

RESTORING HOPE

Establishing Albanian Social Anchors



Dr Krish Kandiah OBE



Faith Communities Roundtable Gathering, Tirana, Albania, April 2023

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Albania is the most frequent place of origin of those involved in small boat irregular migration accounting for 28% of the 46,000 who were known to arrive this way in 2022.

To deter Albanian young people from making the dangerous crossing of the English Channel on the small boats, we have the opportunity to work with the Albanian government, faith groups and civil leaders to build educational, employment and entrepreneurial opportunities in country for potential migrants.

A fact-finding mission went to Tirana and Kamza to speak with Albanian young people, faith and civil society leaders, politicians and NGOs. The mission assessed the opportunities and viability for anchoring approaches to keep young Albanians safe.

Albania is a unique and exciting context for these anchoring projects. It has a growing economy, a peaceful and constructive interfaith working relationship, and is reasonably accessible within Europe. New forms of civic engagement and capacity building will be of strategic benefit not only to Albania but to the wider diplomatic and development mission of the UK.

Interventions in Albania can spearhead new approaches to migration, which, when proved successful, can then be expanded into other countries.

Migration Push Factors

- Economic Poverty
- Family Responsibility
- Poverty of Opportunity
- National Exodus

Migration Pull Factors

- Organised Criminal Gangs
- Social Media Marketing
- UK's Labour Shortages
- UK's Multicultural Society

