

# GEF-8 PROJECT IDENTIFICATION FORM (PIF)

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## General Project Information

### Project Title

Environmental and socio-economic solutions for ecosystem conservation and enhanced livelihoods in the Vjosa Wild River National Park, Albania

Region	GEF Project ID
Europe and Central Asia	12267
Country(ies)	Type of Project
Albania	MSP
GEF Agency(ies):	GEF Agency ID
UNDP	10289
Executing Partner	Executing Partner Type
Ministry of Environment	Government
GEF Focal Area (s)	Submission Date
Multi Focal Area	12/30/2025

### Project Sector (CCM Only)

### Taxonomy

Influencing models, Strengthen institutional capacity and decision-making, Convene multi-stakeholder alliances, Demonstrate innovative approaches, Stakeholders, Private Sector, SMEs, Large corporations, Capital providers, Individuals/Entrepreneurs, Beneficiaries, Local Communities, Civil Society, Non-Governmental Organization, Community Based Organization, Academia, Type of Engagement, Partnership, Participation, Consultation, Information Dissemination, Communications, Awareness Raising, Education, Public Campaigns, Behavior change, Capacity, Knowledge and Research, Capacity Development, Knowledge Generation, Learning, Adaptive management, Theory of change, Indicators to measure change, Gender Equality, Gender Mainstreaming, Sex-disaggregated indicators, Gender-sensitive indicators, Women groups, Gender results areas, Access to benefits and services, Access and control over natural resources, Participation and leadership, Knowledge Generation and Exchange, Focal Areas, Biodiversity, Protected Areas and Landscapes, Terrestrial Protected Areas, Productive Landscapes, Community Based Natural Resource Mngt, Mainstreaming, Tourism, Agriculture and agrobiodiversity, Biomes, Rivers, Grasslands, Temperate Forests, Land Degradation, Sustainable Land Management, Restoration and Rehabilitation of Degraded Lands, Ecosystem Approach, Integrated and Cross-sectoral approach, Sustainable Livelihoods, Income Generating Activities, Sustainable Agriculture, Sustainable Pasture Management, Sustainable Forest, Improved Soil and Water Management Techniques, Land Degradation Neutrality, Land Productivity, Land Cover and Land cover change

Type of Trust Fund	Project Duration (Months)
GET	72
GEF Project Grant: (a)	GEF Project Non-Grant: (b)
4,416,210.00	0.00
Agency Fee(s) Grant: (c)	Agency Fee(s) Non-Grant (d)
419,539.00	0.00

Total GEF Financing: (a+b+c+d)	Total Co-financing
4,835,749.00	34,100,000.00
PPG Amount: (e)	PPG Agency Fee(s): (f)
150,000.00	14,250.00
PPG total amount: (e+f)	Total GEF Resources: (a+b+c+d+e+f)
164,250.00	4,999,999.00

#### Project Tags

CBIT: No NGI: No SGP: No Innovation: No Competitive Window: No

### Project Summary

Provide a brief summary description of the project, including: (i) what is the problem and issues to be addressed? (ii) what are the project objectives, and if the project is intended to be transformative, how will this be achieved? (iii), how will this be achieved (approach to deliver on objectives), and (iv) what are the GEBs and/or adaptation benefits, and other key expected results. The purpose of the summary is to provide a short, coherent summary for readers. The explanation and justification of the project should be in section B “project description”. (max. 250 words, approximately 1/2 page)

The Vjosa River Basin hosts Europe’s last large free-flowing wild river of globally significant ecological value, sustaining one of the few intact river-to-coast connectivity ecosystems remaining in Europe. Its natural hydrology supports rare freshwater and riparian habitats and species of global concern, while linking Key Biodiversity Areas such as the Narta Lagoon and Butrinti National Park. This intact system maintains longitudinal, lateral, and basin-to-coast ecological connectivity, sustaining a dynamic mosaic of freshwater, riparian, floodplain, and coastal habitats that are now rare across Europe, and supporting species of global conservation significance, including migratory fish such as the Critically Endangered European eel. The basin also supports local livelihoods, agriculture, and tourism. Despite the establishment of the Vjosa Wild River National Park (VWRNP), the basin faces mounting pressures from land degradation, unsustainable land use, weak cross-sectoral coordination, and climate-driven hydrological risks, which threaten ecological integrity and long-term socio-economic resilience.

The project aims to conserve biodiversity and reduce land degradation across the Vjosa River Basin by aligning socio-economic development with conservation objectives through integrated river basin governance, ecosystem restoration, improved protected area management, and nature-positive economic incentives. A transformative approach is pursued by embedding conservation objectives into basin-wide spatial planning, strengthening cross-sectoral institutions, and mobilizing sustainable financing through regulated nature-based tourism and public-private partnerships.

The project will deliver results through four integrated components: (i) strengthening enabling conditions for basin-scale planning and governance; (ii) restoring priority freshwater, riparian, and terrestrial ecosystems while improving VWRNP management effectiveness; (iii) establishing conservation-compatible tourism systems to generate recurrent financing; and (iv) scaling learning through knowledge management and partnerships.

Global Environmental Benefits include improved management of **12,727 ha of protected areas** (GEF Core Indicator 1.2), **restoration of 1,600 ha of degraded ecosystems** (Core Indicator 3), **adoption of improved practices across 91,000 ha of landscapes** (Core Indicator 4), and direct **benefits to 26,000 people (54% women)** (Core Indicator 11), alongside measurable improvements in water quality, ecological flows, and priority species conservation.

### Indicative Project Overview

#### Project Objective

Conserve biodiversity and reduce land degradation in the Vjosa River Basin by aligning socio-economic development with the conservation objectives of the Vjosa Wild River National Park through integrated river basin planning and restoration.

## Project Components

### Component 1: Enabling conditions for integrated land and ecosystem management in the Vjosa watershed through cooperative planning and cross-sectoral governance

Component Type	Trust Fund
Technical Assistance	GET
GEF Project Financing (\$)	Co-financing (\$)
1,200,000.00	9,000,000.00

#### Outcome:

Outcome 1.1 Cross-sectoral governance mechanisms strengthened for integrated river basin management across 91,000 ha to mitigate threats to the ecological integrity of the VWRNP

This will be measured by:

#### Indicator

*Number of public sector, private sector and non-government organisations actively involved in the financing and/or implementation of management measures to mitigate threats to the VWRNP*

Target: >20 partner organisations (from a baseline of <5)

At least **3** key basin institutions demonstrably implementing new mitigation measures (baseline: 0), with **50** personnel (40% female) trained

At least 2 policies or local plans updated to integrate Vjosa conservation objectives.

**At least 5** co-management agreements, public–private partnerships (PPPs) or volunteer programs that leverage community engagement, in-kind contributions, and private co-financing to implement the Action Plan’s high-priority activities.

**10** municipal development plans updated to incorporate Vjosa conservation and risk mitigation zones (target: 10 plans; baseline: 0)

#### Output:

Output 1.1.1 Detailed threat mitigation gender-responsive Action Plan with costed activities (*informing the Output 1.1.3*)

Output 1.1.2: Capacities of multi-stakeholder governance structures strengthened, and cooperative framework agreements developed with civil society and businesses to mitigate threats to the ecological integrity of the VWRNP, **supporting LDN**

Output 1.1.3: Basin-wide spatial planning and zoning frameworks approved **to address LDN**, integrating conservation priorities, sustainable agriculture zones, nature-based tourism sites, and hazard-risk maps. (*informed by the analysis of threats and by the Action Plan under the Output 1.1.1*)

### Component 2: Improved management of key biodiversity in Vjosa river basin

Component Type	Trust Fund
Investment	GET
GEF Project Financing (\$)	Co-financing (\$)
1,300,000.00	9,000,000.00

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Outcome:

Outcome 2.1 Improved freshwater ecosystem integrity and reduced land degradation in priority catchments through Landscape-scale adoption of SLM and restoration practices across the Vjosa River Basin.

This will be measured by:

Indicator

*Number of household and smallholder farmers (by gender) benefitting (as measured by an increase in agricultural yield and/or income) from project support.*

Target: >30 household and smallholder farmers

Indicator:

Soil erosion reduced at least 10% on demonstration farms/plots applying GAP (SLM) measures

Indicator: At least 5,000 ha under sustainable land management under GAP adoption

Indicator: GEB Core Indicator 3 - Area of land restored

Target: 1,600 ha

Outcome 2.2. Strengthened management effectiveness, ecological monitoring and law enforcement in the VWRNP resulting in improved protection of key freshwater, riparian and terrestrial species of global importance

This will be measured by:

Indicator: 12,727 ha of PA under improved management as measured by METT scorecard (+10 from baseline - TBD at PPG stage)

Indicator: Populations stable or increasing of species of global importance (to be validated at PPG stage) e.g., Marble Trout (*Salmo marmoratus*), European Eel (*Anguilla anguilla*), Otter (*Lutra lutra*), Egyptian Vulture (*Neophron percnopterus*), or Stone-curlew (*Burhinus oedicnemus*)

**Number of operationalized monitoring and enforcement tools and infrastructure in the VWRNP**, including ranger patrol units, anti-poaching kits, signage, and freshwater monitoring stations

Number of NAPA/VWRNP staff trained and deployed in biodiversity monitoring, law enforcement, and community engagement

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Output:

Output 2.1.1 Reduced land degradation and upstream pressures on the Vjosa River through the adoption of biodiversity-friendly and climate-resilient Good Agricultural Practices aligned with LDN and integrated land-use planning (building on Output 1.1.3)

Output 2.1.2 Enhanced ecological connectivity, water quality, and ecosystem function through restoration of priority freshwater, riparian, and floodplain habitats within and around the VWRNP

Output 2.1.3 Basin-wide ecological monitoring system operationalized for water quality, ecological flow, land degradation, and biodiversity.

Output 2.2.1 Improved protection of key species through strengthened park operations, upgraded ranger equipment, enhanced patrolling and anti-poaching capacity, and improved visitor access management

Output 2.2.2: Enhanced VWRNP biodiversity and freshwater ecosystem monitoring through water-quality and ecological-flow surveillance, species monitoring tools (eDNA, camera traps), and digital databases

Output 2.2.3 Management effectiveness of the VWRNP strengthened to implement the Management Plan, including improved planning, staffing, coordination, reporting systems, and METT-driven priorities

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## Component 3: Incentives and Finance for Nature-positive Use

Component Type	Trust Fund
Technical Assistance	GET
GEF Project Financing (\$)	Co-financing (\$)
1,314,000.00	10,100,000.00

Outcome:

Outcome 3.1. Sustainable nature-based tourism and recreation generate increased local income and recurrent financing for the long-term conservation of the VWRNP and its wider basin

Indicator

*Number of formal management agreements with commercial-scale, small business, community-based, public and individual tourism operators and service providers under implementation*

Target: 20 tourism operators and service providers (from a baseline of <5)

Indicator

*Increase in income (in US\$/annum) generated from partnerships with tourism and recreational tourism operators and service providers*

Target: >USD 100,000/annum (from a baseline of US\$0)

Indicator

*Increase (as a % of the baseline) in number of users of, and visitors to, the tourism and recreational network*

Target: >5% year-on-year increase from year 3 (baseline data to be collected at PPG phase)

Output:

3.1.1 Conservation-compatible and gender-responsive nature-based tourism systems established through spatial planning, certification, and regulated access

3.1.2 Climate-resilient public-use infrastructure and visitor management systems operationalized to support regulated access and conservation financing

3.1.3 Integrated visitor safety, risk management, and environmental compliance systems operational along priority river corridors

## Component 4: Knowledge management and linkages to national and international integrated river basin management initiatives

Component Type	Trust Fund
Technical Assistance	GET
GEF Project Financing (\$)	Co-financing (\$)
185,915.00	2,000,000.00

Outcome:

Outcome 4.1 The project implementation is based on Results-Based Management (RBM) and Knowledge Management (KM) approaches

Indicator

*Number of lessons learnt, and best practices documented and widely disseminated*

Target: A cumulative total of at least 20 publications or media products by EOP

Output:

Output 4.1.1 Knowledge Management activities supporting and linking to national and international initiatives

Output 4.1.2 The project's Gender Action Plan and Environmental and Social Safeguards are implemented

## M&E

Component Type	Trust Fund
Technical Assistance	GET
GEF Project Financing (\$)	Co-financing (\$)
206,000.00	2,000,000.00

Outcome:

Outcome 4.2 Project implemented in an accountable and transparent manner, with results documented and available to the public

Output:

Output 4.2.1 Project Monitoring

Output 4.2.2. Project Evaluation

## Component Balances

Project Components	GEF Project Financing (\$)	Co-financing (\$)
Component 1: Enabling conditions for integrated land and ecosystem management in the Vjosa watershed through cooperative planning and cross-sectoral governance	1,200,000.00	9,000,000.00
Component 2: Improved management of key biodiversity in Vjosa river basin	1,300,000.00	9,000,000.00
Component 3: Incentives and Finance for Nature-positive Use	1,314,000.00	10,100,000.00
Component 4: Knowledge management and linkages to national and international integrated river basin management initiatives	185,915.00	2,000,000.00
M&E	206,000.00	2,000,000.00
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>4,205,915.00</b>	<b>32,100,000.00</b>
Project Management Cost	210,295.00	2,000,000.00
<b>Total Project Cost (\$)</b>	<b>4,416,210.00</b>	<b>34,100,000.00</b>

Please provide justification

## PROJECT OUTLINE

### A. PROJECT RATIONALE

Briefly describe the current situation: the global environmental problems and/or climate vulnerabilities that the project will address, the key elements of the system, and underlying drivers of environmental change in the project context, such as population growth, economic development, climate change, sociocultural and political factors, including conflicts, or technological changes. Describe the objective of the project, and the justification for it. (Approximately 3-5 pages) see guidance here

Despite being a relatively small country, Albania is exceedingly rich in biodiversity. Its ecosystems and habitats support over 5,550 species of vascular and non-vascular plants and around 1,751 animal species, many of which are threatened at global and European levels.

The country has made considerable efforts to expand its network of protected areas (PAs) to protect this biodiversity. The national network of PAs in Albania now includes: 11 national parks, 1 marine park, 718 nature monuments, 23 managed nature reserves, 11 protected landscapes, 4 World Heritage Sites, 4 Ramsar sites and other protected areas of various categories that, when combined, account for 21.36% of the territory. A notable example of the country's efforts to expand the PA network is the recent phased declaration of the **Vjosa Wild River National Park (VWRNP)**<sup>[1]</sup>.

Free from dams or other artificial barriers, the Vjosa River in southern Albania is one of the last big, wild rivers in Europe. The Vjosa river and its main tributaries run freely for over 272km (of which 190km is in Albania), from the Pindus Mountain Range in Greece (where it is called Aoös) to the Adriatic coast in Albania. It navigates the steep narrow gorges in the upper part and the wide braided river sections in the middle part, before reaching the near-natural Vjosa delta where it enters the Adriatic Sea.

The global environmental significance of the Vjosa River Basin lies in its status as one of the last remaining large, free-flowing river systems in Europe, maintaining an entire continuum of ecological connectivity from alpine headwaters to the Adriatic Sea. Unlike most European rivers, which are fragmented by dams and flow regulation, the Vjosa retains intact longitudinal connectivity (enabling migration of species such as the Critically Endangered European eel), lateral connectivity with active floodplains and riparian habitats, and sediment transport processes that sustain dynamic habitat mosaics including gravel bars, braided channels, wetlands, and deltaic systems.

