

DRAFT – FIRST STAGE

The Shpresa Programme: Impact and Successes

‘The Shpresa Programme helps people to help themselves’

‘C’, a woman in her early 20s, Volunteers focus group

First Draft

1. Aim of Review

This review aims to clarify what the effects of the Shpresa Programme are on those who participate and volunteer, and on their families and life circumstances. We have attempted to explore how these effects happen and to suggest ways in which the capabilities embedded in the organisation and its members can be used to give even greater benefits to the Albanian community and the wider society in which it exists.

2. Methods

In order to understand the impact of the Shpresa Programme, the service users and the wider Albanian-speaking community, a questionnaire was asked of 200 service users, and a series of focus groups were held.

Focus groups were held with different groups of Albanian-speakers who use the services of or are in some way in contact with the Shpresa Programme. The following focus groups were held at Shpresa's main offices:

	Focus Group With	Female	Male	Total
A	Service users – adults	9	2	11
B	Service users – children & young people	9	7	16
C	Volunteers	9	0	9
D	Ex-service users/volunteers – adults	5	3	8
E	Service users & volunteers – young adults	2	2	4
	Totals	34	14	48

Focus groups were led by two facilitators, with another research taking notes. Most of the sessions were held in English, though some translation was needed in group A. In the analysis of the focus groups, contributions made via a translator are noted.

Though the focus groups were held with specific groups of service users, volunteers or ex-service users, there was a degree of cross-over. Some current service users were becoming volunteers. Some adults who had come to Shpresa as volunteers had since been service users and later trustees. This overlap was not problematic in the data collection, however, as it represented the fluid nature of user engagement with the Shpresa Programme and demonstrated how people using the services are encouraged to take advantages of all services and opportunities that might benefit them.

Some people also attended focus groups that did not 'fit' their use of the service (e.g. two young people who are volunteers should have been in the group E, but were only able to be present in group D. Again this was unproblematic due to the fluidity of their use of the organisation and the chance in each session for individuals to explain their history of engagement with Shpresa.

((Details of questionnaire to come later))

3. Findings from discussion groups

The Albanian community is a relatively new immigrant group. All the adults we met had arrived in UK with their families less than 10 years ago, and most came speaking very little or no English and with few resources, into a state of isolation and often considerable distress. The young people we met included those who had arrived with their parents at a young age and others who had been born in the UK since the family's arrival.

In this sample of service users and volunteers, their experiences with the Shpresa Programme had been universally positive. Over and over again we heard of the dramatic changes that people had managed to make in their lives and always, at the heart of these changes, they were able to describe a long-term, incremental process that enabled them to move away from passivity, depression, confusion and isolation to purposefulness, confidence and community involvement.

The entry points that our respondents described fell into four broad groups within which experiences were remarkably similar:

1) Adults who had heard about the Shpresa Programme and came to seek specific help with a problem. In many cases the help they received involved a combination of advice, translation services and encouragement to take action. These adults frequently went on to become more involved in other activities and introduced their family to the services and activities offered.

'M', a female service user in her late 20s with two children, explained that she had heard of the Shpresa Programme from her friends. She said they told her 'You can go to the Shpresa Programme for what you need, for everything...[they have] many activities for kids, for us'. She joined the organisation and took part in an English course. She later participated in a range of other courses, including childcare. Her children attend the dancing and language sessions, and other activities open to them. She told the group that it was hard at first to persuade her husband to let her go to Shpresa, but that it is alright now. She has since become a volunteer and continues to attend the Womens' Project sessions. She said:

'I [found] new friends...a welcoming and warm environment'

A female service user in her early 30s told us about her involvement in Shpresa – which had been for the past four years. As a refused asylum seekers she was seen as an 'illegal' immigrant and was therefore without an income. She said that Shpresa had referred her to places where she could get food, and clothes for her children. They also supported her new asylum claim and subsequent Definite Leave to Remain status.

*'I went to them for every problem'
(story shared via translator)*

2) A smaller number of adults who came to Shpresa as volunteers, normally initially as interpreters and have remained involved with the wider range of activities.

'G', a man in his early 30s, told us about his involvement in Shpresa since 2004. He initially joined as a volunteer taking part in interpreting, translation and advocacy services. He is now a member of the Board of Trustees and values the experience that involvement with Shpresa has given him.

