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Empowering Women for Rural Development in Northern Albania

Gender-Sensitive Value Chains Analysis in the Bulqizë Municipality

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This gender sensitive value chain analysis was developed under the project "Empower Women for Rural Development in Northern Albania", implemented by UN Women and funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of the Republic of Italy. This project is implemented in partnership with the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Ministry of Health and Social Protection.

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Municipality of Bulqizë

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Empowering Women for Rural Development in Northern Albania

Gender-Sensitive Value Chains Analysis in the Bulqizë Municipality

June 2025

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List of Abbreviations

AICS	Italian Agency for Development Cooperation
AIDA	Albanian Investment Development Agency
AKU	National Food Authority
AKVMB	National Authority for Veterinary and Plant Protection
AREB	Regional Agricultural Extension Agency
AU	Administrative Unit
FAO	The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
GAP	Good Agricultural Practices
GIZ	German Agency for International Cooperation
GMO	Genetically Modified Organisms
GSVCA	Gender Sensitive Value Chain Analysis
HACCP	Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points
IUCN	International Union for Conservation of Nature
INSTAT	Albanian Institute of Statistics
MAP	Medicinal and Aromatic Plants
MARD	Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development
MEKI	Ministry of Economy, Culture, and Innovation
NCC	National Chamber of Handicrafts
QTTB	Agricultural Technology Transfer Centers
UN Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
USAID	The United States Agency for International Development
VC	Value chain
WEE	Women's Economic Empowerment

Rationale

Gender based violence can create a barrier for economic opportunity and growth. In turn, women's economic empowerment (WEE) can increase confidence and independence and reduce the likelihood of living in violent situations; however, increase in WEE also challenges deeply rooted gender stereotypes and social norms, which can manifest in an increase of gender-based violence.

This duality highlights the complex interplay between empowerment and resistance to change, underlining the need for a comprehensive, context-sensitive approach to gender equality. Hence, women's economic empowerment is seen both as a tool to end the cycle of violence for women survivors, as well as a way to enhance women's economic independency and participation in labor force.

These dynamics are particularly evident in the municipalities of Bulqizë, Malësi e Madhe, Shkodër, and Dibër, which are targeted by the project ""Empowering women for rural development in Northern Albania"[1] implemented by UN Women Albania with support from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation through the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS Tirana). These areas are affected by persisting gender stereotypes, a systematic lack of social services including public transport and kindergartens, limited or unclear access to property ownership for women, and a significant share of unpaid and informal work performed by women, which may limit the extent to which women in target municipalities could effectively participate in economic activities.[2] To address these challenges, UN Women promotes gender responsive governance, including elements of enhancing the gender-responsiveness of the policy framework on agriculture and local development at national and local level, raising awareness about women's rights and addressing gender stereotypes, including in relation to property rights, and ending violence against women. This gender-sensitive value chain approach is a proactive strategy that not only fosters gender equality but also enhances the efficiency, sustainability, and inclusiveness of rural economies. Grounded in international good practices, social justice principles, and the business case for gender inclusion—such as those articulated by the International Labour Organization (ILO)[3]—this approach recognizes women as active contributors to economic productivity and community resilience. The initiative aims to transform existing power dynamics and expand women's roles as economic agents. **Ensuring that laws, policies, and services are gender-responsive will create an enabling environment that supports not only women's rights but also economic competitiveness and sustainability.** Promoting WEE, in turn, strengthens women's autonomy, enabling them to escape cycles of violence, assert their rights, and contribute more fully to their households and communities.
Recognizing the pivotal role of gender equality in achieving inclusive and sustainable rural development, the project is undertaking **location-specific Gender-Sensitive Value Chain Analyses in each partner municipality**. These analyses aim to identify key economic sectors and value chains with development potential, map the differentiated roles of women and men within these chains, and detect bottlenecks that constrain women's participation and leadership. Based on this evidence, tailored interventions are being designed to increase women's access to economic opportunities and to promote equitable value chain development. This analyzes in the municipality of Bulqizë through a gender perspective and suggests gender sensitive approaches to enhance gender equality within and through economic value chains, building on UN Women's expertise in this area.[4] It aims to identify actionable strategies for enhancing gender equality within and **through economic value chains**, drawing on UN Women's global expertise and local partnerships. **By promoting inclusive value chains, the project seeks to unlock women's full economic potential and reinforce their roles as change-makers in sustainable rural development.**

1. Project funded by AICS - Italian Agency for Cooperation and Development and implemented by UN Women Albania (2024-2027).
2. Empowering Women in the Rural Economy. See: https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/%40ed_dialogue/%40sector/documents/publication/wcms_601071.pdf
3. Guide to Gender-Sensitive Approaches to Value Chain Development. International Labour Organization (ILO). (2022). See: https://www.ilo.org/publications/guide-gender-sensitive-approaches-value-chain-development
4. https://albania.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2022/12/gender-sensitive-value-chain-analysis

Summary of Main Contextual Findings

Bulqizë Municipality, located in the Dibër region of Albania, is characterized by a mountainous terrain, rich natural resources, and a predominantly rural population. The municipality covers an area of 694 km², with 73.1% of residents living in rural areas and experiencing challenges related to infrastructure, economic development, and access to essential services.

Historically, Bulqizë has been known for its mining industry, particularly chromium extraction, which remains a dominant economic sector. However, the region also holds potential in agriculture, livestock, medicinal plant cultivation, handicrafts, and tourism, which remain untapped. Despite its economic potential, Bulqizë faces high unemployment rates, gender disparities, and limited access to resources, particularly for women. Addressing these challenges requires targeted interventions that promote gender-inclusive economic growth and sustainable development.[5]

The economy of Bulqizë relies predominantly on mining, agriculture, and small-scale trade, with the mining sector employing a significant portion of the workforce. However, women's participation in the formal economy remains low, with 38% of women unemployed and limited access to economic opportunities outside of traditional roles.[6] Small businesses, particularly those led by women in handicrafts, agribusiness, face barriers such as limited access to credit, lack of business training, and exclusion from formal networks.

Agriculture plays a vital role in the local economy, but only 14.9% of registered farmers are women, highlighting gender disparities in land ownership and agricultural participation. Women are primarily engaged in subsistence farming, livestock care, and medicinal plant collection, but their contributions often remain informal. Despite the municipality's potential in beekeeping, dairy production, and MAPs cultivation, women have limited access to training, technology, and markets.

Women are primarily engaged in subsistence farming, livestock care, and medicinal plant collection, but their contributions often remain informal.

Only 14.9% of registered farmers are women, highlighting gender gaps in land ownership and agriculture.

38% of women are unemployed with limited access beyond traditional roles.

5. Country Gender Equality Brief Albania: UN Women Albania. 2020. https://albania.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/12/country-gender-equality-brief-albania-2020-0

6. Women and Men in Albania 2023. INSTAT. See: https://www.instat.gov.al/en/publications/books/2023/men-and-women-2023/

Women in Bulqizë face social and economic barriers that limit their participation in decision-making processes and economic activities. Single-mother households represent 10% of families, emphasizing the need for gender-responsive social policies. Education for young girls is also a concern, with long travel distances to schools and a lack of vocational training opportunities.[7] Addressing these challenges requires investments in social infrastructure, women's empowerment programs, and community-based support services.[8]

Bulqizë has high tourism opportunities, particularly in eco-tourism and adventure tourism, yet this sector remains underdeveloped. Attractions such as Liqeni i Zi (The Black Lake), the Martanesh Highlands, and the region's historical sites offer unique opportunities for sustainable tourism development.

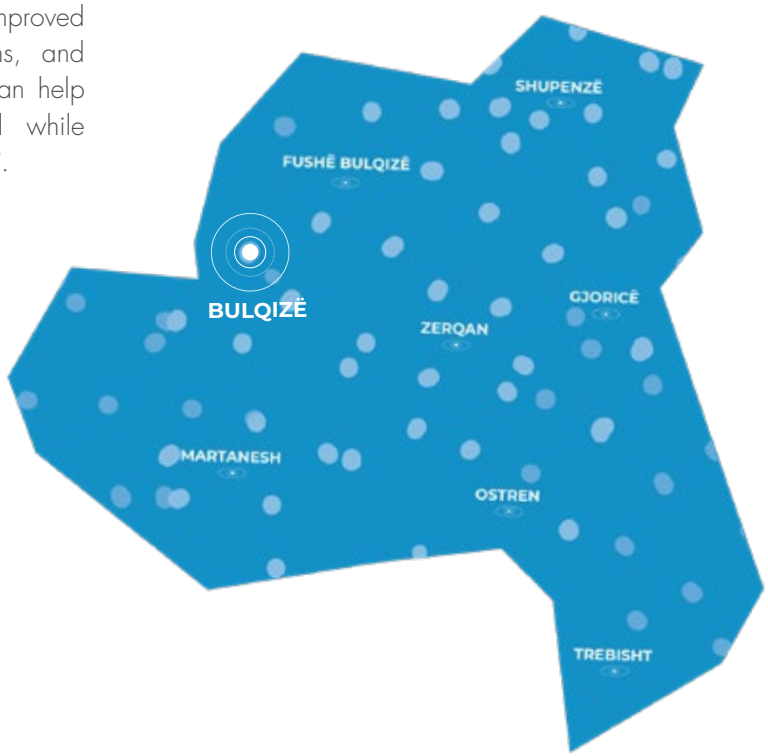
Women can play a key role in tourism-related enterprises, such as guesthouses, handicrafts, and local culinary experiences, but face challenges in formalizing and marketing their businesses. Improved infrastructure, promotion of local attractions, and investment in women-led tourism initiatives can help unlock the municipality's tourism potential while supporting gender-inclusive economic growth[9].

Bulqizë Municipality possesses rich natural resources, cultural heritage, and economic potential but faces significant structural challenges that hinder inclusive and sustainable development. The dominance of the mining sector has limited economic diversification, while agriculture, tourism, and handicrafts remain underdeveloped despite their potential to provide employment and economic growth. Women, in particular, face systemic barriers in accessing economic opportunities, education, healthcare, and financial resources, limiting their full participation in local development.

Bulqizë Municipality

Area
694 km²
(8 administrative units)

Population
26,826
(13,608 men and 13,218 women)



7. Bulqizë Municipality.
8. Bulqizë Municipality
9. National Tourism Strategy of Albania 2024-2030. See: https://www.konsultimipublik.gov.al/Konsultime/Detaje/785

Main Findings

Finding I Around 300 rural families engage in spontaneous MAP harvesting.[10] There is limited experience in cultivation (except for around 30 families in the Shupenzë AU, which were part of an USAID funded intervention back in 2019).[11] The local consolidator is eager to take an active role and promote cultivation. Lack of infrastructure presents an additional challenge, particularly in the processing of medicinal and aromatic plants (MAPs), where modern facilities and technologies in post-harvest processes are lacking.

Finding II Handicrafts, especially wool knitting, has potential for self-employment of women in Ostren. Women's skills are limited only to a few local traditional products and they lack knowledge on market demands.

Finding III Beekeeping is limited and is still perceived as a "men's" activity. The local beekeeping association is not very active and cooperation is lacking. Out of 36 registered beekeepers, members of the local association, only five are women.

Finding IV Livestock farming and dairy production shows great promise according to the desk research conducted; however, the field visit and interviews with actors and stakeholders revealed that cooperation and trust among farmers is almost inexistent.

Finding V Another significant barrier is limited market knowledge – women have little understanding of the value chain dynamics, pricing mechanisms, and consumer demands. This is further compounded by restricted access to resources, including financial aid, technical assistance, and market linkages. Women are also underrepresented in decision-making bodies, which limits their influence on policies and economic strategies at both local and regional levels.

The field research revealed critical challenges that hinder women's participation and economic growth, as well as opportunities where targeted interventions can create inclusive and sustainable development. One of the major challenges identified is the invisible role of women in value chains, particularly in sectors such as beekeeping and livestock farming, where their contributions remain largely unrecognized. Additionally, there is lack of cooperation among value chain actors, especially in the beekeeping and livestock/dairy sectors, which hampers collective growth and value chain efficiency. Moreover, high seasonal migration, with approximately 80% of men leaving to engage in temporary employment elsewhere, disrupts family and business stability, making it difficult for women to sustain economic activity.

10. Information provided during the meeting with Lo-Am Medicine.

11. USAID's Planning and Local Governance Project implemented an intervention on women empowerment in the MAPs value chain in the administrative unit of Shupenzë.

