

IMPACT

April 2022

Dear friends,

While keeping up with current events, it can feel like we are lurching from one global crisis to another. Images of war and displacement strike us to our core but what is often unseen are the actions of compassion and mercy that are active behind the scenes.

As an international relief and development organization NG is no stranger to stepping into desperate situations with hope and practical help. We've found ways to come alongside others working directly in affected areas in Ukraine, as well as face head-on the challenges that have spun off of the conflict and directly increased difficulties of Albanian daily life.

We're hard at work! I hope you read this Impact and feel encouraged, challenged, and inspired. We can all make the choice to bring help and hope amid trying times. ▾


Michelle Mann
Executive Director - NG USA



Spring is at the doorstep in March, but snow still makes the transport of aid parcels a challenge in the Albanian mountains.

Inflation Has Hit The Country

Nehemiah Gateway Albania seeks to alleviate the plight of families in need at a time of soaring living costs

These bags and boxes are filled with things people need—staples like cooking oil, pasta, rice, beans, coffee, sugar, and soap. Aid parcels have been a part of NG's operations since the early 1990s, when young church volunteers got commercial driver's licenses so that they could drive stacks of banana boxes filled with staple goods to Pogradec in trucks. Since that time, hundreds of thousands of aid parcels have been distributed to people in the communities NG serves.



Another means of transport - this boy was sent to pick up aid parcels for his family by bicycle, and seems to be quite happy with it.

Some make their way to the villages around Pogradec in the backs of NG's most rugged vehicles. Others go home with students at Amaro Tan and Gjirokastër, so that these often-overlooked families have enough to eat. When there is a crisis, the need expands, and the team finds a way to distribute more.

Recently, inflation has hit the aid program. In March 2021, aid parcels distributed to the villages cost €12 each. In March 2022, the same parcel costs €17—and prices seem to be increasing every week. That means that supplying aid parcels to people in need in 2022 will cost at least 50% more. Even before the start of the war in Ukraine, the official inflation rate in Albania was 3.7%—about the same as Germany. As NG Albania Executive Director Herolinda Shkullaku explains, the important thing to remember is that, though the inflation rates may be similar, people in the EU spend about 15% of their income, on average, on food, while in the US it's about 10%. Albanians spend 41%. This means that under inflation, even Albanians who have good, steady employment must spend a higher percentage of their money on necessities.

As one Pogradec resident observed, “non-food markets are almost empty. People aren't buying clothes because they have to spend all their money on healthcare and food.”

Society's most vulnerable people, including people who are old or sick and marginalized communities such as the Roma, can quickly be pushed into crisis. Inflation quickly eats away at their ability to meet their most basic needs. Program managers in Pogradec and Gjirokastër report that these communities are anxious and afraid, because their situation is already bad and it could possibly get worse.

War in Ukraine has added shortages of essential commodities to the mix. Before the war, Albania imported about half of its wheat from Russia and Ukraine. That supply has been disrupted. The costs of natural gas—used in Albania for heat and for cooking—have gone up by 50%. And the cost of petrol (gasoline) is rising more every day. As of March 10, with petrol prices at \$10/gallon, protests were erupting all over the country. At the time of the writing of this article, the Albanian government has set up an Administrative Council to manage these price increases. With the minimum wage in Albania approximately \$265/month, the current rates are unsustainable for most Albanians.

Even large, stable operations like Nehemiah Gateway's Buçimas campus, with its energy efficient, well-built buildings, are having to look carefully at places where there are opportunities to conserve. Trips to the villages, or to Tirana, must be planned more carefully and efficiently because they cost substantially more now. And, as cold weather has persisted, NG has responded to gas rationing by having people move into smaller, shared spaces to work, or work from home. Eri Geiger, who is Head of Facilities Management at Buçimas, is pragmatic. “Our concern is mostly logistical and administrative,” she says. “We are not panicking over all these changes. NG has been through a number of crisis situations in the last thirty years, and our planning reflects that.”

Still, many Albanians remember times of economic instability and rapid inflation, and this situation must feel terrifyingly familiar. While NG is committed to our staff, as well as to the people we serve—students, program beneficiaries, and community partners—we recognize that there are challenges on the horizon and are determined



Families are gratefully signing their receipts for much-needed food support.



Here's what NG's aid parcels mostly contain: basic staples that help people in need to survive.

to remain a safe and reliable force in the community.

