

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

Review PIF and Make a recommendation

Basic project information

GEF ID

12267

Countries

Albania

Project Name

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

Agencies

UNDP

Date received by PM

1/8/2026

Review completed by PM

Program Manager

Alla Ljungman

Focal Area

Multi Focal Area

Project Type

MSP

GEF-8 PROJECT IDENTIFICATION FORM (PIF) REVIEW SHEET

1. General Project Information / Eligibility

a) Does the project meet the criteria for eligibility for GEF funding?

b) Is the General Project Information table correctly populated?

Secretariat's Comments

May 4, 2026

Cleared.

a) The alignment with LD-4 is clearly indicated. b) It is noted that the Ministry of Environment has been added as an executing entity as it is indicated in the LoE.

February 4, 2026

a) Yes. The project is eligible for LDFA investment. Most activities mentioned in component 1 are related to the the LDN framework. Please align a significant amount of the component 1 investments with LD-4.

The project is also aligned with BD FA, objective 1: To improve conservation, sustainable use, and restoration of natural ecosystems. It plans to improve the land use planning integrating biodiversity conservation priorities, and management measures, involving multisectoral and multi-stakeholders approach, and using an integrated landscape approach. Nevertheless, governance to be implemented need to be better described to clearly explain roles and mechanisms at different levels of the different stakeholders and administrations, to ensure policy coherence between different sectors (component 1).

b) Please list the Executing Partner as TBD in the General Project Information table.

Executing
Partner:

Executing Partner Type:

Agency's Comments

April 16, 2026

a) Addressed. Component 1 has been more explicitly aligned with LD-4, as it supports the enabling policy and institutional framework for LDN through multi-stakeholder governance, cooperative frameworks and spatial planning and zoning. Additional references to LDN have been made to Output 1.1.2. and Output 1.1.3. The Indicative Focal Area Elements table has been adjusted to add LD-4, and reallocate LDN resources amongst LD-1, LD-2, and LD-4.

Thank you for the comment on governance and policy coherence aspects. This will be significantly further strengthened in the PPG phase. The following paragraph has been added to the description

of Component 1, addressing roles and mechanisms at different levels related to governance, and policy coherence:

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.

b) The executing Partner as stipulated in the LOE is the Ministry of Environment, and this will be updated and reflected in the portal.

2. Project Summary

Does the project summary concisely describe the problem to be addressed, the project objective and the strategies to deliver the GEBs or adaptation benefits and other key expected results?

Secretariat's Comments

May 4, 2026

Cleared and noted for PPG phase.

February 4, 2026

In general, yes. The project summary adequately describes the key threats to the Vjosa River Basin ecosystem, the project objective, and the four component strategy to deliver global environmental benefits. However, a stronger explanation of the global significance of the biodiversity in the project's target areas is needed to better justify alignment with the Global Environment Facility mandate. The Vjosa River is recognized as one of Europe's last large free-flowing wild rivers, but the summary does not sufficiently articulate why this constitutes a globally significant biodiversity asset requiring GEF investment. The Agency is requested to strengthen this narrative in the project summary and, where relevant, in the project description. Additionally, a more detailed diagnosis of the environmental situation is needed, including information on ecological connectivity, key habitats, and species of global significance. While the document mentions flagship species (e.g., Marble Trout, European Eel, Egyptian Vulture), the ecological context and connectivity analysis should be elaborated to substantiate the global environmental significance of the project area.

Agency's Comments

April 16, 2026

Thank you for these comments. These aspects will be further significantly strengthened during the PPG phase. The PIF has been updated with the below additions to address these comments.

Revision of Project Overview:

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 [?]

Additions and Revisions to Project Rationale:

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 km², 4,540 km² 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 biodiversity hotspot. Of the documented basin-wide 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 otters, the threatened Egyptian Vulture, and other fauna dependent on intact riverine and riparian ecosystems further underscore the global significance of the basin's ecological integrity.

Project Description

Added in the second bullet point under "Outcome 2 will deliver additional benefits including Global Environmental Benefits, including:?"

[?] Globally important species found in the Vjosa River Basin, such as Marble Trout (*Salmo marmoratus*), European Eel (*Anguilla anguilla*), 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 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.

3 Indicative Project Overview

3.1 a) Is the project objective presented as a concise statement and clear?

b) Are the components, outcomes and outputs sound, appropriate and sufficiently clear to achieve the project objective and the core indicators per the stated Theory of Change?

Secretariat's Comments

May 4, 2026

Cleared.

February 10, 2026

a) Yes, the project objective is concise and clear.

b) The four-component structure is logical and appropriate. However, the governance mechanisms underpinning Component 1 need to be more explicitly described, particularly the roles of different stakeholders and administrations at various levels, and how policy coherence across sectors will be ensured. This needs to be addressed by CEO Approval.