This intact hydro-morphological system supports a suite of species of global conservation concern that are directly dependent on these ecological processes, including migratory fish (e.g., European eel, sturgeon species), endemic freshwater species (e.g., Marble trout), and riparian and terrestrial species (e.g., Egyptian vulture, Eurasian otter). The basin therefore represents a rare reference system for riverine ecological integrity in the Mediterranean region, where freshwater biodiversity has undergone severe decline, and provides critical habitat connectivity between Key Biodiversity Areas, including the Narta Lagoon and other coastal ecosystems. The conservation of the Vjosa system contributes directly to maintaining ecological connectivity and ecosystem integrity at a scale that is no longer widely represented in Europe.

The transboundary river basin of the Vjosa river covers an area of approximately 6,800 km<sup>2</sup>, 4,540 km<sup>2</sup> of which is in Albania. To date, a total of 1,687 species (1,034 animals and 653 plants) have been documented in the river basin. Within the Vjosa Wild River National Park itself, at least 1,175 species of flora and fauna have been recorded, including 13 globally threatened animal species and two threatened plant species, reflecting the area's status as a critical biodiversity refuge within the wider Mediterranean Basin global biodiversity hotspot. Of the documented species, 39 are on the IUCN Red List (15 of which are 'at risk') and 119 (74 of which are 'at risk') on the Red List of Albania. Approximately 99,835 ha (22%) of the river basin is still under some form of forest cover. Flagship species such as the near threatened Eurasian otter (*Lutra lutra*), the threatened Egyptian vulture (*Neophron percnopterus*), and other fauna dependent on intact riverine and riparian ecosystems further underscore the global significance of the basin's ecological integrity. The Vjosa's global significance is especially strong for freshwater biodiversity, where Europe has seen severe declines, with notable species including the critically endangered European eel (*Anguilla anguilla*), critically endangered Adriatic sturgeon (*Huso naccarii*), critically endangered European sea sturgeon (*Acipenser sturio*), and endemic Skadar gudgeon (*Gobio skadarensis*).

The Greek portion of the river basin in Greece includes three protected areas, while the Albanian portion of the river basin includes nine protected areas (including Vjosa Wild River National Park) and 110 Natural Monuments.

The Albanian portion of the river basin traverses the Korçë, Gjirokastrë, Vlorë and Fier regions. More than 80% of the population in these regions (estimated at 130,000 people) live in rural areas and the majority lives in the lower sections of the river. The rural aspect - characterized by small urban centers, traditional agriculture, livestock keeping, and basic industry - has resulted in a limited anthropogenic influence on the natural state and biodiversity of the Vjosa river. The main socio-economic activities in the river basin are agriculture, animal husbandry, light processing industry and tourism. The Vjosa valley is rich in natural mineral resources, such as natural gas, oil, bitumen and coal. Approximately 23% of the river basin is agricultural land (comprising 17,542 ha of pastures, 32,418 ha of arable land and 22,296 ha of orchards and vineyards). A key industry that has experienced extremely rapid growth in recent years in the river basin is tourism, notably rafting tours in the surrounding area of Përmet. The river basin also feeds significant groundwater resources, and the aquifers are important for water provision for all major settlements in the basin (such as Fier, Vlorë, Saranda, Butrint and Gjirokastra).

The management and oversight of natural resources in the Albanian portion of the Vjosa river basin is regulated by a number of enabling national laws, including *inter alia* protected areas (Law on Protected Areas, 2017), forests (Law on Forests, 2020), pastures (Law on the Pasture Fund, 2007), agricultural land (Law on Agriculture and Rural Development, 2007), freshwater bodies (Law on the Integrated Management of Water Resources, 2010), spatial planning (Law on Territorial Planning, 2014), environment (Law on Environmental Protection, 2011 and Law on Biodiversity Protection, 2006), and mining (Law for the Mining Sector, 2010 and Law on Hydrocarbons, 1993).

The first phase of the declaration of the Albanian portion of the Vjosa river as the **Vjosa Wild River National Park (VWRNP)** was completed in 2023<sup>[2]</sup>. Covering a total area of 12,727 ha, the VWRNP now includes the main channel of the river (including some land and river vegetation within the active channel, or at risk of flooding or erosion) and four tributaries (Drino, Kardhiq, Bënça, and Shushica) (see Map 1 below). The management of this river area as a National Park is currently in the process of being operationalized by the National Agency of Protected Areas (NAPA) under the strategic guidance of the *Vjosa Wild River National Park Management Plan (2024-2033)*.

Figure 1. Location Map of the VWRNP



The second phase of the declaration, still to be initiated, will seek to expand the VWRNP through the addition of other free-flowing tributaries and adjacent areas that are integral to the river’s ecosystem, plus some private land if feasible (as part the stakeholder consultation process).

The overarching ecological value of the VWRNP is the ‘dynamic unobstructed free-flowing river with full representation of all hydro-morphological and biotic features of a natural river’.

However, due to the unique shape of the VWRNP (it is about 400km long and, on average, around 200m wide), most of the pressures and threats to the ecological integrity of the VWRNP originate from outside the national park rather than from within.

**Environmental Threats to the Vjosa River Basin:** These pressures and threats include: (i) discharge of untreated wastewater from villages, settlements and single buildings; (ii) discharge of untreated industrial wastewater (including the side products of production processes such as bitumen and oil production and fish farming); (iii) surface erosion from agricultural lands (particularly over-grazed pastures) and degraded forests during flood events; (iv) adoption of traditional, engineered flood protection measures, especially in the lower section close to the delta; (v) diversion and extraction of water for the irrigation of agricultural fields, drinking water or water bottling; (vi) straightening and narrowing of rivers and tributaries as a safety measure for areas (such as crop fields) and structures (such as roads) that run along the river; (vii) unregulated private and commercial gravel extraction; (viii) unsustainable levels of harvesting of forests for timber and fuelwood; (ix) construction of operation of small hydropower plants and water abstraction infrastructure on tributaries of the Vjosa river (such as the Shushica River); (x) surface mining for limestone and silica; and (xi) unregulated growth and expansion of many privately-run tourism and recreational enterprises.

It is likely that the effects of climate change will further exacerbate these threats and pressures. The river basin is already prone to numerous natural hazards, including floods, droughts, forest fires, and landslides. The severity and frequency of these events are increasing under a changing climate (where temperatures are projected to increase, precipitation is projected to decrease and there is

likely to be a high degree of inter-annual rainfall variability), posing threats to agriculture, water supplies, and key industries like hydropower and tourism. Additionally, the lower reaches of the Vjosa river makes it particularly susceptible to sea-level rise, flash floods, and forest fires, which account for most of its natural hazards. Due to its large variability of annual flows, its large gravel body, and the wide riverbed, the Vjosa river currently provides an important function for flood control, moderating larger floods to a certain extent. However, as a result of the ongoing exploitation of river gravel, increase in economic development, continued high deforestation rates, destruction of embankments and changing climate, major flood events (mostly in the form of ‘flash floods’ with flow values ranging from 2,000 - 3,000 m<sup>3</sup>/s in the upper part and 4,000 - 5,000 m<sup>3</sup>/s downstream) are becoming more frequent and more damaging, particularly along the lower section of the Vjosa river<sup>[3]</sup>.

**Key Barriers to Ecosystem Integrity and Effective Management of the VWRNP:** Despite its exceptional ecological values and recent designation as a protected river corridor, the Vjosa River and its basin continue to face a range of interlinked threats that cannot be effectively addressed under current institutional, technical, and governance conditions. These constraints are represented by barriers that limit the ability of national and local actors to reduce pressures, manage trade-offs, and implement integrated, basin-wide solutions. The project has been designed to address three core barriers.

**Barrier 1: Fragmented and sector-driven governance limiting integrated river-basin management:** Management of the Vjosa River basin is currently characterized by fragmented institutional mandates, with sectoral planning and decision-making (e.g. hydropower, agriculture, gravel extraction, forestry, transport, tourism) occurring largely in isolation from biodiversity and freshwater ecosystem considerations. While VWRNP provides a strong protection framework for the core river corridor, many of the most significant threats originate upstream, downstream, or outside park boundaries, where land-use decisions continue to affect hydrology, sediment dynamics, water quality, and habitat connectivity. Addressing these requires a whole-of-society approach across the river basin, including engagement of civil society and the private sector. There are currently limited capacities and inadequate multi-stakeholder, multi-sectoral cooperative frameworks to address the integrated and multi-faceted nature of the threats.

Further, there is no operational mechanism to align basin-wide development planning with conservation objectives, nor to systematically assess cumulative impacts across sectors and administrative boundaries. As a result, policies and investments often fail to account for downstream ecological consequences, climate risks, or the river’s natural flood-regulation functions. This governance fragmentation significantly constrains efforts to address the root causes of degradation and to manage the Vjosa as a single, interconnected socio-ecological system.

**Barrier 2: Limited technical capacity, resources and data for evidence-based freshwater, biodiversity, and protected area management:** Effective management of a dynamic, free-flowing river system requires robust, long-term data on hydrology, water quality, ecological flows, sediment transport, and biodiversity trends. At present, monitoring systems across the Vjosa basin are incomplete, unevenly applied, and weakly integrated across institutions. Existing data are often project-specific, short-term, or insufficiently standardized to support adaptive management, enforcement, or policy decisions. This gap is particularly acute in relation to climate change, where increasing variability in flows, droughts, floods, and extreme events demands stronger analytical tools and early-warning capacities. Limited access to modern monitoring approaches (e.g. ecological flow assessment, eDNA, digital biodiversity databases) further constrains the ability of authorities to detect emerging pressures, evaluate management effectiveness, or demonstrate conservation outcomes. Without a shared, operational evidence base, both park-level management and basin-scale decision-making remain largely reactive rather than preventative.

Although the VWRNP represents a landmark achievement for river conservation, its management effectiveness is constrained by gaps in staffing, equipment, operational planning, and enforcement capacity. Rangers and park authorities face challenges in monitoring a large, linear, and hydrologically complex landscape, particularly in relation to illegal resource extraction, unregulated access, and pressures linked to tourism and infrastructure development. Weak coordination between park authorities and external agencies further limits the ability to address threats that cross jurisdictional boundaries, such as poaching, gravel extraction, or pollution sources originating outside the park. These constraints reduce the park’s capacity to act as a strong anchor for basin-wide conservation and to safeguard key species, habitats, and ecosystem functions over the long term.

**Barrier 3: Limited stakeholder engagement and incentives for biodiversity-friendly practices beyond the park:** A wide range of stakeholders—including farmers, forest users, local communities, municipalities, and private-sector actors—play a critical role in shaping land- and water-use outcomes across the Vjosa basin. However, current engagement mechanisms provide limited incentives, guidance, or support for adopting biodiversity-friendly and climate-resilient practices. In many upstream and surrounding areas, livelihoods remain closely tied to activities that can exacerbate erosion, water pollution, habitat fragmentation, and flood risk if not sustainably managed. The absence of coordinated outreach, capacity-building, and benefit-sharing mechanisms limits stakeholder ownership of conservation objectives and reduces compliance with environmental safeguards. This barrier is compounded by uneven

awareness of the river's ecosystem services and by weak integration of conservation priorities into local development planning. As a result, pressures originating outside the VWRNP continue to undermine conservation gains achieved within its boundaries.

Depending on the implementation of the project, there are three potential future scenario narratives linked to the assumptions and risks outlined in the Theory of Change presented in the following section:

### **1. Nature-Positive Transformation (Optimistic Scenario)**

In this scenario, strong institutional coordination and sustained stakeholder commitment enable the full implementation of the River Basin Management Plan and effective co-management of the national park and surrounding landscapes. Clear mandates, stable financing, and cross-sector collaboration align conservation, water management, agriculture, energy, and tourism objectives at the basin scale. Sustainable land-use practices, ecological restoration of riparian and floodplain habitats, and incentive-based green tourism models are successfully scaled, generating livelihoods while reducing pressure on sensitive ecosystems. Climate adaptation measures, nature-based solutions (NbS), and basin-wide ecological and hydrological monitoring systems are fully operational, supporting ecological flows, improved water quality, and resilience to floods, droughts, and heat extremes. Local communities and municipalities are actively engaged in decision-making, benefit-sharing, and stewardship, strengthening social legitimacy and long-term governance capacity. The Vjosa emerges as a flagship model for "living rivers" in Europe, demonstrating how intact river systems can underpin climate resilience, biodiversity recovery, and sustainable development, while delivering on Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) Targets 1, 2, 11, and 23 and embodying the UNDP Nature Pledge's principles of systems thinking, policy coherence, and participatory governance.

### **2. Gradual Progress (Business-as-Usual Scenario)**

In this scenario, National Park management systems are incrementally strengthened through improved staffing, basic monitoring, and selective enforcement, and some habitat restoration and tourism investments materialize, particularly within the park core. However, limited inter-sectoral coordination, fragmented planning, and slow uptake of sustainable land-use and water-management practices constrain basin-wide impacts and hinder full-scale transformation. While land degradation slows in priority areas and biodiversity pressures stabilize for certain species and habitats, ecological threats from unregulated or weakly regulated agriculture, tourism, gravel extraction, and water abstraction continue to accumulate in surrounding catchments and along unprotected river stretches. Climate variability increasingly exposes these weaknesses, amplifying localized erosion, water-quality degradation, and habitat fragmentation. As a result, the ecological integrity of the Vjosa is maintained in some areas but remains fragile and uneven across the river system. This scenario reflects likely near-term realities, where institutional mandates and responsibilities remain partially unclear or overlapping, financing is insufficient for sustained implementation, and technical and governance capacities improve gradually but remain inadequate to address cumulative and cross-sectoral pressures at the basin scale.

### **3. Missed Opportunity (Pessimistic Scenario)**

Under this scenario, fragmented government mandates persist, and political or economic shifts undermine implementation, resulting in weak enforcement, inconsistent spatial planning, and limited coordination across sectors and administrative levels. The growing unregulated tourism, gravel extraction, pollution, and water abstraction likely intensify, particularly through expanded riverbank development, ongoing off-road vehicle access, unmanaged visitor pressure on riparian habitats, continued in-stream aggregate extraction, untreated wastewater discharges, agricultural runoff, and unsustainable irrigation withdrawals upstream and downstream of the park. Climate shocks exacerbate degradation of land and water resources, including more frequent and severe floods, prolonged droughts, heatwaves, and wildfires, which accelerate riverbank erosion, sedimentation, loss of ecological flows, declining water quality, and stress on freshwater and riparian biodiversity. Public opposition grows as local communities experience reduced ecosystem services, increased disaster risks, and unequal distribution of tourism-related benefits, eroding trust in governance institutions. The park is not integrated into its wider landscape, leading to continued upstream-downstream disconnects, unmanaged external pressures, and incompatible land uses in surrounding catchments, and biodiversity loss accelerates, particularly for migratory fish, riparian species, and floodplain-dependent habitats. This scenario highlights where maladaptation could occur if external pressures continue unchecked and the socio-ecological system loses resilience, locking the river basin into a trajectory of cumulative environmental degradation and increasing social and economic vulnerability.

**The project will thus seek to build on, and further strengthen linkages between, the VWRNP and different land users in the river basin in collective efforts to restore, enhance and/or protect the resilience of the ecosystems in the river basin and the dynamic unobstructed free-flowing nature of the Vjosa river.**

In addition to the recurrent baseline investments being made by the different responsible public institutions in maintaining and delivering public services, infrastructure and facilities (according to their respective mandates) in the river basin, there a number of other complementary initiatives that seek to improve the synergies between economic and social development and the sustainable use and conservation of biodiversity.