Part 1
Methodology

The analysis was conducted by UN Women Albania in the framework of the "Empowering women for rural development in Northern Albania" project, funded by AICS Tirana, with the support of Bulqizë Municipality staff and cooperation of various VC stakeholders. Despite these challenges, there are several opportunities for intervention. Handicrafts and MAP value chains offer potential win-win scenarios for both VC development and women's empowerment.

The aim of this analysis is to assess economic growth opportunities in Bulqizë Municipality, with a specific focus on identifying sectors where women's involvement could be enhanced. By understanding the challenges and potential within different value chains, the study sought to propose targeted interventions that could lead to both economic development and women's empowerment. The first objective was to identify the key economic sectors presenting opportunities for economic growth and development in Bulqizë Municipality. This involved assessing the level of women's involvement in these sectors and their potential for empowerment. By understanding the existing dynamics, the study aimed to highlight opportunities where women could play a more active role and benefit from economic initiatives. The second objective was to narrow down the most promising value chains for development. This included providing targeted recommendations to enhance women's roles while addressing gender-biased barriers. The study sought to identify specific measures that would foster women's participation in economic activities and eliminate structural challenges hindering their empowerment.

The gender-sensitive approach in value chains is primarily based on the methodology outlined in "Making the Strongest Links - A practical guide to mainstreaming gender analysis in value chain development" by the International Labour Organization (ILO) published in 2007, the complementary guide "Gender-Sensitive Approaches to Value Chain Development: A Complementary Guide" also published by ILO in 2022, the "Guide for Practitioners and Interested Stakeholders" prepared by USAID in 2019 and republished by UN Women Albania in 2021.

The methodology used is a qualitative one, combining both secondary and primary sources. Secondary sources include the consideration of different reports and data which were mainly gathered from official publications and statistics of the Institute of Statistics in Albania, Municipality reports, Regional Councils reports, Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, Ministry of Tourism and Environment, as well as data and information obtained from previous studies and projects conducted in the relevant field. Municipality reports, (mainly Strategic and Operational Plans), were especially valuable in understanding the general economic structure of the area, and municipal vision for ensuring sustainable economic development.

Primary sources, i.e. field research, were conducted to support the value chain selection process. It included consultations, interviews, and direct engagement with municipal representatives, value chain actors (both women and men), producers, and experts. This step was divided into two phases:

Preliminary Assessment: Discussions and meetings were held with municipal representatives, producers, project team members, and supporting organizations to explore value chain opportunities. Focus group sessions with municipal representatives helped identify constraints, gender-specific barriers, and opportunities related to existing and emerging value chains. Based on this preliminary fieldwork, several key sectors were identified for further analysis due to their potential for economic development and inclusive participation of women in the target areas. These include **dairy production, medicinal and aromatic plants (MAPs), beekeeping, tourism-related services, and traditional handicrafts**. These sectors were prioritized due to their accessibility to women, potential for job creation, existing local knowledge, and cultural relevance.

In line with ILO's Decent Work Agenda, the selection of these sectors emphasizes objectives such as:

- **Promoting productive employment** through locally viable and labor-intensive sectors;
- **Expanding access to fair income opportunities** for women and marginalized groups;
- **Improving working conditions and social protection,** especially in agriculture and informal activities;
- **Enhancing voice and participation** of women in decision-making across value chains.

Field research: On-site visits, meetings, and interviews with VC actors to gain in-depth insights into the economic sectors. The findings from desk research were consulted with the municipality's representatives Haxhi Pulja, Deputy Mayor, Shahin Alliu, director of Agriculture in the municipality, during the meeting of 21.01.2025.

The main value chains selected for in-depth evaluation were medicinal and aromatic plants; handicrafts (Golloborda region); beekeeping; and livestock farming. The above selected VCs were the primary focus of field missions. Field work included:

- Visit to the MAPs consolidator/company located in Bulqiza, meeting and interview with Drilon Voci, Owner of "Lo-Am Medicine", one staff (woman), two farmers delivering products in the facility (one woman and one man), and agriculture department representatives of the municipality on 21.01.2025.
- Visit to the administrative unit of Ostren (Golloborda), meeting with local representatives (Ostren AU staff: Bajram Mata (administrator), Fatos Tola (Civil Registry), and Mehmet Gjoka (agronomist), and Llambi Kurti, veterinarian in the Trebisht-Ostren area) as well local women (eight) who are engaged in producing handicrafts/ traditional costumes, on 21 January 2025.
- On-site visit and meeting with the head of the Beekeeping Association and beekeeper, Arjan Zogu, on 21 January 2025.
- On-site visit and meeting with the owners of a livestock and dairy family farm, Mona and Naim Xheli, and Shupenzë AU administrator, Ylli Jani, on 22 January 2025.

The field research provided key insights into the structure and dynamics of value chains in Bulqizë, highlighting economic potential, barriers to women's participation, and areas where targeted interventions can enhance both economic development and gender equality. The following criteria were applied to assess potential value chains:

- Is there a growing demand for the product?
- Are women involved in the steps of the chain?
- Are most steps of the chain based in the municipality?
- Are there existing or recent past initiatives to build on in the value chain?
- Are there opportunities for developing the chain?
- Is there a link between what women are doing and prospects for growth/diversification in the value chain?

As a result of meetings with VCs actors, stakeholders, consultations,[12] interviews, and observations of the work environment, the final value chains to be further evaluated based on the assessment grid of women's empowerment and gender equality in the value chains are handicrafts (in Ostren), and MAPs.

Overall, the process followed these steps:

1. **Objectives and target group:** Establishment of objectives based on national and municipal goals (i.e. Improving livelihoods and promoting gender equality) and definition of the target group and selection criteria:
2. **Target group:** women and women's groups in northern rural areas;
3. **Criteria:** importance of the value chain in creating economic empowerment opportunities for women.
4. **Municipal scope:** The initial municipal scoping and desk research, based on plans, strategies, previous studies, etc.;
5. **Main sectors:** The identification of the main sectors through the assessment of different reports, data, and publications;
6. **VC evaluation:** Evaluation, through brainstorming, discussions, focus-groups, of the main value chains pertaining to the selected sectors;

12. Consultation with General Secretary of the National Beekeeping Association, Veterinarian of Shupenzë, Trebisht and Ostren of the AKVMB Dibra office, Beekeeping expert Dr. Pëllumb Aleksi, MAPs experts, Prof. Dr. Gjon Gaspri and Prof. Dr. Alban Ibraliu, National chamber of Crafts, Social Development Investment - an CSO active in the field of artisans and crafts.

7. **VC selection:** Selection of one to two main value chains and assessment of opportunities, constraints and areas of intervention through field research;

8. **Recommendations:** Provision of recommendations on the improvement of the value chain in the municipality and on intervention options for the project.

Figure 1. Methodological Approach

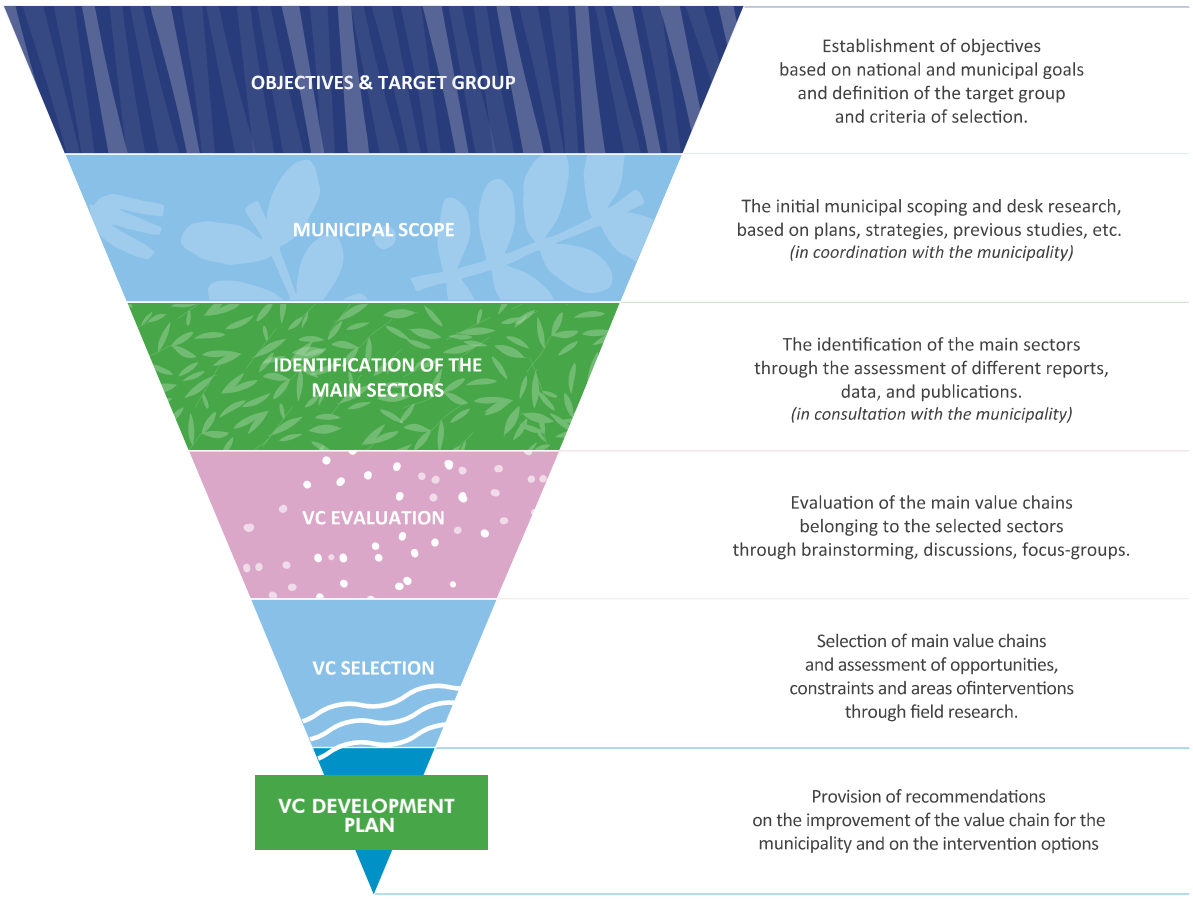


Table 1. Ranking and selection of value chains using gender-sensitive criteria

Criteria	MAPs	Handicrafts (Ostren)
Is there a link between what women are doing and prospects for growth/ diversification in the value chain?	Women are currently involved only in picking and sometimes they participate in delivering the product to the local collector. The consolidator accepts only fresh products and dries them in the grounds inside his facility. The consolidator has started a small demonstration plot testing plants for cultivation. Transitioning to cultivation could be a good growth opportunity for the women.	Women in Ostren have a long tradition in handicrafts. Their portfolio is limited to products that are traditional in area but with support they possess the skills to expand their portfolio with additional products based on market demands.
Do women have (or can they acquire) the skills needed for value addition through processing or product diversification?	Women are engaged only in wild picking. More knowledge is needed, especially in the application of standards, certification, and application of best practices in all stages, including drying and primary processing.	Women have the basic skills and can acquire more if supported with training. More is needed in terms of product diversification, including new models and products for the market, market linkages, and training on new models.
Does this value chain offer new opportunities for women?	Yes. If there is collaboration between the actors and engagement in cultivation and drying.	Yes. Especially if women are oriented towards the market and collaborate with each-other.
Can the value chain improve livelihood conditions for women/ families?	By transitioning from wild collection to cultivation, women would increase income and improve working conditions.	Yes. This activity can be done from home and women can increase their family income. Still, small investments in working space and new equipment would be required.
Is there a motivated organization in the value chain which can support/ represent value chain actors that can move forward development?	The local consolidator is interested in supporting the VC. In addition, women and farmers grouping would be required.	The municipality and the administrative unit have listed the Ostren artisans as one of their priorities. During the field visit they showed interest to provide the women with a working space inside the administrative unit building. Still, grouping of women for better representation in the market would be required.
Is there an opportunity to make changes with small investments?	Yes, if the transition from wild collection to cultivation is done based on market demands and application of the required practices and standards. This would require investments such as in obtaining seeds/ seedlings, training on good agriculture practices, and drying equipment.	Yes, by supporting with basic equipment, training on technology and business skills, and market linkages.