'Working with Shpresa was one of the best experiences in my life'

A man in his 40s explained that he had joined Shpresa in 2005 as a volunteer for a year. He had previously graduated with a qualification in housing studies and benefited from working with Shpresa by gaining advocacy experience around housing, which helped him to get employment. He is still involved with the organisation on the Board of Trustees.

3) Young people who heard about the activities such as dancing or kick-boxing from their parents or friends or through the Schools Project and, often after being initially tentative and doubtful, found they enjoyed the activity and through it had found a circle of friends.

One teenage male explained that he got involved with Shpresa because his friend had. They now both take part in kickboxing, football and traditional Albanian dancing. He said that the dancing gave him more confidence than he had had previously.

'J', a fifteen year old girl told the group about becoming involved in the organisation via her mother. She said before joining she was not doing anything productive with her time. Once she joined Shpresa and took part in their Young People's Project she made friends and understood more about her background. She said she was better able to understand her family now, as she knows about their culture.

4) Adults who had come to the Shpresa Programme as a user of services, who had since become a volunteer and used the experience and training gained to access further training and employment. This progress seemed to allow some service users, particularly women, to access opportunities they did not think would otherwise have been open to them.

One woman in her early 40s told us about how involvement with Shpresa had given her the experience and confidence to get employment in the voluntary sector. She initially joined as a service user, then later became a Board Member and Treasurer. She took part in a great deal of training via the Shpresa Programme and became a volunteer helping with financial aspects of the organisation. She now has two part time jobs as finance workers for two voluntary organisations. Her children have been, or continue to be, involved in Shpresa's activities for young people and she highly values the chance for them to learn Albanian so that they can communicate with their grandparents.

'It was a great experience. I got back more than my contribution'

One woman said she joined the Shpresa Programme as part of the Volunteering Project where she did interpreting and translation for Albanian-speaking women accessing mental health services. This experience inspired her to study psychology. She now has a degree in psychology and is planning further post-graduate study.

Once the users had been introduced through one of these routes, they then tended to explore the other opportunities available to them and their families through the Shpresa Programme and often to actively pursue activities on a regular basis that they felt would give them personal benefits – as the stories above show. The result of this growing level of involvement tended to be described in very similar ways by almost all of those we interviewed, although obviously not all respondents joined at the same point in the process.

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This story in one form or another was told repeatedly, especially by women and by young people. The implications are highly significant. Because of the process that is at the heart of the Shpresa Programme, those who move on from simply seeking advice to becoming more regularly involved gain a set of sustainable benefits that are life changing for them. It is not merely that they adjust to life in the new UK setting, but that their aspirations, confidence, capability and achievements move beyond the levels they might have achieved if they had remained in their original Albanian setting.

It is important to point out that the Shpresa Programme, whilst it was set up to meet the needs of men, women and young people, has nevertheless become associated

particularly with women and their families. The involvement of adult, especially older, men has therefore been somewhat different from the above model and therefore the impact on their lives has almost certainly been less. Whilst adult men have used the advice and translation services almost as much as women, they have tended to become involved in other activities mainly only when there is “Men’s Work” to be done (such as decorating or maintenance) or when there are bigger community events and performances. This “personal development” process described above, therefore tends to have been seen as being aimed at women.

The facilitators wondered whether men perhaps did not like to ask for help or to access services from women, given the traditionally patriarchal nature of Albanian culture that the focus groups participants spoke of. Shpresa’s Women’s Development Worker said:

Shpresa’s advice surgeries are nearly 50/50 gender-wise. When there is a need, men come and use the services. They have no need to socialise here as they can go to Albanian cafes. They might come to celebrate cultural events – so their attendance is equal, but different. Men have no difficulty in coming to me [for advice] if their wife can’t come, or if the man needs to. (Paraphrased)

Shpresa’s female Women’s Development Worker

4. Questionnaire findings

(To be inserted later)

5. Why is this effect happening?

The amount of positive effects reported by our respondents appears to be based on several factors working together. Some of these features of how the Shpresa Programme works may have originally emerged quite unconsciously. Now however, staff, volunteers and women and young people participating on a regular basis tend to consciously reinforce each of the factors so that their effects become even more marked.