In a recent interview, Herolinda Shkullaku said that “as an Albanian who grew up under communism, I have an allergic reaction to talk about “producing everything ourselves.”” That was the policy of the xenophobic Hoxha regime, and everybody was hungry and poor—not good times. Still, efforts over the years to make operations on NG’s campus more self-sufficient and self-contained will hopefully help mitigate some of the powerful forces rocking the region. A teaching garden on land by the lake produces supplemental food in the summer, reducing the amount of produce (as well as eggs and honey) that need to be purchased. “We probably need more of that,” Shkullaku says. Fresh, local, organic produce is a wonderful thing, and may go some way to offsetting the impact of inflation on NG’s food budget. The Nehemia School cafeteria and adjacent L’Aurore Caffè produce a combined 700 meals daily for school and university students, staff, and soup kitchen clients, so this is a substantial ongoing cost.

As Executive Director of NG Albania, Shkullaku is thinking past the immediate situation. “This may sound strange when we have been talking about the economic situation,” she says, “but I do want to emphasize that education is our long-term investment in a solution. That is truly the way that we can build a better Albania and a better world—by providing quality education, training leaders with the ability to make a real difference. Humanitarian aid helps people get through difficult times. Education empowers people to shape and determine their lives, and school provides a safe and stable place for young people during times of turmoil, like now.

Prices for the most basic staples have risen sharply these last months - as you can see below:

	March 2021		March 2022
Cooking oil	70 lek	➔	260 lek
Sugar	68 lek	➔	100 lek
Rice	85 lek	➔	90 lek
Flour	65 lek	➔	95 lek
Pasta	75 lek	➔	89 lek
Coffee	85 lek	➔	95 lek
Detergent	80 lek	➔	90 lek

Lek is Albania’s currency, 1 USD is about 110 lek

We will always provide short-term aid when it is needed. Right now that’s what we are talking about. But I hope our supporters understand that the education programs are the long-term solution.”

It’s a solution that goes beyond “teaching a man to fish.” People who live near one of Europe’s oldest and deepest freshwater lakes may not need that lesson right now. Even as global problems originating far beyond Albania’s borders challenge us all, they create both short-term needs and a renewed urgency for longer-term solutions. At NG, even as we adapt to rising prices for aid parcels, we will continue to invest in future leaders who have the skills and the values to build a world where less people need emergency aid.



Heda (photo courtesy of Benilda Merdani)

A Playground in Peacetime

By Arlinda Merdani

With the recent outbreak of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine on February 24, Europe has moved from many years of peace to a frightening and unpredictable new reality.

I visited Albania earlier this month to celebrate the 6th birthday of my niece, Heda. I was able to enjoy the peace and chat with my mother over a cup of coffee, even as horrible pictures from Ukraine filled the TV. We tried not to let Heda watch the news, but in an Albanian house life is mostly concentrated in the kitchen. It was inevitable that the little girl would see such pictures. Then she asked me: "Why do people hurt each other?"

I had given her the book *100 Kinder* by Christoph Drösser as a present last Christmas. In the book, the world consists of only 100 children. The book explores the

different and unequal lives of children around the world. Heda, was saddened by the chapter „Children fleeing“ and said where she would go if she left her home because of war.

A few months later, hundreds of thousands of children have had to flee their homes. Heda learned gratitude for peace and inspired by this she painted a playground with flowers, swing chair and blue sky. She titled her painting "Playground in Peace Time" and thought about how to help children fleeing. She decided to give me most of her toys, to bring to the refugee children.

When I traveled home to Germany after Heda's birthday, I was carrying even more toys than I had brought to give to her. I was also carrying a substantial cash donation from a family I know well. Although they are a family of modest means, they asked me to use their donation to help Ukrainian refugees through one of NG's partner projects. Even in times like these it is possible also to feel hopeful seeing the tremendous generosity and kindness we all have within us.

The NG team has tremendous compassion and concern for the Ukrainian people during this crisis.

To help, NG is working with reliable partners-- organizations we have known for a long time and know to be trustworthy. NG USA is working with the Danish organization Mission10Forty to help Ukrainian refugees. For possible US tax deduction, donate to Mission10Forty through NG USA at ng-usa.org/donate and write "Ukraine relief" in the memo.

To support aid organizations effectively, donate money rather than food and other goods!

Organizations that are helping refugees find donations of money much more helpful and easier to manage. Money does not expire and is not heavy to transport—so if the need is greatest six months from now, your gift will still be good. And the organization has the latitude to use money where the greatest need is.

