

#04

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Albania – keeping children in school...

Against the background of rock bottom export prices and indecent wages, thousands of Albanian children are faced with serious difficulties keeping up with school.

What are Albanian teachers' unions doing to keep children in school, or to bring them back, including those from the discriminated Roma minority? Report.

Children pay for indecent prices

Hundreds of children work in the production of shoes and clothing exported from Albania. The prices imposed by international buyers go some way towards explaining this exploitation.

The textile, garment and footwear sector represented 54% of Albania's export revenue in 2006. The sector developed following the fall of the dictatorship, partly thanks to foreign investment (the companies existing before 1991 were generally closed because they were not competitive). Many of the companies in the sector are subcontractors of firms based in the European Union, especially Italy. They receive imported raw materials from abroad and process them into clothing or footwear, a large percentage if not all of which is exported.

The factories are concentrated along the Albanian coastline, around the ports of Durrës and Vlorë, as well as around the large cities such as Tirana (the capital), Korça and Shkodra. The industry currently employs 65,000 people. The lowest wages are around 100 euros a month and the highest do not generally exceed 200 euros a month (except for highly skilled workers). The salaries are a key incentive for European companies, which are able to pay 10 times less for workers just hours away from home. Albania shares a border with Greece and is just a few hours by boat from the Italian coast.

Some Albanian factories, both garment and footwear, employ minors aged under 18 or even under 16 years old. *"At least seven out of the 150 workers in my textile factory are under 18,"* confirms the employee of a company in Korça that exports to Italy. *"Some are not even 14 years old. The employer likes to take on younger people because he doesn't declared them, so doesn't have to pay taxes for them, and because they're more docile. My boss tells them to hide when a work inspector comes, so he's never been caught".*

Some Albanian factories inadvertently employ minors. One example is the Bertoni shoe factory, which is the largest

employer in Shkodra (northern Albania), with 870 workers. Its customers are exclusively Italian. The company's director, Paulin Radovanni, is confronted with the problem of forged documents. *"I'm not interested in employing girls aged under 18,"* he explains. *"They are less productive and I risk having problems with the labour inspection or with my customers, who demand that all the workers be over 18. Having said that, some of the women I employ beg me to take on their daughters too, even if they're underage. They say that they don't want to leave their daughters home alone, that it's too risky, or that their family is so poor that they really need their daughters to work. I tell them it's impossible, but weeks later, they come with forged identity documents indicating that the girl is 18 or over!"*

Crushed by a press at the age of 15

Although the number of children working in garment, textile and footwear factories is low relative to the 65,000 workers in the sector, a tragic accident recently shook public opinion in Albania. On 23 December 2006, a 15-year-old girl, Hava Haku, died in a workplace accident in the Camileto factory that produces cardboard handbags for Italian buyers. She had only been working in this small factory in the coastal town of Durrës since 4 December. Her lack of experience and training perhaps explain the accident (her head was crushed by a press). The factory owner, Ndrim Saliaj, is being prosecuted for employing this young girl without authorisation from the Labour Inspectorate. *"I had gone to the factory a week before the accident,"* says Hajdar Kanani, president of the textile, clothing, leather and handicrafts trade union federation (affiliated to the KSSH confederation), *"but the employer had refused any union organisation."*

Social indicators in the red

Forty-five years of isolation and 17 years of economic turmoil have turned Albania into one of the poorest countries in Europe. The children are the number one victims.

Until 1990, Albania was one of the most closed regimes and worst dictatorships in Europe. The switch to a market economy then gave way to the worst excesses, such as the creation of the "pyramid" system of financial investments which, after caving in, led to a terrible social crisis, civil conflict and the collapse of the political institutions (in 1997). Since then, the political situation has become somewhat stabler, but the economic situation in Albania remains among the most fragile in Europe.

According to a study carried out in 2002 by the Albanian Institute of Statistics, 25% of the Albanian population lives beneath the poverty line and 5% lives in extreme poverty, unable to cover basic food needs. The social structures in place during the totalitarian period have been dismantled and the new social security system is too weak to alleviate the poverty that exists at present. As a result, a fifth of the population lives abroad and remittances represent some 14% of gross national product.