At a national scale, these initiatives include:

- The *General National Spatial Plan 2030* provides the strategic spatial planning framework for balancing economic and social growth in the Vjosa River Basin with the responsible management of natural resources and protection of the environment.
- The *National Strategy for Integrated Development (NSID)* serves as the framework for aligning the implementation of the sector-specific laws (and their respective policies and plans) in the Vjosa River Basin with any cross-sectoral strategies under implementation in the Vjosa River Basin (such as the *National Strategy for the Integrated Management of Water Resources*, *National Irrigation and Drainage Strategy 2019-2031*, *National Strategy for Land Consolidation 2016-2030*, (draft) *National Strategy of Tourism 2024-2030*, and the *Agriculture, Rural Development and Fisheries Strategy 2021-2027*).

### Key initiatives and related synergies and related co-financing

Nr.	Name	Donor	Synergy
1	EU for Circular Economy and Green Growth	EU - IPA III	Budget total: 30,900,000 USD from which the co-financing is 14,600,000 USD related to Component 2
2	EU for NATURE	EU - IPA III and SIDA	Budget total: 7,500,000 USD from which the co-financing is 2,500,000 USD related to Component 1
3	Clean and Regenerative Environment for the Blue Sea	World Bank	Budget total: 80,000,000 USD from which the co-financing is 15,000,000 USD related to Component 2
4	Green Vjosa	GIZ	Budget total 4,000,000 USD from which the co-financing is 2,000,000 USD related to Component 3

At the scale of the Vjosa River Basin, these initiatives include:

- The River Basin Authority (AMBU) is, with the support of the River Basin Council (RBC) (one of seven in Albania), overseeing the preparation of a River Basin Management Plan (RBMP) for the Vjosa River Basin District to ensure that it will conform to the requirements of the EU *Water Framework Directive (WFD)*<sup>[4]</sup>.
- Component 1 of the European Community funded *EU4Rivers/EU for Water project in Albania* (USD 7.5m) is further assisting the country in meeting the requirements of the EU *acquis* (WFD and other water related directives). This includes technical and financial support in the development and implementation of the RBMP for the Vjosa River Basin.
- In parallel to the development of the RBMP, AMBU are also preparing a flood risk management plan – that focuses on major flood risks and related required management actions - for the river basin.
- The Austrian Development Agency (ADA) funded project (grant of USD 776,200) ‘*Enhancing a science-policy interface development for the Vjosa*’, implemented by the Stiftung Europäisches Naturerbe (EuroNatur), has contributed to building and communicating the scientific knowledge required to underpin the preparation of the RBMP for the Vjosa River Basin.
- With support from the Government of Italy (through the Earth Network), the NAPA are in the process of preparing a nomination for designating the Vjosa ‘Valley’ as a UNESCO MAB Biosphere Reserve.
- The International Bank for Reconstruction (IBRD) funded *Clean and Resilient Environment for Blue Sea Project* (loan of US\$ 80m), implemented by AMBU, seeks to reduce pollution from land-based sources into the aquatic environment in selected areas of the South-West Coastal Belt of Albania. The implementation of the second component of the project is spatially focused in the Vjosa river valley and includes investments in the expansion of sanitation infrastructure, improvements in sanitation facilities and management; and the prevention of non-point source pollution.

At the scale of local government, these initiatives include:

- The Municipalities of Kolonja, Përmet, Këlcyra, Gjirokastra, Libohova, Fier, Vlorë, and Himarë have approved their Local General Plans (LGP) – which include support for the establishment and management of the VWRNP - while the LGPs of the Municipalities of Dropull, Tepelenë, Memaliaj, and Selenicë are in the process of being finalized.

At the scale of the VWRNP, these initiatives include:

- With the technical and financial support of the ECO Institute of Ecology (Austria), Patagonia, IUCN and a number of other local organizations and individuals, the NAPA have consultatively prepared a draft of an overarching park *Management Plan (2024-2033)*, and a number of subsidiary plans (Tourism Master Plan, Interpretation Plan, and Business Plan) covering the same timeframe as the Management Plan.
- A limited number of staff currently employed in the three Regional Administrations of Protected Areas (RAPA) units (at least two staff per RAPA), overlapping the footprint of the park have been given jurisdictional responsibility for park management over the transitional period during which the institutional arrangements for the future management of the park are being developed.
- NAPA and the MTE are currently developing the legal mechanisms required to establish a dedicated park management authority and to appoint park-specific staff in this management authority.

The project has been designed to complement and further build on the implementation of these baseline investments and initiatives.

A full detailed project **Stakeholder Engagement Plan** will be developed during the PPG. The establishment of the VWRNP was the result of a unique collaboration between the Albanian Government, local communities, private sector (such as the outdoor clothing company, Patagonia), local and international experts, environmental NGOs (such as Save the Blue Heart of Europe campaign and IUCN), donor agencies (such as the Austrian Development Agency) and multilateral organizations (such as the World Bank Group).

The project will thus seek to sustain this collaborative approach during the project's development and implementation phase, through further building and strengthening functional working relationship with and between the key river basin-level stakeholder groups, including: (i) national authorities (such as MTE, NAPA, National Territorial Planning Agency, National Environmental Agency, AMBU, Ministry of Infrastructure and Energy); (ii) regional authorities (RAPAs, Regional Development Agency; RBC); (iii) municipal authorities (municipalities of Përmet, Këlcyrë, Gjirokastër, Tepelenë, Memaliaj, Selenice, Mallakastër, Vlorë); (iv) farming communities (such as pastoralists, household farmers, commercial crop farms, fish farms); (v) tourism and recreational service providers (such as rafting companies, hotels and guesthouses, restaurants, tour operators, tour guides, event companies); (vi) industrial and energy companies (such as hydro power companies; gravel and sand quarries; oil and mining companies); (vii) international, national and local NGOs and CSOs (such as the Vjosa River Basin Civil Society Network); (viii) academic and research organizations (University of Gjirokastër, Faculty of Natural Sciences Tirana, Agricultural University of Tirana, University of Vlorë, Polis University, and international universities); and (ix) donor organizations (such as multilateral agencies, bilateral agencies, private sector investors, philanthropists).

The project will strive to actively and continuously involve all stakeholders - encompassing individuals of different ethnic, age and social backgrounds, as well as gender - in the design, planning, implementation and monitoring of all project activities. It is envisaged that at least 40% of all project-related appointments – including all project management jobs and employment created through the implementation of project activities - will be woman.

In recent years, Albania has made significant strides in narrowing gender disparities across various socio-economic indicators. Trends indicate a positive trajectory, with notable improvements in areas such as education, healthcare, and political representation (World Bank, 2024). The government's commitment to Gender-Responsive Budgeting (GRB) underscores a strong sense of national ownership and dedication to advancing gender equality agendas across all levels of governance. Central budgetary institutions have made notable strides in embracing GRB, evidenced by the rise in gender-specific budget allocations, but progress within local governments has been slower.

However, while progress has been made, persistent gender gaps continue to present challenges. Gender gaps persist in economic opportunities, including lower labor force participation, employment rates, and ownership of enterprises. Despite women's increasing educational attainment and delayed marriage, these gains have yet to translate into commensurate improvements in economic prospects. A large percentage of women work as unpaid family workers, reflecting the high rates of underemployment for women. Women are mainly concentrated in less profitable economic sectors and occupations such as manufacturing and agriculture.

In response to these gender gap challenges, the project's strategic focus on gender equality will be on improving women's access to economic opportunities arising from the implementation of project activities in the Vjosa river basin. These economic opportunities may include:

- Actively encouraging the equitable use of women labor and supervisors from local villages and towns in project-supported construction, maintenance and conservation works.
- Optimizing opportunities for the employment, training and equipping of women as national park staff, contractors and service providers.
- Ensuring that women-owned and/or managed businesses participate equitably in the development of income-generating opportunities from nature-based tourism development.
- Ensuring that women-owned and/or managed businesses participate equitably in the procurement of project-funded equipment, technical services and infrastructure.
- Ensuring that the reach of project-funded training and capacity development programs will include women and women-headed households.
- Advocating for an increase in the number of women involved in the collection and management of park-level, basin-wide and project-level monitoring data.
- Collaborating with project-contracted businesses to continually develop and implement mechanisms which may further strengthen the capacities and involvement of women and women-headed households.
- Ensuring that the interests of women and women-headed households are adequately represented on the park, biosphere and river basin governance structures.
- Promoting the involvement of women and women-headed households in the development and implementation of nature-based tourism management agreements.
- Wherever possible, procuring professional, technical and management services from suitably qualified and experienced female national consultants and women-owned businesses.

There is however currently insufficient detailed information about the specific nature of the economic opportunities for increasing women's participation in the proposed project. Therefore, a gender-responsive Rapid Social Assessment (RSA) and **Gender Analysis and Gender Action Plan (GAP)** will be prepared during the PPG. The RSA will first analyze gendered roles in production, access to resources and services, and decision-making power and will identify meaningful opportunities to promote gender equality and women economic empowerment in the project. The Gender Action Plan – that outlines the practical steps required to promote gender equality - will then be developed to assure the mainstreaming of gender inclusivity into the project outcomes, outputs, and activities. **The Gender Analysis and Gender Action Plan, to be developed during the PPG phase, will further inform the governance structure by identifying gender-specific barriers to participation and defining targeted measures to ensure equitable representation of women across all governance bodies. Once finalized, the findings and actions of the GAP will be integrated across all project components, and gender-sensitive indicators will be embedded into the Results Framework to enable systematic tracking of gender equity outcomes throughout project implementation.**

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[1] The Greek portion of the Vjosa river (including its source) in Greece is also protected within the Vikos-Aaos National Park, Vikos-Aoös National Park and the Protected Natural Formation and Protected Landscape (between Northern Pindo NP and the Albanian border).

[2] Decision of Council of Ministers No. 155 based on Article 100 of the Constitution and Articles 8.2, and 10 of Law No. 81/2017, "On protected areas".

[3] The most recent flash flood occurred in 2021.

[4] The WFD requires Member States to use their River Basin Management Plans (RBMPs) and Programmes of Measures (PoMs) to protect and, where necessary, restore water bodies to reach good status, and to prevent deterioration.

## B. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

### Project description

This section asks for a theory of change as part of a joined-up description of the project as a whole. The project description is expected to cover the key elements of good project design in an integrated way. It is also expected to meet the GEF's policy

requirements on gender, stakeholders, private sector, and knowledge management and learning (see section D). This section should be a narrative that reads like a joined-up story and not independent elements that answer the guiding questions contained in the PIF guidance document. (Approximately 3-5 pages) see guidance here

The project's TOC (see Figure 2 below) provides a diagrammatic overview of the proposed project outputs that will facilitate change and contribute to achieving the project's outcomes, and objective. The desired project impacts are mapped in the TOC – as part of the 'outcomes pathway' – showing each output, outcome, and impact in a logical relationship to all the others.

The basic premise for the TOC is that:

IF a detailed, costed, and gender-responsive threat mitigation Action Plan is prepared to address the key pressures affecting the ecological integrity of the Vjosa Wild River National Park (VWRNP) (**Output 1.1.1**), AND IF the capacities of multi-stakeholder governance structures are strengthened and cooperative framework agreements are established with relevant public institutions, civil society organizations, and businesses (**Output 1.2.1**), AND IF basin-wide spatial planning and zoning frameworks are approved that integrate conservation priorities, sustainable agriculture, nature-based tourism, and hazard-risk considerations (**Output 1.3.1**), THEN cross-sectoral governance mechanisms for integrated river basin management can be strengthened across the Vjosa River Basin, enabling more coordinated, coherent, and effective mitigation of threats to the ecological integrity of the VWRNP (**Outcome 1.1**). This will result in a reduced scale and intensity of cumulative pressures on the VWRNP through improved cooperative planning and governance at the river basin scale (**Project Impact A**).

IF partnerships with VWRNP-adjacent households and smallholder farmers promote and incentivize the adoption of biodiversity-friendly, climate-resilient Good Agricultural Practices aligned with Land Degradation Neutrality and integrated land-use planning (**Output 2.1.1**), AND IF priority freshwater, riparian, and floodplain habitats within and around the VWRNP are actively restored to enhance ecological connectivity and ecosystem function (**Output 2.1.2**), AND IF a basin-wide ecological monitoring system is operationalized to track water quality, ecological flows, land degradation, and biodiversity trends (**Output 2.1.3**), THEN freshwater ecosystem integrity will improve and land degradation pressures will be reduced in priority catchments across the Vjosa River Basin through landscape-scale adoption of sustainable land management and restoration practices (**Outcome 2.1**). This will result in measurable improvements in hydrological function, water quality, and habitat condition, contributing to enhanced ecosystem resilience and biodiversity conservation at the basin scale (**Project Impact B**).

IF park operations, ranger capacity, patrolling systems, and visitor access management are strengthened (**Output 2.2.1**), AND IF biodiversity and freshwater ecosystem monitoring systems within the VWRNP are enhanced through improved surveillance tools, digital databases, and species monitoring technologies (**Output 2.2.2**), AND IF overall management effectiveness of the VWRNP is improved through strengthened planning, staffing, coordination, reporting systems, and METT-driven priorities (**Output 2.2.3**), THEN management effectiveness, ecological monitoring, and law enforcement within the VWRNP will be strengthened, resulting in improved protection of key freshwater, riparian, and terrestrial species of global importance (**Outcome 2.2**).

IF conservation-compatible and gender-responsive nature-based tourism systems are established through spatial planning, certification schemes, and regulated access mechanisms (**Output 3.1.1**), AND IF climate-resilient public-use infrastructure and visitor management systems are operationalized to support regulated access and conservation financing (**Output 3.1.2**), AND IF integrated visitor safety, risk management, and environmental compliance systems are implemented along priority river corridors (**Output 3.1.3**), THEN sustainable nature-based tourism and recreation will generate increased local income and recurrent financing for the long-term conservation of the VWRNP and its wider river basin (**Outcome 3.1**). This will contribute to sustained incentives for conservation-compatible economic activities and enhanced financial viability of protected area management (**Project Impact C**).

IF project knowledge, performance data, and lessons learned are systematically collected, managed, and shared to support national and international integrated river basin management initiatives (**Output 4.1.1**), AND IF the project's Gender Action Plan and Environmental and Social Safeguards are fully implemented (**Output 4.1.2**), THEN project implementation will be guided by Results-Based Management and adaptive management approaches, enabling continuous learning and performance improvement (**Outcome 4.1**). This will ensure the project is implemented in an accountable and transparent manner, with results documented and available to the public, supporting accountability and knowledge transfer (**Outcome 4.2**).

