



## CONEX BASELINE REPORT

### 0 General Information

The CONEX project aims to address problems affecting marginalised groups who are disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 crisis, including older people, vulnerable women, minorities (e.g. Roma), refugees and IDPs as well as people with disabilities. The key problems that the proposed intervention will address are:

Lack of food, medication and other essential supplies: Already before the crisis, marginalised groups lived under difficult circumstances: in a study conducted by the Red Cross of Serbia in 2017, of older people living in rural areas, only 38% received a pension at all and more than two thirds could not meet their basic needs. This reflects both the low level of pensions and the lack of information that older people have on their rights regarding access to social welfare services. In a baseline conducted in October 2020 by CARE in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, all respondents reported the need for essential food items and a severe lack of soap, disinfectants and masks.

Deterioration of economic conditions: Western Balkan countries have been facing relatively high unemployment rates in general. The COVID-19 pandemic has plunged all these countries into a deep recession and has worsened labour market conditions. In Montenegro, for example, the unemployment rate has risen by 30% from March to November 2020. The World Bank estimates that in Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro, and Serbia the COVID-19 crisis has pushed over 300.000 people into poverty<sup>1</sup>. Often vulnerable groups, such as minorities or poorly educated women, are the most affected and there is a need to strengthen training and employability initiatives, also addressing skills mismatches. The risk of poverty, discrimination and isolation has risen significantly for different groups in society such as older people or people with disabilities.

In addition, the COVID-19 crisis has led to a drastic reduction in remittances to the region, which are a main means of survival especially for older, but also for young unemployed people. Habitually, these remittances are handled in cash and given to family members personally during summer, winter or Easter holidays. “The Western Balkan countries rely heavily on the steady inflow of remittances, financing domestic demand and investment. Remittances, which constitute 10% of the GDP in the Western Balkans, are likely to diminish due to travel restrictions and increased unemployment, linked to the anticipated economic contraction in the EU – the main source of remittances for the Western Balkans.”<sup>2</sup>

Another important factor is gender-specific inclusion in the labour market - especially in Kosovo. Based on the Agency of Statistics of Kosovo (2020), only 20.3% of women of working age are active in the labour market; the gender gap is wide between men and women.

Isolation and lack of access to social services: The risk of poverty and isolation has risen significantly through the COVID-19 pandemic for different groups in society, especially older persons living on their own or in households with their peers. The measures to control the pandemic in several countries included very strict prohibition

<sup>1</sup> Western Balkans Regular Economic Report: November 2020.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.oecd.org/south-east-europe/COVID-19-Crisis-Response-Western-Balkans.pdf>

of movement for persons over 65, putting this entire segment of the population in detention in their homes for weeks. Moreover, the under-capacitated and underfunded government social welfare institutions in the region cannot cover all the needs of the target beneficiaries. In the process of attaining social services, the marginalised population is faced with numerous administrative requests which represent an insurmountable obstacle. The deterioration of economic conditions of women caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has an impact on the increase of the risk factors that lead to domestic violence<sup>3</sup>.

Social, health and home-care services available are in most cases located in urban areas and the rural population is often not even informed about and has almost no access to them. 75% of older people living in rural areas in Serbia have never been visited by any public social welfare service while almost half of them think they need assistance (SRC 2017). There are also limitations in the availability of services; this is due to a high number of older people living alone. In the whole region, those older people are affected by multiple consequences (economic, psychological and social) of the COVID-pandemic. On top of that, regular health services in the region continue to have become temporarily unavailable during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the overburdening of the local health systems.

### **Overview of the COVID-situation in the project region as of 04<sup>th</sup> of December 2021**

Country	Total cases	Active cases	Cases / 1M pop	Deaths / 1M pop
Austria	1,193,286	117,049	131,428	1,405
Albania	201,045	6,551	69,969	1,082
Bosnia and Herzegovina	277,228	72,323	85,254	3,902
Kosovo	161,072	320	89,700	1,656
Montenegro	158,076	2,267	251,642	3,696
North Macedonia	216,670	8,037	104,006	3,656
Serbia	1,260,806	46,111	145,131	1,363

Sources: <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>, <https://covid19.who.int/region/euro/country/xk> and <https://www.rtklive.com/en/news-single.php?ID=20177>

## **1 Introduction:**

The following report analyses the data obtained as part of the baseline study of the CONEX programme conducted in six Western Balkan countries.