The rise in poverty has impacted directly on the living conditions of Albanian children, who represent a large portion of the population: one million out of the 3.1 million inhabitants are under 18. Despite Albania's historic and cultural tradition of placing children at the centre of the family's concerns, increasing numbers of parents no longer prioritise their children's education and would rather they work to contribute to the family income. Aside from the authorities' negligence regarding truancy and the economic decline, there are numerous socio-economic factors behind this situation: the lack of schools or teachers in certain regions; family dysfunctions; lack of awareness regarding the importance of education; vendettas; discrimination of ethnic minorities (such as the Roma communities), etc.

Whilst children can be found working in garment and footwear factories, they are employed in much higher numbers in home-based operations. Several Albanian companies subcontract work not requiring machines to home workers. Doniana, for example, a Tirana based company that exports to Italy and the United States, employs 1200 people in its three factories, but also works occasionally with 1500 families from some thirty different villages in Albania. They are most often subcontracted during the winter, when the company receives orders for summer shoes, which require less technology than those worn in winter. It works with intermediaries who distribute the work in the villages.

"I come to Doniana every two days to load semi-finished shoes into my vehicle," explains one of the intermediaries. "I have a list of 25 women who I collaborate with in the village. They take the amount of shoes they think they can sew and bring them back to me the next day. I have no control over the way they work. It's not up to me to find out whether they involve their children in the work. There is so much poverty in our villages that I could give work to hundreds of families, but there is not enough for all of them. The women prefer to work at home because they can look after their family at the same time."

Many children work at home

Home work implies the risk of children taking part in the work, all the more so given that it is the poorest families that resort to this kind of activity. Aurora, a 38 year-old mother works for Doniana at home along with her three children. She lives in a remote village where there is practically no work and only receives a widow's pension of 10,000 leks a month (80 euros). She receives semi-finished shoes from

Doniani's intermediaries. Her work consists in assembling the different parts of the shoes by hand with a needle and thread. She receives 10 pairs of shoes to sew every day and is paid 25 leks (0.2 euro) for each pair. Like the other families in the village, she asks her children to help her, to be able to earn enough to feed them. So her three daughters aged 11, 12 and 14 kneel by her side to work every evening.

"My daughters don't like the work and I feel guilty asking them to help me. I would rather let them play, but we wouldn't be able to manage financially without their help," she explains. "It's really tough. In winter, they start to help me shortly after coming home from school, at around 3pm, and we finish at around 10 or 11 in the evening. I wake them up in the morning at around 6 am so that they can do their homework before going to school, which starts at 8 am. They feel tired during the classes because of all this work and I would love to find a job that would allow me to earn enough to spare them such a childhood. We work together all day during the weekend," Aurora sheds tears as she explains how conscious she is of the handicap that this work represents for her daughters' education.

"At school, the children who work are easy to spot"

Aurora's three daughters continue their schooling under very difficult conditions. One of them is in the class of Dervish, who teaches Albanian language and is a member of the teachers' union FSASH. *"A teacher can easily spot the children who spend many hours sewing shoes after school,"* he says. *"We can see that they are more tired, that they have more difficulty concentrating. Aurora's daughter is exceptional: she never complains, she does her best not to let her tiredness show, and tries to study like the others,*

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"I don't control whether children work for me in their homes"

"My Italian buyer pays me 3.20 euros for a simple pair of sandals that are sold for around 35 euros in the European Union," explains the director of a footwear company employing 80 women in Korça. "It's not much, but the buyer provides me with the raw materials and pays for the goods transport. The wages in Italy are eight or nine times higher than in my company, but it has to be said that my workers are less productive than Italian workers. During the two periods of the year when we receive the most orders, we distribute home work to our employees or other workers, who we first train. I don't know if they ask their children to help them at home. It's the parents who are responsible for this kind of control, not me." (Note: a former worker from this factory confirmed that children are most certainly involved).





“Children who work until late in the evening sewing clothes or shoes at home often develop eye problems and are so tired the next day that they risk dropping out of school in the long run.”



(Natasha Lubonja, representative of the BSPSH trade union)

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even though she doesn't have time because of work. She is, however, faced with other problems because of her mother's poverty: at the beginning of the school year, some of the books are not available in the village, but her mother cannot afford to go to Tirana to buy them.”