Agency's Comments

April 16, 2026

Thank you for the comment. Additional text has been added to the description of Component I, addressing these aspects (as indicated under Comment 1.a) above). In addition, the stakeholder roles are summarized in a new table, indicated below, and added to the PIF.

B. Project Description

Sentence after the following paragraph referring to a more comprehensive table listing all stakeholders and respective roles, to be included in the Annexes:

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) could ensure transparency, citizen engagement, and advocacy. Together, these institutions could 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.

Table:

No.	NAME	STAKEHOLDERS CLASSIFICATION	ROLE IN THE PROJECT
1	Ministry of Environment	National Government Stakeholders	Primary project executing entity responsible for overall coordination, policy guidance, and supervision. Leads national policy direction on environmental protection and ecotourism, ensuring integration of biodiversity, climate, and sustainable tourism into national planning frameworks.

2	Administrative Office of Vjosa National Park (AOV)	National Stakeholders Government	The Administrative Office of Vjosa National Park (AOV) is the lead authority for managing and protecting Vjosa National Park. In collaboration with UNDP and GEF-supported projects, it oversees implementation of the park's management plan, biodiversity monitoring, and enforcement of conservation regulations. The office facilitates project activities, engages local stakeholders, and supports environmental education and sustainable tourism. It also contributes to data collection, reporting, and policy alignment, playing a key role in ensuring the park's long-term ecological integrity and sustainable development.
3	Ministry of Defense	National Stakeholders Government	Oversees land use in strategic areas and border security. It ensures security and land integrity in areas of military significance and contributes to environmental risk assessments in border and buffer zones.
4	Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development	National Stakeholders Government	Technical lead for sustainable agriculture initiatives and Good Agricultural Practices implementation. Sets national standards for agricultural sustainability, provides extension services, and promotes climate-resilient farming practices.
5	National Agency for Territorial Planning	National Stakeholders Government	Advisory body for spatial planning alignment and territorial plan integration. Ensures that land-use planning incorporates environmental safeguards and aligns with the national territorial development strategy.
6	National Environmental Agency	National Stakeholders Government	Technical support provider for environmental monitoring and assessment. Responsible for issuing environmental permits, conducting environmental impact assessments, and publishing state-of-environment reports.
7	Water Resources Management Agency (WRMA)	National Stakeholders Government	Lead coordinator for river basin management and implementation of water-related regulations. Oversees Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) and ensures compliance with EU Water Framework Directive principles.

8	Albanian Geological Service	National Government Stakeholders	Technical support provider on geological impacts of river dynamics and flooding. Provides scientific data on erosion, sedimentation, and geological hazards to inform land-use planning and flood risk mitigation.
9	National Coastal Agency	National Government Stakeholders	Coordinates coastal zone management where the Vjosa enters the Adriatic. Supports integrated land-sea planning and implements national strategies for sustainable coastal development.
10	National water and sewerage agency ((AKUK)	National Government Stakeholders	Technical support for water quality monitoring activities and implementation of wastewater management measures that affect the Vjosa River. Supervises municipal water utilities and leads infrastructure modernization for improved sanitation and pollution control.
11	Vjosa River Basin Council (RBC)	Regional and Local Government Stakeholders	Inter-sectoral coordination forum for basin-wide planning and stakeholder engagement. Facilitates policy coherence across sectors and jurisdictions to support integrated river basin management.
12	Regional Development Agency	Regional and Local Government Stakeholders	Integration facilitator for regional development frameworks and economic initiatives. Promotes green economic growth and coordinates alignment of environmental priorities with regional investment strategies.
13	Municipalities (P?rmet, Tepelene, Gjirokast?r, etc.)	Regional and Local Government Stakeholders	Local-level implementers for community engagement and territory-specific activities. Execute local land use plans, support participatory governance, and implement community-level resilience actions.
14	Regional Coastal Agencies	Regional and Local Government Stakeholders	Manage coastal zones at regional level where river meets sea. Implement local coastal plans, support habitat restoration, and monitor marine-environment interactions.
15	Vjosa River Basin Civil Society Network	Civil Society and Academic Institutions	Community mobilizer and public advocate for river conservation. Amplifies citizen voices, advocates for transparent governance, and mobilizes grassroots campaigns for protection of the river.