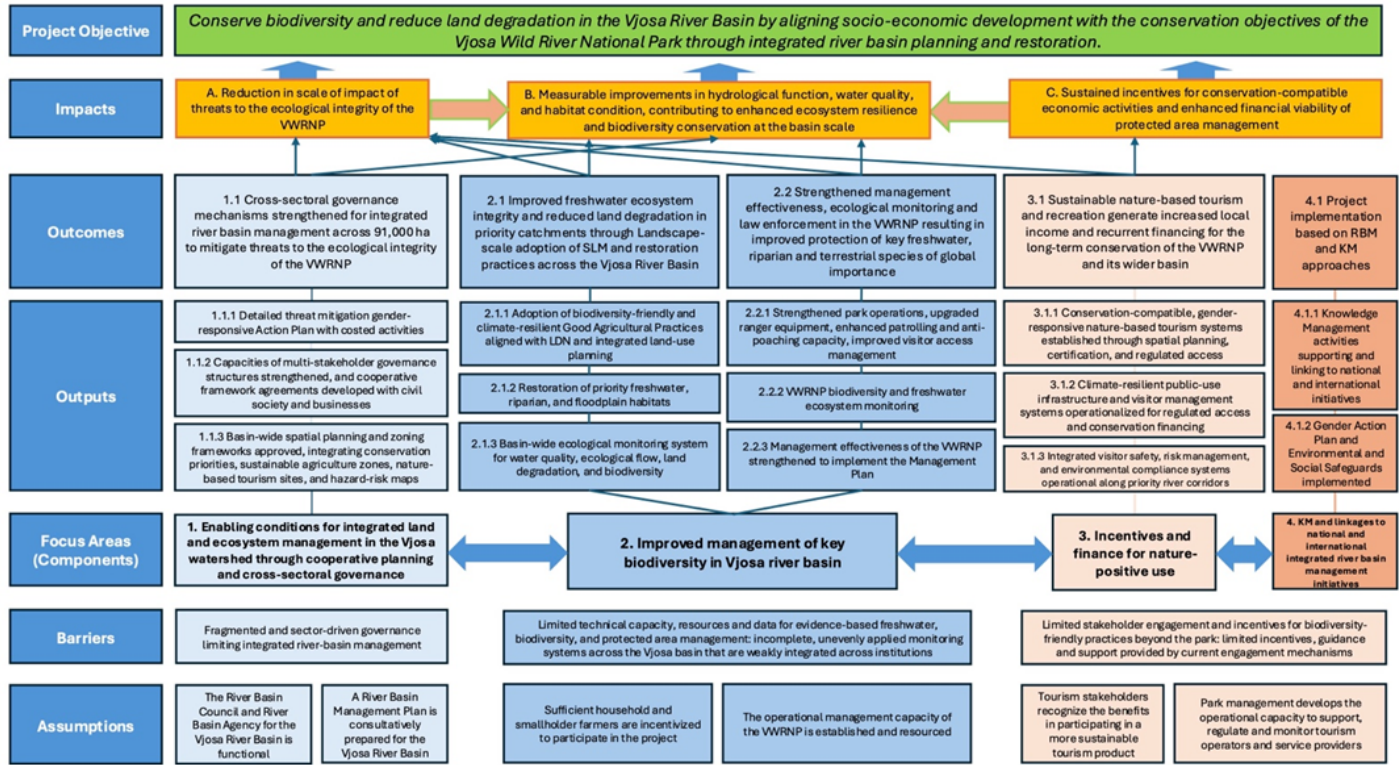
The narrative below provides more details on the TOC, including a brief description of:

- (i) the project components, outputs, and activities (including knowledge management, alignment with national policies and gender mainstreaming).
- (ii) the project risks.
- (iii) the involvement of stakeholders in project design and implementation.

(iv) the global environmental benefits (impacts) of the project.

The TOC in Figure 2 (see below) should thus be read in conjunction with this narrative.

**Figure 2. Theory of Change Diagram: Albania Vjosa Proposed Project**



The project design is currently guided by the (draft) *Management Plan for VWRNP (2024-2033)*, and its detailed subsidiary plans (draft *Tourism Master Plan*, *Interpretation Plan*, and *Business Plan*). During the project preparation phase (PPG) the project design may be further refined, as needed, to more fully align with the *River Basin Management Plan* for the Vjosa watershed (under preparation), the *Flood Risk Management Plan* for the Vjosa watershed (under preparation), and the *Management Plan for the Vjosa Biosphere Reserve* (to be prepared, if a biosphere reserve is designated). Project activities have been developed to build on other complementary initiatives underway in the watershed, notably investments in improving municipal services and facilities in the treatment and disposal of domestic and industrial sewage (under the *Clean and Resilient Environment for Blue Sea Project*).

The overall project objective is to “*Conserve biodiversity and reduce land degradation in the Vjosa River Basin by aligning socio-economic development with the conservation objectives of the Vjosa Wild River National Park through integrated river basin planning and restoration.*”

The project’s three core technical components will be implemented at two scales of intervention. At the scale of the Vjosa river basin, the project will contribute to: (a) managing external threats to the ecological integrity of the VWRNP; (b) reducing land degradation from unsustainable agricultural land use practices; (c) restoring and rehabilitating degraded natural habitats; and (d) supporting the development of a more integrated network of tourism and recreational routes, destinations and sites. At the scale of the VWRNP, the project will contribute to: (a) restoring and rehabilitating degraded natural habitats; (b) monitoring the state of water flow and quality; and (c) developing opportunities for income-generation from sustainable tourism and recreational uses. The project’s fourth component will be implemented at the scale of the project.

The project’s four components are inter-related and will collectively lead to further improvements in reconciling the socio-economic development priorities in the river basin with the conservation priorities of the VWRNP (and other protected areas in the basin).

Under Component 1 the project seeks to build cooperative cross-sectoral governance mechanism across the Vjosa River Basin in the planning and implementation of management measures to mitigate threats to the ecological integrity of the VWRNP (**Outcome 1.1**).

The proposed governance mechanism builds on the existing river basin committees and stakeholder platforms and aims at bringing together approximately ten key partner institutions whose mandates and expertise cover the environmental,

hydrological, agricultural, spatial, and socio-economic dimensions of the basin: e.g. the Ministry of Tourism and Environment (MTE), the Administrative Office of Vjosa National Park (AOV); the Water Resources Management Agency (WRMA); the Vjosa River Basin Council (RBC); the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD), the National Environmental Agency (NEA); the National Territorial Planning Agency (NTPA); and key municipalities (Përmet, Tepelenë, Gjirokastër, Memaliaj, and Vlorë) to support the integration of water, land, and tourism actions in their development plans. In addition, the Vjosa River Basin Civil Society Network (including NGOs such as EcoAlbania, PPNEA Vlore, Environment and Agriculture Association, Urban research Institute) can ensure transparency, citizen engagement, and advocacy. Together, these institutions can deliver coordinated cross-sectoral governance to address the identified threats and implement mitigation measures aiming towards integrated river basin management, supporting Albania's commitments under the EU Water Framework Directive and the Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. **A comprehensive stakeholder table is included as Annex H to this PIF, summarizing roles in the project.** In the absence of GEF investment, baseline funding (national budgets, EU, ADA, WB) does **not provide a mechanism for cross-sector coordination** or implementation of nature-based solutions at the landscape scale. As a result, external threats to the park such as unsustainable land use, unregulated development and tourism, pollution, etc. could persist under the baseline scenario, and opportunities for synergistic action (e.g., linking sustainable agriculture incentives with conservation, or coordinating land-use zoning across jurisdictions) would be missed. The ecological integrity of the Vjosa, while recognized in plans, would remain vulnerable without an **integrated, basin-wide approach** to reconcile development and conservation.

**The GEF investments under Component 1** will provide the critical **integrative layer** that the baseline lacks. The GEF incremental value will **enable systemic coordination across sectoral agencies and stakeholders**, establishing a governance mechanism and platform that bridges water management authorities, protected area managers, local governments, communities, and private sector actors. Through this mechanism, **spatially explicit planning instruments** will be developed - for example, a basin-level land-use plan that identifies critical habitats, floodplains, and restoration areas, *ensuring that future investments align with ecological integrity targets*. In practice, this means that infrastructure development, agriculture expansion, and tourism facilities in approximately 91,000 ha of the national park watershed (20% of the total Albanian Vjosa watershed) will be planned with strict consideration of biodiversity and land degradation criteria.

The project will build on existing assessments and will develop a comprehensive review and analysis of the integrated threats to biodiversity and land. The project will initially review and update (as required) the mapping and assessment of the nature, scale and extent of external threats to the VWRNP (a preliminary assessment was completed as part of the process of drafting the park management plan), including threats measurement scale and an evaluation of the concomitant risks and vulnerabilities of a changing climate. **The threat assessment will also document traditional and customary land and water use practices prevalent in the basin communities, recognizing that locally held knowledge of seasonal resource use patterns, historic land cover changes, and traditional water management practices constitutes a valuable baseline for understanding both the drivers of degradation and the conditions under which ecosystems have historically been maintained.** These external threats may include illegal, or unsustainable levels of urban and industrial pollution, mining, gravel extraction, water extraction, fishing, wood cutting, waste disposal, livestock grazing/browsing, new crop planting, biodiversity encroachment etc. It will also evaluate the feasibility and cost-effectiveness of a suite of different management measures in the VWRNP, to mitigate these threats. Based on the outcomes of this evaluation, the project will then prepare a cost-effective gender responsive action plan **during the PPG phase with gender-disaggregated targets for participation in governance structures, aiming for a minimum of 40% women representatives in the River Basin Council and its technical working groups** to guide the phased implementation of these management measures by the different partnering public institutions and other organizations represented in the River Basin Council<sup>[1]<sup>5</sup> (**Output 1.1.1**) and will be reflected by the updated spatial and municipal planning in the localities situated in the Vjosa basin (under Output 1.1.3, below).</sup>

The project will contribute to building the capacities (**Output 1.1.2**) of the multi-stakeholder governance mechanism in the Vjosa River Basin (such as the River Basin Council and River Basin Management Agency)<sup>[2]<sup>6</sup> and the individual public institutions represented in these multi-stakeholder structures, to implement a suite of high priority activities identified in the costed action plan (prepared under Output 1.1.1). Capacity-building activities under this output may include support to: (a) updating regulatory frameworks to address drivers of biodiversity decline and land degradation; (b) professional and technical training of staff to design and implement integrated nature-positive solutions; (c) targeted applied research; (d) aligning local integrated land use management plans and territorial plans, **supporting LDN**; (e) constituting management structures for the Biosphere Reserve; (f) field-testing innovative technologies and approaches; (g) extension and advisory services; (h) awareness-raising and information sharing; (i) monitoring and information management; (j) trans-boundary cooperation; and **(k) documenting, validating, and integrating traditional ecological knowledge held by local farming communities, pastoralists, and riverine communities into technical training curricula, extension services, and advisory materials, ensuring that locally proven land and water management practices inform the design of nature-positive solutions alongside scientific approaches.** The equitable involvement of women under this output will be guided by</sup>

the action plan prepared under Output 1.1.1., and the project will integrate gender-disaggregated indicators into all training and capacity-building activities, with a target of at least 40% women participants across all professional and technical training programs.

The project will also facilitate, through the appointment and resourcing of dedicated relationship managers, the development of cooperative arrangements (**Output 1.1.2**) with the private sector and with organized civil society to support the responsible public institutions in the implementation of the high priority activities identified in the costed action plan (prepared under Output 1.1.1). The nature of these cooperative arrangements may include *inter alia*: (a) volunteer work; (b) free or discounted rates for goods and materials; (c) free or discounted rates for professional and technical advice; (d) advocacy; (e) fund-raising; (f) ring-fenced financing instruments; (g) focused ‘campaigns’ (such as a clean-up campaign); (h) citizen science; (i) voluntary biodiversity offsets; (j) in-kind contributions; and (k) formal public-private partnerships (PPPs).

The project will support the development and formal approval of basin-wide spatial planning and zoning frameworks (**Output 1.1.3**) for the Vjosa River Basin that integrate biodiversity conservation priorities with sustainable land and water uses to support LDN. Building on the threat analysis and costed, gender-responsive Action Plan (Output 1.1.1), these frameworks will translate strategic priorities into spatially explicit guidance for decision-making across sectors and administrative levels. The project will consolidate and harmonize existing planning instruments and spatial datasets, including protected area zoning, municipal territorial plans, agricultural land-use plans, and sectoral strategies, to ensure coherence and alignment. In addition to formal planning instruments, the project will systematically collect and incorporate traditional knowledge of land use, seasonal grazing routes, customary fishing areas, and historically important ecological corridors held by local communities. Where traditional practices have demonstrably contributed to the maintenance of ecological values – such as traditional flood-season grazing rotations or customary restrictions on fishing during spawning periods – these will be formally recognized and, where appropriate, codified within the spatial planning frameworks. The resulting frameworks will delineate conservation and ecological connectivity zones, sustainable agriculture areas, nature-based tourism sites, and hazard- and climate-risk zones (e.g. flooding and erosion), supported by GIS-based mapping. The project will work with national and municipal authorities to ensure formal adoption and integration into municipal development plans, providing a durable mechanism to guide future investments and reduce land-use conflicts across the basin.

Overall, Component 1 will strengthen governance through clearly defined institutional roles and coordination mechanisms across national, basin, and municipal levels. At the national level, relevant ministries (environment, agriculture, tourism, and water) will provide policy direction and regulatory oversight. At the basin level, the project will support the establishment or strengthening of a multi-stakeholder coordination platform (e.g., river basin committee) to align sectoral planning, integrate biodiversity and land degradation considerations, and guide implementation across jurisdictions. At the local level, municipalities will operationalize integrated land-use plans and enforce zoning and management measures. Policy coherence will be achieved through integrated spatial planning processes, shared data and monitoring systems, and formal coordination mechanisms that align sectoral policies and investments, reducing fragmentation and ensuring consistent implementation of conservation and sustainable land management objectives.

The governance mechanism under Component 1 will be further elaborated during the PPG phase, including a detailed description of the roles, responsibilities, and decision-making authority of stakeholders at national, regional, and municipal levels, and the mechanisms through which policy coherence across water, land, agriculture, and tourism sectors will be ensured. This will include clarifying the operational structure of the River Basin Council, the coordination functions of AMBU and AOV, and the modalities for integrating municipal development plans with basin-level spatial planning frameworks. Representation will explicitly include small-scale farmers and Roma community representatives from the Vjosa valley, recognizing their role not only as project beneficiaries but as active partners in decision-making, particularly on matters related to land use, restoration priorities, and community-based conservation under Components 1 and 2.

Under Component 2 the project seeks to strengthen sectoral partnerships in the Vjosa River Basin through the promotion of more sustainable land use practices (with a focus on the agricultural sector) and the restoration of degraded natural habitats (with a focus on the conservation sector) (**Outcome 2.1**) and to strengthen the capacity of the Vjosa River National Park to implement the Management Plan, deliver on its mandate and improve the conditions of critical biodiversity at site (**Outcome 2.2**).

