.

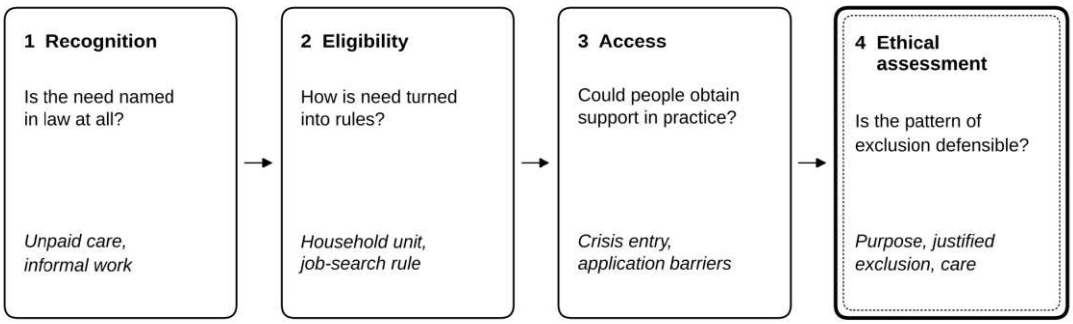


**Fig. 1** The Recognition-to-Access framework. Arrows indicate relationships to be examined, not established causal effects. The final stage, drawn with a heavier border, evaluates the evidence gathered in the first three

The stages are analytical rather than causal. A problem identified at one stage does not entail failure at the next, and each connection must be established on the basis of evidence. The framework also admits three possible verdicts on any given rule: that it is justified, that it is not, or that the available evidence does not permit a judgement.

At the fourth stage, I apply three tests. The first concerns *purpose*: does the rule serve the purpose of the scheme, understood here as protecting people's capacity to secure adequate food when their ordinary means fail? The second concerns *justified exclusion*: where the rule leaves some people in need without support, is this justified by a genuine constraint, such as a limited budget, the need for criteria that officials can apply, or the prevention of fraud, and is the exclusion proportionate to that constraint? The third concerns *care and gender*: does the rule treat unpaid care, and the dependency it creates, as a source of need, or does it disregard them; and if its costs fall more heavily on women than on men, is there a reason for that difference that does not rest on disregarding care?

These tests are deliberately modest. They do not presuppose a comprehensive theory of justice and can be endorsed from a number of ethical positions, including those that Galtier (2026) compares. They also require the analyst to state the strongest available justification for a rule before passing judgement on it, which guards against the temptation to treat every gap as an injustice. A rule that fails the first test but passes the second may be regrettable and yet defensible. A rule that fails the third without good reason represents the clearest case of ethical inadequacy.

## Case and Method

### The Albanian Case

NE is Albania's principal cash social-assistance scheme for poor families. It was reformed by Law No. 57/2019 on Social Assistance (Assembly of the Republic of Albania 2019; hereafter cited as Law No. 57/2019 with article numbers), which simplified the application procedure and limited support to five years for most families (ILO 2022). Council of Ministers Decision No. 597/2019 sets out who may apply, what documentation is required and how much beneficiaries receive. Eligibility is determined by a scoring formula applied to household data, and municipalities may use an additional fund of up to 6% for families that the formula does not select (Council of Ministers of Albania 2019). In 2021, 68,246 families received the benefit. Although payments were raised several times between 2020 and 2022, the ILO continued to regard them as low relative to poverty thresholds and expressed concern about coverage (ILO 2022). In 2022, the monthly benefit ranged from 2,178 lek for a single person to 12,672 lek for two adults with three children (ILO 2022).

Following the declaration of a state of natural disaster on 24 March 2020, the government acted through the existing scheme, introducing the doubled payments and one-off support described in the introduction (Council of Ministers of Albania 2020a; 2020b) and moving applications to electronic and postal channels. A later amendment to Decision No. 597/2019 doubled NE again for a further six months. Measures explicitly targeted at women, such as double payments for women-headed families and higher one-off crisis payments to them, were introduced only in 2022, through Decisions No. 617/2022 and No. 899/2022. Albania thus represents a clear instance of a crisis response built upon an existing targeted scheme, which makes it particularly well suited to the study of inherited recognition.