16	PPNE and Environmental and Organic Agriculture Association	Civil Society and Academic Institutions	Scientific advisors and conservation advocates for river ecosystem protection. Provide technical expertise, international advocacy, and support for sustainable alternatives to infrastructure development.
17	National NGOs like: ECO Albania, Resource Environmental Center Albania, INCA etc	Civil Society and Academic Institutions	National knowledge provider and community-based conservation facilitator. Deliver environmental education, conduct citizen science, and support policy advocacy at the national level.
18	Local NGOs like: Flag Pine, Visit Vloa, Green Vision Vlore, SEEP Vlore (specific local organizations)	Civil Society and Academic Institutions	Local knowledge provider and community-based conservation facilitator. Organize community-based activities, raise local awareness, and bridge communication between residents and institutions.
19	Universities (Tirana, Gjirokastër, Agricultural, Vlorë, Polis)	Civil Society and Academic Institutions	Research partners and technical knowledge providers for monitoring and assessment. Conduct field studies, engage students in applied research, and support data-driven decision-making.
20	Local Schools	Civil Society and Academic Institutions	For environmental education and awareness programs. Raise awareness among youth through eco-clubs, curricula on river conservation, and participatory learning initiatives.
21	Patagonia	Private Sector Stakeholders	Private conservation sponsor and international advocacy supporter. Provides financial backing, supports awareness campaigns, and helps elevate the global visibility of the Vjosa River as a protected ecosystem.
22	Agricultural producers and farmers' associations	Private Sector Stakeholders	Adopters and demonstrators of sustainable agricultural practices. Pilot agroecological techniques, reduce chemical inputs, and advocate for climate-smart agriculture at scale.
23	Tourism businesses (Rafting companies, hotels, guesthouses, event organizers, Local bars, tourist guides etc.)	Private Sector Stakeholders	Service providers implementing sustainable tourism standards and visitor experiences / Commercial implementers of sustainable tourism practices and product developers
24	Fisherman communities	Local Communities Stakeholders	Adopters of water-efficient and low-pollution aquaculture practices. Protect local fish stocks and contribute to river health through sustainable harvesting practices.

25	Shepherd communities	Local Stakeholders Communities	Practitioners of traditional ecological knowledge and pastoral management. Preserve biodiversity through rotational grazing and landscape stewardship.
26	Fishing farms	Local Stakeholders Communities	Commercial aquaculture operations affected by water quality. Stakeholders in water regulation and critical for ensuring environmentally sound aquaculture operations.
27	Family-operated farms	Local Stakeholders Communities	Adopters of sustainable farming practices and erosion control measures. Integrate traditional practices with new methods to preserve soil quality and minimize runoff.
28	Commercial Crop Producers	Local Stakeholders Communities	Implementers of scaled sustainable agriculture techniques. Have the capacity to influence landscape-level impacts and test innovation in land management.
29	Agricultural Input Suppliers: Providers of seeds, fertilizers, and other agricultural inputs	Local Stakeholders Communities	Distributors of environmentally-friendly agricultural products. Key enablers in transitioning to organic and low-impact farming systems.
30	IUCN	International Organizations	Conservation standards advisor and technical guidance provider. Offers best practices for ecosystem management, restoration, and biodiversity metrics aligned with global frameworks.
31	World Bank	Development Bank	Co-financing partner for complementary water and infrastructure investments. Brings expertise in infrastructure financing, safeguards, and climate resilience in water resource management.
32	GIZ	International Organizations	Co-financing partner for complementary interventions in eco-tourism development.
33	European Union	International Organizations	Co-financing partner for aligned nature conservation and circular economy initiatives. Supports regulatory harmonization with EU directives and leverages green funds for nature-based solutions.

3.2 Are gender dimensions, knowledge management, and monitoring and evaluation included within the project components and appropriately funded?

Secretariat's Comments

February 10, 2026

Gender dimensions are addressed through a commitment to a minimum of 40% women in project-related appointments and through the planned preparation of a Gender-Responsive Social Assessment and Gender Action Plan (GAP) during the PPG phase. The Agency should ensure that gender-disaggregated targets are embedded across all components, not only in Component 4.

Knowledge management is addressed through a dedicated Component 4, which includes knowledge products, a gender-sensitive communication strategy, and a target of at least 20 publications or media products. This is adequate.

Monitoring and evaluation is integrated into Component 4 through Outcome 4.2 and is linked to the GEF core indicators. The M&E framework will need to be further developed during the PPG phase.

Agency's Comments

April 16, 2026

GENDER

Component 1 ? Output 1.1.1

After ?cost-effective gender responsive action plan? added:

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

Component 1 ? Output 1.1.2

Add the end of the first paragraph, added:

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.

Component 2 ? Output 2.1.1

At the end of the description of Output 2.1.1. add:

Progress toward gender equity in agricultural support will be tracked through sex-disaggregated beneficiary data collected throughout project implementation

Component 2 ? Output 2.2.1

Add at the end of the output description: Capacity building of field staff will target a minimum of 20% women, with gender-disaggregated data collected on staffing, training completion, and operational deployment

Component 2 ? Output 2.2.3 (management planning and staffing)

Add: Staffing development plans for AOV and VWRNP will include gender-disaggregated targets for recruitment and promotion.

Component 3 ? Output 3.1.2 (tourism infrastructure)

Add at the end: 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.