The main factors are:

- Inclusiveness
- Cultural Identity
- Problem Solving Know-How
- Focus on Women and Young People
- Progressive Steps
- Understanding the UK and Getting the UK to Understand Albanian-Speakers

Each of these components will be discussed with a sample of representative quotes and stories from the focus group sessions.

Inclusiveness – Shpresa has a very strong culture of family, friendship, solidarity and warmth which gives rise to high levels of trust and openness. It also sends out messages of inclusiveness to newcomers, so that they can take full advantage of the

opportunities as quickly as possible. In the focus groups, service users often referred to Shpresa, its staff and users, as 'family':

'I feel very good with the Shpresa Programme, for me it is my family'

'E', woman in the Service Users focus group

'I was accepted as part of a family'

'G', man in the Volunteers/Ex-Service Users – Adults focus group

'We are far from home, and do not have much family. When I go to Shpresa I feel I am with my family. I calm down and can cope better with my children'

'W', women in the Volunteers focus group

'We feel friends, [the staff] are not just 'staff''

'K', woman in the Service Users focus group

'The staff are friends, [I] enjoy every minute with them'

'L', woman in the Volunteers focus group

'Friendship here is very important'

'M', woman in the Service Users focus group

'[After joining Shpresa as service user and volunteer] They completely changed my life...I was happy as I made friends. Shpresa is my point of reference'

'D', young woman in the Volunteers/Ex-Service Users focus group

Cultural Identity – Shpresa's programme of activities, and provision of a 'space' for the Albanian-speaking community provides a clear reinforcement of identity of what it means to be Albanian through language, dances and cultural climate and activities. This reinforces family ties by giving better means of communication between parents and children and building new links to grandparents. This clarity of identity is experienced as providing a way of finding one's place in British society and giving rise to respect from others outside the Albanian community. Our respondents often described a strong sense of confusion and isolation which had been eliminated by their newfound identity.

When I was younger I did feel proud to be Albanian, but I wanted to fit in with what was going on...Shpresa gives you pride in Albania and you need that to integrate

(Paraphrased)

'Y', woman in early 20s, Volunteers focus group

One man felt that Shpresa offered children the chance to experience their culture even when families were unable to go home:

If you go back home it raises a different perspective for children. If families can't afford to go, the Shpresa Programme can replicate the experience (paraphrased)

'N', man in his 40s, Ex-Service Users/Volunteers focus group

The young people were particularly proud of their cultural heritage. When asked, all the participants in the Children and Young Peoples' focus groups said they would want their own children to know their language and history.

'I was a bit shy to say I was Albanian, but I came here and got confidence and now I'm proud to say I'm Albanian'

'T', 9 year old girl in the Children & Young People's focus group

'I benefited a lot, I got the experience and friends I needed...I didn't have any Albanian friends before, I lost my culture. I know more who I am now'

'J', 15 year old girl, Children & Young People's focus group.

[In response to 'Would you still come here if your parents didn't make you?'] 'Yes, as I want to learn more about my culture, and show it to others'

'H', 10 year old girl in the Children & Young People's focus group

Problem Solving Know-How – In Shpresa it is clear that the staff act as role models to service users and volunteers, and demonstrate consistent patterns of behaviour. This includes:

- Acting as though every problem can be solved.
- Knowing enough about a vast range of subjects to be able to be useful to others, but also admitting the limits of their knowledge and finding experts who do know.
- Not compartmentalising problems, but seeing those they help as people in the round.
- Stressing self-help and encouraging active experimentation and personal development.
- Encouraging honest reflection and openness in facing difficulties.

The effect of stressing the skills of problem solving is that participants can transfer this approach to all other problems they face.

When talking to the Service Users focus group the facilitator asked about the seemingly wide range of knowledge held by the staff of the Shpresa Programme and those present tended to agree. One said:

I agree, people here [Shpresa] have a wide range of knowledge, especially in referrals
(Via translator, paraphrased)

'P', woman in early 30s, Service Users focus group

'[Shpresa] put me through many, many training...they brought my confidence back. If [the staff] can't help, they find someone else to help'

'L', woman in the Volunteers focus group

As these women reveal, Shpresa is excellent at making use of referrals to other organisations if they cannot solve problem themselves. Not only are referrals made, but the service user is supported by Shpresa throughout the period of need. One service user explained the process as she had experienced it.