Half of the girls over 12 in Aurora's village help their parents to make the shoes exported mainly to Italy. It's the same for thousands of other Albanian families. This child labour is clandestine, as is the work of many adult home workers, who are not declared by the intermediaries. As a result, they are not covered by social security, no one pays their pension contributions and they receive no assistance if they fall ill or are injured. And yet this type of work leads to health problems in the long run: the workers inhale the chemical products for the shoe components and their sight is impaired by the long hours of detailed work often done by candlelight (blackouts are long and very common in Albania).

Indecent prices imply Medieval working conditions

It would be easy to blame the Albanian companies for exploiting adult and child workers, but those really responsible for these Medieval working conditions are the big international buyers that impose indecent prices on their suppliers. At Filanto, for example, a pair of shoes bought from the factory in Tirana costs 4 euros and is resold for between 22 and 30 euros in the shops of Italy. In Shkodra, the director of Berttoni, who is in favour of dialogue with the unions, says that he would like to be able to offer his workers better wages, but the prices imposed by the buyers leave him with little room for manoeuvre: *“I know my workers are not satisfied with the wages I pay them ... but, on my side, I am not satisfied with the prices the buyers pay me. They provide me with the raw materials then pay me between 1.50 and 2.50 for each pair of shoes assembled. How can I pay my workers better with such low prices? I have to cover all my costs, including that of the electricity generators, because long blackouts are common in Shkodra.”*

Engjellushe, the director of a garment factory employing 61

women in the coastal town of Durrës, has had no luck obtaining better prices, even though her main buyer is German. *“The prices have stayed the same since the beginning of the 1990s, even though the wages have risen from 3000 to 18,000 leks a month (24 to 143 euros). I only receive two or three euros for a dress and three euros for a jacket. All of my employees are members of the KSSH union and I'm trying to collaborate with the latter to obtain tax cuts from the government to compensate for the rise in wages. I also invest in training my workers and in better machinery to remain competitive. It's really difficult to keep my company alive. The blackouts lasting three hours a day on average make it all the more difficult, increasing my costs by 5%”.*

It is the same in Korça, in the southeast of the country. An employer exporting clothing to Greece has tried to negotiate better prices with his main buyers. *“I receive no more than two euros when my workers produce a dress sold for 60 euros in Greece. I tell the buyers that I cannot pay a salary of 20,000 leks (160 euros) a month with such prices, and I have to resort to using home workers; but they threaten to go to China if I increase my prices. I don't know whether they would actually do that, because Korça is only a few kilometres from the Greek border, which makes life easier from my Greek buyers, but I don't want to risk losing them. I'm responsible for the livelihoods of over 110 women.”*

In this paradoxical situation where the major international buyers impose prices on their suppliers, it is very hard for an employer in a country like Albania to offer its workers a decent wage, or to organise production whilst eradicating all child labour. The Albanian authorities are confronted with a dilemma when it comes to clandestine homework: on the one hand, the families are in dire need of the work but, on the other, children should not be made to work so hard, and it is impossible to check what is happening inside private homes. The buyers are called on from all sides to be socially responsible...

Note: Part of the information published in this article is drawn from research into the textile, garment and footwear sector in Albania carried out at the beginning of 2007 by the Dutch union FNV. The anonymity of the interviewees was assured, to allow them to speak as freely as possible, which is why most of the names of the workers or employers quoted have been changed or left vague.

Trade union presence still very limited

Only 10% of the 65,000 workers in the Albanian textile, garment, footwear and leather sectors is unionised. *“We have to be very careful when trying to organise a factory in this sector, because the unemployment rate is very high in Albania, and many companies have closed their gates over the last few years to go to Bulgaria or Romania, or elsewhere. The employers brandish the threat of international relocation if workers approach a union,”* underlines Eshtem Graci, president of the independent trade union of textile, garment and leather workers of Albania.

A garment worker from a factory in Korça that subcontracts for a Greek company, testifies to the fear of joining a union: *“Here, when we form a union the employer considers us as an enemy and we can be dismissed as a result. So no one in our factory has the courage to form one. The same applies to strike action: it's not something we'd never dream of, but we don't have the guts!”* Natasha Lubonja, representative of the BSPSH trade union confederation in Korça, confirms these fears: *“Sometimes workers dare not tell us what is really happening in their factory for fear of the measures that will be taken by their employers, because they know that we will not stand by with our arms folded.”*

“Some workers have already been fired because they provided us with information on home work and the involvement of children,” notes Petrit Dajko, president of the independent light industry and textile trade union (affiliated to the BSPSH). Hajdar Kanani, president of the textile, clothing, leather and handicrafts trade union federation (affiliated to the KSSH confederation), tries to secure an agreement with the employer before contacting the workers. *“Once we have secured this agreement, it's not very difficult to convince the workers to join us,”* he ensures.