Component 4 ? Output 4.1.2 (GAP)

Add to the opening sentence after Gender Action Plan: to be further developed during the PPG phase.

Component 4 ? Output 4.2.1 (monitoring)

Add to the M&E activities list: 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.

M&E

Including the following sentence after this paragraph of Component 4, Outcome 4.2:

?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; (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.

3.3 a) Are the components adequately funded?

b) Are the GEF Project Financing and Co-Financing contributions to PMC proportional?

c) Is the PMC equal to or below 5% of the total GEF grant for FSPs or 10% for MSPs? If the requested PMC is above the caps, has an exception (e.g. for regional projects) been sufficiently substantiated?

Secretariat's Comments

May 4, 2026

Cleared.

February 10, 2026

a) The component funding appears broadly adequate for the scope of activities described. The financing across BD-1-1, LD-1 and LD-2 is noted. However, LD-4 alignment is require (the focal area elements table). The Agency should revisit the financing table to ensure the revised allocation is reflected accurately.

b) Yes, PMC portions for the GEF grant financing and co-financing are proportional.

c) Yes.

Agency's Comments

April 16, 2026

Thank you for the comment. The 'Indicative Focal Area Elements' table has been revised to include LD-4, reflecting the project design.

4 Project Outline

A. Project Rationale

4.1 SITUATION ANALYSIS

a) is the current situation (including global environmental problems, key contextual drivers of environmental degradation, climate vulnerability) clearly and adequately described from a systems perspective?

b) Are the key barriers and enablers identified?

Secretariat's Comments

May 4, 2026

Cleared.

February 10, 2026

a) - b) Yes.

Agency's Comments

4.2 JUSTIFICATION FOR PROJECT

a) Is there an indication of why the project approach has been selected over other potential options?

b) Does it ensure resilience to future changes in the drivers?

c) Is there a description of how the GEF alternative will build on ongoing/previous investments (GEF and non-GEF), lessons and experiences in the country/region?

d) are the relevant stakeholders and their roles adequately described?

Secretariat's Comments

May 4, 2026

Cleared.

February 10, 2026

a) The integrated river basin management approach is justified as the most appropriate response to the fragmented governance barrier.

b) Climate resilience is addressed through climate-smart agriculture, rapid response capabilities for flood and drought events, and climate-resilient visitor infrastructure. The

project's approach to embedding conservation into basin-wide spatial planning also contributes to long-term resilience.

c) Yes

d) Stakeholders are broadly identified, including national authorities (MTE, NAPA, AMBU), regional and municipal authorities, farming communities, and the private sector (tourism operators). However, the role of traditional practices and knowledge in the project process is not adequately described. The Agency is requested to explicitly describe how traditional knowledge will be integrated into land-use planning, sustainable use practices, and community engagement processes in Components 1 and 2.

Agency's Comments

April 16, 2026

d) Component 1 ? Output 1.1.1

Add after "*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.

Component 1 ? Output 1.1.2

Add as a new item to the capacity-building list:

(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.

Component 1 ? Output 1.1.3

Add after "*The project will consolidate and harmonize existing planning instruments and spatial datasets*":

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.

Component 2 ? Output 2.1.1

Add after the introductory sentence describing the support to smallholder farmers:

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.

Component 2 ? Output 2.1.2

Add after the list of restoration measures:

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.

Component 2 ? Output 2.2.3

Add at the end of the output description:

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.

5 B. Project Description

5.1 THEORY OF CHANGE

a) Is there a concise theory of change that describes the project logic, including how the project design elements will contribute to the objective, the expected causal pathways, and the key assumptions underlying these?

b) Are the key outputs of each component defined (where possible)?

Secretariat's Comments

May 4, 2026

Cleared.

February 10, 2026

a)-b) Yes

Agency's Comments

5.2 INCREMENTAL/ADDITIONAL COST REASONING

Is the incremental/additional cost reasoning properly described as per the Guidelines provided in GEF/C.31/12?

Secretariat's Comments

May 4, 2026

Cleared.

February 10, 2026

Yes.

Agency's Comments

5.3 IMPLEMENTATION FRAMEWORK

a) Is the institutional setting, including potential executing partners, outlined and a rationale provided?

b) Comments to proposed agency execution support (if agency expects to request exception).

c) Is there a description of potential coordination and cooperation with ongoing GEF-financed projects/programs and other bilateral/multilateral initiatives in the project area

d) Are the proposed elements to capture and disseminate knowledge and learning outputs and strategic communication adequately described?

Secretariat's Comments

May 4, 2026

Cleared.

February 10, 2026

a) Yes.

b) No.

c)-d) Yes.

Agency's Comments

5.4 a) Are the identified core indicators calculated using the methodology included in the corresponding Guidelines (GEF/C.54/11/Rev.01)?

b) Are the project's indicative targeted contributions to GEBs (measured through core indicators)/adaptation benefits reasonable and achievable?