**Design and Documentary Corpus**

The study takes the form of a qualitative documentary analysis of legal texts and published assessments, and involved no new data collection from human participants. The corpus comprises three groups of documents, selected for their direct bearing on the four stages of the framework. The first consists of legal and regulatory texts: Law No. 57/2019 on Social Assistance; Council of Ministers Decision No. 597/2019 and its amendments of 2021 and 2022; Decisions No. 254/2020 and No. 305/2020 on COVID-19 support; Ministerial Order No. 213/2020 on remote applications; Decision No. 899/2022 on crisis support; and Decision No. 956/2016 on the scoring formula. The second consists of official and institutional assessments: the letter of the People's Advocate (the Albanian Ombudsman) to municipalities on economic assistance during the pandemic (People's Advocate 2020); the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) evaluation of access to and household use of social protection transfers, based on interviews and focus groups in three municipalities in 2021 (Jorgoni et al. 2021); the ILO analysis of the economic assistance programme (ILO 2022); the World Bank policy brief on adaptive social protection (World Bank 2022); and UN Women's Rapid Gender Assessment (UN Women 2020). The third consists of context documents: the National Social Protection Strategy 2020–2023 and the National Strategy on Gender Equality 2021–2030, which were used to establish which gendered circumstances had already been officially acknowledged.

Documents were included where they were published by a government body or a recognised international organisation, addressed Albania's social assistance or the gendered effects of COVID-19, and covered the period 2019–2022. Media reports were used to date events and, in a single case where no official source exists (the funding of food parcels in 2020), as evidence; this is indicated in the text.

## Translation and Coding

All legal texts are in Albanian. The relevant provisions were identified in the official texts, translated using Google Translate and DeepL, and the two versions were compared with each other and, where possible, with English-language secondary sources that cite the same articles (ILO 2022; Jorgoni et al. 2021). As no translation was checked by a native speaker, quoted provisions are kept short, the original Albanian is given for key terms, and the full original text of the provisions on which the argument rests is reproduced in Online Resource 1.[2] Each relevant provision or reported finding was entered as a separate record and coded against the four stages of the framework. For each record, I noted the source and its location; a close paraphrase or translation of the text; its relevance to women's circumstances; any justification for the rule stated or implied in the documents; counter-evidence; and a confidence rating (high for statements in law or official statistics, medium for findings of credible assessments, and low for inferences). Following the Sex and Gender Equity in Research (SAGER) guidelines, I use "gender" for socially shaped roles, such as responsibility for care, and "sex" only where sources report figures for women and men. The sources available report data in binary categories, so the analysis cannot address people outside them. Description and ethical judgment were recorded in separate fields, so that every evaluative claim could be traced back to the evidence on which it rests. In total, 24 records were coded, comprising 15 legal provisions and 9 findings from institutional assessments and, in one case, media reporting. The full set of coded records is provided in Online Resource 1. All coding was carried out by the author.

[2] The Albanian originals of the key terms quoted in this article are *kryefamiljar* (head of family), *bashkëshortja e kryefamiljarit* (the wife of the head of family), *familje në nevojë* (family in need) and *veprim i qëllimshëm* (deliberate action).

## Limitations and Use of AI

Since I do not read Albanian, I worked with the legal texts in translation, and it is possible that some nuances of legal meaning were lost; for this reason, the analysis relies on the structure and conditions of the rules rather than on fine distinctions of wording. More generally, a documentary approach can establish what the rules required, what institutional assessments reported, and where the two diverge. It cannot establish how individual households experienced the scheme, who within a household controlled the benefit, or whether particular rules caused food insecurity. The analysis also treats women largely as a single group. In Albania, the effects of the rules examined here are likely to be sharper for rural women, Roma women, and women heading households alone, and the available documents rarely report data for these groups separately; an intersectional analysis of this kind, as the EAT–Lancet Commission recommends (Rockström et al. 2025), would require data the state does not currently publish. Where a conclusion would depend on information that the documents do not contain, I state this explicitly and leave the question open rather than infer an answer.