For the full interview with Arnold Geiger, founder of NG:
<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/how-can-we-help-interview>



Matthias Schindler, one of the most successful para-cyclers worldwide, is training in his favorite discipline: Time trial



Matthias and Siw with their little daughter Emma

From The Wheelchair to The Top of The Sporting World

Honorary Ambassadors for NG, Matthias and Siw Schindler, have an impressive story to tell

“ ... when the light goes out, I fall!” In 2010, the German police officer Matthias Schindler was diagnosed with a spinal tumor, which led to severe incomplete paraplegia. He explains, *“Both my legs are numb from the waist down. It’s like they’ve gone to sleep ... there is no feedback. If I don’t have visual control, I don’t know what’s happening down there. I have to perform every movement consciously, nothing works automatically anymore.”* Today, his severe disability is hardly noticeable - at least when the lights are on.

Getting out of the wheelchair brought Matthias to cycling, an ideal sport to push his physical and mental limits. Top-level sports gave him new goals and perspectives; after all, advancing in the police service was no longer an option. A desk job until retirement? Unthinkable for the ambitious and active athlete. Today he holds, among others, multiple world championships in paracycling (time trial), the World Cup and, yes, he won a Paralympics bronze medal in Tokyo 2020!

Severe disability, career break, professional sports, world class competition ... his career testifies to an iron will. He talks openly about falling into a deep, dark hole and fighting his way out of it.

A struggle that naturally also left its mark on his private life. Matthias and Siw experienced many a deep crisis in their marriage, and their unfulfilled desire to have children was particularly stressful. Today, they can deal with this very openly. What’s more: after more than 15 years, their most ardent wish was finally fulfilled, and in January their little daughter Emma was born. Today, family is once again at the forefront of Matthias’ life plans, and he is also aiming for further successes in top-level sport over the next few years. What will happen after that? That is still open, but we will certainly be hearing a lot more from him.

Their experiences and, last but not least, their strong trust in God, enable Siw and Matthias to support other people as well, to overcome seemingly impossible obstacles and to show that one can lead an active, healthy and successful life despite a physical disability. Matthias does this today in inspiring motivational talks at big companies and institutions, and he gives personal coaching in the areas of motivation, general lifestyle, health and nutrition (www.andreakummer.com/de/athleten/matthias-schindler). Together, their wish is to accompany individuals and couples and help them solve problems and find new perspectives.

That’s why they were immediately enthusiastic about becoming Honorary Ambassadors for NG: “We’d like to invest ourselves, make our contribution and put our faith into action.” For starters, Matthias is using his many information channels and contacts to spread the word about NG’s work. But they also want to get involved with NG in a practical way and support the work. “This is just the right time for us to start something new.” They definitely have a lot to give.

Amaro Tan Students - Volunteers with Energy And Compassion For The Elderly

The weeks after Christmas were very cold in Pogradec this year— a damp cold that gets into your bones, cold that is only kept at bay by a hot stove that is constantly being fed with firewood. The people who are regulars at Amaro Tan’s soup kitchen are old, and firewood is expensive—and physically taxing to get.

Fortunately for them, Amaro Tan students are both energetic and compassionate. When the school arranged a firewood delivery for these vulnerable elders, the students did a lot of the legwork, helping deliver bundles of wood to homes all over the Pogradec area. Martin, an 8th grader, helped carrying firewood, saying “I am very happy to be able to give my contribution in helping the elderly. It gives me a sense of satisfaction when I help others.”

Amaro Tan students get a lot of help themselves during their time at the school. The Amaro Tan project was devised in 1998 for students who don’t get a lot of support at home—or even enough to eat. Without education, poverty and hopelessness are more likely to become a permanent condition for these young people. At Amaro Tan, students not only learn, they get healthy meals, access to healthcare and the support of teachers who are dedicated to seeing them succeed.

The goal of this 100% donor-funded program is to empower a new generation to build dignified and sustainable lives in their communities. This includes helping others. Through volunteer projects, students learn that they have something to give, and that helping others feels great. These projects are always entirely optional, and there is no negative consequence for not participating. But students are usually glad that they did.

A lakeshore cleanup on a sunny day last fall was an example of another volunteer project that provided real benefit to the community and showed the students that they could make a difference. Trash and plastic waste accumulate at



Amaro Tan student Martin Rizvani loves to lend a hand.

and around the lake, as waterways that flow down from the mountains carry garbage down and around the lake, as waterways that flow down from the mountains carry garbage down. In addition to being an eyesore, plastic and other waste harms the wildlife in and around this beautiful natural site. “The kids had a great time,” says Marin Piqoni, Director of Amaro Tan. “They made their town nicer, and they also got to spend a beautiful day outside.”

Increasingly, volunteer projects are part of day-to-day life at Amaro Tan. Helping our soup kitchen guests isn’t limited to firewood delivery. By assisting with meal service in the soup kitchen, students bring both company and youthful energy. Older students (ages 12-16) even help the clients out basic chores at home. They are accompanied by school staff, and the space is always inspected for hazards first. [If hazards are identified, NG’s facilities team visits first to fix them.] The students learn useful skills—and they learn what a difference they can make, just by showing up to lend a hand. As 9th grader Odise said after delivering firewood in January, “it gives me joy when I see their happy faces.”