1,400 children in school thanks to teachers' unions

450 working children back in school and 950 other prevented from dropping out thanks to motivated teachers who visit parents in their homes to convince them of the benefits of an education.



Child labour is not an inevitable consequence of poverty. In Albania, one of the poorest countries of Europe, the unions are in the process of proving that teachers equipped with energy and motivation can bring all children, even the least advantaged, back to school. Their approach is simple: if children do not attend or stop attending school, the teachers go to their home and discuss the reasons with their parents. They try to find solutions with them, to convince them of the importance of schooling for the future of the child and the family. The moral authority they exercise with the families generally assists in convincing the parents.

It takes dedication and courage for teachers to go out in their free time and visit families they barely know, even though they generally receive a good welcome. *"When I reach the home of a family, I always start by asking how they are, what their situation is like at the moment, and so on,"* underlines Dilaver Lena, a 58-year-old teacher working on the outskirts of Tirana. *They generally offer me a coffee, and then we start to speak about school. The parents understand that I'm not there for my own good, but for the good of their children, so they generally respond positively to my visit. I find out about the family before going to visit; I try to find out whether it's the parents or the children that are averse to schooling. It's good to know, because if it's the children who are not motivated, I ask one of the best pupils in my class, Asquri*

Peshka to accompany me. It is easier for him to find the right words to convince a young person of his age to come back to school." Asquri confirms: *"I explain how important schooling is in building a future for ourselves and supporting our families when we reach working age. The teenagers find it easier to believe me, because I'm the same age and I know how to talk to them".*

Fear of ridicule

Poverty is often the first excuse presented by parents who no longer send their children to school. *"It may be a false pretext, but it's a factor that shouldn't be underestimated,"* explains Dilaver Lena. *"Schooling is free, but some parents are ashamed that they can't buy their children decent clothes; they are afraid that they'll be ridiculed at school."* Roma families, who are generally financially worse off than other Albanians, are often reluctant to send their children to school because of such inequalities, especially during the cold winter months (see page 7). Teachers do not have the means to help poor parents financially, but they can find ways of making things easier for them, such as offering them textbooks recovered from previous years. The welcome children are given on returning to school is crucial to the future of their education. *"Often, when children come back to*

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class they feel a little ashamed, a little shy, and keep their distance from the other children. We prepare the pupils in advance, so that they give those coming back a warm welcome."

The teachers often have to persevere, going back to visit a family several times before convincing them to send their child back to school. *"I remember two girls who were in my class and then stopped coming to school,"* continues Dilaver Lena. *"I had to visit their family six or seven times over a period of two months before they finally came back to school. They have now completed their primary education. But I doubt whether they'll take their studies any further than that: their parents are from northeast Albania, a region where many people believe that teenage girls whose bodies are starting to develop should no longer go to school... They are the kind of parents that say they no longer send their girls to school because the journey is not safe, but it's often a false pretext. Having said that, if there are real safety fears we try to organise a small group of children who live in the same*

area to make the journey together. I can also ask a local official to accompany me on my next visit to the parents, to reassure them, to guarantee police surveillance, ..."

Trade union workshops to raise awareness

Whilst a number of teachers have always had the motivation needed to undertake such initiatives, the Albanian teachers' unions (backed by the Dutch teachers' union AOB) have organised awareness raising seminars on child labour in four districts of the country to awaken the consciousness of others. *"These seminars have given teachers a better understanding of child labour, the context in which it develops, and the international conventions on the matter. They have also given rise to concrete action plans for teachers,"* underlines Lavdosh Llanaj, the head of the project in the Fieri region. *"I have noticed that the teachers have been much more motivated since the seminar; they have a better understanding of how important their role is and can see where we are headed. We have set up groups within schools to intervene when a pupil is absent for a long*

"I feel a great sense of satisfaction when I convince a child to come back to school"