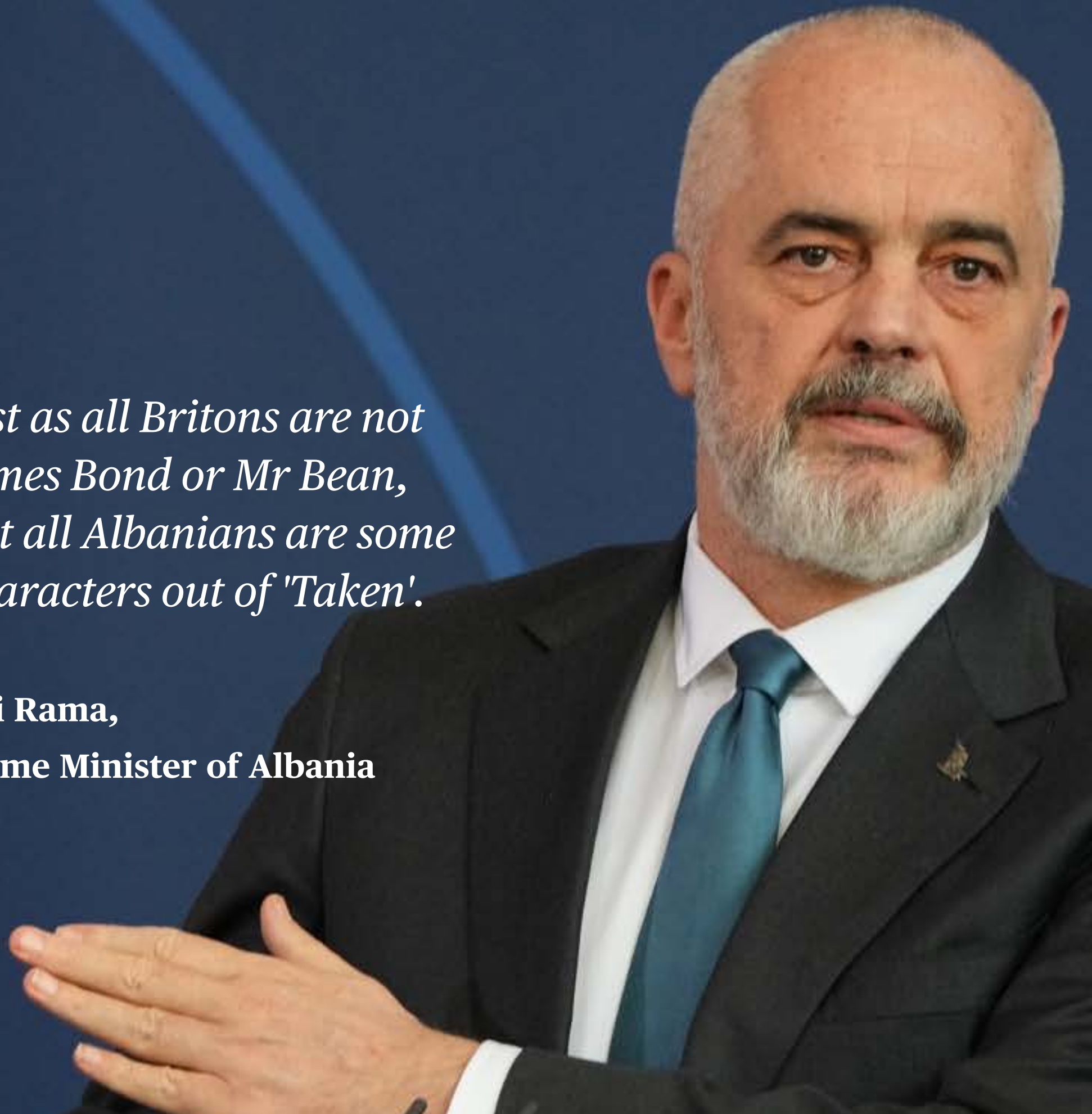
Social Anchor Solutions

- Strategic Communications Campaign
- Government-Faith Community Partnership
- Employment Opportunities through Investment
- Educational Opportunities through Vocational Training
- Entrepreneurial Opportunities through Sport
- Qualified Visa Routes
- Young People Empowerment
- Faith Bridges

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*Just as all Britons are not
James Bond or Mr Bean,
not all Albanians are some
characters out of 'Taken'.*

**Edi Rama,
Prime Minister of Albania**



INTRODUCTION

The UK government has made stopping the small boat crossings one of its top five priorities following a major spike in the number of people apprehended trying to enter the UK via this route.

In 2020, 54 Albanians were detected crossing the Channel to come to the UK in small boats. This figure rose to 815 in 2021, and last year, 2022, jumped 1500% to 12,301. Albania was the largest place of origin of those involved in small boat irregular migration accounting for 28% of the 46,000 who were known to arrive this way.

As well as attempting to curb Albanian migration by stopping the small boats, another approach would be to incentivise potential migrants to stay in their home countries, by building educational, employment and entrepreneurial opportunities there.

To look at the viability of this anchoring approach, we spent three days of April 2023 on a fact-finding mission to Albania. Our aim was to identify the drivers that have led to the spike in migration, considering the relative stability of the country. We also wanted to better understand the push and pull factors influencing young men to make the dangerous journey to cross the channel and attempt to migrate to the UK. And we wanted to explore some solutions that could help young Albanian men choose to stay in their home country.

We conducted a series of focus groups with university students and High school students in Kamza, we also interviewed politicians from Dibra and finally conducted an extensive round table consultation with faith and civil society leaders. These discussions began by focussing on migration push and pull factors.





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The UK risks charges of hypocrisy if we focus disproportionately on keeping people out. The overall focus should be on building anchors not walls.

Professor Alexander Betts
Refugee Study Centre,
Oxford University

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The generational trauma endemic in the culture has led to a passivity and unhealed and deeply embedded psychological consequence in the heart of the Albanian people.... There is need for a truth and reconciliation process amongst the people to undergo healing from this trauma and rediscover their own respect and dignity.

Sr Imelda Poole MBE,
Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary
(Loreto Sisters)



PUSH FACTORS

1. Economic Poverty

Tirana and the tourist areas of Durres, Shkodra and Vlora are now beautiful holiday destinations and bustling and modern towns and cities. But there are parts of the country particularly in the North of Albania that have been left behind by the recent surge in development.

It is predominantly these areas that are seeing an exodus of young lads via a perilous journey in small boats, and the main reason being given is economic poverty. One High School student commented: “The cost of everything has increased in the last year due to the Ukraine war.” Albania seems to be experiencing its own cost-of-living crisis and families from poorer areas are having to make impossible decisions: “families have to choose whether to buy medicine or whether to eat,” said one young woman.