Table 2. Assessment of women's empowerment and gender equality in the MAP VC

Question	Score*	Weight**	Total	Narrative
Is the share of women employed in the value chain relatively high?	3	2	6	Yes, based on the information provided by the local consolidator, the share of women engaged in wild collection is 50%.
Are there many female entrepreneurs in the value chain?	2	2	4	Women primarily participate in wild collection and often accompany male family members for deliveries. Some women collaborate in transportation and collection, but there are very few independent female entrepreneurs.
Do women control equipment and assets?	2	2	4	The activity is carried out in the forest and the nearby mountains. Land ownership still remains an issue regarding control of assets.
Do women have (or can they acquire) the skills needed for interesting value addition through processing or product diversification?	4	1	4	Yes. Women have the basic skills in agriculture and cultivation of plants. By shifting to cultivation with focus MAPs they would require specific training based on the plants.
Do women control the sales income and the enterprise?	1	2	2	Business transaction is done mainly by men. The local consolidator highlights there are only few women that deliver the products to his facility.
Can the work take place close to home?	3	1	3	Yes, by shifting from wild collection to cultivation.
Is this a value chain with low entry barriers for poor entrepreneurs (small scale of production, low start-up costs, not requiring major capital investment, using low-tech skills)?	4	1	4	Yes, seedling for cultivation in small scale (small plots) of perennial plants, low tech equipment and tools for cultivation.
Is this a value chain with low entry barriers for women (time and mobility, access to technology and assets, cultural constraints)?	3	2	6	Yes. Women are already engaged in spontaneous collection, making this a familiar activity.
Does this value chain offer new opportunities for women?	2	4	8	Average. Even by shifting only to cultivation women would still remain to the bottom of the chain, unless women aim for the end market targets (consumers) and engage in post-harvest activities (drying, cutting, packaging, etc.) for local market
Is the activity in the value chain in line with livelihood conditions (year-round income, using family labor, rapid returns, keeping the environment intact?	4	2	8	Yes. Shifting to cultivation, introducing single-harvest perennial plants to lower planting costs and labor force, and applying good agriculture practices.
Is there a linkage between what women are doing and prospects for growth/ diversification in the value chain?	4	1	4	High. Same as above.
Are there gender norms (for example stuck in 'women's work') that prevent women from taking full advantage of value chain opportunities?	2	2	4	The only constraint which is typical especially in northern part of Albania is women's rights on land/ farm ownership. Many women are still not registered as (co-)owners of their houses, land, and other property, which largely remain registered under the name of men. This has barred women farmers from accessing benefits like agricultural extension services, financial support, and formal contracts with traders, negatively impacting on women's productivity.
Overall total for gender potential			57/102	

** Score: 0 (very low, no, not at all) to 5 (very high, yes, very important).*

*** Weight from 1 to 4 according to the importance and impact that each of the above points carries in achieving the defined objectives.*[13]

Table 3. Assessment of women's empowerment and gender equality in Crafts VC in Ostren AU

Question	Score*	Weight**	Total	Narrative
Is the share of women employed in the value chain relatively high?[13]	4	2	8	Women are the ones engaged with handicrafts in the area of Ostren.
Are there many female entrepreneurs in the value chain?	3	2	6	Almost all women of Ostren have skills and are engaged in handcrafting, mainly embroidery, woolen-based clothes and vests. During the site visit a group of 8 women attended the meeting.
Do women control equipment and assets?	4	2	8	Women control the equipment which are very basic.
Do women have (or can they acquire) the skills needed for interesting value addition through processing or product diversification?[14]	4	1	4	Women have the basic skills and can acquire more if supported with training. More is needed in terms of product diversification, including new models and products for the market, market linkages, training on new models.
Do women control the sales income and the enterprise?	4	2	8	Yes. Women decide about the product's selling price, taking into consideration mainly the cost of production.
Can the work take place close to home?	5	1	5	Yes, the activity is carried out at home. In addition, the municipality's deputy mayor and the administrator of Ostren AU were keen to offer a working space for the women inside the administrative unit building located in the center of the village.
Is this a value chain with low entry barriers for poor entrepreneurs (small scale of production, low start-up costs, not requiring major capital investment, using low-tech skills)?	4	1	4	Yes. he production process is largely manual, with traditional low-tech tools such as the loom.
Is this a value chain with low entry barriers for women (time and mobility, access to technology and assets, cultural constraints)?	4	2	8	Yes. Also, there are no time constraints regarding gender differences, since women are engaged in almost all the production processes, nearby or in-house, and crafting is already a women's-controlled VC.
Does this value chain offer new opportunities for women?	3	4	12	Yes, considering that the activity is a women-lead one, women are involved in all the stages, and considering the remote area of Ostren doesn't offer many other opportunities for women.
Is the activity in the value chain in line with livelihood conditions (year-round income, using family labor, rapid returns, keeping the environment intact?	4	2	8	Yes. Low cost entry points and rapid returns if women produce market oriented and demanded products.
Is there a linkage between what women are doing and prospects for growth/ diversification in the value chain?	4	1	4	Same as above. Crafting is a tradition. Orientation and support of women towards the market demands would improve the overall efficiency of the value chain.
Are there gender norms (for example stuck in 'women's work') that prevent women from taking full advantage of value chain opportunities?	4	2	8	No. Same as above. Crafting is typically considered as women's activity. Usually, this is transmitted from one generation to the other. There are still constraints like decision-making on starting a business, access to finance, access to resources, etc.
Overall total for gender potential			84/102	

13. The prioritization of value chains based on the opportunities they offer for promoting gender equality serves as an effective way to highlight the factors that have a positive impact on women's/young women's employment and income. For this purpose, a 1–4 rating system has been used (where 1 means low, 2 means medium, 3 means good, and 4 means very good). Based on: Women's Inclusion and Value Chain Improvement in Albania – A Guide for Practitioners and Stakeholders. USAID 2019 and UN Women 2021.

Part 2

Analysis of the Medicinal and Aromatic Plants Value Chain

1. Gender Sensitive Analysis of MAP Value Chain

Albania has a long tradition in the production and export of MAPs. The main supply-side sector development driver is the abundance of wild-grown MAP. Around 15% of 3,250 species of Albania plants have medicinal, aromatic, spice, or tannin value. The industry has a long tradition spanning more than 60 years.

At present, harvesting, cultivation, processing, and trade of MAPs represent a major agri-forestry business in Albania.[15] According to the Albanian Investment Development Agency (AIDA), there are over 85,000 individuals (mainly from rural areas) engaged in the entire value chain from wild collection, cultivation, to export. About 1/5 of rural families in mountainous areas are involved in activities that bring income from medicinal and aromatic plants, in collection and cultivation, or other activities in the MAP value chain.

Over 400 MAP species have been identified as aromatic medicinal plants of the Albanian flora, and over 200 species are collected and exported. About 90% of the production of medicinal and aromatic plants is exported, representing almost 20% of the total agricultural exports of Albania. In 2022, the local production of MAPs was 16,430 tons. Also, in 2022, the total exports of aromatic medicinal plants reached the value of 63 million Euros, with an increase of 6.7% from the previous year (59 million Euros).[16]

The area under cultivation of MAPs reached 7,200 hectares in 2023 with a production of 17,800 tons. Cultivation of MAPs is concentrated in Malësia e Madhe (5,200 ha), but is expanding at a fast pace in other regions of the country (in Belsh 478 ha, Cërrik 188 ha, Gramsh 135 ha, etc.).[17]

In Bulqizë, around 300 families (50% women) are engaged in MAPs.

Even if demand for MAPs in the domestic market is limited, a wide range of MAPs with lower processing grade is sold in fresh fruit and vegetable markets and retail outlets. The main products traded in the domestic market include herbal teas and spices used for cooking.

At present, tea and salep are packaged by Albanian companies and are sold in retail outlets including supermarkets as well as restaurants.

Other herbs and spices are sold in fresh fruit and vegetable markets packaged in basic bags – usually 20-100 gram.[18]

15. Medicinal and Aromatic Plants Sector Study. MARD and GIZ, 2021. See: https://bujqesia.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/04-MAP-Sector-Study_FINAL.pdf
16. Biofach 2024. AIDA. See: https://aida.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/BIOFACH-24-broshure-1.pdf
17. INSTAT - Agriculture Statistical Yearbook, 2023.
18. MEDICINAL AND AROMATIC PLANTS SECTOR STUDY. AASF, 2023. See: https://aatsf.com.al/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/4Map-cover-EN.pdf

1.1 SITUATION OF MAPS VALUE CHAIN IN DIBËR REGION

The specific climatic and terrestrial conditions of Dibër region have influenced in the creation of high biodiversity, where MAPs play an important role in the spontaneous flora of the area. There are more than 100 types of MAPs in Dibër region, belonging to 30 plant families. Almost 98% of these plants grow naturally and recently about 2% is cultivated. The majority grows in height 1,000-1,700 m or even 2,000 m above sea level, which makes them highly valued. Around 300 families in Bulqizë Municipality and 500 families in Dibër Municipality are involved in MAPs (mainly wild collection).[19]

In 1988, around 91 medicinal and aromatic plants (MAP) were collected and exported from Dibër region. The total quantity of exported MAPs that year was 5,374 tons, generating a value of $1.124 million.

Currently, 63 types of medicinal and aromatic plants are collected in this area. Out of these, 16 are classified under one of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) threat statuses.[20]

Specifically:

- **Critically endangered (CR):** There are three plants with extinction status: black alder, birch, and lime tree.
- **Endangered (EN):** There are five plants with endangered status: alchemilla, gentiana, basil flowers, walnut, and oregano (mountain tea).
- **Vulnerable (VU):** There are seven plants with vulnerable status: black juniper, red juniper, common yew, sage, elder, thyme, and blueberry (chokeberry).
- **Near Threatened (NT):** There are no MAPs collected today with this status.
- **Least Concern (LC) or Lower Risk (LR):** This includes one species: bearberry.

Table 4. List of wild plants collected in Dibër region

No	Latin name	Albanian name	Threat status
1	Juniperus communis	Dëllinjë e zezë	VU Alb
2	Juniperus oxycedrus	Dëllinjë e kuqe	VU A1b
3	Achillea millefolium	Njëmijëfletësh	
4	Althaea officinalis	Mëllaga e bardhë	
5	Alchemilla catachnoa	Alkemilë kataknoe	EN A1b
6	Arctium lappa	Rrodhja	
7	Anthyllis montana	Antilidë e malit	

19. Information provided by local consolidators in Bulqizë and Dibër, and from interview with Prof. Dr. Alban Ibraliu, Agricultural University of Tirana.

20. Information from interview with Prof. Dr. Alban Ibraliu, Agricultural University of Tirana.

No	Latin name	Albanian name	Threat status
8	Arctostaphylos uva-ursi	Rrushi i arushës	LR cd
9	Artemisia absinthium -	Bar pelini	
10	Bellis perennis	Luleshqerra	
11	Betula pendula	Mështekna	CR B2e
12	Castanea sativa	Gështenja	
13	Carlina vulgaris	Ushunjëz e rëndomtë	
14	Centaurea cyanus	Kokoçeli	
15	Corylus avellana	Lajthia	
16	Crataegus monogyna	Murrizi njëbërthamëz	
17	Crataegus oxyacantha	Murrizi dybërthamëz	
18	Colchicum autumnale	Xhërokulli vjeshtor	
19	Cynodon dactylon	Grami	
20	Fragaria vesca	Luleshtrydhja	
21	Fraxinus excelsior	Frashër i zi	CR A1b
22	Fraxinus ornus	Frashër i bardhë	
23	Galium verum	Ngjitëse e vërtetë	
24	Gentiana lutea	Sanzi	EN A1b
25	Iris sp	Shpatore	VU A2b
26	Helichrysum arenarium	Lule aku	
27	Hypericum perforatum	Lule basani	EN A1b
28	Juglans regia	Arra	EN A1b
29	Malus sylvestris	Molla e egër	
30	Melilotus officinalis	Jonxha e egër	
31	Melissa officinalis	Melisa	
32	Ononis spinosa	Gjuhë nuse	
33	Origanum vulgare	Çaji i malit	EN A1b
34	Papaver rhoeas	Lulëkuqja	
35	Parietaria officinalis	Parietaria	

(Continues on the next page)