I asked with help to find a solicitor as it is hard to cope with two children illegally. Shpresa helped me to make an appointment and to collect evidence. I was supported by NASS in [name of town] for eight months, then I got status. At every step Shpresa helped with forms and correspondence.

(Via translator, paraphrased)
'P', woman in early 30s, Service Users focus group

Focus on women and young people – The Shpresa Programme provides a range of specific projects for children, young people and women. Hence, there appears to be a focus on these groups. Although this focus was probably not intentional, it has had the effect of reaching those who are the most significant holders and transmitters of cultural values.

However, as Shpresa's Women's Development Worker was keen to point out there have been attempts to attract male service users to a greater extent – including a Men's Project along the same lines as the highly successful Women's Group, but at more appropriate times and more suitable venues. However this was not successful. The facilitators asked the service users why this might be:

Some of them work, it is not that they don't want to be involved
(Paraphrased)

'I', woman in her late 20s, Service Users focus group

Men go out a lot, they meet in pubs, Albanian cafes and share their culture and memories. So they do have opportunities [to maintain their Albanian culture]
(via translator, paraphrased)

'R', man in early 60s, Service Users focus group

Older men aged thirty to sixty, they have a mentality (Paraphrased)

'G', man in the Volunteers/Ex-Service Users – Adults focus group

They are expected to earn and provide for the family here and at home. Also [in our culture] men are dominating (Paraphrased)

'Z', woman in the Volunteers/Ex-Service Users – Adults focus group

As outlined above, it was noted that men *do* use Shpresa services as and when it is needed, or that they benefit without direct involvement:

Men were involved in the Talent show, but women are the ones who take part in the projects. Men are getting the benefits of Shpresa from their wives and children
(Paraphrased) 'O', woman in the Volunteers focus group

One man in his early 60s explained that he had used Shpresa's translation and interpretation services in order to understand some official letters he had received. He appreciated the fact that he could come at any time, on any day and be helped by the staff. He said:

I have been coming since Shpresa was in Manor Park. Since then I feel at home, it is like my family (via translator, paraphrased)

'R', man 60s, Service Users focus group

Progressive Steps – Participants reported how they have continued to take on progressive challenges to suit their stage of development both within Shpresa, such as the volunteering programme, or outside, such as courses to further their career aspirations. It is clear that the staff take an active hand in encouraging and supporting

this climate of self-development. There is a strong feeling amongst women who are current and ex-service users that by being in the UK and in contact with Shpresa, that they can achieve things that would not have been possible at home in their personal development and careers. This is partly because they can access courses and training; partly due to encouragement from staff members; and partly because of the increase in confidence that contact with Shpresa and use of its services, offers.

I have benefited from activities and training courses. At home, being 25, I would not be able to access this

(Via translator, paraphrased)

'M', woman in the Service Users focus group

'Shpresa is like a stepping stone to improve your skills and see what is out there'

'Y', woman in early 20s, Volunteers focus group

They made me feel good for myself. Previously, I was isolated, waiting for a decision on my refugee status. [Once in contact with Shpresa] 'I felt useful working for other people.

I got my self-esteem and have gone on to higher education'

'B', woman in the Volunteers focus group

I came to Shpresa in 2002, and helped with the Albanian classes, I have done training, and worked in the office. 'I really found my confidence. I had been inspired by them,

especially [the Project Director]

'AA', woman in the Volunteers focus group

'The people at Shpresa serve as role models for us – my parents...still live in the past. People like [the Project Director] are an inspiration. We can be proud of being English and Albanian'

'Y', woman in early 20s, Volunteers focus group

Me and my friends had hairdressing qualifications. [The Project Director] encouraged us to manage a shop. We have been doing it for three years now, we are doing well over there (Paraphrased)

'BA', woman in the Volunteers focus group

This trend of aiming high is also very apparent in the young people who access Shpresa's services. In the focus group with Children and Young People, aged 7-20, there was a strong sense of ambition and having high personal expectations that appears to be linked to the experiences they have had with Shpresa and the interaction with the staff and older volunteers.

One teenage boy, 'F', told the facilitators about his involvement in presenting Shpresa's Talent Show. Because of this he had been prompted to approach his school to suggest staging a show about youth mentality – which he received permission for. He said:

I think Barking and Dagenham youth are into crime – they don't care about education, they get bored at home, get into alcohol and this leads to trouble you can't control.