2. Family Responsibility

Increased economic pressures are coupled with Albanian culture’s very strong intergenerational family bonds. Families are relying on young men to travel abroad, earn money and send it back to support the wider family. Parents are pushing their sons to migrate by all means available in order to provide for the family and encouraging them to have a better life outside the country.

Therefore, the risk to life on a small boat is a price many young people are willing to consider in order to seek to fulfil their responsibility to provide economically for one another. The young people we met in the town of Kamza confirmed this sense of obligation. Many of their school friends had left to go and live in the UK. One young person remarked “most of the families here rely on relatives abroad sending money.” Many families are supported by those who migrated to Italy or Greece in the 1990s^[1]. It is estimated that up to half of the population of Albania are living abroad with the majority living in Greece and Italy. Studies show that another 83% of Albanians still living in their home country would like to leave if they can^[2].



3. Poverty of Opportunity

Talking with students aged between 14 and 16 in a high school in Kamza, it was clear that every one of them knew someone who had travelled to the UK in a small boat. The students were all aware of the financial cost of coming to the UK and how it is a lot cheaper now that the small boat route is available than previous times when people used the backs of articulated lorries to make the journey. They are also aware of the dangers. When asked why people made the journey, they told us that it was because there was nothing for people to do in Kamza: there were no opportunities to earn a living. The students believed that they could earn 5 times as much on a building site in the UK as they could potentially earn in Kamza, even if jobs were available there. “There’s nothing to do here” said one young boy. We “have nothing to lose” added another. The students commented that those who struggled academically were most likely to want to leave via small boats, while those who succeeded were more likely to pursue further education or employment overseas. It is this poverty of opportunity that leads many parents in these towns to actively encourage their children to leave, and work in the grey economy – undocumented as labourers or in a car wash for cash in hand. The young people saw it as their parents driving them to succeed in life, rather than simply for financial benefit.

4. A National Exodus

Most Albanians leave the country are the highly educated and skilled people who are keen to seize opportunities to study or work overseas. Balkan Barometer found that medical professionals constitute the largest sector of Albanians seeking a fresh start outside of the country. We also heard of directors of banks leaving Albania to work in the US financial industry, lawyers seeking employment in Europe. This is causing labour shortages in Albania and some businesses are even flying in workers from Bangladesh to fill vacancies. It was observed that there has been no national census in Albania for over 10 years, and some are worried the country’s population has drastically shrunk. Schools are closing for lack of students. Dr Andi Hoxha of UCL described the exodus as leaving behind hollowed out “ghost towns.”^[3] The more people who leave, the more this creates a push towards further exodus.





Young people lack hope and they believe that their dreams can be fulfilled in other countries and not in Albania. This is not just a problem for Albania - it is a problem for the world. However there are faith communities in Albania who are modelling something different and, with international support, could help restore hope for the future of our country.

Toni Gogu

**Member of Parliament and Former
Deputy Minister in the Ministry of
Justice of Albania**

PULL FACTORS

1. Organised Criminal Gangs

A jump from 815 to 12031 Albanians caught making the difficult crossing to the UK does not happen without organised crime. Gangs capitalise on the inequalities in Albania between the rich and the poor and provide aspiration to those living without hope of a good life. They make promises of cheap and easy crossings from Calais. They promise fast money. Because it costs £3000 to come to the UK, the families take loans and the gangs promise they can be paid back on arrival in the UK through work. The gangs find them jobs in grow houses for cannabis. These debutant criminals are easily caught by the UK police force. Over 1300 Albanians are in British prisons right now. Most of the young men coming to the United Kingdom in this way had no intention of working with criminals or being involved with drugs – they wanted to earn money honestly and legally. However too many are tricked, coerced, exploited or tempted into criminal activities as a direct result of their choice of route to the UK. They are no longer eligible for protection under the Modern Slavery Act if they have arrived via small boat crossings.