Large language models (ChatGPT, Gemini) were used to support the methodology, the sorting and translation of sources, and the paraphrasing (Quillbot, Grammarly) of the text. The author takes full responsibility for the content.

## Findings

### Recognition: Whose Need Counts

The scheme recognises more than household poverty. In addition to families with no or insufficient income, it names orphans, victims of trafficking and victims of domestic violence as claimants in their own right (Law No. 57/2019, art. 7). The implementing decision further exempts families headed by women with a child in basic education from the five-year limit on support (Council of Ministers of Albania 2019, ch. I pt 3). These provisions show that the

scheme is capable of recognising gendered vulnerability. In practice, however, such recognition remained limited: between 2019 and 2021, victims of domestic violence received 3,000 lek a month and accounted for only around 0.2% of beneficiaries (Jorgoni et al. 2021).

What the scheme does not recognise is unpaid care as a reason for not earning. The law excludes a family for six months if any working-age member who is able to work is registered neither as an unemployed jobseeker nor as self-employed with the tax authority, and for a year if a member refuses suitable offers of employment (Law No. 57/2019, art. 15). The only exceptions concern rural families who own farmland and students up to the age of 25; full-time care for children or older relatives is not among them. The law goes further still, defining any action aimed at avoiding paid employment as a "deliberate action" against the scheme (art. 4(v)). Implementation research confirms the consequences. Women without family support, the UNDP evaluation reports, "cannot go to work as they have to take care of their children", yet refusing job offers can remove the entire family from the scheme (Jorgoni et al. 2021).

At this point, the law's own principles pull in different directions. Its principle of social justice holds that everyone is obliged to secure basic living conditions for themselves and their dependants and to contribute, through work, income and assets, to reducing their own poverty (art. 5(b)). Its principle of non-discrimination, by contrast, prohibits discrimination on grounds that include gender, pregnancy, parental responsibility and family status (art. 5(d)). A rule that sanctions a parent for not seeking work, without enquiring whether parental responsibility is the reason, satisfies the first principle at the expense of the second. The tension is thus inscribed in the statute itself, and not merely in its implementation.

The contrast with disability is instructive. Albanian law does recognise care where it is attached to a recognised status: it provides personal assistants for persons with severe disabilities, and those caring for blind persons may receive a payment (Jorgoni et al. 2021). Care as such is not

invisible to the system. What remains invisible is the everyday care of children and older relatives, the greater part of which is performed by women and which carries no status of its own.

Recognition did eventually widen, but only after the pandemic. From 2022, women-headed families with up to two children received double payments (Council of Ministers of Albania 2019, as amended in 2022, ch. III pt 16/1), and a one-off crisis payment granted women-headed families 20,000 lek compared with 8,000 lek for other families (Council of Ministers of Albania 2022). In 2026, the time that economically inactive personal assistants spend caring for a person with disabilities began to count as an insurance period for the purposes of the old-age pension (Council of Ministers of Albania 2026). These later developments suggest that the gaps identified here were open to correction. They also indicate that such correction came too late to shape the response to COVID-19.

**Eligibility: How Need Becomes Rules**

Need is assessed at the level of the household. The law defines a family as a group of people linked by marriage, parenthood, kinship or guardianship who live under the same roof (art. 4(d)). The head of family or another adult member applies together with the spouse, and spouses may apply separately only once divorce proceedings have begun (art. 16(1)). The deliberate division of members who share a home into separate households is sanctioned, with an exception for mother–daughter households (art. 15(1)(a)). Eligibility is then decided by a scoring formula whose indicators are set by government decision (art. 16(3)) and which, according to Jorgoni et al. (2021), include living conditions, remittances, household composition, education, employment and other income. The formula itself is not published, on the grounds that its publication would encourage fraudulent claims (ILO 2022).