### **Objective of the baseline study**

The baseline study aims to measure the current situation of the beneficiaries. In particular, the study includes people's estimation of their psycho-social wellbeing, economic conditions and vulnerability. Furthermore, it captures the optimism of

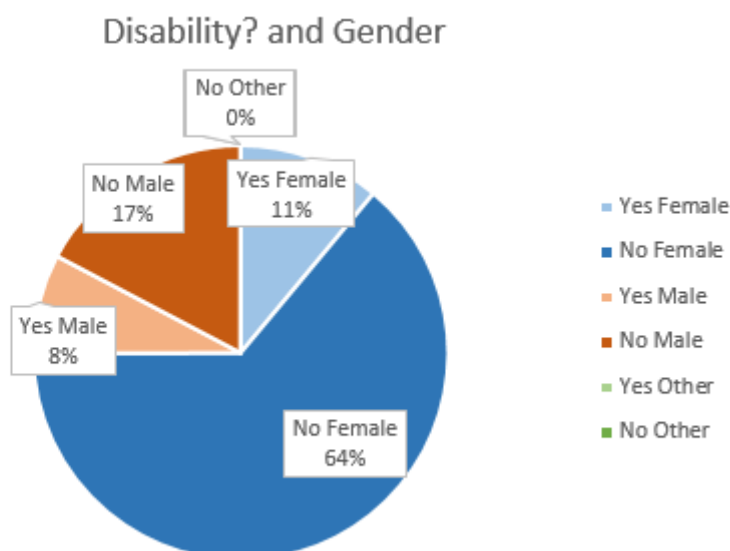
<sup>3</sup> Effects of COVID-19 Pandemic on Gender Equality and Status of Women from marginalised Population Groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina, BiH Women Network, December 2020

beneficiaries to address future economic challenges. Most importantly, the client's hope created by the help they will receive through the CONEX project is assessed.

The results form a basis for the CONEX project, as the study was conducted before many programmes have started. The goal is to compare the data obtained with the responses to the results of the endline study by 28.02.2023. This provides a way of measuring the improvement of beneficiaries' situations.

### Scope of the baseline study

Across all six relevant Western Balkan countries, where the CONEX project is implemented (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia), a total of 804 responses were recorded. Three quarters are women, and every fifth person has a disability.



Disabilities of beneficiaries were classified into physical, sensory, intellectual and systems disability<sup>4</sup>. Physical or sensory disabilities were more common than the other

<sup>4</sup> In the CONEX project, these are defined as follows:

**Physical disability** implies difficulties in physical functioning specially in the field of mobility, dexterity or stamina. The disability may be permanent or temporary. It may exist from birth or be acquired later in life.

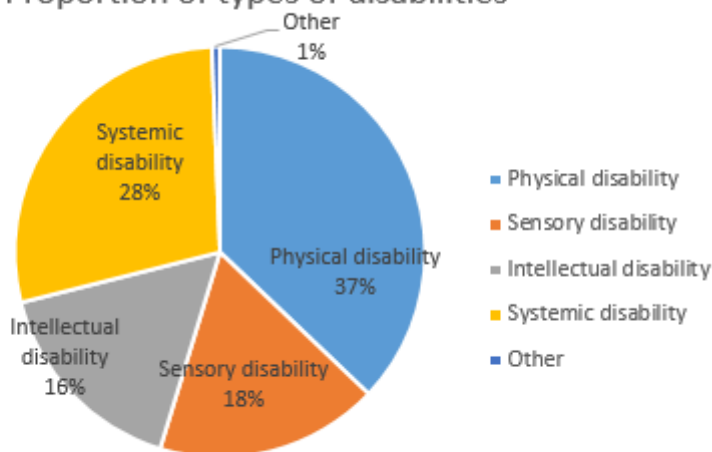
**Sensory disability** is a neurological disorder that affects the human brain to process sensory information (such as sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell) normally and properly. The most common types in the general population are blindness or low vision and hearing loss or deafness.

**Intellectual disability** is a generalized neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by significantly impaired intellectual and adaptive functioning. Intellectual disability is subdivided into syndromic intellectual disability, in which intellectual deficits associated with other medical and behavioral signs and symptoms are present, and non-syndromic intellectual disability, in which intellectual deficits appear without other symptoms.

**Systems disabilities** implies difficulties in the functioning of the organ system caused by autoimmune or systemic diseases.