Dilaver Lena, aged 58, has been a lower secondary school teacher for 36 years. She is a member of a teachers' group set up in 2005 by FSASH in Bathora, a suburb of Tirana, to prevent children dropping out of school and to bring those who have already done so back. *"I was already carrying out such activities on an individual basis before the union got involved, but the group it has set up has brought new dynamic: more teachers react to truancy, we have received training on the wider context of child labour, and we can solicit aid more easily from others taking part in these training sessions, such as local authority representatives. Teachers have also set up rapid reaction groups in schools and classes: if we see that a child has been absent for several days, the group intervenes directly and decides who to send to the child's home to see what is happening. It could be a friend of the child, a teacher, the school director, etc. At my school, the group is comprised of seven people (a teacher, a representative of the parents and five pupils with good social skills). There are also small outreach groups in each class."*

Dilaver Lena devotes between three and four hours a week to these activities targeting children who have dropped out or are at risk of dropping out of school. *"I do not receive any financial reward for it. My salary of 20,600 leks (164 euros) a month remains the same, but I am very motivated. First of all, because I find child labour unacceptable, and children who drop out of school generally end up working (selling cigarettes on the streets, washing cars, working in construction, etc.); and, secondly, because I feel a great sense of satisfaction, I feel valued as a teacher when I manage to bring a child back to school and he or she gets good results."*

period; they blow the whistle directly and go to the parents' home. The statistics we have gathered on absenteeism and school abandonment add credibility to our lobby to convince the authorities to assist these children."

More than 100 teachers, members of the FSASH (1) and SPASH (2) teachers' unions took direct part in these seminars. They then went on to organise meetings in their respective schools to raise awareness among hundreds of others. This project, launched two years ago, has brought some 450 Albanian children back to school and has prevented around 950 others from dropping out. In the case of those who were at risk of abandoning their education, the teachers went to see their parents, to encourage them to keep their children in school.

The teachers who are members of the outreach groups set up by the unions also try to spot children who have never been to school, so that they can take measures to persuade them to attend. Such is the case in Bathora, a suburb of Tirana where a large portion of the population are internal migrants from other parts of Albania. They are not all registered with the local administration and do not all mix with the local communities, so it is not easy to identify their children when they do not attend school. "Our pupils sometimes let us know when they see children in this type of situation," explains Dilaver Lena. "We try to contact the parents, sometimes accompanied by a local official who also comes to find out what is happening, but such cases are more difficult to resolve."

(1) FSASH, the Trade Union Federation of Education and Science of Albania, is a member of the ITUC-affiliated confederation KSSH.

(2) SPASH, the Independent Trade Union of Education of Albania, is a member of the ITUC-affiliated confederation BSPSH.

Roma children also want to go to school

Roma are often characterised as unworthy parents who force their children to beg. The teachers' unions, brushing aside such prejudices, are showing that it is not a lack of interest but discrimination that stops them from sending their children to school.



Photo: Ali Begeja

Little Neim Hamzash, aged 12, was very disappointed when school restarted last September: his uncle and grandparents had decided not to send him to school anymore. This Roma family living in the Fieri region, some 80 km from the capital (Tirana), is no longer able to assume the expenses linked to Neim's schooling (books, clothes, ...). "The other children have nicer clothes than ours; they also receive pocket money to buy snacks," explains Neim's uncle, who supports six children of his own and his two nephews. "We would rather all our children go to school, we couldn't wish for more, but we don't want them to be humiliated because of our poverty. Another obstacle is the distance between where we live and the school. It's a thirty-minute walk in winter, without warm clothes, which is very hard for a child to cover on foot, along a dangerous road, and the public

transport is too expensive."

Neim's case is typical of the situation affecting tens of thousand of children in Albania. He, however, has been fortunate: a few months prior, the teachers from his school had attended an awareness-raising seminar on child labour, organised by their union, with the support of the Dutch teachers' union AOB, and subsequently set up an outreach group that visits the homes of pupils who do not attend or stop attending school. The group is essentially comprised of teachers and parents. "We have contacted the Roma association "Amarodrom", which accompanies us on our family visits," explains Arpile Bitri, a teacher working in Fieri. "It has great moral influence and does everything to ensure that

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Roma children go to school. The cost of sending a child to school in Fieri is around 25,000 leks (200 euros) a year, which includes clothes, textbooks and 500 leks a day for minor expenses such as snacks and transport. Many families find it virtually impossible to raise such an amount, multiplied by the number of children they have. After several visits, we managed to convince Neim's uncle to send him to school by offering him textbooks recovered from the previous year. And so, ten days after having dropped out, he was back at school." Neim is very happy to be back at school: "I want to learn how to read and write properly, it's very important for my future. I like going to school and seeing my friends there."