No	Latin name	Albanian name	Threat status
36	Phaseolus vulgaris	Fasulja	
37	Plantago lanceolata	Gjethe delli	
38	Polygonum aviculare	Bar pate	
39	Primula veris (=P. Officinalis)	Agulicja	
40	Prunus cerasus (=Cerasus vulgaris)	Qershia	
41	Prunus spinosa	Kulumbria	
42	Robinia pseudoacacia	Akacia	
43	Rosa canina	Trëndafili i egër	
44	Rubus fruticosus	Ferrëmanëza	
45	Rubus idaeus	Mjedra	
46	Salix alba	Shelgu i bardhë	
47	Salvia officinalis	Sherbela	VU Alb
48	Salvia sclarea	Shëngjini	
49	Sambucus ebulus	Qingla	
50	Sambucus nigra	Shtogu	VU Alb
51	Saponaria officinalis	Lule sapuni	
52	Satureja montana	Trumza	VU A1c
53	Taraxacum officinale	Lule shurdha	
54	Teucrium chamaedrys	Arrsi dushk	
55	Thymus serpyllum	Zhumbrica	
56	Tilia platyphyllos (=T. officinarum)	Bliri	CR Alc
57	Tilia tomentosa (=T. argentea)	Bliri i argjendtë	
58	Trifolium pretense	Tërfili i kuq	
59	Tussilago farfara	Thundërmushka	
60	Tussilago hybrida (=Syn. P. officinalis)	Llapoi	
61	Urtica dioca	Hithra	
62	Vaccinium myrtillus	Qershigla, boronica	VU A2b
63	Viola odorata	Manushaqja	

In Bulqizë, over 300 families are involved in the collection of wild Medicinal and Aromatic Plants (MAPs), providing their products to the local consolidation center, Lo-Am Medicine, which was established in 2021 and is located near the town. The plants are harvested from remote areas and delivered fresh at a minimum price, which primarily reflects the time spent on harvesting. The farmers do not participate in post-harvest activities, and a simple drying process (on the ground) is carried out by the company within its facility. In 2019, approximately 30 families in the Shupenzë administrative unit were supported in cultivating mallow and cornflower over an area of 2 hectares, through a USAID funded project. Currently, the cultivated area for MAPs in Bulqizë is reported by INSTAT to be only 1 hectare. Lo-Am Medicine has initiated a demonstration plot near its facility, focusing on the cultivation of thymus and red oregano in collaboration with QTTB Shkodër. This initiative aims to assess the growth performance, adaptability, and potential yield of these medicinal and aromatic plants under local conditions. So far, the results from the demonstration site have been promising, indicating good plant development and favorable cultivation conditions. These findings suggest potential for future expansion, either for commercial production or further research into optimizing growth techniques and value chain opportunities.

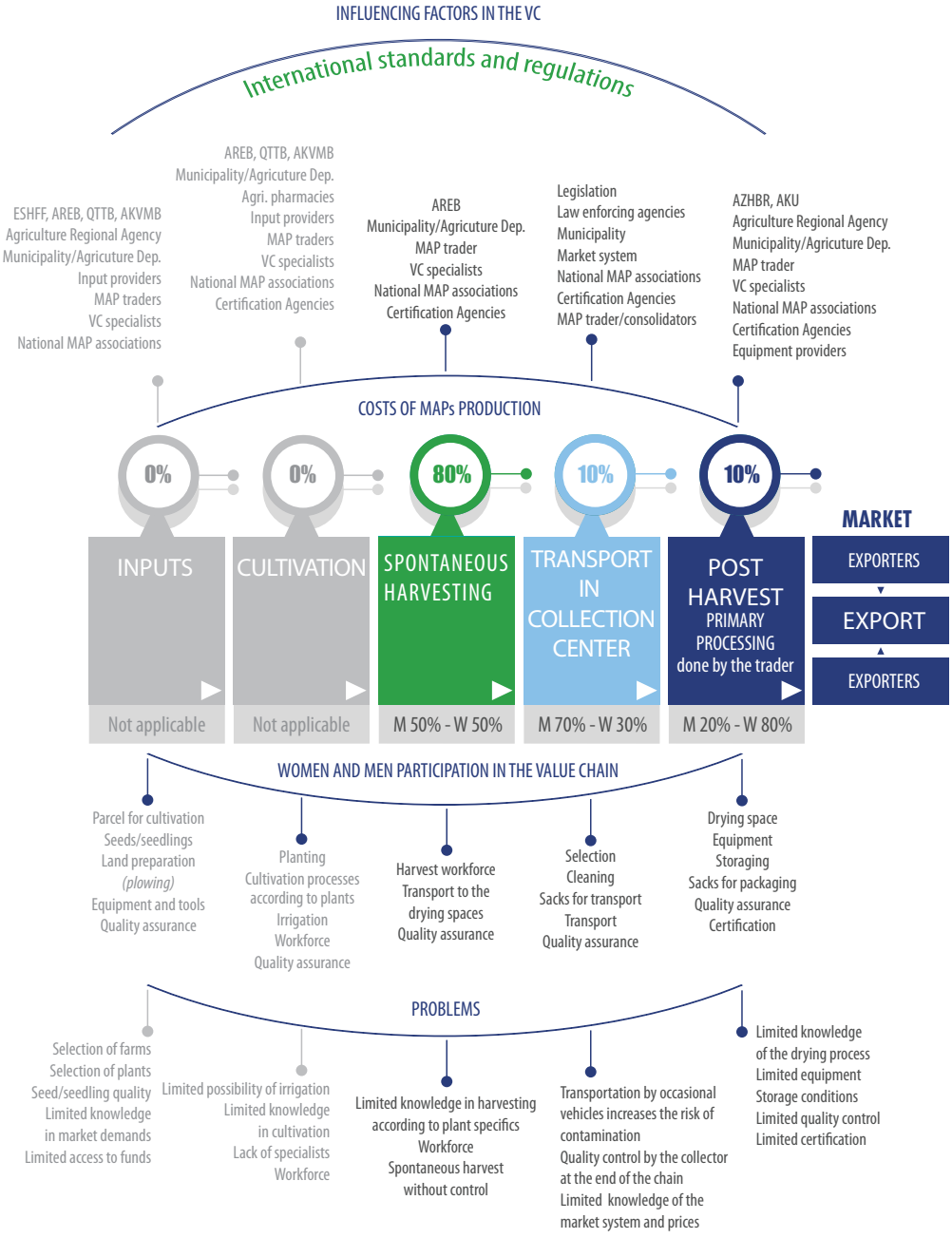
Table 5. SWOT analysis of the maps value chain

Strengths	Weaknesses
Rich Biodiversity and Favorable Climate. Around 400 types of medicinal plants grow in the country, representing approximately 15% of the total flora, and over 200 of them are collected and traded. **Proximity to European markets.** **A new consolidation facility has been recently established** in Bulqizë. **Good examples and rapid expansion** of cultivated areas in the country. **MAPs are considered one of the key renewable** potentials for the socio-economic development of rural areas. **Willingness of consolidators to collaborate** with local farmers. **Willingness to initiate transition** to cultivation. **Commitment of key value chain actors** to improving product quality. **Women's involvement in the spontaneous collection** of plants and increasing awareness of their contribution. **Growing number of individuals** (both women and men) engaged in spontaneous plant collection in recent years.	**Farmers have limited knowledge** in the cultivation of medicinal and aromatic plants (MAPs). **Lack of financial resources**, and consequently, insufficient investment in technology and processing. **Absence of certification** for safety and quality standards. **Existence of a technical skills gap** in carrying out all processes (post-harvest, drying, processing). **Informal operation of collectors** in the market. **Information asymmetry** regarding market developments. **The location of MAP activities**, sometimes requiring workers to travel up to three hours from their homes. **Climate vulnerability may affect MAP production** (especially wild production). **Distance of the harvesting locations** (mountains) from the collection center. **Hard work and poor working conditions**, especially for women.
Opportunities	**Threats**
Wide diversity of medicinal and aromatic plant (MAP) species in the area show potential for cultivation. **Good practices and rapid growth** of the cultivation sector in the country. **Good opportunity to make a difference** with small investments, including training in application of good agriculture practices. **Innovative developments and advancements** in MAP drying and treatment processes. **High demand for MAPs** (domestically and internationally).	**Endangered plant species** (wild collection); **Negatively affecting the biodiversity and natural habitat** - Overharvesting of wild MAPs and environmental degradation can threaten the long-term sustainability of wild MAPs production. **High migration rates** affecting the labor force; **Climate Dependency:** climate change poses a significant threat; particularly as changing weather patterns may affect plant growth and yields. **Fluctuating market trends** (international).

2. Mapping of the Medicinal and Aromatic Plants Value Chain

Below is the comprehensive map of the value chain links, actors, supporting factors, and key issues identified, based on findings from interviews with stakeholders and local support agencies, field research, and consultations with specialists. The diagram presents the main interest groups, the stages from inputs to the final market, and helps identify challenges in the production flow. The numerical values above the boxes represent costs and the added value for each phase.

Figure 2. Mapping of the MAPs Value Chain



2.1 VALUE CHAIN ACTORS

As seen in the diagram above, the MAP value chain in Bulqizë is organized into a few key levels, namely:

- Wild collection
- Direct sale, delivery/transport to the collection center
- Post-harvest (drying) and wholesale market (carried out by the consolidator)

Below is a brief description of each value chain actor and supporting agencies in the market system, from collection/cultivation to aggregation, processing, and final market distribution.

Input suppliers play a crucial role in the MAPs value chain. They provide seeds, seedlings, and fertilizers to farmers and often serve as key sources of information and technical guidance.

Technology providers supply essential tools and equipment for various stages of the MAPs value chain, including harvesting, post-harvest handling, storage, drying, processing, and packaging. Their role is critical in improving efficiency, maintaining product quality, and ensuring compliance with market standards.

There are no input and technology providers located in Bulqizë. These companies/individuals are mainly located in areas with higher production intensity or nearby the agriculture sector industries.

Wild collectors (harvesters) are individuals living in rural and mountainous areas who gather wild Medicinal and Aromatic Plants (MAPs) from their local environment. They dry and store the plants in their homes until they sell them to local collectors or processors.

In Bulqizë, around 300 families (50% women) are engaged in this activity. The harvested plants are delivered fresh to the collection point, where they undergo drying or an initial processing phase before further distribution. The facility workers are mainly women (80%).[21]

Local consolidators (150)[22] are warehouses or companies operating in the area that act as intermediaries between wild plant harvesters, cultivators, and regional processors. They play a crucial role in the value chain by distributing pricing information to harvesters and serving as key regulators between cultivators and larger processors.

In Bulqizë, there is only one main local collector, Lo-am Medicine, but there are also itinerant collectors operating in the area, as well as additional collectors in the neighboring Dibër municipality.

Regional consolidators (10)[23] are based in different districts and purchase MAPs from local and/or ambulant consolidators. These collectors play a key role in the supply chain, acting as a bridge between local gatherers and larger processors or exporters.

Lo-am Medicine serves also as such by providing their MAP products to large consolidators. During the site visit and interview with the owner Drilon Voci, it was mentioned that the company cooperates with several large consolidators and exporters who have a market focus in wild herbs.

Small processors trade an average of 150 to 500 tons of Medicinal and Aromatic Plants (MAPs) per year. They typically engage in basic processing or packaging activities, focusing on the domestic market with products like mountain tea and other culinary herbs.

Occasionally, these companies manage to export their products to international buyers. On the other hand,

21. Information provided during site visit to Lo-Am facility and interview with the owner (man) and staff (woman).
22. Biofach 2024. AIDA. See: https://aida.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/BIOFACH-24-broshure-1.pdf
23. Ibid.

Medium-sized processors handle between 500 and 1,000 tons of MAPs annually. Approximately 31 companies fall into these categories, having established regular export relationships with international buyers. These companies compete for MAP collection and sourcing from local cultivators.[24]

Large processors/exporters (15) handle an average of 1,000 to 1,800 tons of Medicinal and Aromatic Plants (MAPs) per year. This accounts for a significant portion of Albania's MAP exports. They source their products from all levels of the supply chain, including large cultivators, consolidators, and small to medium-sized processors. These processors/exporters are equipped with the most advanced processing lines, allowing them to meet international standards and effectively serve global markets.[25]

2.2 SUPPORT AND CONTROL SERVICES

The four Regional Agricultural Extension Agencies (AREB) ,[26] located in Shkodër, Lushnjë, Korçë, and Tiranë (which also covers the Dibër region), operate under the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, in accordance with Decision of the Council of Ministers No. 147, dated 13.3.2018, "On the establishment, organization, and functioning of regional agricultural extension agencies." These regional agencies aim to become key actors in the development of a competitive and sustainable agricultural sector in the country by working in long-term partnerships with beneficiaries. Their main duties and responsibilities include:

- Provide information and advisory services on the technical and technological development of farms to enhance competitiveness in agriculture.
- Offer information and assist farmers in benefiting from national support schemes, IPARD, and other projects in agriculture and rural development.
- Encourage and support the creation and functioning of various forms of farmer cooperation.
- Organize and conduct professional training for farmers in agriculture and rural development.
- Ensure access to information on standards related to the environment, quality, marketing, organic farming, and products with geographical indications.
- Inform and advise farmers on the selection and use of agricultural machinery and equipment, providing free technical assistance.