Secretariat's Comments

May 4, 2026

Cleared. Noted for PPG phase.

November 10, 2026

a)-b) Yes.

Given the nature-based tourism focus, the Agency may consider the opportunity to identify expected results under Core Indicator 5.

Given the focus on the Vjosa River, the Agency may consider a focus on Fisheries under Core Indicator 8 or 5.1.

Under Terrestrial protected area, consider including the WDPA ID of VWRNP as available.

Agency's Comments

April 16, 2026

The GEF Core Indicators 5 and 8 relate to marine ecosystems, and since the entire scope of the project is freshwater (or potentially partially brackish water at the mouth of the Vjosa river), these indicators do not appear to be relevant.

The WDPA ID of VWRNP is not currently designated; this will be further explored during the PPG (with the VWRNP potentially registered in the WDPA at that time).

5.5 NGI Only: Is there a justification of financial structure and use of financial instrument with concessionality levels?

Secretariat's Comments N/A

Agency's Comments

5.6 RISKS

a) Is there a well-articulated assessment of risk and identification of mitigation measures under each relevant risk category?

b) Is the rating provided reflecting the residual risk to the likely achievement of intended outcomes after accounting for the expected implementation of mitigation measures?

c) Are environmental and social risks, impacts and management measures adequately screened and rated at this stage and consistent with requirements set out in SD/PL/03?

Secretariat's Comments

May 5, 2026

Noted. Cleared.

February 10, 2026

a) Please explain how the overall risk rating was determined. We also noted that the environmental and social risk is rated as low in the Key Risks table, while the ESS document classifies it as moderate. Kindly ensure that the ratings are consistent across the documents.

- I. Under the Technological risk entry, the narrative focuses on an execution/planning risk rather than a risk specific to the project's innovative elements. Please either reflect on innovative elements (e.g. passive rewilding) or consider removing the text and associated rating.
- II. Under Institutional and Policy risk, consider reflecting the institutional innovation here: embedding conservation objectives into basin-wide spatial planning through a cross-sectoral governance mechanism.
- III. Under Financial and business model, consider reflecting on the likelihood that the user-fee systems and PPPs will generate recurrent income for the national park.
- IV. Under Capacity risk and given the GEF Risk Appetite's focus on residual risk, consider elaborating on mitigation measures that would bring the residual rating below High.
- V. Under the Fiduciary risk, please remove references to UNDP providing support services in an executing capacity as it is premature at PIF stage. With this, kindly consider revising further the rating and associated narrative.
- VI. On Stakeholder risk, consider revising the narrative and rating given the coordination complexity across municipalities, ministries and tourism operators. Please clarify how the project concept (PIF) was consulted with vulnerable populations including the Roma communities and small-scale farmers particularly Component 1 and 2, and how the results of the consultations with them were integrated into the project concept (PIF).

b) Yes.

c) Please make sure that E&S risk rating is consistent in the PIF Key Risk table and the Environmental and Social (E&S) Screening Tool. Both UNDP Environmental and Social (E&S) Screening Tool and Environmental and Social Safeguards in D. Policy requirements (page 31) said E&S risks as Moderate. However, the environmental and social risk in the Key Risks table (page 26) said Low risk.

Agency's Comments

April 16, 2026

a) The overall risk rating is determined based on the highest risk level among any of the assessed risks.

i. Text and associated rating removed, as suggested.

ii. Risk description added, per suggested comment.

iii. Risk description added, per suggested comment.

iv. Changed risk rating for Institutional capacity for Implementation and sustainability from High to Moderate, to more accurately reflect the risk level.

v. There was not explicit reference to UNDP providing support services in this section, but the mitigation section has been revised to be clearer about UNDP fiduciary oversight of the Executing Agency execution role

vi. The risk text and mitigation information has been revised to respond to the comment, and the risk rating has been changed from Low to Moderate.

Risks to Project Preparation and Implementation:

c.) Changed risk rating for environmental and social from Low to Moderate, as per pre-SESP.

5.7 Qualitative assessment

a) Does the project intend to be well integrated, durable, and transformative?

b) Is there potential for innovation and scaling-up?

c) Will the project contribute to an improved alignment of national policies (policy coherence)?

Secretariat's Comments

March 8, 2026

a)-c) Yes.

Agency's Comments

6 C. Alignment with GEF-8 Programming Strategies and Country/Regional Priorities

6.1 Is the project adequately aligned with focal area and integrated program strategies and objectives, and/or adaptation priorities?

Secretariat's Comments

March 8, 2026

Yes.

Agency's Comments

6.2 Is the project alignment/coherent with country and regional priorities, policies, strategies and plans (including those related to the MEAs and to relevant sectors)

Secretariat's Comments

March 8, 2026

Yes.