The project will promote the adoption of more environmentally friendly farming practices by rural household and smallholder farmers - particularly farmers in female-headed households who are farming in the areas immediately adjacent to the VWRNP (**Output 2.1.1**). The design and selection of environmentally friendly farming practices under this output will draw explicitly on the traditional agricultural knowledge of local farming communities, including customary crop rotation cycles, indigenous seed varieties adapted to local soil and climatic conditions, traditional soil fertility and erosion management techniques, and historically practiced forms of mixed crop-livestock integration. A participatory baseline assessment will be conducted at project outset to document these traditional practices, identify those with demonstrated environmental and productivity benefits, and integrate them into the technical assistance and extension services provided to farmers. This approach will help ensure that externally introduced innovations complement rather than displace locally embedded knowledge systems, improving both cultural acceptability and the likelihood of long-term farmer uptake. To improve the likelihood of farmer uptake, these environmentally friendly farming practices will however need to yield a measurable

increase in productivity of agricultural output and generate a significant increase in smallholder farmer income per unit area or crops or per head of livestock. The project will then provide professional, technical and financial support to smallholder crop and livestock farmers to help them improve the sustainability and productivity of their farming practices. This may include: (a) procuring improved seed varieties and cuttings that are more profitable and resilient to extreme weather conditions; (b) improving soil fertility management (including composting and mulching, organic fertilizers, crop rotation, mulching, erosion control) and pest control (using, for example, bio-pesticides); (c) improving tillage practices; (d) diversifying crop farming and animal husbandry farming activities to distribute risks; (e) procuring weather-based risk insurance coverage; (f) procuring veterinary health services and products for livestock, pigs and poultry; (g) intensifying livestock farming practices; (h) supplemental feeding of livestock; (h) maintaining demonstration sites for environmentally friendly farming practices at the Agricultural Technology Transfer Centre (ATTC) in Vlorë; and (i) implementing an agricultural land degradation monitoring program to establish a baseline at project start and evaluate the efficiency and effectiveness of good agricultural practices on the state of land degradation over time. The activities under this output have been designed to build on a recent FAO project - financed by the SDG Acceleration Fund, with contributions by the Government of Norway - that introduced more sustainable farming approaches to better cope with the climate change impact on agriculture and disaster events. **Progress toward gender equity in agricultural support will be tracked through sex-disaggregated beneficiary data collected throughout project implementation.**

The project will further support the implementation of measures to restore and rehabilitate priority natural areas in, and immediately adjacent to, the VWRNP (**Output 2.1.2**), with a spatial focus on the river floodplain areas. These restoration and rehabilitation measures may include: (a) enrichment planting; (b) seeding (e.g. hydroseeding), (c) exclusion fencing; (d) weed control; (e) composting and irrigation; (f) gabion installation; (g) riverbank stabilization; (h) micro-damming; (i) minor landscaping works; (j) erosion control technologies (such as mats, blankets, polyethylene mesh); (k) assisted natural regeneration; (l) reforestation; etc. **The identification and prioritization of restoration sites, as well as the selection of appropriate restoration techniques, will be informed by community knowledge of historical habitat conditions, traditional riparian management practices, and locally observed ecological changes over time. Where communities have maintained customary practices that have contributed to the resilience of floodplain and riparian habitats, these will be documented, respected, and where feasible, formally incorporated into the restoration and management protocols for the relevant sites.** If required, the project will also support the establishment of a temporary nursery facility to supply indigenous seeds, seedlings and saplings for restoration works under the project. It is envisaged that the priority degraded natural areas that will be targeted for project support will be those areas which could contribute to improving the role of the VWRNP in downstream flood mitigation during flood events<sup>[3]</sup>.

In order to measure the ecological benefits of controlling damaging activities (under Output 1.1.2 and 1.1.3 above), improving sustainable management of productive land use (under Output 2.1.1 above and Output 3.1.1 below), effectively managing protected areas (Output 2.2.3) and restoring degraded natural habitats (under Output 2.1.2 above) in the Vjosa River Basin, the project will, in close collaboration with the River Basin Management Agency, also support the design and operationalization of a ecological monitoring network for the VWRNP (**Output 2.1.3**). The design phase may include: (a) defining the river monitoring objectives for the VWRNP; (b) identifying suitable locations for permanent water monitoring stations and temporary sampling sites; (c) determining the monitoring parameters (physical, chemical, biological), sampling frequency and data collection methods (manual sampling, automated sensors); and (d) identifying the approach to data analysis and interpretation (such as quality control, database management, data portal, statistical analysis, modelling). Support for the operationalization phase may include: (a) maintaining (and renovating, if needed) the existing network of permanent water quantity (water flow) monitoring stations; (c) procuring equipment and materials to monitor water flow (such as velocity planks) and water quality (such as sensors, probes, data loggers, flow meters, and analyzers) at the water monitoring locations; (d) integrating citizen science monitoring data into the water monitoring network; and (e) subsidizing the running costs of the set-up, management and maintenance of the monitoring network.

**Outcome 2.2** strengthens the institutional and operational capacity of the VWRNP and NAPA to manage and protect the park's 12,727 ha effectively. The project will improve field operations, ranger capacity, patrolling, anti-poaching, and visitor-management systems (**Output 2.2.1**), enabling more effective control of illegal activities and reduction of pressures on priority habitats. Monitoring capacities for freshwater ecosystems, species populations and habitat condition will be enhanced through upgraded surveillance tools, and camera-trap systems, and ecological database (**Output 2.2.2**). To consolidate these gains, the project will support management planning, inter-agency coordination, staffing development and METT-aligned performance monitoring (**Output 2.2.3**), leading to measurable improvements in management effectiveness. **Management planning processes under this output will include structured mechanisms for engaging local communities as knowledge holders, ensuring that traditional ecological knowledge informs park zoning decisions, visitor management protocols, and species monitoring priorities. Where traditional community practices overlap with or complement formal conservation measures, the management plan will seek to formally recognize these practices as contributing to the park's conservation objectives.** Capacity building of field staff will target a minimum of 20% women, with gender-disaggregated data collected on staffing, training completion, and operational deployment. Staffing development plans for AOV and VWRNP will include gender-disaggregated targets for recruitment and promotion.

Outcome 2.2 will deliver additional benefits including **Global Environmental Benefits**, including:

- Improved management effectiveness across **12,727 ha** of the Vjosa Wild River National Park (CI-1)

The Vjosa Wild River National Park—a newly established protected area—faces significant capacity gaps related to law enforcement, monitoring, patrolling coverage, and boundary demarcation. These weaknesses have limited the park’s ability to address threats such as illegal fishing, disturbance of nesting and roosting areas, sand and gravel extraction, habitat degradation, and unregulated visitor activities. By strengthening field operations, upgrading ranger equipment, and improving protected-area boundary delineation (Output 2.2.1), and by enhancing management planning, coordination and reporting systems (Output 2.2.3), the project will address these systemic barriers and deliver a measurable increase in METT score by at least +10 over the baseline. This improvement reflects enhanced governance, enforcement presence, monitoring, staffing and threat management across all 12,727 ha of the park, contributing to more effective long-term conservation of the park’s freshwater and riparian ecosystems

- Strengthened conservation of globally important species through improved enforcement, habitat restoration and monitoring

Globally important species found in the Vjosa River Basin, such as Marble trout (*Salmo marmoratus*), European eel (*Anguilla anguilla*), Eurasian otter (*Lutra lutra*), Egyptian vulture (*Neophron percnopterus*), and Stone-curlew (*Burhinus oedipnemus*), are threatened by a combination of factors, including declining water quality, sedimentation, habitat fragmentation, disturbance from recreation, illegal fishing, and shoreline degradation. The Marble trout, classified as Vulnerable on the IUCN Red List and endemic to the Adriatic basin, depends on clean, cold, well-oxygenated river reaches with intact gravel substrates for spawning — habitat types that are well-represented within the VWRNP but increasingly threatened by sedimentation and water extraction upstream. The European eel, classified as Critically Endangered, requires unobstructed longitudinal connectivity along the full length of the river to complete its life cycle between freshwater feeding habitats and marine spawning grounds in the Sargasso Sea, making the free-flowing character of the Vjosa of direct global conservation significance. The Eurasian otter relies on the integrity of riparian gallery forest and undisturbed riverbank habitat along the length of the basin, while the Egyptian Vulture — classified as Endangered and a long-distance migratory species — uses the open agricultural and rocky landscapes of the Vjosa valley as foraging habitat during its migration between sub-Saharan Africa and European breeding grounds. The Stone-curlew, a species of European conservation concern, nests on the exposed gravel bars and semi-arid grassland patches that are characteristic of the lower Vjosa floodplain and are highly sensitive to disturbance and habitat modification. Beyond these flagship species, the basin supports significant populations of globally threatened freshwater invertebrates, endemic Balkan herpetofauna, and internationally important waterbird assemblages, further substantiating its global environmental significance.

The project addresses these pressures through a combination of targeted habitat restoration (1,600 ha under Outcome 2.1), strengthened patrolling and anti-poaching enforcement (Output 2.2.1), and installation of species-focused monitoring tools such as eDNA, camera traps and biodiversity databases (Output 2.2.2). Habitat restoration activities will specifically target the riparian gallery forest, floodplain wetland, and gravel bar habitats that underpin ecological connectivity within the park and across the broader basin corridor, prioritizing sites where restoration can most effectively re-establish habitat linkages between fragmented patches. These interventions protect spawning grounds for Marble Trout and European Eel, reduce disturbance to riparian and wetland areas used by Otter and Stone-curlew, and improve surveillance and detection of poisoning or disturbance incidents affecting the Egyptian Vulture. Together, these measures enable **stable or increasing population trends** for at least three priority species (validated during the PPG), contributing to Global Environmental Benefits under the Biodiversity Focal Area.

- A functional monitoring and enforcement system that reduces illegal activities and disturbance pressures

At present, the park lacks a comprehensive monitoring system capable of detecting illegal activities or assessing biodiversity and ecosystem health. Illegal fishing of trout and eel, unregulated recreational use of gravel bars, disturbance of ground-nesting birds, and illegal extraction of river materials pose ongoing risks to the park’s ecological integrity. Through deployment of monitoring stations, SMART-enabled patrolling, and camera-trap networks, and upgraded GIS-based ecological databases (Output 2.2.2), the project will enable real-time detection and documentation of illegal activities. Additionally, strengthened ranger operations, coordinated enforcement protocols, and improved visitor-access management (Output 2.2.1) will reduce pressures on sensitive habitats. This integrated system will result in a **measurable reduction in recorded illegal activities** and will significantly decrease human disturbance on key species, particularly during breeding, spawning and migration periods. The development of this system directly supports the park’s ability to sustain GEBs and comply with METT requirements for enforcement, monitoring, boundary and threat management.

- Increased institutional capacity of NAPA and park authorities, supporting long-term sustainability

NAPA, as the national protected area authority, currently operates with limited staff, technical capacity, and resources for managing a park of this scale and ecological importance. This lack of capacity is reflected in insufficient patrolling, limited

biodiversity monitoring, inadequate coordination with inspectorates and municipalities, and a lack of standardized protocols for visitor management or enforcement. The project directly addresses these barriers through targeted training and deployment of NAPA/VWRNP staff (Output 2.2.3), focusing on improved zoning at landscape level, biodiversity monitoring, law enforcement, visitor management, conflict resolution, and community engagement. Equipment and operational systems provided under Output 2.2.1 ensure that staff can apply the training effectively in the field. This strengthened institutional capacity supports the long-term sustainability of the park, reduces reliance on external technical assistance, and ensures that conservation gains continue beyond the project lifetime.

Under Component 3 the project seeks to strengthen sectoral partnerships in the development of a network of gender sensitive nature-based tourism products<sup>[4]</sup> (tourism sector) that could, over the longer term, generate income to help fund the costs associated with the conservation of VWRNP as a tourist destination (**Outcome 3.1**). Component 3 has specifically been developed to complement (and further build on) recent nature-based tourism planning initiatives – such as the *Upper Vjosa Ecotourism Development Plan* (2021), *VWRNP Feasibility Study* (2022), *VWRNP Ecotourism and Sustainable Tourism Concept Study* (2022), and the *VWRNP Tourism Master Plan* (2024) – for the Vjosa river valley. The network approach being promoted under this component is further elaborated in the *VWRNP Tourism Master Plan* (which proposes a network structured around interconnected, geographically specific ‘visitor hubs’).

It is envisaged that the formal management agreements concluded between accredited tourism operators and service providers under Output 3.1.1 (see below) will include a fee (lease, permit, concession, etc.) to be paid to the park management authority, with revenues earmarked to support the recurrent costs of conservation, monitoring, visitor management, and enforcement within the VWRNP. These financing arrangements will be designed to ensure that tourism-related revenues flow transparently through the protected area management structure and are directly reinvested in maintaining the ecological values that attract visitors in the first place. While there may be initial resistance to the imposition of such fees, the project will also invest in value-added services (facilities, services and emergency response – see Outputs 3.1.2 and 3.1.3 below) that help justify these costs and reinforce compliance with park regulations.

This component will further ensure that only those nature-based tourism operators operating in strict compliance with VWRNP conservation objectives and regulatory requirements are accredited, certified, and authorized to operate within the park and its surrounding landscape. All tourism development will be fully aligned with the spatial and integrated land-use planning framework developed under Component 1, including clear zoning, visitor carrying-capacity considerations, and sensitive-habitat avoidance measures. The component will contribute to recurrent financing for the park by generating more than USD 100,000 annually and formalizing at least 20 partnerships, with priority given to women-led and community-based operators. Additionally, climate-resilient, accessible, and ecologically safe tourism routes and facilities will be developed to minimize disturbance to key species such as the Otter, Stone-curlew and Egyptian Vulture, particularly in sensitive breeding and foraging areas.

The project will first support the consultative process of designing, and subsequently initiating the development of, a conceptual framework that links the diverse range of nature-based tourism and recreational routes (e.g. hiking trails, scenic drives, food tasting routes), products (e.g. rafting, kayaking, mountain biking tours, overnight accommodation) and sites (e.g. Bënja Thermal Baths, Lengarica Canyon, and the “City Stone” viewpoint in Përmet) across the Vjosa River Basin (**Output 3.1.1**). Project support may include: (a) designing, mapping, branding and marketing of the network; (b) formalizing locally specific, conservation-aligned tourism certification standards for the network (such as the proposed “Vjosa Quality Mark”); (c) training prospective local tourism operators and service providers—particularly women, youth groups, and communities living in or adjacent to the park—in conservation-compatible business practices; (d) establishing a micro-fund to support start-up costs for new community-based operators; (e) certification of operators using the “Vjosa Quality Mark”; (f) negotiation of formal working agreements (concessions, leases, permits, authorizations, etc.) that explicitly define environmental performance requirements, monitoring obligations, and sanctions for non-compliance; (g) promotion and environmental management of large annual events (such as the Vjosa Ultra-Trail Marathon); (h) identification of targeted private-sector investment opportunities to address infrastructure or service gaps; and (i) training of park and partner-agency staff in regulating, monitoring, and enforcing conservation-compatible tourism use. The network will be designed to actively direct visitors away from ecologically sensitive riparian and nesting habitats and channel visitation into clearly designated, low-impact zones. All routes, sites, and products will be subject to environmental safeguards, carrying-capacity assessments, and ongoing compliance monitoring to ensure that nature-based tourism directly supports—rather than undermines—the conservation objectives of the VWRNP.

The project will then support the upgrading, or installation of the basic public facilities and services that will further enable the effective functioning of the nature-based tourism and recreational network (**Output 3.1.2**). This technical support may include: (a) designing and installing directional, informational and interpretive signage (in coordination with Output 2.2.1); (b) maintenance of hiking and MTB trails; (c) upgrading of tourism infrastructure and facilities at trail heads and sites of interest; (d) upgrading viewing

platforms at view sites; (f) upgrading of rafting pull out points; and (e) installation, equipping and management of control/pay points at key points of entry, high volume destinations and secure parking areas.

The infrastructure upgrades will incorporate climate-resilient design, ensure accessibility for diverse visitor groups (including women, children and older visitors), and reduce erosion, waste, and unregulated access to sensitive habitats. These investments will improve visitor experience while simultaneously increasing revenue for conservation management and long-term park financing. Infrastructure design will incorporate gender-responsive considerations, including facilities that address the safety and accessibility needs of women visitors and staff, and progress will be tracked through gender-disaggregated visitor and satisfaction data.

The project will support the operationalization of integrated visitor safety, risk management, and environmental compliance systems along priority river corridors (**Output 3.1.3**) to reduce ecological disturbance and strengthen protection of sensitive freshwater, riparian, and terrestrial habitats. This output will target risks that arise from unmanaged visitation, informal access points, and emergency situations that can lead to habitat degradation, pollution incidents, wildlife disturbance, and non-compliance with conservation regulations. The project's support will prioritize the establishment of coordinated field-based systems that integrate environmental risk prevention with visitor management and enforcement functions. Activities may include: (a) establishing a multi-stakeholder environmental risk and compliance coordination mechanism involving park authorities, river basin institutions, and accredited tourism operators; (b) preparing site-specific environmental risk and emergency response protocols linked to sensitive habitats and seasonal ecological constraints; (c) equipping and training designated response units to address incidents that pose direct threats to ecosystems (e.g. fuel spills, waste dumping, illegal access, wildlife disturbance, or unsafe river use); and (d) integrating environmental compliance messaging, codes of conduct, and emergency procedures into visitor information systems and signage. By strengthening on-the-ground presence, coordination, and rapid response in high-use areas, this output will deter unsanctioned activities, reduce cumulative ecological impacts, and reinforce compliance with zoning, carrying-capacity limits, and conservation rules. In doing so, it directly contributes to safeguarding biodiversity values while enabling regulated, low-impact nature-based tourism consistent with the conservation objectives of the VWRNP.