In one respect, the rules work in women's favour. The law defines the head of family in neutral terms, as the first person listed on the family certificate (art. 4(h)), but grants the right to collect the benefit to "the wife of the head of family", and to the head only where there is no wife (art. 16(5)). The wording presupposes that a married head of family is a man, yet its effect is to place the money in women's hands. The gendered problem at this stage, then, concerns not who receives the money but who is able to claim it. A woman living in a shared or multigenerational household cannot be assessed independently. A woman leaving a violent partner may claim as a family in need only once she has initiated divorce proceedings, and some administrators continue to require the presence of both spouses (Jorgoni et al. 2021).

**Access: Whom the Crisis Response Reached**

The scheme was not designed to respond to shocks. The law provides that Albanian citizens in need of emergency assistance as a result of natural disasters or wars do not benefit from it on that basis (art. 11(ç)), such needs being intended to be met through other channels. When COVID-19 was declared a natural disaster in March 2020, the response accordingly had to be attached to the scheme by means of separate decisions, and it was designed around those already within the system. The doubled payments went only to existing beneficiaries and to recent applicants. A ministerial order moved applications online and to the postal service, and existing beneficiaries were paid without having to appear in person (People's Advocate 2020). Applicants rejected since July 2019 received a one-off payment of 16,000 lek, with the exception of families excluded under the sanctions in article 15 (Council of Ministers of Albania 2020b). As a consequence, families excluded under the job-search rule described above received neither the doubled benefit nor the one-off payment.

New claimants also faced practical obstacles. The Ombudsman warned that many families, particularly in remote areas, possessed no device or other means of communication with which

to apply online, and urged municipalities to identify these families and assist them (People's Advocate 2020). Applications could be submitted only during the first ten days of each month, and the obligation to report in person every three months excluded those without access to transport (Jorgoni et al. 2021).

The caseload figures are consistent with the notion of inherited recognition. The number of beneficiary households rose only from 60,496 in 2019 to 61,445 in 2020, an increase of less than 2% (Jorgoni et al. 2021), even though the World Bank estimated that poverty rose by between one and four percentage points over the same period (cited in Jorgoni et al. 2021). Support per household, in other words, increased substantially, while the number of households supported barely changed.

**Food**

The connection between the benefit and food is a direct one. Beneficiaries told municipal staff and civil society organisations that the benefit did not cover their basic food needs, and some reported that it sufficed for a single week's food (Jorgoni et al. 2021). In 2020, the average benefit amounted to 5,161 lek per month, whereas the average household spent 33,952 lek per month on food and non-alcoholic beverages (Jorgoni et al. 2021). Following the doubling, the average benefit in 2021 rose to 9,189 lek, which still represented only about a quarter of that figure.

The law also makes provision for direct food support. It defines benefits in kind as food, everyday goods and clothing provided to families and individuals in need, and grants these a right to such benefits, the modalities of which are to be established by government decision (arts. 4(ll), 12(3)). During the 2020 lockdown, food did reach households in kind, but largely outside this legal framework. Municipalities and the armed forces began distributing food parcels in mid-March, and by 27 March the government reported that 12,749 families had been

supplied (Exit News 2020a). In Shkodër alone, 4,962 families received food and hygiene parcels between 11 March and 23 June 2020 (Municipality of Shkodër 2023). According to an investigation by the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, as reported by Exit News, approximately 173,000 people received food packages, most of which were funded by private or charitable donations; state funding accounted for around 12% of the aid reported by the Ministry of Defence, and some families stated that they had received too little or nothing at all (Exit News 2020b). The right to food in kind set out in the law was thus fulfilled during the crisis largely through discretionary and charitable channels, a pattern closely resembling the one that Spring et al. (2022) describe in their account of the growth of foodbanking.