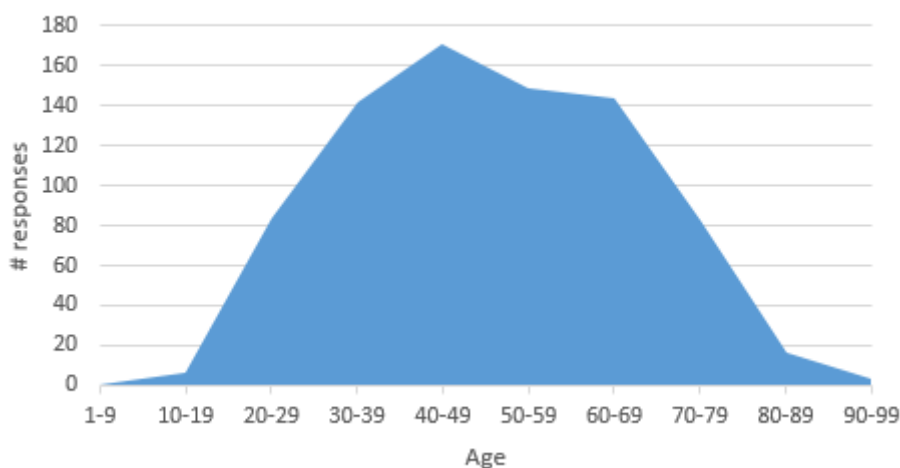
two types. However, all types of disabilities were still represented by at least a sixth of beneficiaries with disabilities.

Proportion of types of disabilities



The average age of people interviewed as part of the baseline study is 50 years (and the median is 49 years). The youngest beneficiary is 18 years old, and the oldest is of an age of 93.

Age distribution



Even though overall the CONEX project has a wide variety of beneficiaries, different organisations in different countries focus on supporting other groups of people:

Caritas Albania, the partner organisation in **Albania**, submitted 164 forms on the data collection tool KoBoToolbox. Three out of four interviewees are women, and one in nine has a disability, in 90% of cases a physical or intellectual disability. There were approximately equally many forms submitted in all three regions (Lezhë, Durrës and Shkodër).



Caritas Albania selected their interviewees based on the Indicator Guidelines and among their beneficiaries. Due to the three locations, where the organization is situated, beneficiaries also live in these areas. Most interviewees are part of the suburban population, but some also live in the city or more rural areas.

Caritas staff (coordinators and nurses) conducted the interviews individually during regular home visits at the beneficiary's place. In eleven cases, two members of the same household were interviewed; in all other cases, only one household member was asked to respond to the questions.

CARE's local partners in **Bosnia and Herzegovina** and **Southern Serbia** conducted interviews with 464 beneficiaries, of which 172 took place in the municipality of Vranje in Serbia.

Only users of the services provided by each partner organisation were selected as participants in the baseline study. Beneficiaries are members of marginalised groups and live in the area where the organisations operate. Otaharin, in particular, chose settlements in the wider city area of Bijelina inhabited primarily by members of the Roma minority.

In all regions of CARE's local partners combined, 71% of interviewees were women, and 22% have a disability. People across all ages were chosen, for example, pregnant or older women, members of the Roma community or members of large families.

All interviews were done individually. In Bijelina in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Vranje in Serbia, volunteers partly conducted the interviews.

In **Kosovo**, a total of 52 beneficiaries participated in the baseline study. People to be interviewed were identified based on the Indicator Guidelines: overall 69% are women and 31% men, and every third person has a disability.

The focus of Caritas Kosovo and the Mother Teresa Society lies in supporting older people and people with disabilities. Indeed, 77% of beneficiaries interviewed are 65 years or older, and all of the remaining beneficiaries have a disability.

Furthermore, the two organisations worked closely together to select a balanced cross-section among all regions where either Caritas Kosovo or the Mother Teresa Society is present: 25 people from a rural household near Prishtina and Gjakova and 27 people from the urban areas of Prishtina and Prizren were interviewed.

Two nurses per region conducted all interviews during one of their regular home visits. All beneficiaries in the baseline study were interviewed individually and are also the heads of their households.

From **Montenegro**, responses from 27 beneficiaries were recorded through the data collection tool KoBoToolbox. Red Cross Montenegro, the partner organisation, focuses on unemployed women. Correspondingly, all interviewees are unemployed women aged between 22 and 59, and all without a disability.