Agency's Comments

6.3 For projects aiming to generate biodiversity benefits (regardless of what the source of the resources is - i.e. BD, CC or LD), does the project clearly identify which of the 23 targets of the

Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework the project contributes to and how it contributes to the identified target(s)?

Secretariat's Comments

March 8, 2026

Yes.

Agency's Comments

7 D. Policy Requirements

7.1 Is the Policy Requirements section completed?

Secretariat's Comments

March 9, 2026

Not fully

Agency's Comments

April 16, 2026

Presumably this comment relates to the elements below (which fall under the 'Policy Requirements' section) to be revised. If there is something more specific that is necessary to respond to the above comment, please clarify. Thank you.

7.2 Is a list of stakeholders consulted during PIF development, including dates of these consultations, provided?

Secretariat's Comments

May 5, 2026

Cleared.

March 9, 2026

The Agency is requested to include a table with the names of organizations consulted and the corresponding dates of consultation, as required by GEF policy. Please clarify how the project concept (PIF) was consulted with vulnerable populations including the Roma communities and small-scale farmers particularly Component 1 and 2, and how the results of the consultations with them were integrated into the project concept (PIF).

Agency's Comments

April 16, 2026

Inserted following text as part of the stakeholder engagement:

As part of the Project Identification Form (PIF) process, a stakeholder engagement process was carried out in close cooperation with the Ministry of Environment (ME), and other line ministries and subordinate agencies and institutions, municipalities, international partners, civil society and academia.

However, since consultations were limited to main stakeholders 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, vulnerable groups, etc.

Stakeholder Consultations Agenda Table:

Name	Institution	Date	Topic of Discussion
Klodiana Marikaj	Director for Biodiversity, Protected Areas, and Forestry Ministry of Environment (ME)	27 October 2025	Discussion of the latest updates on reform agenda in the area, government priorities in Vjosa and fine tuning the status of other interventions in Vjosa
Arben Muka	Head of Water Sector, Ministry of Agriculture	27 October 2025	Need for strong coordination between national and local institutions to identify high-risk areas. Strengthening the Agency for Water Resources Management (WRMA) as the lead body for integrated water management with clearer mandates and responsibilities, priorities of the Ministry of Agriculture on sustainable land management practices and land degradation hotspots
Keti Gjinali	Head of Sector, Ministry of Energy & Infrastructure	27 October 2025	Energy sector's extreme vulnerability to drought given its heavy reliance on hydropower, advocating for the development of a national drought management plan aligned with EU directives and improved data availability and monitoring systems

Hektor Xhomara	National Forestry Agency (NFA)	27 October 2025	Highlighted their primarily advisory role within a decentralized framework, reported severe wildfire impacts in 2024, uneven municipal capacities, and the introduction of a new national forestry data platform
Enkelejda Kucaj	Environment and Climate Specialist Institute of Geosciences - IGEO	27 October 2025	Absence of a national drought assessment, strategy, and Early Warning System as a critical gap, recommending the establishment of a coordinated national EWS focused on key hotspots.
Abdulla Diku	CSO Representative, PSEDA Iliria NGO	27 October 2025	Synergies with ongoing initiatives in the Vjosa River Basin, promoted nature-based and community-based solutions, and recommended a phased, pilot-based approach centered on capacity building, practical training, and scalable best practices
Debora Bonucci	Project Manager (EU4Rivers project), Austrian Development Agency (ADA)	27 October 2025	Discussing ongoing activities and the work under the project on Vjosa River basin planning EU4Rivers
Iir Profka	Director of Vjosa River Basin Office	28 October 2025	Echoing CSO's inputs and stressed the importance of integrated, ecosystem-based approaches and coordinated implementation of National and Local Adaptation Plan measures to strengthen climate resilience at both river basin and municipal levels
Multi-Stakeholder Workshop Vlora 28 October 2025			

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Eriselda Kullolli - Shyqyri Sadiku - Artion Seferi - Lavdosh Ferruni - Xhoana Elmazi - Edi Beqaraj - Kastriot Sheqi - Liljana Ferunaj - Thoma Leka 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Vlorë Municipality - Prefecture Vlore - Administrative Office of Vjosa National Park (AOV) - Organic Agriculture & Environment Association - Regional Coastal Agency Vlorë - Greening NGO - Regional Waste Management Center Vlora - Community Education for Rights, Culture and Integration CERCINGO 	<p>28 October 2025</p>	<p>Presentation and consultation on the project interventions</p>
<p>Eduina Guga</p>	<p>Head of Vjosa Administration Office (currently located in Gjirokastra municipality)</p>	<p>29 October 2025</p>	<p>Presented the management plan of Vjosa National Park and articulated priority actions. Reiterated CSO's inputs as well as the recommendations shared by Ilir Profka, Director of Vjosa Basin on strengthening ecosystem-based approaches</p>

Other stakeholders met during July-October 2025

A field mission, organized on 3rd July 2025, aligned with the findings of the National Adaptation Plan (NAP) by assessing climate change impacts along the Vjosa River and within Vjosa National Park. The mission gathered national and local stakeholders to observe field conditions, discuss prioritized adaptation measures particularly Nature-based Solutions (NbS) and Ecosystem-based Solutions (EbS) and align with GEF 8 project.