**Assessing the Response**

In this section, I apply the three tests set out above to the four features of the scheme that bear most directly on women's food-related needs. In each case, I begin with the strongest justification that can be offered for the rule in question.

**The Job-Search Rule**

There are sound reasons for the rule. A scheme directed at people of working age requires some protection against claims that conceal informal earnings, and an obligation to register as a jobseeker is inexpensive to fulfil and straightforward to verify. The law also gives expression to a defensible value, that people should contribute to their own support where they are able to (art. 5(b)). Under ordinary circumstances the rule passes the first test, since moving people into paid employment may secure their access to food more durably than a transfer.

The rule also has a philosophical defence that deserves to be taken seriously. On a reciprocity view of social justice, those who share in the benefits of social cooperation owe a reasonable productive contribution in return, and a work requirement is one way of enforcing this obligation (White 2003). I accept the principle of reciprocity, but I contend that it supports a

care exemption rather than counting against one. Caring for children is itself a contribution to society, because children are the future of a country and will form its future workforce; the care of older or dependent relatives, for its part, carries out work that would otherwise fall to the state. White's own account allows care work to count as a contribution that satisfies the reciprocity requirement (White 2003). A rule that treats full-time carers as failing to contribute therefore misapplies the very principle on which it might be defended.

In its current form, however, the rule fails the second and third tests. The constraint to which it responds is the difficulty of verifying who is really unable to work. Yet the law already verifies inability to work arising from care where the person cared for has a certified disability (arts. 10, 13), and there is no evident reason why verifying full-time care for young children or dependent older relatives should prove more difficult. A narrower rule was available, and the exclusion is disproportionate, removing support from the entire household, children included, for six months or a year. The rule also bears most heavily on women, who perform the majority of unpaid care (UN Women 2020), and it does so by characterising that care as a "deliberate action" to avoid work (art. 4(v)). This is the kind of failure of recognition that the ethics of care describes (Kittay 1999). During lockdown, when paid work largely disappeared and care needs increased, the rule served its purpose least well and imposed its burden most heavily. On the available evidence, I conclude that the rule is not ethically defensible in the absence of a care exemption. This conclusion is consistent with UN Women's recommendation that social protection in Albania be extended to unpaid as well as paid care workers (Vaidya 2022). Such an exemption matters most for women, on whom the responsibility for care mostly falls, and above all for mothers, who carry this burden on top of raising children.

### Household Assessment

Assessing need household by household rests on a sound rationale. Household members usually share food, individual assessment is more costly and more susceptible to manipulation, and the prohibition on splitting households responds to a documented risk of fraud. As a default rule, it passes all three tests. Its weakness lies in the absence of any exception. A woman whose access to the household's food or income is in doubt, most obviously one leaving a violent partner, can be assessed separately only after initiating divorce proceedings (art. 16(1)), which entail both costs and delays (Jorgoni et al. 2021). The exception that the law already makes for mother–daughter households demonstrates that the legislator accepts exceptions where the household unit misrepresents need. Household assessment is therefore defensible as a default, but not as an absolute rule.

### Who Collects the Benefit

The rule that the wife of the head of family collects the benefit (art. 16(5)) passes all three tests. Research on intra-household allocation suggests that income controlled by women is more likely to be spent on food and on children's needs (Agarwal 1997; Duflo 2003). Although the wording presupposes a male head of family, which sits uneasily with the law's gender-neutral definition of that role (art. 4(h)), its practical effect is to strengthen women's control over money for food. It constitutes the clearest instance within the scheme of gender being recognised, and it shows that the shortcomings discussed in the two preceding subsections were not unavoidable.