All beneficiaries are from cities in the southern, central or northern region; villages are not included. Red Cross Montenegro focuses its support on the country's northern part, where 44% of interviewees come from.

Most interviews took place face to face and individually around training times. Additionally, Red Cross Montenegro also organised two focus groups in the capital city Podgorica.



In **North Macedonia**, 12 beneficiaries were interviewed. All are unemployed women aged between 26 and 60 years and do not have a disability. Furthermore, all interviews took place in the southern part of North Macedonia in the municipality of Bitola.

In **Central and Western Serbia**, Philanthropy interviewed 83 people as part of the Baseline study. Great value was given to selecting a balanced variety of interviewees from different areas receiving a different kind of support.

Philanthropy focuses on supporting people in rural areas around Kraljevo, Lucani and Kragujevac. The interviews were conducted in communal areas in the villages where the beneficiaries live. People were interviewed individually, and interviewees have already received assistance for a few years. As a result, the relationship between Philanthropy and the beneficiaries is strong; people have much trust and happily provided answers to the study.

Since beneficiaries come from rural villages, many people were of an elderly age, every other person 60 years or older. In addition, 12% of interviewees have a disability.

## 2 Summary:

Overall, the results obtained from the baseline study follow what one might expect.

Almost 5 in 6 beneficiaries are optimistic that the support they are about to receive will help them cope with the consequences of COVID-19. On the contrary, only 17% of beneficiaries consider their current life situation more than halfway up the “Cantril’s ladder of life” and only every eighth beneficiary currently feels prepared for economic challenges.

Across all three indicators, women tended to respond more positive than men, and a person without a disability on average responded better than a beneficiary with a disability. In contrast to that, there is close to no correlation between the age of an interviewee and their response to Indicator SO 1.1. and Indicator SO 1.2.

Most notable for each Indicator are some differences by country. In North Macedonia and Montenegro, not a single interviewee thinks that it is unlikely that the support they receive will help them cope with the consequences of COVID-19. On the contrary, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the country with the highest percentage, 8.9% of beneficiaries responded with “Unlikely” to Indicator SO 1.1.

In Central and Western Serbia, interviewees consider themselves standing on average higher than on the 6<sup>th</sup> step of the ladder in Indicator SO 1.2. On the contrary, the lowest average response to Indicator SO 1.2 of around 1.9 occurred in Albania.

In Montenegro, according to the responses obtained through Indicator SO 1.3., 8 in 9 people feel prepared for economic challenges, whereas across all countries, only every eighth thinks so.

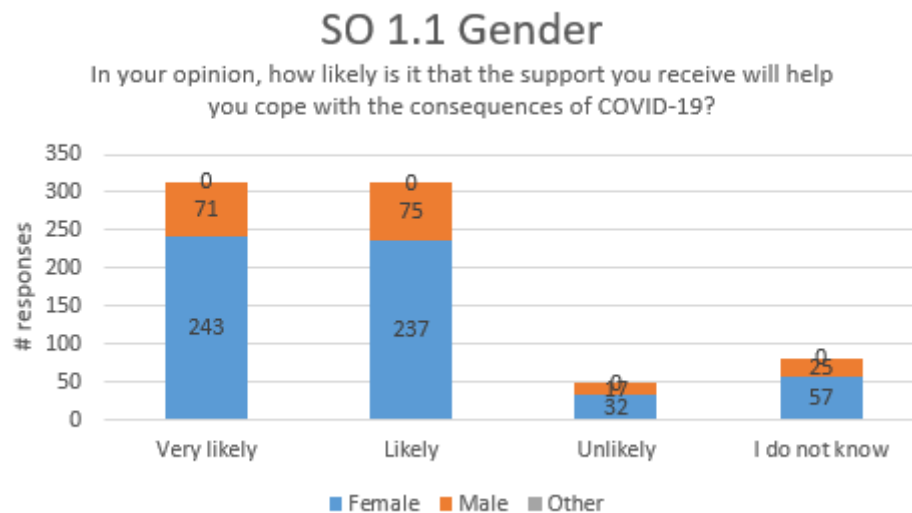
However, the majority of beneficiaries in every country are optimistic that the help they receive will help them cope with the consequences of COVID-19.

### 3 Data and Data Analysis:

Overall, 804 sets of data have been collected through KoBoToolbox, in all six relevant Western Balkan countries. Every set of data corresponds to one beneficiary and includes, where provided, the person’s age, gender and disability and their responses to the Indicators SO 1.1, SO 1.2 and SO 1.3 as outlined in the “Indicator Guidelines”.