2. Social Media Marketing

When people heard that my accent was from London, they asked if I knew 'The London Boys.' Groups of Albanian young men (often linked to criminal activity) have a very professional social media presence where they advertise themselves driving around Britain's capital in a pimped up Mercedes Benz or bright yellow jaguar with an Albanian flag on the bonnet. They portray a luxury and aspirational lifestyle that is very attractive to disenfranchised Albanian youth from the left behind cities in the north. They and other online influencers like them offer this image to young Albanians their influence coupled with the criminal gangs making use of clever marketing online marketing, offering bargain deals to be smuggled to the UK, for example when the Queen died or the Prime Minister resigned have a big impact on the hearts and minds of disaffected youth in Albania.



3. UK's Labour Shortages

Young Albanians know that there are labour shortages in the UK, for example in the building trade or the lucrative seasonal work opportunities. Comparatively well paid, low skilled work is an attractive prospect to teenagers with nothing to lose. The disparity in wages for relatively unskilled labour in the UK and in Albania makes it more than worthwhile to risk the irregular routes.

4. UK's Multicultural Society

When the Kamza students were asked why the boys were travelling to the UK, as opposed to Germany or other European countries, they told us that it was because Britain was seen to be a welcoming multicultural society. "I went to Germany and people were racist towards Albanians, while in Britain, you treat people with respect" said one university student. Another said: "when I look at your Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, and even your Home Secretary and I see that the skin is brown, I think if they can make a success in Britain, maybe I can too." Others are inspired by Albanian-heritage pop stars Rita Ora and Dua Lipa. Many have some familiarity with English language because of their access to the BBC or film and television industries which act as a lure and an imaginative bridge, particularly for the younger demographic.



POTENTIAL FOR INTERVENTION

1. Strategic Communications Campaign

The roundtable revealed a strong and active presence of faith group and NGO youth and family work across Albania. Faith leaders explained that they are trusted often more than the government or international actors, due to history of corruption. They have reach to families both through their work with the families of the young people tempted to come to the UK but also with the young people themselves through programmes that have been running for decades. The faith groups of Albania claim to work well together across denominational and inter-religious lines. We also heard from youth initiatives from the Muslim, Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant communities providing vital services to young people in Albania and working to prevent young people from being exploited and trafficked. Some of these groups would be excellent partners for strategic communication initiatives. The messaging could include myth-busting the lies of criminal gangs promising a life of luxury in the UK, as well as showcasing testimonies of those who have been exploited, criminalised and imprisoned. It could also highlight success stories from within Albania, such as in the tourist trade, or from other young entrepreneurs.

2. Government-Faith Community Partnership

Many of those at our faith leaders' roundtable commented how much they appreciated being involved and consulted when it came to a national social challenge. They would like further opportunities to be able to problem solve and solution find. In recent years we have seen a sea change in the way that government and faith communities have collaborated for public benefit and the common good in the UK. There is great opportunity to capacity build in Albania through further strengthening and developing the faith community's contribution to national life. Many of the things the government wants to do to improve education, employment and entrepreneurial opportunities in Albania are already being set up by civic groups, charities and NGOs. By working together with government, capacity can be expanded and impact increased.



3. Employment Opportunities through Investment

Strategic communications from any one group (government, education, faith etc) is unlikely to persuade marginalised youth in the poorest parts of Albania to stay. However, a more cohesive approach is likely to have more impact. DHLUC's investment into development grants for local and national VCS partners catalysed widespread good practice for the welcome and inclusion of Hong Kong BNO passport holders. The money energised and empowered these groups to effective and impactful service. Development Grants for grassroots projects is not only potentially more impactful, but more economical. The money goes much further when channelled into existing networks, than when used for a brand-new start from third party providers. Local-based projects also provide opportunities for entrepreneurial drive and employment. Grant applications could be made possible for funding from UKAID for Albanian local community initiatives, as it will have direct impact on improving the lives of the poorest of Albania.

4. Education Opportunities through Vocational Training

Educational development is one of the British Council's key priorities in the region. Many of the boys who come to the UK have struggled in the more academically focussed elements of their education. Albania used to have a strong tradition of vocational training under communism but has moved towards a more academic focussed system in recent times. There are excellent models of vocational training that have been pioneered in British schools through initiatives such as University Technical Colleges. A pilot vocational educational intervention in the three towns of Dibra, Kamza and Kukes could go a long way to establishing educational anchors in Albania. If the array of subjects could be aligned with local or foreign business interests looking at investment in the affordable labour markets in Albania this could offer a compelling reason for young people to stay and help bring wealth and flourishing to the region.



