**Free legal aid helps Sister and Brother end statelessness**

If you want to know how it is to raise children in harsh economic conditions without being legal residents, Fatmir is the right person to talk to. His story is painful yet gives hope to many originating from vulnerable communities with limited resources.

Fatmir is a member of the Roma community originating from Dibra, one of the poorest northern cities in the country. A few years ago, he decided to leave Dibra and move to Tirana in search of a brighter future for his kids. Fatmir, a single and dedicated father, raised his children with limited resources and without any social or economic assistance program guaranteed by the state. As Fatmir with his family moved to Tirana- he inquired residency transfer for his kids. However, his request was rejected by the Civil Status Office for unknown reasons. Under these circumstance and in his search for a lawyer, Fatmir learned about Dibra Free Legal Aid (FLA) office run by Tirana Legal Aid Society, an experienced civil society organization specialized in free legal aid service provision, and supported by UNDP Albania to provide free legal aid to vulnerable communities in Dibra region. For Fatmir and his kids, this was their last hope.

During the interview with the TLAS attorney, Fatmir was informed of the reasons why his children could not be registered. Fatmir and his partner (who left the family when the kids were three years old) were not married. Due to the discriminatory mentality of the region which does not accept the birth of children out of wedlock, it was impossible for the father to register his children under the civil status law. Dibra FLA office provided the necessary legal support to the case with the registration procedure. As a result, the children registration was finalized after years of waiting and facing multiple barriers.

A law suit was prepared for the paternity case which is currently being resolved through court procedures. All costs related and additional expenses such as DNA were covered by the Dibra FLA office since Fatmir has no economic resources. The resolvement of this case apart from terminating the identity issue, brings a considerable economic support for the father, who has not benefited from any of the available state support. Fatmir’s children will soon enjoy the right of an identity and receive the so much needed support.

According to the latest UNDP supported Access to Justice Survey, almost half of the Albanian population (48.7%) experienced legal aid problems in the last five years. Disputes are frequently focused on property, land or parental disputes. Those with more frequently disputes that have faced several barriers in accessing justice, are members of the Roma community. Citizens’ disputes are against or involving the government.

To respond to the increasing demand for having unhindered and equitable access to justice, UNDP supports the Government of Albania to implement the newly introduced FLA law scheme for vulnerable individuals.

Only during first half of 2019, UNDP through the FLA centers in Dibra and Shkodra has assisted more than 600 beneficiaries (260 females-342 males). The total number of beneficiaries include80 gender-based violence survivors, 170 members of the Roma and Egyptian communities, 112 persons with disabilities, 170 pensioners and 39 returned migrants.

Top-subject matters of legal aid included divorce, birth registration, property disputes, parental rights and immigration.

Fatmir’s case sheds further light on the need to have a responsive, unhindered and fair justice system that is accessible for the most marginalized individuals in the Albanian society.

Free Legal Aid centers in Dibra and Shkodra have benefited from the financial support of the Government of UK.