**Indicator SO 1.1** measures the number of people who benefitted from the assistance in order to cope with the crisis and stabilise their livelihoods. For this, beneficiaries were asked if they find it very likely, likely, or unlikely (with an additional option of “I do not know”) that the support they receive will help them cope with the consequences of COVID-19.

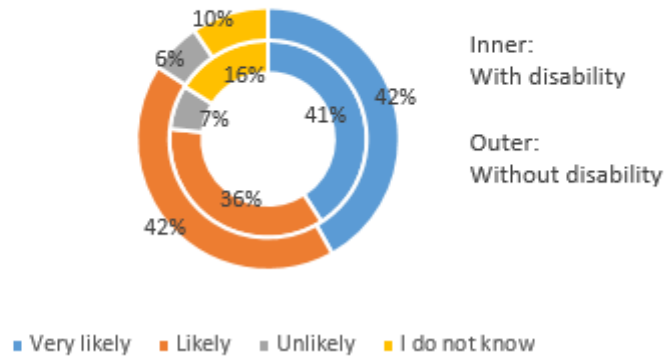
The answers of beneficiaries to the question above were overwhelmingly positive and optimistic. For example, about 84% of women and 78% of men found it to equal parts very likely or likely that the support they receive will help them cope with the consequences of COVID-19. In contrast, only 49 people (out of 765 recorded responses to this Indicator) responded with “Unlikely” to the question.



Comparing responses of people with and without disability, percentage-wise approximately twice as many people with than without disability chose to answer “I do not know” to the Indicator. Apart from this, both groups of people responded similarly.

## SO 1.1 Disability

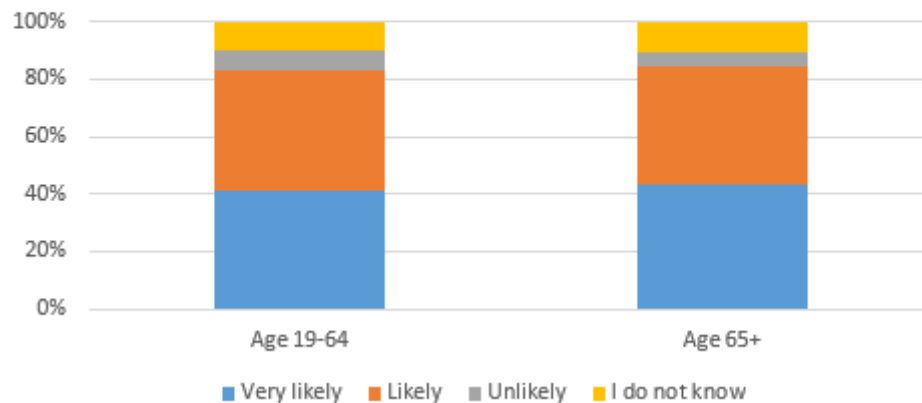
In your opinion, how likely is it that the support you receive will help you cope with the consequences of COVID-19?



Since the youngest participant in the baseline study is 18 years old, it is sensible to compare responses of people of aged 65 or older with answers of beneficiaries younger than 65 years. As can be seen in the graph, there is almost no difference in the percentages among these two groups of people.

## SO 1.1 Age

In your opinion, how likely is it that the support you receive will help you cope with the consequences of COVID-19?