The five Agricultural Technology Transfer Centers (QTTB)[27] located in Fushë-Krujë, Shkodër, Vlorë, Lushnjë, and Korçë, were established by Decision of the Council of Ministers No. 515, dated 19.07.2006, "On the restructuring of scientific research institutes under the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development." Among them, QTTB Shkodër is the only center specifically focused on medicinal and aromatic plants (MAPs). The main responsibilities of the QTTBs include:

- Identify, test, adapt, and introduce new agricultural methods and inputs into farming practices.
- Develop technological packages for key agricultural crops and livestock breeding.
- Conduct research and testing on farms to address issues raised by farmers in the respective regions.

24. Consolidated data from Biofach 2024. AIDA. See: https://aida.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/BIOFACH-24-broshure-1.pdf, Medicinal and Aromatic Plants Sector Study. MARD and GIZ, 2021. See: https://bujqesia.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/04-MAP-Sector-Study_FINAL.pdf, and MEDICINAL AND AROMATIC PLANTS SECTOR STUDY. AASF, 2023. See: https://aatsf.com.al/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/4Mapcover-EN.pdf

25. Ibid.

26. See: https://bujqesia.gov.al/drejtorite-e-bujqesise/, and https://www.bujqesia.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/2.1-struktura-AREB-TIRANE.doc

27. See: https://bujqesia.gov.al/qendrat-e-transferimit-te-teknologjive-bujqesore-qttb/

- Provide training for agricultural specialists, farmers, agricultural science students, and other interested parties.
- Ensure technical expertise for advisory service structures and farmers.
- Demonstrate new cultivation technologies for agricultural crops and livestock breeding.
- Prepare and publish informative materials for agricultural specialists and farmers.
- Support policymaking by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) in the fields of agriculture, food, consumer protection, and rural development.

The National Authority for Veterinary and Plant Protection (AKVMB)[28] is responsible for ensuring the health and safety of animals, plants, and agricultural products in Albania. It operates under the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) and plays a crucial role in safeguarding public health, promoting agricultural sustainability, and facilitating international trade in agricultural and food products. Key responsibilities of AKVMB include:

- **Veterinary services:** Monitor and control animal health, prevent the spread of infectious diseases, and ensure food safety in animal-derived products.
- **Plant protection:** Implement phytosanitary measures to prevent and control plant diseases and pests that could harm agricultural production.
- **Pesticide and fertilizer regulation:** Oversee the import, distribution, and use of pesticides and fertilizers, ensuring compliance with safety standards.
- **Food Safety and Inspection:** Conduct inspections of farms, food processing facilities, and markets to ensure that products meet national and international food safety standards.
- **Border control and biosecurity:** Manage veterinary and phytosanitary border inspections to prevent the entry of pests, diseases, and unsafe food products into the country.
- **Legislation and Compliance:** Develop and enforce laws, policies, and regulations related to veterinary services and plant protection.
- **Capacity building and training:** Provide training and support for farmers, veterinarians, and agricultural professionals to improve best practices in plant and animal health management.

AKVMB operates throughout the entire territory of the Republic of Albania and is organized at the central level with through the General Directorate, and at the regional level via four regional veterinary and plant protection directorates in Elbasan, Vlorë, Shkodër, and Tirana (which also covers the Dibër district), along with direct veterinary service units. Regional directorates operate within their jurisdiction and carry out the following tasks:

- Assess needs and issues related to veterinary and plant protection services, proposing solutions to the General Directorate.

28. See: https://akvmb.gov.al/

- Plan and submit needs for veterinary and plant protection services to the General Directorate.
- Coordinate and monitor the delivery of veterinary and plant protection services in their territory.
- Prepare reports on sample collection, pathological materials, and test results for suspected and confirmed diseases.
- Provide periodic reports on plant infection rates and plant product status.
- Detail and implement work plans approved by the General Directorate in compliance with current legal frameworks.
- Issue documents and certificates according to legal provisions, sub-legal acts, and authorizations from the General Directorate.
- Perform additional tasks assigned by law or the General Directorate.

The National Food Authority (AKU)[29] is a government agency under the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, responsible for national inspection and management in the fields of consumer protection, plant protection, and animal welfare. AKU operates under Law No. 10,433, dated June 16, 2011, "On inspection in the Republic of Albania," specifically Article 7 on the "Inspection program principles." The timing of inspections is defined in the annual inspection program, although random inspections are conducted when required by law. Article 4 of the same law outlines the purpose of inspections, which include: i) Assessing compliance with legal requirements; ii) Documenting best practices for adhering to legal requirements; iii) Advising inspected entities on proper implementation of legal obligations; iv) Ordering corrective actions for legal violations and eliminating their consequences; and, v) Imposing penalties and taking other administrative measures to mitigate risks to public interest. The National Food Authority (AKU) in Albania is the regulatory body responsible for ensuring food safety, quality, and compliance with national and international standards. AKU oversees the entire food supply chain, from production and processing to distribution and consumption, aiming to protect public health and ensure food safety. Its main tasks include:

- Monitoring and inspecting food production, processing, and distribution facilities.
- Ensuring compliance with food safety regulations and standards.
- Conducting food quality control and testing to prevent contamination and ensure safety.
- Implementing food safety laws and regulations set by the government.
- Coordinating with other national and international institutions to align food safety standards.
- Providing guidance and training to businesses and stakeholders in the food industry on best practices.
- Issuing certifications and approvals for food products, as required by law.

The State Entity of Seeds and Seedlings (ESHFF),[30] based in Tirana, operates under the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. It is funded by the state budget and works in accordance with Law No. 10416, dated April 7, 2011, "On propagating and planting material," as well as the related sub-legal acts. ESHFF's mission includes:

- Protecting farmers' interests.
- Expanding the availability of planting and propagating materials.
- Introducing new varieties into the market.
- Improving the quality indicators of commercial planting materials.
- Ensuring fair market competition.

The institution monitors the regional network for comparative trials that new varieties, either

29. See: https://aku.gov.al/
30. See: http://www.eshff.gov.al/

domestically produced or imported, undergo for reproduction, propagation, and commercialization. Based on the results of these trials and laboratory methods, the ESHFF evaluates and registers varieties in the National Catalog.

The Agriculture Sector in Bulqizë Municipality (composed of seven men and one woman) is currently only focused on data collection and reporting for INSTAT, but isn't providing much support to farmers through extension services, which are crucial for improving agricultural practices and increasing productivity.[31]

Certification The basic standards are the **Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points** (HACCP) and **Organic** Certification.

HACCP[32] is an international standard based on the principles of the FAO/WHO Codex Alimentarius Commission, encompassing a full set of principles for food hygiene and safety. It is a preventive system for food safety management, which is mandatory for all food businesses in accordance with European Regulations (EC) 178/2002[33] and 852/2004,[34] as well as National Guideline No. 20, dated November 25, 2010, from the Minister of Agriculture, Food, and Consumer Protection.[35] The HACCP certification process typically takes between 14 to 30 days, depending on the specific requirements of the business, and include:

- **On-site visit:** A specialized consulting company visits the business to assess its operations and provide recommendations for improvements and adaptations to meet HACCP standards.
- **Preparation of documentation:** The business must prepare all necessary documentation, including records, procedures, and plans related to food safety and hygiene.
- **Establishment of record-keeping systems:** A system for maintaining records and data must be set up, ensuring that food safety procedures are properly documented and traceable.
- **Inspection by certification body:** The certification body inspects the business to ensure that all HACCP requirements are met, checking both documentation and practices.
- **Issuance of Certification:** After a successful inspection, the certification body issues the HACCP certificate, confirming that the business complies with food safety standards.

Organic certification is a lengthy but valuable process, as it opens up access to global markets and allows businesses to market their products as organic, which can command higher prices and demand. It is a process that ensures that products are produced according to specific organic farming standards, which focus on sustainability, environmental preservation, and the exclusion of synthetic chemicals and genetically modified organisms (GMOs). The certification is required for businesses that wish to market their products as "organic," especially for international markets.

The parliament of Albania has recently approved the Law No. 104/2024 "On organic production, labeling of organic products, and their control".[36] The purpose of this law is to establish the principles and regulations governing organic production, certification, and the use of indicators referring to organic production in labeling and advertising. It also defines the rules for official control, in addition to those outlined in the existing legislation on official inspections.

Key stages of Organic certification:

- **Initial application:** The business submits an application to an accredited organic certification body.

31. Findings from meeting and interviews with the municipality and with value chain actors.
32. See: https://aku.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Udhezim_Nr.20.pdf
33. See: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32002R0178
34. See: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32004R0852
35. See: https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/alb144203.pdf
36. This law is partially aligned with EU Regulation (EU) No. 2018/848 of the European Parliament and the Council, dated May 30, 2018, on organic production and labeling of organic products, which repealed Council Regulation (EC) No. 834/2007. For more see: https://bujqesia.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/ligj-nr.-104-dt.-19.9.2024-prodhimi-organik.docx

Organic certification helps MAP producers, including many women in rural areas, reach higher-value markets by meeting strict sustainability and quality standards.

- **Farm or facility inspection:** An on-site inspection is conducted by the certification body to ensure compliance with organic farming and processing standards. This inspection includes reviewing records, production methods, and environmental practices.

- **Documentation and record keeping:** Businesses must maintain detailed records of their farming practices, inputs used (fertilizers, pesticides, etc.), crop rotation, soil management, and other relevant practices. These records help ensure transparency and traceability.

- **Review of practices and procedures:** The certifying body reviews the business's practices against the organic standards. This includes ensuring no use of prohibited substances (such as synthetic chemicals or GMOs) and that the production methods support long-term environmental health.

- **Certification decision:** After the inspection and review, the certification body will make a decision. If the business is found to be in compliance with organic standards, they are granted organic certification.

- **Ongoing inspections:** Organic certification requires annual inspections and audits to maintain certification. Businesses must continue to adhere to the standards, and any changes to practices must be documented and approved.

The certification process is typically 2-3 years, as businesses need to demonstrate that they have adhered to organic practices for at least that period. During this time, businesses are often given an interim status of "In Process of Organic Certification."

Key MAPs exporting operators are certified according to the European Organic Standard and the US Organic Standard (representing the main markets for Albanian MAPs). Organic certification is carried out by several certification bodies: Ecocert SA, ICEA, BCS, OkoGarantie GmbH, BioInspecta AG, CERES GmbH, Control Union Certifications B.V., IMO CH, IMC srl. Historically, the only local certification body based in Albania has been Bio-inspecta (former Alb-inspect), which is accredited by Swiss Accreditation Services.[37]

Associations There are only two main associations: The Essences Producers and Cultivators Association (EPCA)38 and the Association of MAPs of Albania (AMAP).39 There is no association of MAP-Producers representing their interests and of other actors in the MAPs value chain nationwide.

The only country wide organization is KASH (Albanian Agribusiness Counsel) which is an overall umbrella association/federation covering all major agri-food sectors in Albania, including MAPs.

Most actors (collectors/growers, aggregators/consolidators and processors/exporters) are not engaged in any of the associations (DSA, 2023). Lack of wide participation has led to missed opportunities for promoting good agricultural practices for the cultivation and collection of MAPs and food safety controls.

37. Quality and standards for sustainable trade of Medicinal and Aromatic Plants. GQSP. UNIDO, 2023. See: https://hub.unido.org/sites/default/files/publications/UNIDO%20GQSP%20ALBANIA%20Medicinal%20Aromatic%20Plants%20Value%20Chain%20STUDY%202023.pdf

38. See: https://www.map-epca.com/

39. See: https://amap.org.al/

2.3 RESEARCH FINDINGS

Based on fieldwork, observations, and interviews conducted with key value chain actors (two women and two men), including producers and processors, and specialists of MAPs value chain, the following data were identified:

Opportunities:

- Increase in demand for MAPs across the country. There has been a noticeable increase in demand for MAPs in the region and throughout the country, driven by the market demand. This is also directly linked to the wide variety of products available, as well as the post-COVID-19 period and the growing demand from international markets.[40]

- Cultivation of MAPs appears to be a good opportunity for engaging farmers based on the progress of initiatives in the country so far. Currently, only one hectare is cultivated with MAPs in Bulqizë, but the potential is much greater. Early results from the Lo-Am Medicine and QTTB Shkodër demonstration plot show promising plant growth, highlighting strong potential for expansion or commercial production. Cultivating according to best agricultural practices increases production quantities while ensuring quality in line with international market demands.
  - By transitioning from wild collection to cultivation, women would increase income and improve working conditions.[41] This would require investments starting from seeds/seedlings and training on good agriculture practices.