Under Component 4 the project seeks to ensure that the implementation of the project is underpinned by results-based management (RBM) and knowledge management (KM) approaches (**Outcome 4.1**).

To facilitate ongoing communications and engagement with a wide range of different local stakeholders the project will develop and disseminate project-based information and knowledge products (**Output 4.1.1**). A gender-sensitive project communication strategy will be prepared to show how information will be disseminated to, and received from, all local stakeholders involved in the project. This will include identifying the target audiences, information needs, communication mechanisms, information elements, frequency of communications, and roles and responsibilities. Activities under this output will include *inter alia* the: (a) collation and synthesis of project-related information and knowledge generated from the implementation of project activities; (b) tailoring and packaging of this project information and knowledge into appropriate, user-friendly formats (such as written articles, photographs, infographics, stories, videos, maps, newsletters, press releases, etc.); (c) distribution and sharing of this information and knowledge through suitable communication mediums (such as meetings, workshops, radio, television, social media, project website, knowledge management platforms, mobile applications, training modules, research papers, etc.); and (d) building of a local 'community of practice' through hosting informal dialogues and formal information-sharing sessions with project beneficiaries and prospective partners. Near the end of the project, a comprehensive report on best practices and lessons learnt from project implementation will be prepared and packaged into a user-friendly, accessible product for wider distribution to local and international knowledge platforms.

The project will implement the Gender Action Plan (GAP) and the Environmental and Social Management Framework (**Output 4.1.2**), to be further developed during the PPG phase. The project will monitor and report on the implementation of the project's GAP and conformance to the project's Environmental and Social Safeguards.

The project will be implemented in an accountable and transparent manner, with results documented and available to the public (**Outcome 4.2**). The project monitoring and evaluation of results, corresponding indicators and mid-term and end-of-project targets in the Results Framework and GAP will be monitored (**Output 4.2.1**) and evaluated (**Output 4.2.2**) periodically during project implementation. A Project Monitoring Plan will detail the roles and responsibilities for, and frequency of, monitoring project results. The project will specifically implement the following suite of M&E activities under this output: (a) hosting a project inception workshop; (b) collecting and collating monitoring data to report on project performance indicators in the PRF; (c) preparing the annual Project Implementation Report (PIR) and updating the Risks Log, including tracking and reporting on gender-disaggregated indicators across all components, including beneficiary counts, training participation, income generation, employment, and governance representation, to enable assessment of gender equity outcomes at mid-term and project end; (d) preparing and submitting quarterly and annual progress reports; (e) hosting regular Project Steering Committee (PSC) meetings; (f) undertaking project mid-term and final evaluation reviews; and (g) conducting annual audits of project. The M&E plan will be further developed during the PPG phase. The monitoring and evaluation processes under this output will provide critical insights for adaptive management, enabling informed decision-making and ensuring the project's sustainability and ethical conduct. This will, in turn, guide the development and implementation of a project 'exit strategy' that will incrementally build the sustainability, and strengthen 'ownership', of project investments beyond the term of the project.

[1] Under Output 1.1.2 below.

[2] At a later stage, this may also include the management structure created for the Biosphere Reserve.

[3] A preliminary selection of priority areas has been identified in the draft Management Plan for VWRNP (2024-2033) – these sites will be assessed and updated during the PPG phase.

[4] Including rafting, camping, hiking, swimming, kayaking, fishing, MTB, trail running and spelunking.

## Coordination and Cooperation with Ongoing Initiatives and Project.

Does the GEF Agency expect to play an execution role on this project?

If so, please describe that role here. Also, please add a short explanation to describe cooperation with ongoing initiatives and projects, including potential for co-location and/or sharing of expertise/staffing

The Vjosa river valley has, over the last few years, attracted much national and international attention. This attention has, in turn, created opportunities for new investments in basin-wide projects and initiatives, many of which are adopting an integrated landscape-scale approach to address the basin-scale threats and opportunities (with a strong focus on the conservation, water, agriculture, sanitation and tourism sectors).

Most of these projects and initiatives are – like this project – however still in the conceptual stage of development or at the very early stages of implementation. At the basin-level, the institutional arrangements to coordinate the ongoing development and implementation of these initiatives and projects is also still in its infancy stages. While a Vjosa River Basin Council (RBC) has been established, a Vjosa River Basin Agency (RBA) to coordinate the planning and implementation of a future Vjosa River Basin Management Plan (RBMP) has not yet been operationalized under the RBC. A dedicated management structure for the VWRNP has also not yet been institutionalized. Further, a concurrent effort to have the Vjosa river valley designated as a Biosphere Reserve does not yet provide any clarity on the institutional arrangements that will be required to administer the Biosphere Reserve. While the (draft) *Management Plan for VWRNP (2024-2033)* makes explicit recommendations on a cooperative governance model for the VWRNP and adjacent areas, some of the recommendations – notably those covering the wider “Vjosa river valley” - fall outside the legal remit of the park and the NAPA.

In the absence of the institutional capacities to coordinate activities at the basin level, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) and the Ministry of Environment (MTE) will – through their subordinate institutions – take the lead in coordinating individual projects and initiatives in the Vjosa River Basin and the VWRNP to avoid duplication and ensure complementarity.

The cross-sectoral governance mechanism for the **Vjosa River Basin (proposed under Component 1)** will aim at bringing together key institutions to ensure that the conservation objectives of the **Vjosa Wild River National Park (VWRNP)** are aligned with basin-wide sustainable development.

The project will, through key ministries and their subordinate agencies, cooperate closely with other integrated landscape-scale projects and initiatives underway or under development in other river basins.

The management structure is regulated by the revised Law on Protected Areas, and the Office for Vjosa Park is established as the key coordination structure at PA level.

Key areas where there may be execution gaps, which will be further analyzed during the PPG, include:

- **Technical Assistance:** Assistance for the park office in implementing management plans, ecological monitoring systems, and enforcement protocols.
- **Financial management and procurement:** Support for the project to be executed in a highly efficient manner, fully in line with GEF and UNDP requirements for transparency and robust procurement procedures.

During the PPG, options for execution support will be carefully considered, including i) NIM with 3rd party support services using GEF resources, other UN agencies, etc.); and ii) NIM with UNDP providing support services. Should no suitable options be found to

provide 3rd party support, the Government of Albania will apply to the GEF Secretariat for exceptional approval to receive execution support.

## Core Indicators

### Indicator 1 Terrestrial protected areas created or under improved management

Ha (Expected at PIF)	Ha (Expected at CEO Endorsement)	Ha (Achieved at MTR)	Ha (Achieved at TE)
12727	0	0	0

#### Indicator 1.1 Terrestrial Protected Areas Newly created

Ha (Expected at PIF)	Ha (Expected at CEO Endorsement)	Ha (Achieved at MTR)	Ha (Achieved at TE)
0	0	0	0

Name of the Protected Area	WDPA ID	IUCN Category	Total Ha (Expected at PIF)	Total Ha (Expected at CEO Endorsement)	Total Ha (Achieved at MTR)	Total Ha (Achieved at TE)
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#### Indicator 1.2 Terrestrial Protected Areas Under improved Management effectiveness

Ha (Expected at PIF)	Ha (Expected at CEO Endorsement)	Total Ha (Achieved at MTR)	Total Ha (Achieved at TE)
12727	0	0	0

Name of the Protected Area	WDP A ID	IUCN Category	Ha (Expected at PIF)	Ha (Expected at CEO Endorsement)	Total Ha (Achieved at MTR)	Total Ha (Achieved at TE)	METT score (Baseline at CEO Endorsement)	METT score (Achieved at MTR)	METT score (Achieved at TE)
Vjosa Wild River National Park		National Park	12,727.00						

### Indicator 3 Area of land and ecosystems under restoration

Ha (Expected at PIF)	Ha (Expected at CEO Endorsement)	Ha (Achieved at MTR)	Ha (Achieved at TE)
1600	0	0	0

#### Indicator 3.1 Area of degraded agricultural lands under restoration

Disaggregation Type	Ha (Expected at PIF)	Ha (Expected at CEO Endorsement)	Ha (Achieved at MTR)	Ha (Achieved at TE)
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#### Indicator 3.2 Area of forest and forest land under restoration

Ha (Expected at PIF)	Ha (Expected at CEO Endorsement)	Ha (Achieved at MTR)	Ha (Achieved at TE)
800.00			

### Indicator 3.3 Area of natural grass and woodland under restoration

Disaggregation Type	Ha (Expected at PIF)	Ha (Expected at CEO Endorsement)	Ha (Achieved at MTR)	Ha (Achieved at TE)
Woodlands	400.00			
Natural grass	400.00			

### Indicator 3.4 Area of wetlands (including estuaries, mangroves) under restoration

Ha (Expected at PIF)	Ha (Expected at CEO Endorsement)	Ha (Achieved at MTR)	Ha (Achieved at TE)

### Indicator 4 Area of landscapes under improved practices (hectares; excluding protected areas)

Ha (Expected at PIF)	Ha (Expected at CEO Endorsement)	Ha (Achieved at MTR)	Ha (Achieved at TE)
91000	0	0	0

### Indicator 4.1 Area of landscapes under improved management to benefit biodiversity (hectares, qualitative assessment, non-certified)

Ha (Expected at PIF)	Ha (Expected at CEO Endorsement)	Ha (Achieved at MTR)	Ha (Achieved at TE)
20,000.00			

### Indicator 4.2 Area of landscapes under third-party certification incorporating biodiversity considerations

Ha (Expected at PIF)	Ha (Expected at CEO Endorsement)	Ha (Achieved at MTR)	Ha (Achieved at TE)

### Type/Name of Third Party Certification

### Indicator 4.3 Area of landscapes under sustainable land management in production systems

Ha (Expected at PIF)	Ha (Expected at CEO Endorsement)	Ha (Achieved at MTR)	Ha (Achieved at TE)
71,000.00			

### Indicator 4.4 Area of High Conservation Value or other forest loss avoided

Disaggregation Type	Ha (Expected at PIF)	Ha (Expected at CEO Endorsement)	Ha (Achieved at MTR)	Ha (Achieved at TE)

### Indicator 4.5 Terrestrial OECMs supported

Name of the OECMs	WDPA-ID	Total Ha (Expected at PIF)	Total Ha (Expected at CEO Endorsement)	Total Ha (Achieved at MTR)	Total Ha (Achieved at TE)

### Documents (Document(s) that justifies the HCVF)

Title

### Indicator 11 People benefiting from GEF-financed investments

	Number (Expected at PIF)	Number (Expected at CEO Endorsement)	Number (Achieved at MTR)	Number (Achieved at TE)
<b>Female</b>	14,000			
<b>Male</b>	12,000			
<b>Total</b>	<b>26,000</b>		<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>

Explain the methodological approach and underlying logic to justify target levels for Core and Sub-Indicators (max. 250 words, approximately 1/2 page)

For GEF Core Indicator 1:

Current extent of VWRNP.

For GEF Core Indicator 3:

Conservative estimate of degraded deciduous forests, floodplain forests and thickets, alluvial forests and thickets, grassland and thicket habitats within and immediately adjacent to the VWRNP identified as a restoration priority in the (draft) Management Plan for VWRNP (2024-2033).

For GEF Core Indicator 4:

The 91,000 ha target represents an estimate of the area of the river basin that is not already conserved in protected areas and is not under some form of urban, mining and industrial land use. In at least 20% of the 454,000ha encompassing the river basin area in Albania the project will then support the coordinated implementation of threat mitigation measures, incentivization of more environmentally friendly agricultural practices and promotion of sustainable nature-based tourism activities.

For GEF Core Indicator 11:

The target represents 20% of the total population resident in the river basin area, most of whom will derive tangible benefits (employment, income, contract work, etc.) from an increase in tourist numbers to the river valley. The target also includes – albeit in smaller numbers - other project beneficiaries, such as farming communities, government-employed (including park) staff, short-term contract workers, service providers, volunteers, project staff and NGO and CSO employees. The project envisages that more than 50% of these project beneficiaries will be women.

## Key Risks

	Rating	Explanation of risk and mitigation measures
CONTEXT		
Climate	Moderate	<p>The severity and frequency of natural hazards (floods, droughts, forest fires, and landslides) in the river basin are increasing under a changing climate. The lower reaches of the Vjosa river makes it particularly susceptible to sea-level rise and flash floods. This poses short-term and long-term threats to urban areas, agriculture, water supplies, and key industries like hydropower and tourism.</p> <p>It is possible that project operations and local communities living in the project areas will be directly impacted by an extreme flash flooding event at some point during the project life.</p> <p>Mitigation: The project will: (i) evaluate the risks and vulnerabilities of climate change on the ecological functioning of the Vjosa river system; (ii) support the implementation of</p>

		<p>adaptation measures to mitigate these climate risks and vulnerabilities in the river basin; (iii) promote the adoption of climate smart agricultural practices by household and smallholder farmers; (iv) implement habitat restoration measures in VWRNP and adjacent areas to reduce the destructive effects of downstream flooding during extreme weather events; (v) establish and maintain a river monitoring program to evaluate climate-related impacts on the ecological integrity of the Vjosa river; (vi) build a rapid response capability to deal with any tourist/visitor emergencies that may occur as a result of an extreme weather event; and (vii) making budgetary provision for the recovery of project interventions affected by an extreme weather event.</p>
Environmental and Social	Moderate	<p>At the PIF stage, a preliminary Social and Environmental Screening (pre-SESP) has been completed to identify potential environmental and social risks associated with the proposed interventions in the Vjosa River Basin. While a full Social and Environmental Screening Procedure (SESP) and Environmental and Social Management Framework (ESMF) have not yet been undertaken, the initial screening indicates that the project is likely to present moderate environmental and social risks, consistent with other integrated river basin and protected area landscape initiatives. Potential risks identified at this stage include: (i) concerns related to access to land and natural resources arising from strengthened conservation and management measures; (ii) risks related to the equitable distribution of project benefits, including for women and vulnerable groups; (iii) cumulative environmental pressures linked to development activities within and upstream of the basin; and (iv) institutional and coordination risks associated with multi-sectoral governance arrangements. Mitigation: During the project preparation phase, a full SESP will be conducted in line with UNDP Social and Environmental Standards to further assess risks and define appropriate mitigation measures. An ESMF, including a Grievance Redress Mechanism, will be prepared as required. The project will ensure inclusive stakeholder engagement throughout design and implementation, comply with Albania's national legal and regulatory framework, and promote non-discriminatory participation through project governance structures.</p>
Political and Governance		
INNOVATION		
Institutional and Policy	Moderate	<p>The project introduces an institutional innovation by embedding biodiversity conservation and land degradation objectives into basin-wide spatial planning through a cross-sectoral governance mechanism. This requires coordination across multiple ministries, agencies, and levels of administration with differing mandates, planning processes, and incentives. There is a risk that institutional fragmentation, limited inter-agency coordination, or insufficient alignment of sectoral policies (e.g., agriculture, water, tourism, and spatial planning) may constrain effective implementation and reduce policy coherence. In addition, varying institutional capacities at national and municipal levels may affect the uptake and enforcement of integrated planning approaches. Mitigation: The project will establish and operationalize a formalized basin-level coordination mechanism, building on existing river basin structures, to support structured</p>