Before I was involved in Shpresa I used to be not a very good little boy...My parents sent me to Shpresa because I was getting into trouble at school. Now I've changed a lot,

I've changed my friends. In school I don't have any problems (Paraphrased)

'F', teenage male, Children & Young People's focus group

This teenager was also involved in volunteering on Shpresa's Youth Programme. It seemed common for young people to become volunteers at a certain age after benefiting from services as younger children, whilst also still accessing relevant services – like the Young Persons Project for those over 13 years of age.

An adult in another focus group had a similar story to 'F', but was at a later stage of his life – in his early 20s. It was clear he felt that Shpresa had had a very good stabilising influence on his life:

When I was younger I came to activities. I used to be getting into trouble. I came to Shpresa because I didn't know much English, or what to do. I was depressed and the lack of English meant I didn't go to other services. I felt comfortable sharing problems with those who spoke the same language and cultural background. I did dance, drama, football for a year or two. I did a football training course and got a part-time job through this. Then I took some time out for university. (Paraphrased) 'If Shpresa wasn't here, I don't know where I'd be today. I was little, I didn't have anyone one to tell me what to do'.

'Q', man in early 20s, Ex-Service Users/Volunteers – Adults focus group

When the facilitators asked the young people about their hopes for the future, the young people had considerably high aims and expectations. As well as aspirations to be actors and footballers amongst the younger members of the focus group, those over 13 or 14 mostly mentioned professional careers such as architecture, law or medicine.

'[Being involved with Shpresa] is a very valuable experience. I hope to start my own business'

'X', 20 year old male, Children and Young Peoples' focus group

Understanding the UK & Getting the UK to Understand Albanians – Many people reported how the Shpresa Programme had fostered integration rather than separation. Many commented on the programmes, visits and activities to give insight and understanding and encourage appropriate involvement with UK society – for example visits to the House of Parliament. There was evidence that the Shpresa Programme helps service users of all ages to understand and feel comfortable with British culture. In particular the young people spoken to appreciated the multicultural aspects of British culture:

'The Shpresa Programme helps you with English culture'

'F', teenage male, Children & Young People's focus group

I learned new things here [at Shpresa] about England (Paraphrased)

'DA', woman in the Ex-Service Users/Volunteers – Adults focus group

'Me and my friends don't differentiate by race or nation. Back home I would have been friends with one kind of people'

'C', woman in her early 20s, Volunteers focus group

Shpresa also provides a platform for some service users to engage with other community groups and mainstream organisations:

Shpresa have enabled us to integrate with other communities. Through them we have met MPs and local councillors via the introduction Shpresa gave us to TELCO – the East London Citizens' Organisation. They have a 'Strangers into Citizens' campaign which involves people of all nationalities (paraphrased)

'C', woman in her early 20s, Volunteer focus group

We've been to RAMP and Sure Start, working with them and the different people who benefit from them (Paraphrased)

'M', woman in the Service Users' focus group

We keep our traditions, but Shpresa helps us to integrate (Paraphrased)

'CA', woman in 30s, Volunteer focus group

These six factors act as the pillars supporting all Shpresa work and therefore create a consistent and coherent philosophy for the organisation. Nobody reported any different trends or inconsistencies. This organisational climate brings about a number of important results.

- Firstly, parents feel far more confidence in freely allowing their children to participate, because they have trust in the safe and yet stretching environment. Similarly, husbands who have traditionally expected their wives to remain at home, have trust in the organisation and generally see it as being a "safe" environment.
- A second result is that the Shpresa Programme has created a tightly-knit community amongst the women and young people with a strong sense of mutual obligation for the betterment and wellbeing of one another. What was described to us amounted to a habit of group support and expectation based on belief in one another and a kind of collective ambition for the whole community of Albanians in London.
- A third outcome is that Shpresa appears to be a highly well thought of organisation of its type, which could act to help other organisations working with migrant communities to develop. From the experience of the facilitators, this is certainly the case, and the service users are also aware of Shpresa's success:

Shpresa can show other organisations how to help. Shpresa is a role model in East London (Paraphrased)

'O', woman in the Volunteers focus group

Everywhere we go, organisations, MPs, etc know of the Shpresa Programme and of their hard work (Paraphrased)

'C', woman in her early 20s, Volunteer focus group, involved in campaigning

6. What about the men?

As stated above, men are involved with the organisation to some extent – mainly as users of advisory and translation services or to undertake specific short-term activities where they feel that male involvement would be appropriate. Attempts at more regular programmes for men have not been successful and there appears to be an organisational dilemma about whether to encourage greater or closer involvement. In

favour of greater involvement is the argument that it would result in a more comprehensive Albanian society. It would also allow men to acquire some of the confidence and developmental benefits that their wives have gained.