- Meeting the requirements of standards and obtaining quality certifications would directly contribute to improving the process and increasing the value of products, thus boosting demand for MAP products, raising prices, and increasing income per unit.
  - More knowledge is needed, especially in the application of standards, certification, and application of best practices in all stages including drying and primary processing.

- Organizing farmers, especially women, into groups reduces costs in securing inputs and equipment for cultivation, unifies and guarantees product quality, enables an increase in the capacities of actors across all links of the value chain, and enhances their role in the value chain.

- Opportunity in applying GAP in the cultivation of MAPs:
  - Improve working conditions of women engaged in MAPs VC.
  - All workers need to be trained, especially in agrochemicals/fertilizer management, hygiene and first aid.
  - Personal protection equipment, above all for the application of agrochemicals.
  - GAP in cultivation (plot history; inspection; soil testing; risk of contamination; field preparation; certified seeds/seedlings; sowing and transplanting; manures and fertilizers; irrigation; crop maintenance and plant protection; harvest and post-harvest (primary processing and drying); packaging; storage and transport; etc.)

Limitation:

- Most activities are informal, meaning that workers and producers (especially women) are not registered with tax offices or authorities. As a result, they lose their rights to benefit from subsidy schemes, health insurance, pensions, and various programs and projects. In addition, the fact that women are not registered poses challenges in terms of knowing the full scale of their participation in the VC.

- The areas where spontaneous collection processes take place are often located around three hours away from settlements and especially during the harvesting season, this can create difficulties

40. See: https://invest-in-albania.org/the-economic-potential-of-medicinal-and-aromatic-plants-in-albania/
41. See: https://www.fao.org/4/y4586e/y4586e08.htm

in carrying out all processes. Additionally, the long distance reduces product quality due to the conditions in which the plants are transported until they reach the collection units.

- The economic situation of families. Often, involvement in this activity is the primary source of income for the majority of families.[42] Due to informality, residents are also excluded from subsidy schemes and financial opportunities.

- Low quality, resulting in low prices. The lack of professional skills and quality certification directly impacts the quality of the products. There are cases where the harvested/cultivated product loses quality during the drying process or improper packaging for storage and transport.

Below are the main problems identified for the cultivation of MAPs in Bulqizë. More specifically, the issues (limitations) are related to:

Input Guaranteeing Phase:
- Seedlings and 'organic' certification
- Soil analysis - certified
- Land ownership - access to finance/registration (other support), especially for women

Cultivation Phase:
- Skills for cultivation and harvesting (how, when, why, what)
- Adequate working tools and equipment, especially for women
- Lack of service providers in application of good agriculture practices
- Infrastructure (equipment) and qualifications for the post-harvest process
- Limited experience and area under cultivation

Post-harvest and drying phase:
- Lack of quality control
- Lack of environmentally friendly drying equipment
- Lack of quality packaging
- Lack of knowledge in the above processes for women involved
- Marketing Phase:
- Storage
- Market linkage
- Knowledge about market developments and demands
- Promotion

Regarding Gender Inequality Issues and the Inclusion of Women in the value chain, the information gathered from meetings and interviews shows that around 150 women/young women spread all over the municipality, especially from Zerqan, Shupenzë, and Gjoricë AUs,[43] are involved in most activities, especially in the spontaneous collection processes, while also contributing to household chores. This means that women/young women involved in collecting wild plants far from home are doubly burdened.

Stakeholders and specialists highlight that there are opportunities for cultivating plants closer to home, which could result in improved quality, quantity, and resource control for women, as well as offering opportunities to cultivate high-demand and high-value plants in the market.[44]

Traditional skills in identifying and collecting plants are usually passed down from generation to generation. Women/young women involved in cultivation, harvesting, and collection processes, and possibly in drying the product, directly influence the value chain, making consolidators dependent on their skills to ensure product quality.

Women/young women are rarely involved in decision-making processes, with men (especially the consolidators to whom women/young women sell their products) being the decision-making authority regarding business management processes, financing opportunities, etc.

Regarding Financing Opportunities, for many families, the only source of income is generated from this type of activity. Typically, profits are earned once the collected quantity is delivered to the collection unit. Currently, based solely on spontaneous collection, financing opportunities are very low, if not non-existent.

42. Medicinal and Aromatic Plants Sector Study. MARD and GIZ, 2021. See: https://bujqesia.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/04-MAP-Sector-Study_FINAL.pdf
43. Information from LO-AM Medicine owner Drilon Voci.
44. See: https://tetratechintdev.exposure.co/womens-economic-empowerment-in-albania

2.4 RECOMMENDED INTERVENTIONS FOR THE MAPS VALUE CHAIN IN BULQIZË

Below are some general recommendations regarding the development of the MAPs value chain in Bulqizë Municipality, categorized by their impact:

1. Support Transition from Wild Collection to Cultivation:

- **Enhance good agricultural practices (GAP):** It is crucial to improve the cultivation practices of Medicinal and Aromatic Plants (MAPs) by focusing on good agricultural practices. This includes training in essential aspects such as soil testing, contamination risk assessment, field preparation, use of certified seeds and seedlings, sowing, transplanting, fertilization, irrigation, crop maintenance, and plant protection. Additionally, efficient harvesting, post-harvest handling, drying, storage, and transportation practices must be enhanced to maintain the quality and market value of the products. Specialized training in agrochemicals, fertilizer management, hygiene, and first aid should also be incorporated to improve these practices in the short, medium, and long term.

2. Technical Assistance:

- **Soil analysis and certified propagation material:** Support in soil analysis is essential to ensure optimal conditions for MAP cultivation. Providing access to certified propagation material (seeds and seedlings) and support for on-site seedling replication will enhance scalability and ensure a sustainable supply for future expansion. This initiative should be pursued immediately and continue over the long term to guarantee the success and expansion of MAP cultivation.

- **Small grants for harvest and post-harvest improvements:** Small grants should be provided to improve harvest and post-harvest practices on farms. This could include grants for equipment such as sacks for storage and transport. Such investments will help maintain the quality of the products from harvest to market and should be implemented in the short, medium, and long term.

- **Personal working and protection equipment:** Providing personal protective equipment (PPE) for workers, especially for the application of agrochemicals, is essential for ensuring the health and safety of those involved in MAP cultivation. This support should be provided consistently throughout the short, medium, and long term.

3. Certification of Quality and Safety Standards:

- **Awareness of certifications:** It is important to raise awareness among producers about the value of certifications and how they help gain access to major markets. The process of obtaining certifications, such as organic certification, should be clearly explained to ensure producers understand the steps involved. This awareness-building process should take place in the short term and continue to evolve as the market demands.

- **Support for organic certification:** Producers should receive assistance in obtaining organic certification, ensuring that their products meet the required standards. This support should start in the medium term and continue in the long term to help MAP producers remain competitive in international markets.

- **Coaching and mentoring:** Providing coaching and mentoring to producers in the short, medium, and long term will support their growth and help them better navigate the challenges in the MAP value chain. This will ensure they are continually improving and adhering to market demands.

4. Support for Production Groups:

- **Organizing women into groups:** Organizing women into groups is a key strategy for improving their representation and role in the MAP value chain. Such groups will empower women to have a stronger voice in the market and will be crucial for creating a more robust and competitive sector. This initiative should be pursued in the medium term and sustained in the long term.

- **Capacity building for women farmers:** Providing women farmers with knowledge on business planning, establishing business relationships,

marketing, and identifying financing opportunities is essential for empowering them to thrive in the MAP value chain. Training in these areas should be implemented in the medium term, with ongoing support over the long term.

- **Sustainable relationships with consolidators:** Developing sustainable relationships between production groups and local, regional, or national consolidators will help stabilize the market and ensure producers have reliable buyers. Advance agreements can promote production and guarantee market access. These relationships should be nurtured in the medium term and maintained in the long term to ensure the continued success of the MAP value chain.

These recommendations offer a comprehensive approach to strengthening the MAP value chain by focusing on technical assistance, certification, empowering women, and improving market access through strong partnerships. These actions will help create a more sustainable and profitable sector for MAP producers in Albania.

Table 6. Recommendations for the MAP Value Chain

No.	Activity	Impact		
		Short-Term	Medium-Term	Long-Term
1	Support transition from wild collection to cultivation			
1.1	Enhance Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) in the cultivation of MAPs, improving harvesting techniques and post-harvest handling, including proper drying, storage, and transportation. Key areas of focus include: o Plot management: History, inspection, soil testing, and contamination risk assessment. o Cultivation practices: Field preparation, use of certified seeds/seedlings, sowing, transplanting, fertilization, irrigation, crop maintenance, and plant protection. o Harvest & post-harvest: Efficient harvesting, primary processing, drying, packaging, storage, and transport to maintain quality and market value. o Training especially in agrochemicals/fertilizer management, hygiene and first aid.	X	X	X
2	Technical Assistance			
2.1	o Soil analysis o Support with certified propagation material o Support on-site seedling replication to enhance scalability and ensure a sustainable supply for future expansion	X	X	X
2.2	Small grants for improving harvest and post-harvest practices on farms (sacks for storage and transport, etc.).	X	X	X
2.3	Personal working and protection equipment, above all for the application of agrochemicals.	X	X	X
3	Certification Of Quality and Safety Standards			
3.1	Awareness sessions regarding the importance of certifications in accessing major markets and the necessary steps for certification.	X	X	X
3.2	Provide support for producers in obtaining organic certification, ensuring compliance with standards.		X	X
3.3	Coaching and mentoring.	X	X	X

No.	Activity	Impact		
		Short-Term	Medium-Term	Long-Term
4	Support for Production Groups			
4.1	Organizing women into group to increase representation and role in the value chain.		X	X
4.2	Capacity building for women farmers related to basic knowledge of business planning, business relations, marketing, financing opportunities, etc.		X	X
4.3	Creation of sustainable relationships between production group and local/ regional and/or national consolidators to promote production with advance agreements.	X	X	X

Local Partners/Collaboration: National associations of MAPs; the municipality; the agriculture directorate, the local consolidators. The MAP value chain in Bulqizë is relatively new and in its early stages compared to areas with a longer history in this field. Most MAPs are collected rather than cultivated, although in recent years some farmers have begun cultivating MAPs of the same quality as wild plants (which are, however, more resilient). The local consolidator, Lo-Am Medicine, is eager to promote and support transition to cultivation, in fact, they have started small demonstration plots near the facility.

Part 3

Analysis of Handicrafts Value Chain

1. Gender Sensitive Analysis of Handicrafts Value Chain

Handicrafts have a special place in the cultural heritage of the Municipality of Bulqizë. Folk costumes are a true exhibition of folk art. Prepared with great effort, full of style and beauty, today they convey the rich tradition of this area. The variety of color combinations and details make these costumes amazing. In each of their elements you find a piece of art, which stems from the rich spirit of the Bulqizë girls and women.

The women of the area continue to engage in handicrafts today. The Bulqizë folk costumes are among the most unique in Albania, and they continue to be sewn by the artisans of the area and are traded, turning this craft into a small family business. They are also used in the wedding ceremonies in the area, which is a way to preserve the tradition of the ancestors. Bulqiza women's folk costume consists of a woolen *qasha*, black for women and red for girls, a vest decorated with silver, a white front bodice with a red woolen sash around the waist, a satin shirt with long sleeves, a brightly colored *jepek* (headscarf), white underskirt and socks, colored mittens, or tabes instead of a shirt.

One of these elements of the folk costume, the *qasha*, is a garment that has been passed down from generation to generation and was used even after the 1990s. According to popular tradition, the *qasha* is a key element of the folk costume, dating back to the time of Skanderbeg.

Handicrafts, particularly embroidery and wool-based clothing, are a widespread tradition among the women of Ostren.