		cross-sectoral dialogue, joint planning, and decision-making. Clear institutional roles and responsibilities will be defined and agreed among participating entities, supported by formal cooperation arrangements where appropriate. The project will strengthen technical and institutional capacity for integrated spatial planning, including through guidance, tools, and training, and will promote the use of shared data and monitoring systems to support evidence-based decision-making. Continuous stakeholder engagement and alignment with national policy frameworks and EU directives will further support policy coherence and long-term institutional sustainability.
Technological		
Financial and Business Model	Moderate	The project aims to establish sustainable financing mechanisms for the Vjosa Wild River National Park, including user-fee systems and public-private partnerships (PPPs) linked to nature-based tourism. While these approaches are expected to generate recurrent income over time, there is a risk that revenues may be lower than anticipated due to factors such as limited visitor demand, pricing constraints, seasonality of tourism, or delays in establishing effective fee collection and PPP arrangements. In addition, institutional capacity to manage revenue systems, enforce fee structures, and oversee PPP agreements may affect the financial performance and long-term sustainability of these mechanisms. Mitigation: The project will adopt a phased and adaptive approach to the development of user-fee systems and PPP models, including feasibility assessments, demand analysis, and pilot implementation to test and refine revenue mechanisms. Pricing structures will be designed to balance financial sustainability with accessibility and competitiveness, and will be adjusted based on monitoring of visitor trends and revenue performance. The project will also strengthen institutional capacity for financial management, contract oversight, and revenue collection, and will promote diversified revenue streams (e.g., tourism services, concessions, and complementary funding sources) to reduce reliance on a single income source. Partnerships with experienced private sector actors will further support the development of viable and scalable business models.
EXECUTION		
Capacity	Moderate	The project has strong institutional support at the national level, through the MTE and MARD (and their ancillary institutions). However, the institutional capacities implement the project at the Vjosa river basin scale, and at the VWRNP scale, are not yet fully constituted or functional. Mitigation: The project will support the River Basin Management Council and the River Basin Management Agency to fulfil their inter-sectoral role in coordinating the implementation of elements of the River Basin Management Plan across different government agencies and institutions (under Output 1.1.1). It will also build the capacities of the different responsible agencies and institutions at the river basin level (under Output 1.1.2 and 2.1.1) to implement measures to mitigate the threats to the ecological integrity of the VWRNP. A strong focus of the project (under Outputs 1.1.3, 2.1.2, 2.1.3, 3.1.1 and 3.1.2) is on building

		the planning of the planning, operational and monitoring capacity of the future management team for the VWRNP.
Fiduciary	Low	The project shall be executed fully in line with GEF and UNDP fiduciary requirements. However, there is always some slight risk of inadequate compliance with fiduciary requirements due to staff turnover, limited staff capacity, or inadequate implementation of staff roles and responsibilities. The NIM modality will be further assessed during the PPG to assess risks related to full compliance with fiduciary requirements. UNDP will ensure close communication and coordination between the PMU and UNDP in relation to project financial management and reporting. UNDP will conduct training for relevant staff as necessary on operational procedures, project management, financial management and reporting, and other key fiduciary aspects. In addition, audits will be conducted at regular intervals per UNDP standard requirements. Mitigation: UNDP will assess fiduciary risks and develop and implement mitigation measures under relevant controls, processes, policies, and practices in adherence with GEF minimum standards. This includes ensuring that sufficient skilled staff are available to oversee the project. The Executing Agency PMU staff will have clear lines of accountability, and strong qualifications in the functions in procurement and financial management, clear performance targets in contracts including timely procurement, and clear mechanisms to identify and report wrongdoing.
Stakeholder	Moderate	Understanding the diversity and complexity of stakeholders involved in the conservation and sustainable development of the Vjosa River Basin will be essential to project success. Stakeholders span multiple administrative levels—including national ministries, basin-level institutions, municipalities, and private sector actors such as tourism operators—with differing mandates, priorities, and incentives. This creates a risk that coordination challenges, competing land-use interests, or uneven levels of engagement may affect implementation and limit policy coherence. In addition, vulnerable groups, such as Roma communities and small-scale farmers, may face barriers to participation and may not fully benefit from project interventions if engagement is not inclusive and appropriately tailored. During the PIF development phase, initial consultations were undertaken with key stakeholders at national and local levels, including representatives of municipalities, local communities, and civil society organizations. These consultations informed the design of Components 1 and 2, including the emphasis on integrated spatial planning, support for sustainable land-use practices, and the need for inclusive governance mechanisms that reflect local priorities and livelihood considerations. Mitigation: A comprehensive Stakeholder Engagement Plan (SEP), to be developed during the PPG phase, will provide a structured framework for inclusive and continuous stakeholder engagement throughout project development and implementation. The SEP will map stakeholders across scales, with particular attention to vulnerable and underrepresented groups, including Roma communities and small-scale farmers, and will define tailored engagement approaches to ensure meaningful

		participation. The project will establish mechanisms for regular dialogue and feedback—such as local consultations, participatory planning processes, and grievance redress systems—to ensure that stakeholder inputs are systematically integrated into decision-making. Capacity-building activities and targeted support will further enable effective participation of local stakeholders, strengthening ownership and reducing coordination risks across sectors and administrative levels.
Other		
Overall Risk Rating	Moderate	Mitigation: Risk levels can be minimized and pared down to manageable levels if the risk mitigation measures identified above are fully implemented.

### C. ALIGNMENT WITH GEF-8 PROGRAMMING STRATEGIES AND COUNTRY/REGIONAL PRIORITIES

Describe how the proposed interventions are aligned with GEF- 8 programming strategies and country and regional priorities, including how these country strategies and plans relate to the multilateral environmental agreements.

Confirm if any country policies that might contradict with intended outcomes of the project have been identified, and how the project will address this.

For projects aiming to generate biodiversity benefits (regardless of what the source of the resources is - i.e., BD, CC or LD), please identify which of the 23 targets of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework the project contributes to and explain how. (max. 500 words, approximately 1 page)

At the GEF level, the project is fully aligned with the GEF-8 Programming Directions for the Biodiversity (BD) and Land Degradation (LD) focal areas.

Under the **Biodiversity Focal Area**, the project directly contributes to BD Objective 1-1 (Financial sustainability, effective management and ecosystem coverage system) and delivers measurable results under GEF-8 Core sub-indicators 1.2 (covering 12,727 ha of protected areas and associated ecosystems). by strengthening the management effectiveness, financial sustainability, ecological integrity, and enforcement capacity of the Vjosa Wild River National Park (VWRNP). Through integrated river basin governance (Component 1) and targeted investments in protected area management, biodiversity monitoring, habitat restoration, and law enforcement (Component 2), the project improves conservation outcomes across 12,727 ha of protected areas and associated freshwater and riparian ecosystems.

Under the **Land Degradation Focal Area**, the project aligns with LD Objective 1 (Avoid and reduce land degradation through sustainable land management) by promoting basin-wide adoption of biodiversity-friendly and climate-resilient Good Agricultural Practices and integrated land-use planning that reduce erosion, pollution, and upstream pressures on freshwater ecosystems. The project further supports LD Objective 2 (reverse land degradation through landscape restoration) through the restoration of degraded riparian, floodplain, and terrestrial habitats, improving soil health, ecological connectivity, and watershed function across priority catchments. It will also aim to apply best practices in forestry, grazing, tourism and agriculture to reduce harmful impacts and promote nature-friendly practices to reduce chemical usage, promote soil fertility improvements, reduce erosion, conserve soil and improve habitat for species in cultivable areas. In addition, the project is aligned with **LD Objective 4** (Build enabling environment for Land Degradation Neutrality), by strengthening the policy, institutional, and governance frameworks required to operationalize integrated river basin and landscape management. Through Component 1, the project supports multi-stakeholder coordination mechanisms, basin-wide spatial planning and zoning, and the integration of Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) principles into national and sub-national planning processes.

At the **GBF** level, the project will also contribute to meeting the following targets:

KMGBF Target	Project Contribution
Target 1. Plan and manage all areas to reduce biodiversity loss	The project strengthens basin-wide and municipal spatial planning and zoning frameworks that integrate biodiversity priorities, ecological connectivity, and climate and hazard risks across the Vjosa River Basin (Component 1). By embedding conservation objectives into statutory planning and river basin governance, the project reduces habitat fragmentation, unmanaged access, and cumulative development pressures affecting VWRNP and its wider landscape.
Target 2. Restore 30% of all degraded ecosystems	The project directly supports restoration of degraded riparian, floodplain, and terrestrial ecosystems in priority catchments through sustainable land management and targeted habitat restoration (Component 2). These interventions improve soil stability, water quality, ecological connectivity, and freshwater ecosystem integrity, contributing to landscape-scale recovery aligned with LD and biodiversity objectives.
Target 3. Conserve 30% of land, waters and seas	The project improves management effectiveness of the VWRNP (12,727 ha) and associated freshwater ecosystems by strengthening planning, monitoring, enforcement, and sustainable financing mechanisms (Components 1 and 2). Basin-scale governance and threat mitigation further enhance conservation outcomes beyond park boundaries, supporting effective area-based conservation.
Target 7. Reduce pollution to levels that are not harmful to biodiversity	Through integrated land-use planning, sustainable agricultural practices, and restoration of riparian buffers, the project reduces diffuse pollution, sedimentation, and nutrient runoff affecting freshwater ecosystems in the Vjosa River Basin (Components 1 and 2). Improved water-quality monitoring and compliance further support pollution reduction outcomes.
Target 8. Minimize the impacts of climate change on biodiversity and build resilience	The project enhances ecosystem resilience through climate-resilient spatial planning, restoration of floodplains and riparian habitats, and sustainable land management practices that buffer climate-related risks such as flooding, drought, and erosion (Components 1 and 2). These measures protect biodiversity while strengthening climate resilience of freshwater and terrestrial ecosystems.
Target 10. Enhance biodiversity and sustainability in agriculture, aquaculture, fisheries and forestry	The project promotes biodiversity-friendly and climate-resilient Good Agricultural Practices and integrated land-use planning across priority landscapes, reducing upstream pressures on freshwater and riparian ecosystems (Components 1 and 2). Sustainable land management measures improve soil health, water retention, and habitat quality while maintaining productive land uses.
Target 11. Restore, maintain and enhance nature's contributions to people	Improved protected area management, ecosystem restoration, and sustainable land-use practices safeguard critical ecosystem services including flood regulation, water quality, erosion control, climate resilience, and sustainable livelihoods (Components 1–3). Regulated nature-based tourism further reinforces nature-positive economic benefits while maintaining ecological integrity.
Target 19. Mobilize financial resources for biodiversity from all sources	The project mobilizes domestic and private financing for biodiversity through regulated nature-based tourism, user-fee systems, public–private partnerships, and co-management arrangements that generate recurrent revenue for conservation through the VWRNP management authority (Component 3), reducing long-term dependence on public budgets.
Target 21. Ensure knowledge is available and accessible to guide biodiversity action	The project establishes basin-wide ecological monitoring systems, decision-support tools, and knowledge products to inform planning, management, and enforcement (Components 2 and 4). Lessons learned and best practices are disseminated nationally and internationally to support replication and scaling.
Target 23. Ensure gender equality and a gender-responsive approach for biodiversity action	Gender-responsive planning and implementation are embedded across all components through inclusive governance processes, targeted support to women in sustainable land management and ecosystem restoration, and prioritization of women-led and community-based nature-based tourism enterprises. Sex-disaggregated indicators and a Gender Action Plan ensure equitable access to benefits and decision-making.

At the **SDG** level the project will substantively contribute to SDG 15 ‘Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss’ (notably 15.1, 15.2, 15.3, 15.4, 15.8, 15a and 15b) and will – to a lesser extent - support the realization of SDG 2 ‘End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture’ (notably 2.3, 2.4 and 2a).

At the national and regional level, the project will promote the intent expressed in the *General National Spatial Plan* (GNSP 2030) that the ‘Park of Vjosa’ and the river valley should be managed as a tourist and biodiversity attraction. The project will contribute to meeting some of the targeted objectives (for nature and environment protection, and water resources management) in the *National Strategy for Development and Integration* (2022-2030), including: (i) strengthening the capacity of the NAPA; (ii) improving the conservation status of species and habitats (focused on pastures and forests); (iii) implementation of EU environmental acquis; (iv) improving the protection and management of water bodies and (v) developing protected areas to deliver sustainable tourism products and services. The project is well aligned with the *Integrated Water Resources Management Strategy* (2017-2027) and the *EU Water Framework Directive* (WFD), through its support to the basin-level governance structures of the Vjosa River Basin and

implementation of elements of the Vjosa RBMP and flood risk management plan for the Vjosa river. The project will facilitate the implementation of more sustainable and productive crop and pasture management practices in support of meeting the targets identified in the *Agriculture, Rural Development and Fisheries Strategy 2021-2027*. The project is also closely aligned with the *National Strategy of Tourism (2024-2030)* and the *National Strategy for the Development of Agri-tourism in Albania*. The project will further contribute to national efforts to align with the requirements of the *EU Habitats and Birds Directive* in the development of the Natura 2000 network. Finally, the project will contribute to realizing the voluntary Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) targets for Albania (see *Land Degradation Neutrality Target for Albania and Soil Erosion Measurement Norms and Standards*, 2019).

## D. POLICY REQUIREMENTS

### Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment:

We confirm that gender dimensions relevant to the project have been addressed as per GEF Policy and are clearly articulated in the Project Description (Section B).

Yes

### Stakeholder Engagement

We confirm that key stakeholders were consulted during PIF development as required per GEF policy, their relevant roles to project outcomes and plan to develop a Stakeholder Engagement Plan before CEO endorsement has been clearly articulated in the Project Description (Section B).

Yes

### Were the following stakeholders consulted during project identification phase:

Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities:

Civil Society Organizations: Yes

Private Sector: Yes

### Provide a brief summary and list of names and dates of consultations

As a whole, the project builds on and draws from the extensive stakeholder consultation process that has been undertaken in the development of the VWRNP. As part of the Project Identification Form (PIF) process for the Vjosa GEF-8 project, a stakeholder engagement process was carried out in close cooperation with the Ministry of Environment, and other line ministries and subordinate agencies and institutions, municipalities, international partners, civil society and academia. A wide range of institutions and stakeholders provided comments, feedback, contributions, and inputs through in-person and virtual meetings. Participants included: (i) representatives from government institutions, including the National Vjosa Office, the National Agency of Protected Areas, AMBU, the National Agency for Territorial Planning, and MTE; academic institutions (the University of Tirana); and NGOs (URI and Eco Albania); and (ii) representatives and residents from local municipalities, including Përmet, Tepelenë, Gjirokastër, Vlorë, Këlcyrë, Memaliaj, and Fier, as well as development partners such as GIZ and the World Bank. In particular, discussions with GIZ focused on identifying potential synergies, especially related to eco-tourism development activities. However, since consultation was limited at PIF stage, a broad approach to stakeholder engagement will be developed during the PPG stage and continued into project implementation, including specifically enhancing consultations with the private sector, local communities, women, youth and ethnic minorities and their institutions and state and local level entities.

A summary of stakeholder consultations is included as Annex I to this PIF.