The arguments against greater male involvement include traditional ideas about men being almost exclusively responsible for the economic wellbeing of the family which leaves no time or energy for activities such as Shpresa. It has also been said that the image of Shpresa as a 'safe' organisation for women to join could be diminished by including more men on a regular basis.

It is clear from our discussions that many of the women have gained a large degree of liberation through their involvement with the Programme. Their role and behaviour at home has changed, they are able to shoulder much more demanding responsibilities for the family's interface with mainstream UK officialdom. It may also be that they need to take part in organisation like Shpresa, to learn English and integrate *because* their role as mothers (entailing liaison with schools, GPs and other agencies) requires them to integrate and learn how to function in society more than men. But women's expectations of their husbands have also changed and this has in some cases caused considerable tension in marriages. Some people told us about how they had managed to work through these difficulties and renegotiated their relationship to a more satisfactory balance. Others are still experiencing difficulties, including domestic violence, and some suggested that Shpresa should create a more systematic approach to helping families to address domestic conflict. It should be noted here that Shpresa are currently working in partnership with the Women's Therapy Centre in order to offer support to Albanian-speaking women affected by conflict and domestic violence.

It is hard not to conclude that most Albanian men will remain reluctant to join up fully to what the programme has to offer. It seems more likely that a new separate but linked organisation, started, led and defined by men would have a greater chance of success and would also allow Shpresa to remain as it is, dedicated mainly to the evolving needs of its women and young people.

7. How does UK society benefit from Shpresa?

All that has been described so far suggests that users gain considerably from their involvement. But we believe that it is useful to try and clarify some of the strands of value to society generated through the funding investments that have so far been made in the Shpresa Programme by its many supporters.

The overwhelming impression to emerge from the many group discussions and the data collected by questionnaire is that Shpresa has created in microcosm a healthy community, actively undertaking the responsible support of its members and encouraging individuals to take responsibility for themselves and others, to engage with the mainstream and to integrate into British society. We are therefore including some aspects of value of a more tentative and long term nature.

Firstly, the Shpresa Programme has played a very important part in ensuring that the Albanian community in London has settled down with a minimum of disruption at a faster pace than many other newly arrived ethnic groupings. This process of adjustment is still continuing, but so far the majority of people in this predominantly Muslim group has presented no significant problems in terms of criminality, radicalism, ill health, racial

disharmony, economic dependency or educational achievement. On the contrary, it has presented a model of a way of relating to one another and adjusting to life in Britain that could provide even some indigenous British with a better way of community living. In particular, the intelligent approach to helping women and children with pathways through a very difficult time has led to women in this community challenging old stereotypes and beginning to take a fuller part in society than is typical for recently arrived immigrants. In other words, most Albanian-speakers have been unproblematic immigrants and refugees and furthermore they represent a first-rate example to others.

Secondly, the strong emphasis on young people has created a group of confident, expressive, ambitious and hard-working youngsters who really understand the benefits of being part of and contributing actively to a community. The impact of this is strong enough for the young people to report frequently that their British counterparts often want to (and at times do) become involved. Several youngsters talked about their own transition from hanging about and getting into trouble, to finding a purpose, a friendship group and a new identity and now wanting to become a youth worker or something similar.

Thirdly, the Shpresa leaders have evolved a process with some very significant features (listed in Section 5). It is these features that lead to the impressive level of results. Together the features form the basis of a methodology which can be adapted and used by other new immigrant groups to assist the process of integration. The expertise now embedded in the organisation and its habits of welcoming incomers will allow other groupings to engage with the Shpresa Programme with a view to setting up equivalent programmes in other parts of our society. This could include indigenous British in parts of society that have become disengaged and disempowered.

Together these three strands demonstrate the importance of Shpresa's activities. There are still many others who could benefit and funding will continue to be fully justified for many years yet.