In the town of Bulqizë, ten women have preserved and nurtured traditional artisanal techniques within their homes, crafting exquisite handmade items that embody their rich cultural heritage. Among them, Rabije Alla (62), Selvie Karaj (60), and Tana Shkina (55) are skilled artisans who have dedicated decades to perfecting their craft, creating intricate embroidery and decorative textiles with a deep-rooted knowledge passed down through generations. Arjana Shehu (28) specializes in beadwork, crafting delicate jewelry and decorative accessories. While their raw materials are primarily sourced from Tirana—imported from Turkey or China—some select materials are procured from local suppliers in Albania. These artisans contribute to the local economy and cultural preservation by either selling their products in the local bazaar or producing them as gifts, personal use, or for exchange within their community. The younger generation, including Sara Karaj (21), Nexhmije Gjikola (21), and Argita Vicishta (21), are learning and adapting these traditional techniques, blending them with modern influences. Meanwhile, unemployed women like Xhuljana Lleshi (22), Merita Rama (45), and Ervina Gjikola (38) engage in artisanal work as a means of self-expression, community bonding, and potential income generation.

Despite their economic challenges, they continue their craft with dedication, often using their skills to create handcrafted gifts or items exchanged within close circles. Two of these women, Rabije Alla and Selvie Karaj, actively sell their creations in the local bazaar, sustaining a micro-economy of handmade goods. Their work not only preserves the region's artistic traditions but also fosters a sense of resilience and self-reliance among women in Bulqizë.[45]

45. Information gathered through interview and consultation with SDI representatives, Elias Mazloum and Armando Suka.

The Ostren administrative unit lies to the south-east of Bulqizë Municipality and has an area of 9874 ha, consisting mainly of a mountainous terrain. To the east it is bordered by North Macedonia, to the east by Trebisht, to the south and south-west by Steblevë, to the west by the Zerqan, and to the north by Gjoricë. Ostreni is the largest part of the province of Golloborda, the province that is well known in the Dibër region for its cultural, linguistic, ethnographic, and historical characteristics. The toponymy of Golloborda (Golo Brdo) comes from Macedonian, which means "bare hill", a sight that catches your eye as soon as you step into this area. Nestled among the highlands, it has long been a center for the Bulgarian-speaking community in Albania.[46]

Golloborda preserves ancient traces of civilization, along with a rich heritage of both material and spiritual culture. The area is known for its traditional architecture, with houses built using local stone and featuring intricate wooden elements. The men are especially renowned for their craftsmanship in masonry, a skill passed down through generations. The women, on the other hand, have preserved the art of textile weaving, creating colorful traditional costumes that are still worn during festivals and important events.
The traditional attire of the women in this region reflects an ancient tradition of aesthetic expression, highlighting some of the oldest and most meaningful elements of traditional artistry. The motifs found in this folk art are closely linked to the history of the region and the broader cultural and artistic phenomena of the local population.
Historical sources have allowed us to trace the artistic expressions embedded in this attire, which has been preserved in its purest form throughout the entire area of Golloborda. The diverse embroidered motifs, rich in unique symbolism, testify to the exceptional craftsmanship and historical mastery that date back to antiquity.
Through the embroidery of symbols and patterns, this attire conveys social psychology, where decorative elements are carefully adapted to popular traditions and the history of the region. It is well known that spiritual heritage is not static; it evolves over time, incorporating new elements throughout different historical periods. However, in this traditional attire, the original features have been carefully preserved since ancient times. The crafting process places great emphasis on maintaining tradition, technique, the precision of embroidered motifs, and the quality of the chosen materials. As a form of folk art, the traditional costume represents a significant part of material culture, while the artistic motifs expressed in these garments serve as an essential component of the spiritual heritage of a community or ethnic group.[47]

The traditional costume of Ostreni is an essential part of the region's cultural heritage, reflecting the identity and lifestyle of its inhabitants. Worn across the 13 villages of Ostren, this costume has been carefully preserved by a dedicated group of women, including Xhemile Muca, Lirije Muca, Rehane Muca, Zenepe Tola, and Kujtime Tola. These artisans, handcraft and cherish the traditional costume, which consists of dresses, other items of clothing, and accessories made from natural materials. Their craftsmanship embodies a strong connection to nature and the rich history of the region, highlighting the significant role that women play in both cultural preservation and economic development.

Handicrafts, particularly embroidery and wool-based clothing, are a widespread tradition among the women of Ostren. Nearly all women in the area possess these skills and engage in handcrafting, yet their work remains invisible in official data and registers. Wool knitting, in particular, shows great potential for self-employment, although women's skills are currently limited to a few traditional products, and they lack knowledge of market demands. With proper support, they have the ability to expand their product portfolio beyond local traditions and adapt to market needs.

The production process is largely manual, relying on traditional low-tech tools such as the loom. Women have full control over their equipment and independently determine the selling price of their products, primarily based on production costs. However, market access remains a significant challenge, as their sales are currently confined to the local community or direct contacts. Expanding their reach would require diversification of products, market linkages, and training on new models and techniques.[48]

46. See: https://preserving-heritage.com/
47. See: https://preserving-heritage.com/
48. Findings from meeting and interviews with the women in Ostren.

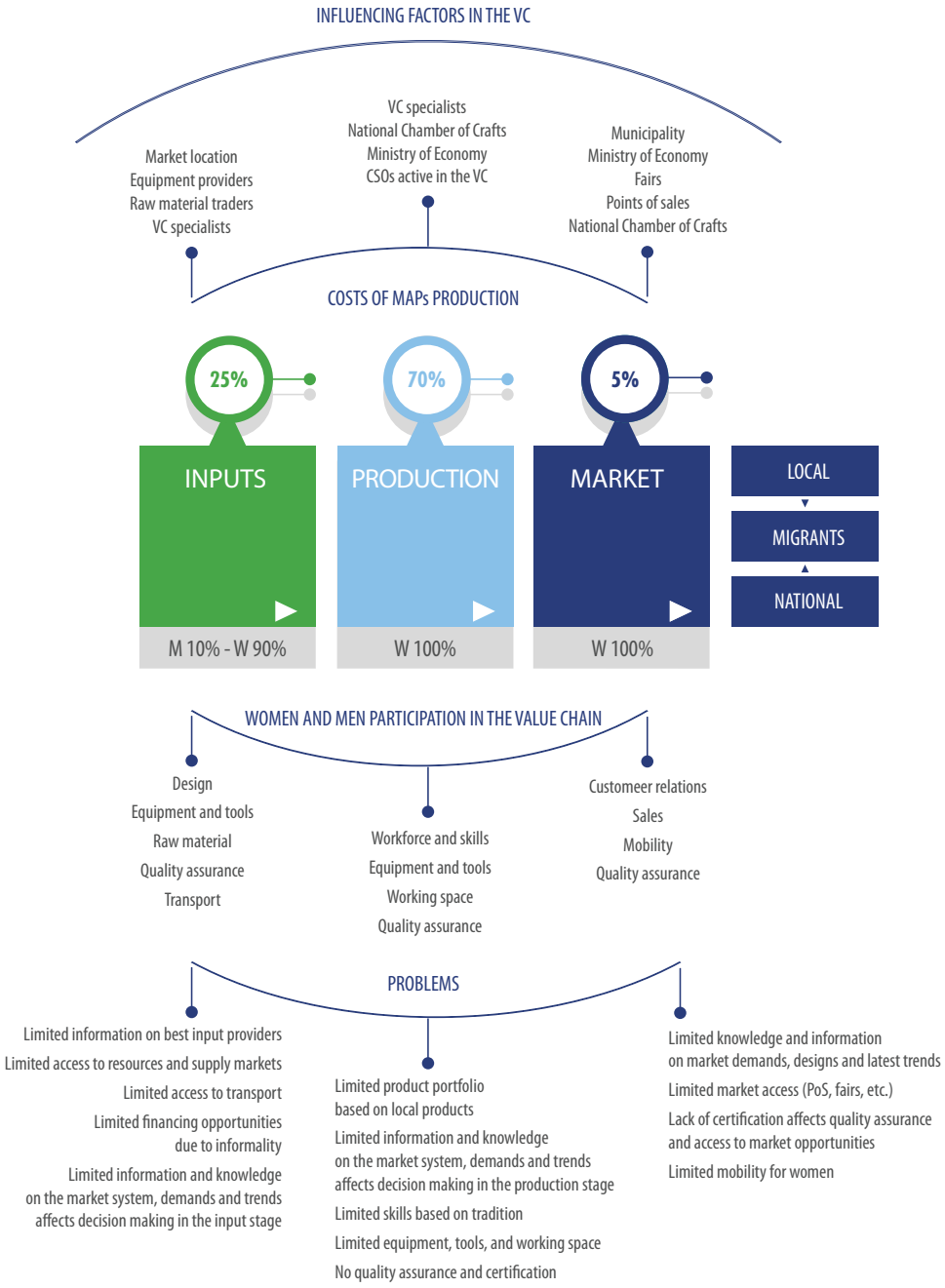
Table 7. SWOT analysis of the handicrafts value chain

Strengths	Weaknesses
Women have the basic skills and can acquire more if supported with training. **Almost all women of Ostren have skills and are engaged in handcrafting**, mainly embroidery, woolen-based clothes and vests. **The production process is largely manual**, with traditional low-tech tools such as the loom. **Women control the equipment** and they decide on the product's selling price, taking into consideration mainly the cost of production. **The activity can be done from home** and women can increase their family income. **There are no cultural constraints.** Crafting is typically considered as women's activity transmitted from one generation to the other.	**The value chain and women engaged** in it are invisible to official data and registers. **Lack of financial resources**, and consequently, insufficient investment in equipment and technology. **Absence of certification** for skills and quality. **Women skills are limited** only to few local traditional products and they lack knowledge on the market demands). **Informal operation in the market.** **Women skills are limited** only to few local traditional products and they lack knowledge on the market demands. **Their market is limited** to the local community or direct contacts. **Limited working conditions**, especially for women. **Limited knowledge and skills** on business administration, finance, marketing, promotion, etc. **There are still constraints limiting women's empowerment**, like decision-making on starting a business, access to finance, access to resources, etc. **Limited information** on market opportunities.
Strengths	**Weaknesses**
Handicrafts, especially wool knitting, shows a potential for self-employment of the women in Ostren. **Their portfolio is limited to the traditional products** from their area but with support they have the skills to expand their portfolio with additional products based on market demands. **Women have the basic skills** and can acquire more if supported with training. **More is needed in terms of product diversification,** including new models and products for the market, market linkages, training on new models. **There is an opportunity to make changes** with small investments, basic equipment, training on technology and business skills, and market linkages. **The municipality and the administrative unit have the artisans in Ostren in their priorities**. They were keen to offer a working space for the women inside the administrative unit building. **Opportunity for women grouping for equipment sharing**, collaboration, and better representation in the market.	**Willingness to cooperate and share assets**, resources, and markets. **Distance to markets** and women's mobility to access markets. **Limited funding opportunities** if women remain informal. **Competition from mass-produced**, cheaper products may reduce demand for handmade items. **Younger generations may not be interested** in continuing the tradition, leading to skill loss over time. **Limited knowledge of pricing strategies**, business management, and market trends. **The sector is not formally recognized** in official data and policy frameworks, limiting institutional support.

2. Mapping of the Handicrafts Value Chain in Ostren

Below is the comprehensive map of the value chain links, actors, supporting factors, and key issues identified, based on findings from interviews with stakeholders and local support agencies, field research, and consultations with specialists. The diagram presents the main interest groups, the stages from inputs to the final market, and helps identify challenges in the production flow. The numerical values above the boxes represent costs and the added value for each phase.

Figure 3. Mapping of the Handicrafts Value Chain



As seen in the figure 3, the handicrafts value chain in Ostren Administrative Unit (AU) is organized into a few key stages:

The input phase – The initial stage involving the collection or cultivation of raw materials, sourcing equipment, and obtaining necessary supplies. Input suppliers play a crucial role in the production process by providing essential raw materials, equipment, and tools needed for handicraft production. These include local farmers or traders supplying wool, cotton, and natural dyes used for crafting, suppliers of traditional handcrafting tools such as looms, needles, spindles, and thread, and retailers or wholesalers providing additional decorative materials, textiles, and accessories.