### The Crisis Response

The decision to act through the existing scheme rests on a strong justification. It was fast, it relied on verified records, and it delivered money to existing beneficiaries without requiring them to travel during lockdown. As an immediate measure, it passes the first two tests; as the

entirety of the response, it does not. It offered no expedited route for new claimants, it excluded sanctioned families even from the one-off payment, and it left emergency food to discretionary parcels funded largely by charity. These gaps were not the product of new decisions taken in March 2020. They followed from rules established earlier: the law's exclusion of emergency need (art. 11(c)), its sanctions (art. 15) and its silence on care. This is what I mean by inherited recognition, since the response could not be fairer than the scheme it was built on.

**What the Framework Adds**

A general ethical assessment of targeting asks whether a method such as a proxy means test reaches the poor at an acceptable cost (Galtier 2026). Applied to Albania, such an assessment would focus primarily on the scoring formula. The stage-by-stage analysis presented here suggests that the more serious problems lie elsewhere, upstream of the formula, in the way the law defines need and treats care, and in the absence of any route into the scheme once a crisis begins. It also shows that recognition is a matter of political choice rather than technical necessity. The same law that disregards the care of children recognises the care of persons with disabilities, and the same scheme that sanctions carers pays its benefit to women. A further finding concerns the evidence itself. No public data indicate how many families were excluded under the job-search rule, or how many of these were headed by women. This absence constitutes a monitoring failure in its own right, and it limits what any assessment, including the present one, is able to establish.

**Conclusion**

In this article, I have argued that Albania's response to the pandemic was rapid and, for those already within the scheme, generous by the scheme's own standards. It doubled payments, removed the requirement to appear in person and kept the money in women's hands. Yet the households it was able to reach had been determined before the crisis began. The law treated

unpaid care as a failure to seek work, assessed need only at the level of the household and excluded emergency need from the scheme, and the crisis response carried each of these choices forward. For those outside the scheme, food came primarily through discretionary parcels financed largely by charity.

The central claim of the article follows from this analysis: the fairness of emergency food assistance is decided, to a considerable extent, in ordinary times. An ethical evaluation of a crisis response must therefore look beyond the measures adopted during the crisis to the categories of need that those measures inherited.

Four recommendations emerge from the findings, each corresponding to the stage at which a problem was identified. With respect to recognition, adults who provide full-time care for young children or dependent relatives should be exempted from the job-search requirement, with their care verified in the same manner as care for persons with disabilities, and care should be removed from the law's definition of "deliberate action". With respect to eligibility, individual assessment should be available where a household member's access to the household's food or income is in doubt, beginning with victims of domestic violence who hold an emergency protection order, and without the requirement to initiate divorce proceedings. With respect to access, any declared emergency should open an expedited route into the scheme for new applicants, suspend sanctions for missed reporting and job search, and include previously sanctioned families in one-off payments. Finally, with respect to food and monitoring, the statutory right to food in kind should be given effect through a public programme rather than left to charity, and data on applications, rejections and sanctions should be published separately for women and men.

The study has its limitations. It relies on legal texts and published assessments rather than on interviews with the women concerned, and it cannot show how many families the rules

excluded or how food insecurity changed within them. These questions call for further research, ideally drawing on the sex-disaggregated administrative data that the state already holds.

What matters most, in my view, is the ethical dimension of the problem: a system of support should be designed so that everyone in need is included, and the gendered side of who is able to obtain food should not be neglected. The implications of the argument extend beyond Albania and beyond COVID-19. Food-price shocks, energy crises and climate-related disasters are likely to be met, once again, by scaling up the schemes that already exist. The EAT–Lancet Commission's call for social protection that reaches mothers and other groups at risk (Rockström et al. 2025) is well founded, but the Albanian case suggests that such protection will reach them only if the categories of need on which it rests already take their circumstances into account. Whether those responses prove fair will depend on what such schemes recognise as need before the next crisis arrives.

**Data Availability**

All sources analysed in this study are publicly available legal texts, official decisions and published reports, listed in the reference list. The coded records on which the analysis is based are provided as Online Resource 1.

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