7 times more Roma children at school in Fieri

The number of examples like Neim has persuaded the Albanian teachers' union to take wider action targeted specifically at the Roma communities, with special emphasis on the region of Fieri. They have managed to convince the local authorities to introduce catch-up classes for Roma

children with very little schooling, with a view to ultimately reintegrating them into mainstream classrooms. The results are very impressive. Refid Dule, president of the Roma association "Amarodrom": *"Only around ten children from the 400 Roma families living in a suburb of Fieri regularly attended school in 2002. There are now 74, thanks to the 'second chance' classes given to Roma children who were too old to sit alongside the children in the first or second year of primary school. The local education authorities set up these classes following pressure from our association and the teachers' unions."*

In the same way as the teachers who visit children's homes to convince their parents to send them to school (see page 5), those giving these catch-up classes are not paid for the time devoted to them. *"Even though we're not paid, I find it's worth dedicating a few hours a week to these children, because they have a great desire to learn,"* explains Adriana Mema, a 26-year-old teacher from Fieri. *"I feel very much valued in my role as a teacher when I'm able to give them a second chance."*

"I'm not in a position to send my son to school all year round

The son of Mbarime Latifi (aged 26), from the Roma community in the Fieri region, occasionally goes to school. But, aged just 10, he also works several hours a week at the rubbish dump.

"My son Luan is 10 years old. He should be in fourth grade by now but has failed his exams on two occasions so is still in 2nd grade. It's not at all easy for me to send him to school: in addition to the problem of clothing (I don't have enough money to pay for his clothes in winter), we live in a one-room house, which complicates matters when it comes to doing homework. On top of that, I have to ask him to stay at home during the day when I find work so that he can look after my little girl. My husband is working in Greece, but it's not easy for him there either, and he's not always able to send money, so my son has to work for two to three hours a day at the rubbish dump after school. He tries to find recyclable materials that can be resold. He spends four or five hours a day there during the holidays. He can earn 100 leks (0.80 euros) on a good day. The teachers and the Roma association come and see me, to persuade me to send him to school more regularly, which I would love to do, because I myself studied up until 8th grade, but under the present circumstances I'm not in a position to let him go to school all year round."

From the rubbish dump... to school

With the help of ILO-IPEC, Roma parents are sending their children to school rather than taking them to work at the rubbish dump.

In Albania's big cities, children, either alone or accompanied by their parents, rummage through rubbish for materials that can be resold. Few jobs are more degrading than this one, and it is most often done by Roma people, pushed by extreme poverty. A little outside help is often all it takes to dissuade parents from asking their children to perform this task and send them to school. This is the case in Korca, in the south east of Albania, where the NGO "Ndihmë për Fëmjet" (NPF – "Help the Children"), backed by the ILO's International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC), has managed to persuade numerous Roma families to send their children to school. Thanks to the material assistance provided by the NGO in the form of children's clothes and food, some families have been able to take their children out of work, at least during school term.

Maxime, aged 38, the father of two boys aged 11 and 12, is one of the Roma parents who has decided to give his children the chance of a better future: *"I leave home for the dump at*

five in the morning every day and stay there until four in the afternoon collecting cans. I receive a dollar for every kilo collected, and on a good day I can collect up to two kilos. I have always wanted my children to go to school, because I don't want them to end up like me, with difficulties reading and writing when they grow up. The problem is that I didn't have enough money to buy my children decent clothes to send them to school. But they are able to go now, and only come to the dump with me during the school holidays, except when NPF organises recreational activities that they can take part in, such as circus classes."

Nonetheless, Maxime and his children still have their problems: the improvement of their financial situation does not depend solely on continued support from NPF. Their living conditions are very precarious. The room they inhabit in an old warehouse has no heating and the toilets are shared with four other, equally destitute families.