Other stakeholders met during July-October 2025

Sofjan Jaupaj	Minister of Environment (former deputy minister of Environment and GEF operational focal point)	Discussions focused on aligning the project with national priorities, EU integration, and global biodiversity goals. Clarified institutional roles, stakeholder benefits, and potential risks such as land-use conflicts. Ensuring the proposal is both technically sound and policy-relevant and builds synergies and complementarities w GIZ and World Bank Projects.
Anila Shehu	Director Water Resources Management Agency	Focus of discussion was on hydrological integrity, basin-level planning, and long-term water governance. Discussed data availability, monitoring systems, and institutional roles in managing water use and conservation. Ensure alignment with national water policies and clarify the agency's role in implementation, coordination, and sustainability of outcomes beyond the project lifecycle.
Ina Nushi	Urban Research Institute - URI	Freelance consultant heading and coordinating the working group on costing of Vjosa Management Plan under IUCN and Patagonia. The discussions focused on priority actions identified in the Management Plan of Vjosa
Mattia Wegmann	GIZ Programme Manager	Identifying potential synergies related to eco-tourism development activities in the Vjosa River Basin
Sofjola Kotelli	GIZ Deputy Project Manager	
Vlora Municipality		Discussions focused on agricultural and infrastructure impacts that are significant in Fier and Vlor?, where flooding and erosion affect farmland, greenhouses, livestock, and key transport infrastructure such as highways and national roads. Coastal dynamics in Fier show contrasting trends: severe erosion at Darezeze beach (around 400m lost over 10?15 years), while in areas like the Vjosa delta and Pish? Poro, the sea has receded and sand deposits have increased.
Sanie Balla	Agriculture Specialist	
Kastriot Bega	Fire Protection Service (MZSH)	
Agim Muka	Expert for Forest Management	
Amarda Kasa	Environment Specialist	
Aulon Spaho	Director, Civil Protection Directorate	
Fier Municipality		
Ledio Gjyla	Director, Fier Directorate of Irrigation and Drainage	

Ledion Gjoka	Specialist for Agriculture issues	
Kreshnik Ymeraj	Head of Civil Emergency Sector	
Valbona Grami	Monitoring Specialist	
Gjirokaster Municipality		Discussions focused on river behavior in Gjirokaster that has intensified, with rivers carrying more sediments, raising water levels, and increasing erosion of agricultural land and with climate change also affecting groundwater systems.
Esmeralda Llongo	Deputy Mayor	
Pellumb Shalari	Director of Service of Fire Protection and Rescue	
Thanas Nikolla	Head of Forests and Pasture Sector	
Florjana Asllanaj	Specialist Agriculture Directorate	
Spiro Diamanti	Irrigation and Drainage Sector, Directorate of Forests, Pastures and Agriculture	
Irma Bajaj	Agriculture Specialist, Directorate of Forests, Pastures and Agriculture	
Inva Beqari	Specialist RAPA Gjirokaster	
Arbora Kore	Specialist RAPA Gjirokaster	
Permet Municipality		
Arjan Jaupi	Services Specialist	
Florand Hasani	Deputy mayor	
Jetmira Prifti	Agriculture Specialist	
Flavio Guçi	Asset Specialist	
Edjon Maliqi	Head of Tourism Sector	

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.

8 Annexes

Annex A: Financing Tables

8.1 Is the proposed GEF financing (including the Agency fee) in line with GEF policies and guidelines? Are they within the resources available from (mark all that apply):

STAR allocation?

Secretariat's Comments

March 9, 2026

Yes.

Agency's Comments

Focal Area allocation?

Secretariat's Comments

March 9, 2026

Yes.

Agency's Comments

LDCF under the principle of equitable access?

Secretariat's CommentsN/A

Agency's Comments

SCCF A (SIDS)?

Secretariat's CommentsN/A

Agency's Comments

SCCF B (Tech Transfer, Innovation, Private Sector)?

Secretariat's CommentsN/A

Agency's Comments

Focal Area Set Aside?

Secretariat's Comments N/A

Agency's Comments

8.2 Is the PPG requested within the allowable cap (per size of project)? If requested, has an exception (e.g. for regional projects) been sufficiently substantiated?

Secretariat's Comments

March 9, 2026

Yes.

Agency's Comments

8.3 Are the indicative expected amounts, sources and types of co-financing adequately documented and consistent with the requirements of the Co-Financing Policy and Guidelines?