Key priorities emerging from consultations directly shaped the project design. ME highlighted the need for coordinated land management and basin-level investments to address land degradation and sedimentation, reflected in Outputs 1.1.3 and 2.1.2. AMBU stressed the need for clearer mandates for integrated water management and stronger ecological monitoring, reflected in Component 1 and Output 2.1.3. Civil society organizations promoted nature-based, community-led solutions and a phased capacity-building

approach, reflected across Components 1 and 2. The Vjosa National Park Administration and Vlorë municipality reinforced the importance of ecosystem-based, integrated approaches at river basin and municipal levels.

A broader stakeholder engagement strategy will be further developed during the PPG phase, with enhanced consultations with women, youth, Roma communities, small-scale farmers, and local institutions to inform the GAP and ESMF.

(Please upload to the portal documents tab any stakeholder engagement plan or assessments that have been done during the PIF development phase.)

### Private Sector

Will there be private sector engagement in the project?

Yes

And if so, has its role been described and justified in the section B project description?

Yes

### Environmental and Social Safeguard (ESS) Risks

We confirm that we have provided indicative information regarding Environmental and Social risks associated with the proposed project or program and any measures to address such risks and impacts (this information should be presented in Annex D).

Yes

### Overall Project/Program Risk Classification

PIF	CEO Endorsement/Approval	MTR	TE
Medium/Moderate			

## E. OTHER REQUIREMENTS

### Knowledge management

We confirm that an approach to Knowledge Management and Learning has been clearly described in the Project Description (Section B)

Yes

## ANNEX A: FINANCING TABLES

### GEF Financing Table

Indicative Trust Fund Resources Requested by Agency(ies), Country(ies), Focal Area and the Programming of Funds

GEF Agency	Trust Fund	Country/ Regional/ Global	Focal Area	Programming of Funds	Grant / Non-Grant	GEF Project Grant(\$)	Agency Fee(\$)	Total GEF Financing (\$)

UNDP	GET	Albania	Biodiversity	BD STAR Allocation: BD-1	Grant	2,208,105.00	209,770.00	2,417,875.00
UNDP	GET	Albania	Land Degradation	LD STAR Allocation: LD-1	Grant	700,000.00	66,500.00	766,500.00
UNDP	GET	Albania	Land Degradation	LD STAR Allocation: LD-2	Grant	508,105.00	48,269.00	556,374.00
UNDP	GET	Albania	Land Degradation	LD STAR Allocation: LD-4	Grant	1,000,000.00	95,000.00	1,095,000.00
<b>Total GEF Resources (\$)</b>						<b>4,416,210.00</b>	<b>419,539.00</b>	<b>4,835,749.00</b>

### Project Preparation Grant (PPG)

Is Project Preparation Grant requested?

true

PPG Amount (\$)

150000

PPG Agency Fee (\$)

14250

GEF Agency	Trust Fund	Country/ Regional/ Global	Focal Area	Programming of Funds	Grant / Non- Grant	PPG(\$)	Agency Fee(\$)	Total PPG Funding(\$)
UNDP	GET	Albania	Biodiversity	BD STAR Allocation: BD-1	Grant	75,000.00	7,125.00	82,125.00
UNDP	GET	Albania	Land Degradation	LD STAR Allocation: LD-1	Grant	37,500.00	3,562.50	41,062.50
UNDP	GET	Albania	Land Degradation	LD STAR Allocation: LD-2	Grant	37,500.00	3,562.50	41,062.50
<b>Total PPG Amount (\$)</b>						<b>150,000.00</b>	<b>14,250.00</b>	<b>164,250.00</b>

Please provide justification

### Sources of Funds for Country Star Allocation

GEF Agency	Trust Fund	Country/ Regional/ Global	Focal Area	Sources of Funds	Total(\$)
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UNDP	GET	Albania	Biodiversity	BD STAR Allocation	1,163,272.50
UNDP	GET	Albania	Land Degradation	LD STAR Allocation	2,936,726.50
UNDP	GET	Albania	Climate Change	CC STAR Allocation	900,000.00
<b>Total GEF Resources</b>					<b>4,999,999.00</b>

### Indicative Focal Area Elements

Programming Directions	Trust Fund	GEF Project Financing(\$)	Co-financing(\$)
BD-1-1	GET	2,208,105.00	17050000
LD-1	GET	700,000.00	5405087
LD-2	GET	508,105.00	3923360
LD-4	GET	1,000,000.00	7721553
<b>Total Project Cost</b>		<b>4,416,210.00</b>	<b>34,100,000.00</b>

### Indicative Co-financing

Sources of Co-financing	Name of Co-financier	Type of Co-financing	Investment Mobilized	Amount(\$)
Donor Agency	European Union (EU) – IPA III	Grant	Investment mobilized	5850000
Donor Agency	European Union (EU) – IPA III	In-kind	Investment mobilized	10000000
Donor Agency	SIDA	Grant	Investment mobilized	1250000
Donor Agency	World Bank (loan - Ministry of Energy & Infrastructure)	Loans	Investment mobilized	10000000
Donor Agency	German Government (GIZ)	Grant	Investment mobilized	2000000
Donor Agency	World Bank (grant - Ministry of Environment)	Grant	Investment mobilized	5000000
<b>Total Co-financing</b>				<b>34,100,000.00</b>

Describe how any "Investment Mobilized" was identified

The VWRNP project benefits from strong synergies and complementary co-financing from several ongoing initiatives supporting Albania’s green transition and biodiversity objectives. These initiatives are summarized below by project.

The EU for Circular Economy and Green Growth Programme, funded through EU IPA III, has a total budget of 30.9 million. Of this amount, 14.6 million (of which 4.6 million investment mobilized) is aligned with and contributes directly to VWRNP objectives, particularly those related to sustainable environmental management, green growth, and circular economy approaches implemented under Component 2. This 4.6 million is combined with 1.25 million from the below initiative, also funded by the EU IPA III, for a total of 5.85 million.

The EU for Nature Programme, co-funded by EU IPA III and SIDA, has a total budget of 7.5 million. Approximately 2.5 million of this investment supports activities aligned with VWRNP Component 1, including biodiversity conservation, protected area management, and nature-positive policy and planning measures. This is indicated in the table as split evenly between the EU IPA III and SIDA (1.25 million each).

Additional co-financing is foreseen through the World Bank’s Clean and Regenerative Environment for the Blue Sea Initiative, an 80 million regional programme. Within this initiative, 15 million is aligned with VWRNP objectives, reinforcing Component 2 interventions related to sustainable environmental management and pollution reduction with downstream and transboundary relevance.

Finally, the GIZ Green Vjosa Project provides targeted support to ecosystem restoration and green development in the Vjosa River Basin. This project has a total budget of 4 million, of which 2 million is aligned with VWRNP Component 3, particularly in relation to landscape-level restoration, sustainable tourism, and nature-based economic opportunities.

## ANNEX B: ENDORSEMENTS

### GEF Agency(ies) Certification

GEF Agency Type	Name	Date	Project Contact Person	Phone	Email
GEF Agency Coordinator		12/30/2025	Ms. Nancy Bennet		nancy.bennet@undp.org
Project Coordinator		12/30/2025	Ms. Monica Moldovan		monica.moldovan@undp.org

### Record of Endorsement of GEF Operational Focal Point (s) on Behalf of the Government(s):

Name	Position	Ministry	Date (MM/DD/YYYY)
Mrs. Ledina Beqiraj Agalliu	General Secretary	Ministry of Environment	12/23/2025

## ANNEX C: PROJECT LOCATION

Please provide geo-referenced information and map where the project interventions will take place



Project Coordinates:

Fier County: 40.7251118,19.5582079

Vlorë County: 40.4707602,19.4912716

Gjirokaster County: 40.1556241,20.2139254

**ANNEX D: ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL SAFEGUARDS SCREEN AND RATING**

**(PIF level) Attach agency safeguard screen form including rating of risk types and overall risk rating.**

Title

10289\_Tool Vjose river\_preSESP\_final

**ANNEX E: RIO MARKERS**

Climate Change Mitigation	Climate Change Adaptation	Biodiversity	Land Degradation
No Contribution 0	Significant Objective 1	Principal Objective 2	Principal Objective 2

**ANNEX F: TAXONOMY WORKSHEET**

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
Influencing models	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Transform policy and regulatory environments</li> <li>Strengthen institutional capacity and decision-making</li> <li>Convene multi-stakeholder alliances</li> <li>Demonstrate innovative approaches</li> <li>Deploy innovative financial instruments</li> </ul>		
Stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Indigenous Peoples</li> <li>Private Sector</li> <li>Beneficiaries</li> <li>Local Communities</li> <li>Civil Society</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Capital providers</li> <li>Financial intermediaries and market facilitators</li> <li>Large corporations</li> <li>SMEs</li> <li>Individuals/Entrepreneurs</li> <li>Non-Grant Pilot</li> <li>Project Reflow</li> </ul>	
	Type of Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Community Based Organization</li> <li>Non-Governmental Organization</li> <li>Academia</li> <li>Trade Unions and Workers Unions</li> </ul>	
	Communications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Information Dissemination</li> <li>Partnership</li> <li>Consultation</li> <li>Participation</li> </ul>	
Capacity, Knowledge and Research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Enabling Activities</li> <li>Capacity Development</li> <li>Knowledge Generation and Exchange</li> <li>Targeted Research</li> <li>Learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Awareness Raising</li> <li>Education</li> <li>Public Campaigns</li> <li>Behavior Change</li> </ul>	
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Theory of Change</li> <li>Adaptive Management</li> <li>Indicators to Measure Change</li> </ul>	

	Innovation Knowledge and Learning	Knowledge Management Innovation Capacity Development Learning	
	Stakeholder Engagement Plan		
Gender Equality	Gender Mainstreaming	Beneficiaries Women groups Sex-disaggregated indicators Gender-sensitive indicators	
	Gender results areas	Access and control over natural resources Participation and leadership Access to benefits and services Capacity development Awareness raising Knowledge generation	
Focal Areas/Theme	Integrated Programs	Commodity Supply Chains ( <a href="#">11</a> °Good Growth Partnership)	Sustainable Commodities Production Deforestation-free Sourcing Financial Screening Tools High Conservation Value Forests High Carbon Stocks Forests Soybean Supply Chain Oil Palm Supply Chain Beef Supply Chain Smallholder Farmers Adaptive Management
		Food Security in Sub-Sahara Africa	Resilience (climate and shocks) Sustainable Production Systems Agroecosystems Land and Soil Health Diversified Farming Integrated Land and Water Management Smallholder Farming Small and Medium Enterprises Crop Genetic Diversity Food Value Chains Gender Dimensions Multi-stakeholder Platforms
		Food Systems, Land Use and Restoration	Sustainable Food Systems Landscape Restoration Sustainable Commodity Production Comprehensive Land Use Planning Integrated Landscapes Food Value Chains Deforestation-free Sourcing Smallholder Farmers
		Sustainable Cities	

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Integrated urban planning</li> <li>Urban sustainability framework</li> <li>Transport and Mobility</li> <li>Buildings</li> <li>Municipal waste management</li> <li>Green space</li> <li>Urban Biodiversity</li> <li>Urban Food Systems</li> <li>Energy efficiency</li> <li>Municipal Financing</li> <li>Global Platform for Sustainable Cities</li> <li>Urban Resilience</li> </ul>
Biodiversity	Protected Areas and Landscapes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Terrestrial Protected Areas</li> <li>Coastal and Marine Protected Areas</li> <li>Productive Landscapes</li> <li>Productive Seascapes</li> <li>Community Based Natural Resource Management</li> </ul>
	Mainstreaming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Extractive Industries (oil, gas, mining)</li> <li>Forestry (Including HCVF and REDD+)</li> <li>Tourism</li> <li>Agriculture &amp; agrobiodiversity</li> <li>Fisheries</li> <li>Infrastructure</li> <li>Certification (National Standards)</li> <li>Certification (International Standards)</li> </ul>
	Species	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Illegal Wildlife Trade</li> <li>Threatened Species</li> <li>Wildlife for Sustainable Development</li> <li>Crop Wild Relatives</li> <li>Plant Genetic Resources</li> <li>Animal Genetic Resources</li> <li>Livestock Wild Relatives</li> <li>Invasive Alien Species (IAS)</li> </ul>
	Biomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mangroves</li> <li>Coral Reefs</li> <li>Sea Grasses</li> <li>Wetlands</li> <li>Rivers</li> <li>Lakes</li> <li>Tropical Rain Forests</li> <li>Tropical Dry Forests</li> <li>Temperate Forests</li> <li>Grasslands</li> <li>Paramo</li> <li>Desert</li> </ul>
	Financial and Accounting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Payment for Ecosystem Services</li> <li>Natural Capital Assessment and Accounting</li> <li>Conservation Trust Funds</li> <li>Conservation Finance</li> </ul>
	Supplementary Protocol to the CBD	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Biosafety</li> </ul>

		Access to Genetic Resources Benefit Sharing
Forests	Forest and Landscape Restoration	
	Forest	REDD/REDD+ Amazon Congo Drylands
Land Degradation	Sustainable Land Management	Restoration and Rehabilitation of Degraded Lands Ecosystem Approach Integrated and Cross-sectoral approach Community-Based NRM Sustainable Livelihoods Income Generating Activities Sustainable Agriculture Sustainable Pasture Management Sustainable Forest/Woodland Management Improved Soil and Water Management Techniques Sustainable Fire Management Drought Mitigation/Early Warning
	Land Degradation Neutrality	Land Productivity Land Cover and Land cover change Carbon stocks above or below ground
International Waters	Food Security	
	Ship Coastal Freshwater	Aquifer River Basin Lake Basin
	Learning Fisheries Persistent toxic substances SIDS: Small Island Dev States Targeted Research Pollution	Persistent toxic substances Plastics Nutrient pollution from all sectors except wastewater Nutrient pollution from Wastewater
	Transboundary Diagnostic Analysis and Strategic Action Plan preparation Strategic Action Plan Implementation Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction Large Marine Ecosystems Private Sector Aquaculture Marine Protected Area Biomes	Mangrove Coral Reefs Seagrasses Polar Ecosystems

Chemicals and Waste

Mercury  
Artisanal and Scale Gold Mining  
Coal Fired Power Plants  
Coal Fired Industrial Boilers  
Cement  
Non-Ferrous Metals Production  
Ozone  
Persistent Organic Pollutants  
Unintentional Persistent Organic  
Pollutants  
Sound Management of chemicals and  
Waste  
Waste Management

Emissions  
Disposal  
New Persistent Organic Pollutants  
Polychlorinated Biphenyls  
Plastics  
Eco-Efficiency  
Pesticides  
DDT - Vector Management  
DDT - Other  
Industrial Emissions  
Open Burning  
Best Available Technology / Best  
Environmental Practices  
Green Chemistry

Climate Change

Climate Change Adaptation

Climate Change Mitigation

Technology Transfer

Constructed Wetlands

Hazardous Waste Management  
Industrial Waste  
e-Waste

Climate Finance  
Least Developed Countries  
Small Island Developing States  
Disaster Risk Management  
Sea-level rise  
Climate Resilience  
Climate information  
Ecosystem-based Adaptation  
Adaptation Tech Transfer  
National Adaptation  
Programme of Action  
National Adaptation Plan  
Mainstreaming Adaptation  
Private Sector  
Innovation  
Complementarity  
Community-based Adaptation  
Livelihoods

Agriculture, Forestry, and other  
Land Use  
Energy Efficiency  
Sustainable Urban Systems and  
Transport  
Technology Transfer  
Renewable Energy  
Financing  
Enabling Activities

Poznan Strategic Programme on  
Technology Transfer  
Climate Technology Centre &  
Network (CTCN)  
Endogenous technology

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United Nations Framework on Climate  
Change

Technology Needs Assessment  
Adaptation Tech Transfer

Nationally Determined  
Contribution

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