5. Entrepreneurial Opportunities through Sport

For disaffected youth struggling with their academic education sport is a well proven way to develop self-esteem, local community links and personal life goals. At the roundtable we heard from an exciting community initiative: Tirana United^[4] which has been funded by faith groups to regenerate an underdeveloped area of Tirana. The project won a FIFA award of excellence and provides football and tennis training for girls and boys in the area. It has contributed to the physical, emotional and spiritual well-being of families and children and brought a greater sense of community cohesion to the area. This model could be expanded across Albania targeting the three impoverished towns where most of the migration is taking place. It would provide employment and recreational opportunities, entrepreneurial opportunities for smaller businesses in the area to scale up. It would bring hope and community spirit to the wider area, incentivising young men to stay.

6. Further qualified visa routes

The provision of safe and legal routes for young Albanians to come to the UK may, ironically, also help to prevent this surge in migration. None of them would pay traffickers £3000 to come to the UK via a non-seaworthy dinghy and work with a criminal gang if they could get on a daily Whizzair flight for £40 and legitimately earn a living. They could help meet labour shortages in the UK, send money home to their families in Albania, contribute their taxes to the UK economy, and choose to return to Albania when they could afford to. Albania's brand-new Chamber of Commerce has shown enthusiastic interest in helping to build bridges between companies in the UK who need to recruit skilled workers and companies in Albania. Further links could be developed especially in areas where the UK has labour shortages, such as construction, fruit-picking and social care for example.



7. Empowerment of young people

The faith group World Vision Albania has a well-established education and life skills programme working on inclusive education, social inclusion, life skills and youth empowerment activities that currently reaches thousands of adolescents across the country. They in turn contribute positively to their communities. One project specifically encourages the development of confident, self-aware and resilient young people who participate in the social, civic and economic life of the country. A second project aims to help strengthen families helping them become more productive and financially stable and building resilience through planning for the future. Projects such as these could make a big difference to the attitudes of the young Albanian men of the future. However it is important not only to fund such projects but to work with them to engage with children and young people in decision making. When young people feel heard and are treated as a valuable part of the society, they are more likely to contribute positively to their country.

8. Building Faith Bridges

With the strong potential for faith groups to take a lead in delivery of programmes across Albania that can actively support community cohesion, it is vital to strengthen links between government and faith leaders. This could be done simply through a programme of inspirational events hosted or attended by high profile faith leaders such as the Archbishop of Canterbury. Visits to local projects could be included in order to bolster morale on the ground.



CONCLUSION

Recommendations from the visit to Albania and the roundtable discussion start with engaging with the young people and listening further to their ideas, building bridges and partnerships with the faith communities and charity already working in Albania. From there a strategic communications campaign can be developed to significantly invest in and enhance opportunities for employment, education and entrepreneurship based on projects that are already underway across the country. These will act as anchors encouraging the young people of Albania to stay and help build a country they want to live in.

Albania is a unique and exciting context in which to explore the potential of these anchoring projects because it has a growing economy, a peaceful and constructive interfaith working relationship, and is reasonably accessible within Europe. It provides us with an opportunity to field test new forms of civic engagement and capacity building, that will be of strategic benefit not only to Albania but to the wider diplomatic and development mission of the UK. Test cases used in Albania can spearhead new approaches to migration, which, when proved successful, can then be expanded into other countries.



REFERENCES

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- [3] <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/news/2022/nov/analysis-albanias-ghost-towns-crisis-caused-exodus>
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There are so many opportunities to help the regions of Albania that have been left behind by the country's rapid development.

I lived in Albania during a dark period for the nation but now it seems to be on the cusp of renewed vision, hope and development. The potential for collaboration between government, civil society and faith communities for the common good is enormous and I look forward to seeing the part the UK can play in this.

Dr Krish Kandiah OBE

Director, Sanctuary Foundation