Secretariat's Comments

May 5, 2026

Cleared.

March 9, 2026

At present, in-kind contributions are usually understood as recurrent expenditures, yet four in-kind entries are categorized as investment mobilized. Also, it is uncommon for WB to provide in-kind contributions, but one such contribution is currently shown from WB.

Where the same co-financier, co-financing type, and investment mobilized category are repeated, it would be better to combine them into a single entry where possible (European Union).

Overall, there is the need to review the financial instruments and investment mobilized classifications for consistency with the GEF co-financing guidelines.

The documents confirming co-financing will be required.

Agency's Comments

April 16, 2026

Merging EU IPA III in-kind investment mobilized into one (3,500,000 = 1,250,000) as well as changing WB contributions from in-kind to a cumulative investment in two forms: a loan to the Ministry of Energy & Infrastructure and grant to the MoE

Annex B: Endorsements

8.4 Has the project been endorsed by the country? (ies) GEF OFP and has the OFP at the time of PIF submission name and position been checked against the GEF database?

Secretariat's Comments

May 5, 2026

Cleared.

March 8, 2026

Yes. We noted that the "Executing Partner" in the LoE is the Ministry of Environment, but in Portal it is empty - please include Ministry of Environment in Portal.

Agency's Comments

Thank you, it has been inserted accordingly.

Are the OFP endorsement letters uploaded to the GEF Portal (compiled as a single document, if applicable)?

Secretariat's Comments

March 9, 2026

Yes.

Agency's Comments

Do the letters follow the correct format and are the endorsed amounts consistent with the amounts included in the Portal?

Secretariat's Comments

March 9, 2026

Yes.

Agency's Comments

8.5 For NGI projects (which may not require LoEs), has the Agency informed the OFP(s) of the project to be submitted?

Secretariat's Comments N/A

Agency's Comments

Annex C: Project Location

8.6 Is there preliminary georeferenced information and a map of the project's intended location?

Secretariat's Comments

March 9, 2026

Yes.

Agency's Comments

Annex D: Safeguards Screen and Rating

8.7 If there are safeguard screening documents or other ESS documents prepared, have these been uploaded to the GEF Portal?

Secretariat's Comments

February 4, 2026

Yes

Agency's Comments

Annex E: Rio Markers

8.8 Are the Rio Markers for CCM, CCA, BD and LD correctly selected, if applicable?

Secretariat's Comments

May 5, 2006

Cleared.

March 9, 2026

Please add LD-4

Agency's Comments

April 16, 2026

Thank you for the comment, added.

Annex F: Taxonomy Worksheet

8.9 Is the project properly tagged with the appropriate keywords?

Secretariat's Comments

March 10, 2026

Yes.

Agency's Comments

Annex G: NGI Relevant Annexes

8.10 Does the project provide sufficient detail (indicative term sheet) to take a decision on the following selection criteria: co-financing ratios, financial terms and conditions, and financial additionality? If not, please provide comments. Does the project provide a detailed reflow table to assess the project capacity of generating reflows? If not, please provide comments. Is the Partner Agency eligible to administer concessional finance? If not, please provide comments.

Secretariat's CommentsN/A

Agency's Comments

9 GEFSEC Decision

9.1 Is the PIF and PPG (if requested) recommended for technical clearance?

Secretariat's Comments

May 11, 2026

All comments have been addressed. The PIF is cleared and recommended for PPG approval.

May 5, 2026

The PIF and PPG are technically cleared.

March 10, 2026

Not yet.

Agency's Comments

9.2 Additional Comments to be considered by the Agency at the time of CEO Endorsement/ Approval

Secretariat's Comments

Under Terrestrial protected area, consider including the WDPA ID of VWRNP as available.

During PPG, the assessment shall include a detailed diagnosis of the environmental situation, encompassing ecological connectivity, key habitats, and species of global significance, with an expanded ecological context and connectivity analysis for flagship species such as Marble Trout, European Eel, and Egyptian Vulture to substantiate the global environmental significance of the project area

The governance mechanisms underpinning Component 1 need to be more explicitly described, particularly the roles of different stakeholders and administrations at various levels, and how policy coherence across sectors will be ensured.

Once the Gender Analysis and Gender Action Plan is developed, the Agency is requested to integrate its findings and action into all project components, and integrate gender-sensitive indicators into the Results Framework.

Please ensure involving vulnerable populations including the Roma communities and small-scale farmers as stakeholders and consider engaging with them as partners of the project governance including the project steering committee or other governance mechanism where relevant.

Agency's Comments

April 16, 2026

Included the following text in the appropriate sections:

B. Project Description - Component 1:

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.

Project Rational (end)

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.

Review Dates

First Review
Additional Review (as necessary)
Additional Review (as necessary)
Additional Review (as necessary)
Additional Review (as necessary)

PIF Review
3/18/2026

Agency Response