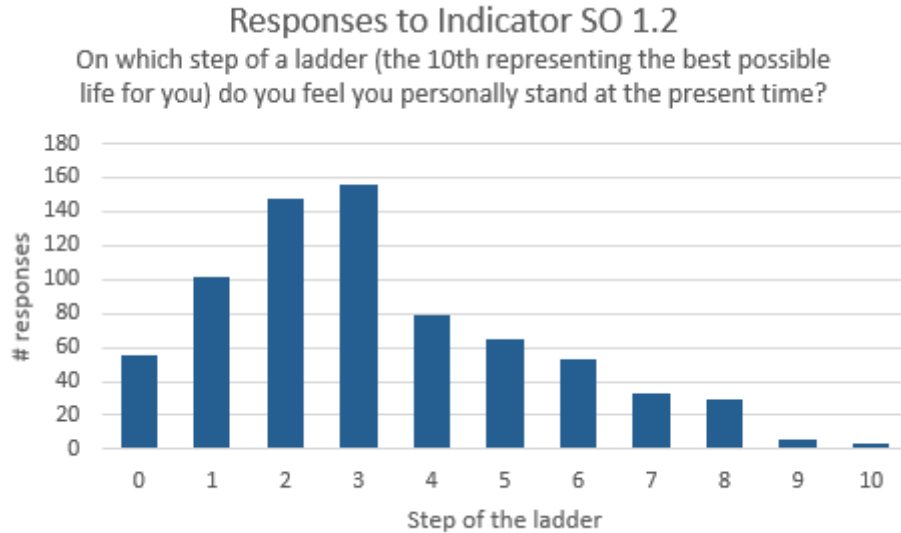


The percentage of people that responded “Unlikely” to this Indicator is highest in Bosnia and Herzegovina with 8.9% and lowest in North Macedonia and Montenegro, where in each country no response of “Unlikely” was recorded.

**Indicator SO 1.2** obtains the percentage of people whose psycho-social wellbeing is improved by the actions undertaken in the CONEX project. Respondents were asked to rank their current situation according to “Cantril’s Ladder of Life” on a scale from 0 to 10. The baseline here is just taken in a moment; to see an improvement through the measures taken, one needs to compare the results presented here with the endline responses.

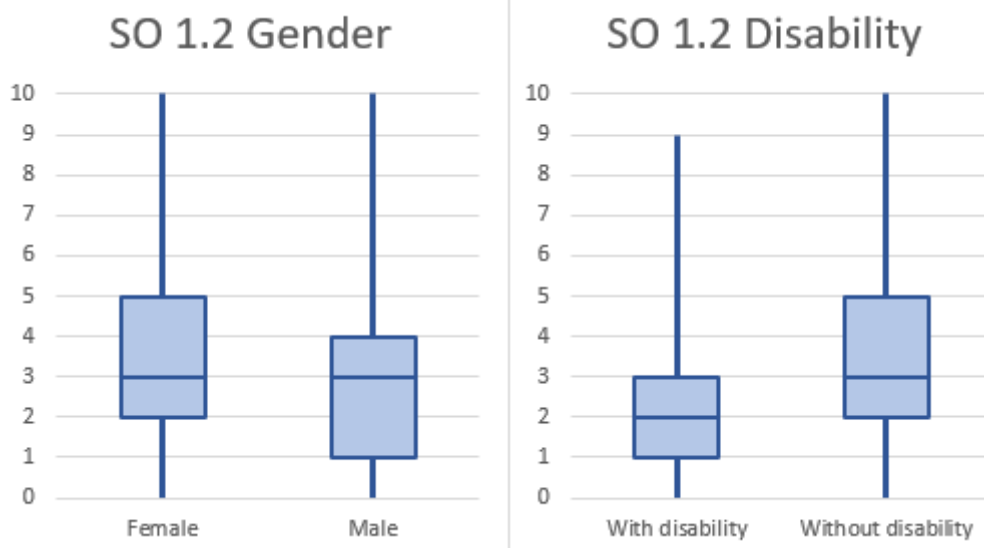


Beneficiaries tended to rank themselves on the lower half of the ladder, with an overall average of 3.27.



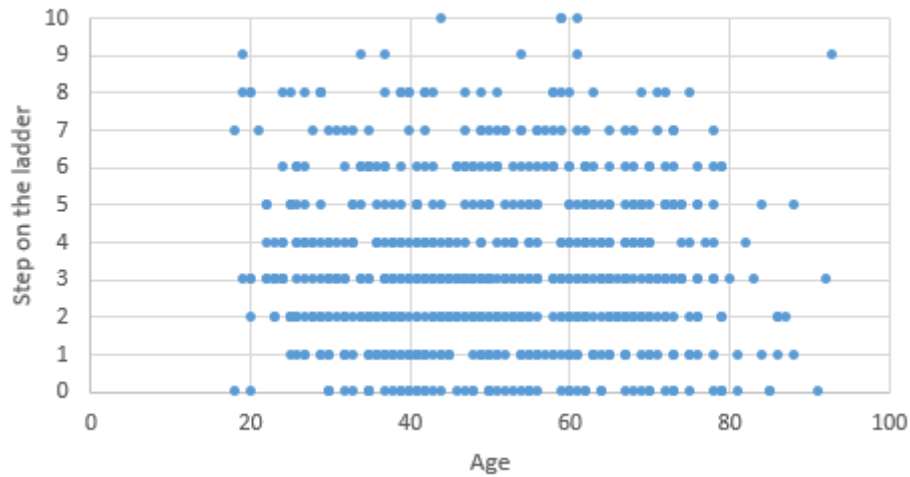
Most notably, on average, women consider themselves currently standing on a higher step of the ladder than men. Similarly, people without a disability like their current situation in life more than people with a disability. Only four of 741 interviewees, who responded to the Indicator, stand on the highest step of the ladder, and none of the four has a disability.