Children at Amaro Tan just love their new playground.

Children's Faces Lit up With Glee

The new playground at Amaro Tan is a highlight among many other projects supported by the Rotary Club of Estes Park

When Rotarians from Estes Park visited Albania last fall to celebrate NG's 30th anniversary, they saw evidence of the Rotary Club of Estes Park's engagement everywhere. Since NG USA opened its doors in Colorado in 2016, Rotary Club of Estes Park has supported NG's work. Says Michelle Mann, NG USA Executive Director and a member of the Rotary Club of Estes Park: "The commitment and generosity of the Estes Park club makes a real difference in the lives of many Albanian children. I am proud and inspired to be a member of such an active and philanthropic group of people."

Rotary was founded in 1905 so that professionals from different backgrounds could share ideas and build fellowship, with a strong humanitarian focus developing over time. Today, there are over 46,000 Rotary clubs in over 200 countries—including Albania. Rotary grants leverage contributions at the individual, club, and district level. Nehemiah Gateway is fortunate to have enthusiastic support from the Rotary Club of Estes Park, as well as from the Pogradec Rotary Club.

These are a few of the projects Rotary Club of Estes Park has made possible since 2017:

Amaro Tan Summer Camp, 2018-20. Amaro Tan is a school for 140 at-risk youth ages kindergarten-9th grade. During the school year, students benefit from a supportive educational environment, hot meals, aid for families and access to healthcare and social work. During the summer, there is risk of attrition—and once kids stop going to school, many never come back. Summer camp keeps them engaged in a positive environment where they can have fun with their friends.

Children's Learning Center, 2020, funded through a Global Grant in partnership with Pogradec Rotary Club. Special education is a new and growing area in Albania. Pogradec schools do not offer services for children with special needs and NG is one of the only places to offer these services free of charge. Grant funds allowed NG to expand their program and facilities and hold trainings on working with children with special needs. Trainings were developed for clinic staff; for teachers in NG's schools; and for teachers from local public schools.

Summer Camp for Special Needs Children, 2021. Summer camp brings together the children participating in the Learning Center program in a fun, supportive, and supervised setting to socialize and have fun with their friends while learning useful, hands-on skills.

Amaro Tan Playground, winter 2021-22. The kindergarten playground at Amaro Tan was little more than some tires, a wooden shack, and a depleted sandbox. A grant from Rotary purchased a new structure with slides, a swingset, a seesaw, and a fresh sandbox.

International Committee member Ron Gordon has a favorite project. "For all the joy the various schools and camps brought our Rotary club, replacing the Amaro Tan playground was the most joyful. To see bare ground turned into a kaleidoscope of colorful equipment was a delight—and useful for years to come."

Rotarian and past club president Doug Mann seems to agree. "I was privileged to be at the Amaro Tan school the first time the students played on the new playground," said Doug. "To watch these young children run to the equipment, to see their faces light up with glee as they slid down the slide and were pushed by the teachers in the new swings; this event was priceless. Our Estes Park club was very happy we could help."



At a Glance



A SPECIAL TREAT FOR UKRAINIAN REFUGEES

Millions of refugees, mainly women and children, fled the war in Ukraine. Many have found refuge in Germany, hundreds arrived in the region of Nuremberg. Nehemiah Gateway invites a number of those living in mass shelters and shared quarters to take a break and spend 2-3 days in its beautiful Hotel Lindenhof.

Many of the children and their relatives suffer from war-related trauma and stress. A short retreat at the Lindenhof gives them the opportunity forget their misery for a while, to play, relax and spend quality time together. Families enjoy the warm welcome at the hotel, the beautiful nature, the delicious food and also the hotel's spa and recreational facilities. We try to support and encourage them to take the next steps in their lives.

"Naturally, it isn't in our power to do anything about the war in Ukraine, but we hope that a free stay in our relaxing facilities will at least bring some comfort during this terrible time," says Member of the NG Board of Partners Kai Uellendahl.



POGRADEC YOUTH COUNCIL

Pogradec Municipality and Nehemiah Gateway University are the main supporters of Pogradec Youth Council (KRP) in its work with the youth of the city. "It's so important for young people to feel that their voices are heard in a meaningful way," said Dorian Leka, Head of KRP's periodical publication "Letër e Hapur", and responsible for Recruitment & Enrollment Management at Nehemiah Gateway University. We are grateful for this initiative of the KRP team and are happy to give our support!

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