Interestingly, the difference in responses by gender does not occur if we restrict ourselves to only people without a disability or only people with a disability.



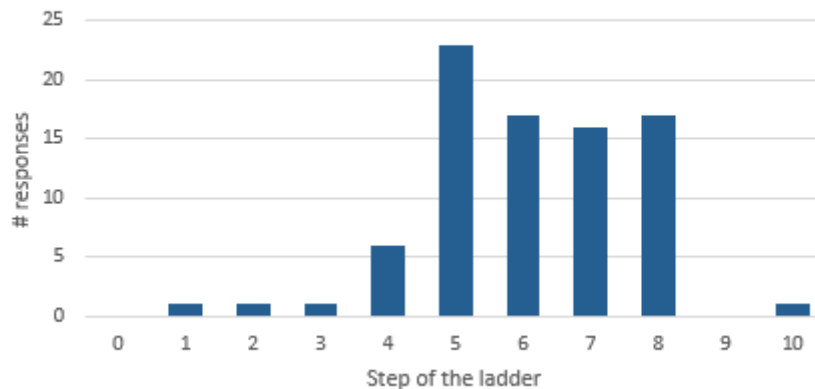
In contrast to gender and disability, there is no correlation connecting the responses to Cantril's ladder and the age of the interviewees.

SO 1.2 responses by age



The responses to Indicator SO 1.2 are particularly surprising in Central and Western Serbia, where people consider themselves standing on average higher than the 6<sup>th</sup> step of the ladder. These highly positive results may be due to the strong relationship and trust between the partner organisation Philanthropy and the beneficiaries, that was built up over the years, creating a high level of joy.

Responses to Indicator SO 1.2 in Central and Western Serbia



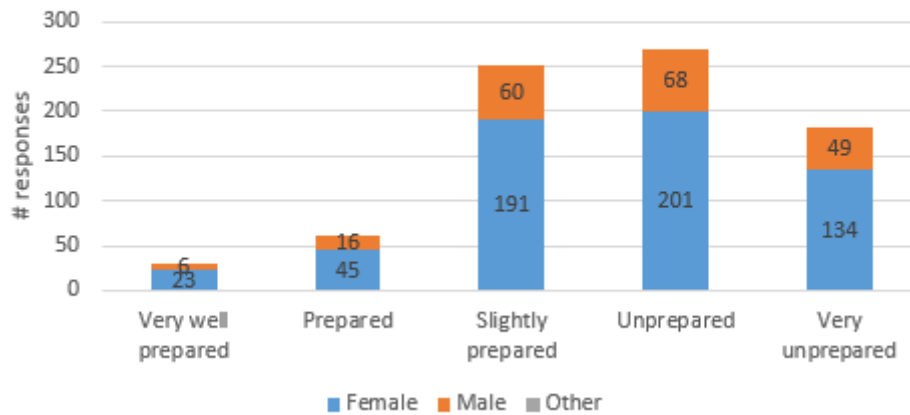
In **Indicator SO 1.3**, we are interested in the percentage of people benefitting from the action that feel better prepared to address economic challenges in their everyday lives. In the baseline study, beneficiaries were asked whether they currently feel very well prepared, prepared, slightly prepared, unprepared or very unprepared for economic challenges.

Only one-eighth of the 803 respondents to Indicator SO 1.3 in the baseline study currently feel better than slightly prepared to address economic challenges. According to the data, there is no correlation between the response and the gender of interviewees.



### SO 1.3 Gender

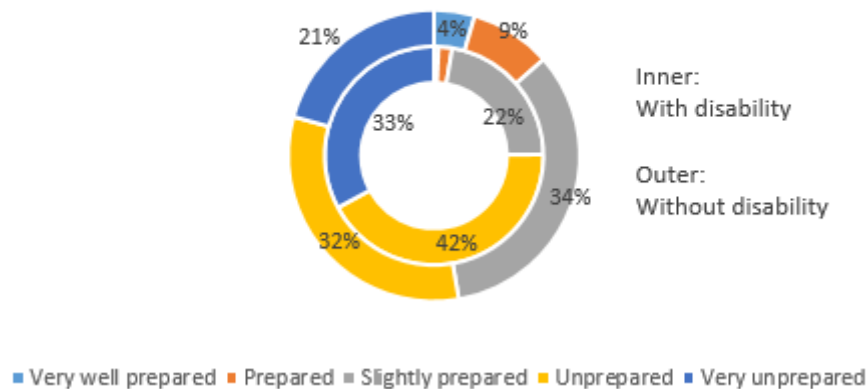
In how far do you feel prepared for economic challenges?



In contrast, people with a disability feel much worse prepared for economic challenges than people without a disability, where only one in 37 interviewees with a disability felt more than slightly prepared for economic challenges.

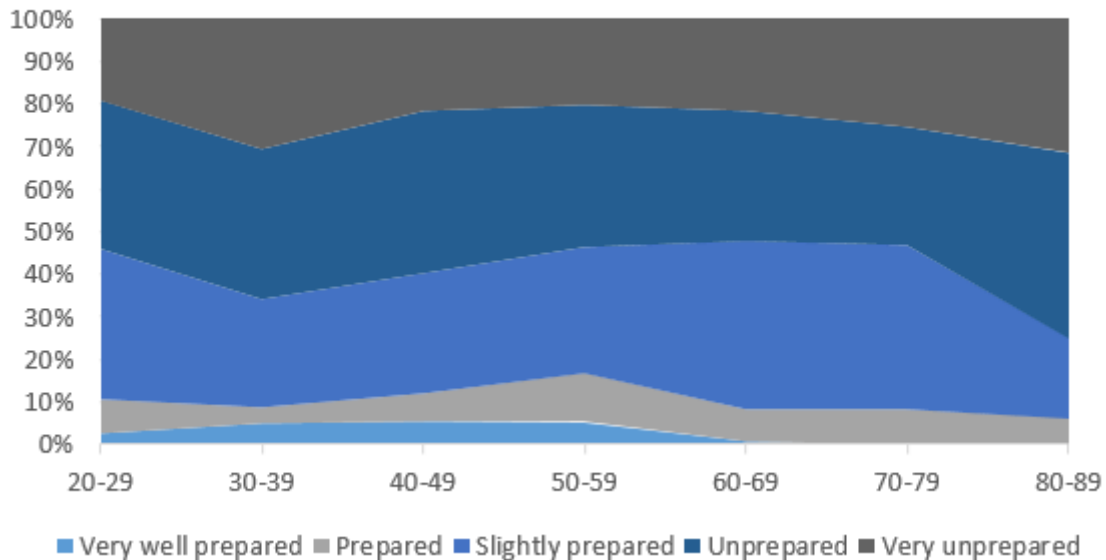
### SO 1.3 Disability

In how far do you feel prepared for economic challenges?



The following chart shows the correlation between the responses and the beneficiaries' ages. Notably, people in their 30s and people older than 60 feel less prepared for economic challenges than respondents between 40 and 59 years.

## SO 1.3 Age



Responses to this Indicator stand out in particular in Montenegro. There, 24 out of 27 interviewees feel at least prepared for economic challenges, compared to every eighth if beneficiaries from all countries are considered.

#### 4 Conclusions:

This chapter presents conclusions and recommendations for the implementation of the CONEX program.

The baseline survey of the " Covid-19 Nexus response for improving the socio-economic situation of marginalized people in 6 Western Balkan countries " was conducted in the communities targeted in collaboration with local stakeholders and according to the level of vulnerability. The results of the survey confirm the relevance of the project and the vulnerability of the targeted households, characterized by low availability of necessary resources to fight the COVID19 pandemic, insufficient sustainable income to implement income generating activities, a majority of people with disabilities, old people or long-term unemployed who cannot implement income generating activities.

For these reasons, the project is targeting exactly the right beneficiaries, supporting marginalized groups and making them better able to withstand the damage caused by Corona.

#### 5 Annex - Logical framework with basic values:

Please attach the logical framework valid for your component and insert the base values in the column provided.

***This chapter is being elaborated by Caritas Austria.***

The baseline study report should not exceed 20 pages (without appendices).

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