The common source of raw material for the artisan women in Bulqizë, is the local market located in town, and in some cases, they get the material in the neighboring towns of Peshkopi or in Tirana. Wool and cotton threads are commonly used in weaving, embroidery, and knitting to create traditional clothing, carpets, and decorative textiles. The main equipment is the loom, which is mainly produced by order to the few artisans remaining in the country. A good handmade loom can cost on average around 1000 Euro. Sewing and embroidery machines needed for a more detailed and finer work, can be purchased in Tirana, where the main suppliers are located. These machines are usually purchased as second hand by the artisans, at prices ranging from 800-1500 Euro (depending on their technical parameters). Due to limited mobility for women, men assist with transportation to the market and purchase the raw material. As the products crafted by the women of Ostren are mainly based on wool, the input stage (raw material) is calculated at 25% of the total product cost. The availability of high-quality raw materials at affordable prices is limited, and artisans lack access to modern equipment that could enhance productivity and improve product quality. Furthermore, they rely on local suppliers without established linkages to alternative national or international markets, limiting their ability to scale production.

The production phase – The stage where handicrafts are manually crafted, processed, or assembled into finished products. This stage is completely controlled and managed (100%) by the women. It is usually carried out during the few hours of spare time women have among other unpaid work in the family. A complete traditional costume of Ostren can take up to two-three months of work for one woman. This stage has the main cost calculated at 75% of the total product cost.

The market phase – This final stage involves the distribution, marketing, and sale of handmade products through various sales channels. However, the artisan women of Ostren face limited market access and lack diverse sales opportunities. Currently, they either produce for personal use or work on order-based production, with their main clients being local community members or those who have migrated to other cities or abroad. A significant tradition is that new brides from the area always receive a full traditional costume upon marriage, keeping the craft alive within the local culture. This stage is also managed completely by the women and carries limited costs (5%).

The artisan women located in Bulqizë are currently selling their products through the local market, where sales mainly occur within the community, and through word-of-mouth and direct contacts, which serve as informal marketing channels. Occasionally, women participate in local craft fairs and exhibitions, which provide them with limited exposure beyond their immediate region. The main challenges in this phase include restricted market access, limited online presence or digital marketing channels to promote products, and lack of branding. Without structured sales channels, artisans face difficulties in reaching a broader customer base.

Below is a brief description of the value chain supporting agencies in the market system:

VC Specialists - Women artisans in Ostren are the primary producers responsible for designing and crafting traditional costumes and other handmade products, utilizing traditional low-tech tools, and maintaining handcrafting techniques. They also make decisions on production costs and set product prices based on material costs and production time. Many artisans lack technical knowledge and formal training in new designs, market trends, and modern production techniques. There is also a lack of quality control standards, which affects product consistency and competitiveness. Additionally, low productivity due to reliance on manual tools and traditional methods

limits their ability to meet larger orders. Artisan women of Ostren have never had any information on opportunities to receive support or assistance from VC specialists.

The ACE Craftsman School[49] is a national center for Art & Craft education, located in Tirana. It was created as an experimental model for education in Art craft and Fashion Design, offering both beginner and advanced levels. The center aims for the highest standards of contemporary art practice and achievement, both locally and internationally, striving to maintain a strong program for community involvement in continuous education and add value to the cultural, economic, and social community, preserving crafts and history, techniques, and natural resources, as a professional school in the Art & Craft field in Albania.

The center offers offline and online practical learning laboratories, with teaching from professional artists and artisans in each field, such as dress couture, sketching design and patternmaking, haute couture sewing, embroidery with tambour, luvenille art, French embroidery, handmade textile flower art, weaving with looms, vintage hand embroidery, 3d goldwork with wire, bead embroidery, leather processing for bags and fashion accessories, traditional costume design, success stories of artists and entrepreneurs in the field, fashion accessories creation, revival of forgotten crafts through contemporary methodology, metal and ironworks, fiber arts as a popular passion in fine art, quilting with textiles, costume design for children, organic dolls, wood and felt art, clay art for interior decoration and fashion accessories, millinery (hat making), and workshops and masterclasses on the progress and sustainability of the fashion industry and artisan crafts in the coming years, along with exhibitions and displays throughout the country as a progression of our students' work.

Support Agencies - Several institutions and organizations play a role in supporting the handicraft sector by providing policy guidance, financial assistance, and training opportunities.

The Ministry of Economy, Culture, and Innovation is responsible for providing policy support to the traditional handicraft sector and promoting cultural heritage preservation. It may offer financial assistance, grants, or subsidies to support local artisans and small businesses, as well as create programs to strengthen market linkages and facilitate exports. However, the lack of structured programs specifically targeting women entrepreneurs in the handicraft sector remains a challenge. The Ministry of Economy, Culture, and Innovation (MEKI) provides financial support for artisans and craftspeople, aiming to strengthen and develop activities that promote craftsmanship and cultural heritage in Albania.

The MEKI funding call (2025)[50] offers public funds to support project proposals from:

- Individual artisans
- Nonprofit organizations (NGOs)
- Registered businesses (QKB-registered individuals and entities)

The first category is open to Individual artisans and Craft associations with an established and ongoing production activity in the designated craft fields. The financial support can cover between 500 thousand to 1.5 million ALL in Purchase of tools and equipment dedicated to their production activities; Procurement of raw materials for crafting artisanal products; and, Support for promotion and branding of artisanal products.

Eligible projects must focus on promoting, educating, protecting, preserving, and passing on traditional crafts. The purpose of this guideline is to provide clear instructions for interested applicants in the craft and cultural heritage sectors, helping them prepare and submit project proposals under the National Grant Program for Culture and Creativity 2025.

The National Chamber of Handicrafts (NCC) was established on December 19, 2017, as a legal entity operating under the "Law on Handicrafts in the Republic of Albania" (No. 70/2016)[51]. It is a nonprofit organization headquartered in Tirana, with nationwide coverage across Albania.

49. See: https://craftsman.al/
50. See: https://meki.gov.al/hapet-thirrja-per-grante-fondi-i-artizaneve-2025/
51. See: https://www.dhkz.org.al/index.php/sq/legjislacioni/178-ligj-nr-70-2016-per-zejtarine-ne-republiken-e-shqiperise

The law provides for the comprehensive organization of the handicraft sector and the establishment of a dual qualification system, following a fully German-based model.

The Chamber focuses on:

- Handicraft activities in Albania
- Vocational training in the sector
- Organizing craft enterprises
- Promoting the development of craftsmanship

This institution represents artisans and craftsmen, advocating for their interests at the national level. It provides business development training and skills enhancement programs, and works on the certification and formal recognition of traditional handicrafts. Despite these efforts, its outreach and engagement with artisans in remote areas like Ostren remain limited, and inadequate funding and resources hinder large-scale business development initiatives.

Certification for Artisan Titles in Albania

- The National Chamber of Handicrafts, in collaboration with the responsible agency for professional qualifications, issues two key certifications in the artisan sector:
- The "Assistant Master" Certificate confirms that an individual holds a professional qualification equivalent to that of an assistant master. The equivalency is determined by the National Chamber of Handicrafts, in cooperation with the responsible agency for professional qualifications.
- The "Master" Certificate verifies that an individual has many years of experience, knowledge, and professional skills in practicing a specific craft and has contributed over the years to passing on expertise to new professionals.
- The Master Certificate is awarded to those who demonstrate the necessary knowledge and skills to practice their craft independently and successfully pass the Master's Examination.

The Women's Economic Chamber of Albania (WECA)[52] is a non-profit organization dedicated to advancing the economic and social interests of women entrepreneurs, professionals, and self-employed individuals across all sectors of the Albanian economy. Founded by a group of experienced businesswomen, WECA aims to empower women through strategic initiatives and support services.

Mission and Activities:

- Policy Advocacy: Collaborates with central and local governments, as well as international organizations, to draft and implement policies that promote women's economic and social empowerment.
- Training and Consultancy: Offers professional training programs and strategic business planning assistance to small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and self-employed women.
- Internationalization Support: Facilitates the international expansion of women-led SMEs by promoting local products, crafts, fashion, and design through fairs, conferences, and seminars.
- Mentorship Programs: Launched Albania's first mentorship program focused on women supporting women, providing guidance through business challenges and growth strategies
- Research and Publications: Conducts studies and publishes materials to inform and support women in business.

The National Center for Traditional Activities[52] in Albania is an institution dedicated to the preservation, promotion, and development of Albania's traditional crafts, customs, and cultural activities. The center focuses on safeguarding the rich cultural heritage of Albania by supporting local artisans and ensuring that traditional practices are passed down to future generations.

Main Objectives:

- Preservation and Promotion of Traditional Crafts: The center works to maintain the authenticity of

52. See: https://weca.al/

Albanian traditional arts and crafts, supporting artisans through various projects and initiatives.

- Cultural Education: It plays a key role in educating the public about Albania's cultural heritage, especially through events, exhibitions, and workshops that showcase traditional crafts.

- Collaboration with Artisans and Communities: The center collaborates with artisans and local communities to improve the quality and sustainability of traditional production methods.

The center often organizes various activities such as cultural festivals, workshops, and training programs to support the traditional craftsmanship in Albania and ensure its vitality in modern society.

The Association of Artisans and Crafts of Albania[53] is dedicated to promoting and preserving traditional Albanian craftsmanship. Established with a membership of approximately 50 artisans, the association actively engages in organizing events and exhibitions to showcase the rich heritage of Albanian crafts. The association regularly organizes craft fairs in various cities, including Shkodër, to provide artisans with platforms to display and sell their products. These events attract both locals and tourists, fostering cultural exchange and economic opportunities. Artisan exhibitions are held in different locations, such as Tuz in Montenegro, highlighting the diversity and skill of Albanian crafts. These exhibitions are open to the public for a specified period, allowing visitors to appreciate and purchase traditional artworks. Artisan women of Ostren have no affiliation to any local or national association.

2.1 RESEARCH FINDINGS

Based on fieldwork, observations, and interviews conducted with key value chain actors, including specialists in the handicrafts value chain, the following data were identified:

Opportunities

There are several opportunities for the growth of the handicraft sector in Ostren. The region has a strong cultural heritage, and existing traditional skills provide a foundation for expansion. Women artisans have the ability to diversify products if provided with appropriate training, and there is potential for market expansion through online platforms, tourism, and collaborations with craft retailers.

The local government has expressed interest in supporting the sector by offering workspace for artisans, and forming artisan cooperatives could improve their bargaining power and enhance visibility. With proper investment, these opportunities could lead to the long-term sustainability of the sector.

Limitations

Despite these opportunities, there are several limitations. Market access remains a significant challenge, and artisans lack business knowledge in areas such as pricing strategies, customer engagement, and financial planning. Dependence on traditional designs, with minimal innovation to adapt to changing consumer preferences, further restricts market expansion.
Another critical issue is the lack of financial resources for investment in better equipment, workspace, and professional training. Additionally, there is no access to e-commerce platforms or digital marketing tools, limiting visibility beyond local sales.

Main Problems Identified

- Input Phase:
  - Shortages of high-quality raw materials at competitive prices.
  - Dependence on imported raw material.
  - Limited information on supply markets.

53. See: https://www.facebook.com/ShoqataEArtizaneveTePunimeveArtistikeTeShqiperise?locale=sq_AL
54. See: https://folklor.gov.al/

- Limited access to funding opportunities, especially for women operating informally.
- Lack of cooperation in joint purchase of inputs.

- **Production Phase:**
  - Manual, time-consuming production process with outdated tools.
  - Low efficiency due to lack of modern equipment and techniques.
  - Limited awareness of market demand, especially for women.
  - Limited working space.
  - Low cooperation in sharing work and equipment.
  - Informal work.

- **Market Phase:**
  - Lack of branding identity that appeals to a broader market.
  - Lack of market linkages with national or international retailers.
  - Low customer relations and minimal promotional efforts.
  - Lack of information and presence in market opportunities (fairs).
  - Limited digital marketing.

Gender Inequality Issues and the Inclusion of Women in the Value Chain

The information gathered from meetings and interviews, a total of 2 visits were conducted, engaging approximately 23 stakeholders, shows that women and young women are actively involved in most stages of the handicraft value chain, particularly in production and sales. However, gender disparities remain in decision-making and access to financial and business development opportunities.

Traditional skills in handcrafting are passed down from generation to generation, but younger women often migrate to urban areas in search of alternative employment, posing a risk to continuity. Many women have limited decision-making power when it comes to business expansion, as household responsibilities often take precedence.

Gender-based barriers, such as lack of access to resources, and financial independence, restrict their ability to scale up production or invest in business growth.

To address these issues, there is a need for business training specifically designed for women artisans, facilitation of networking and market linkages to support women's entrepreneurship, and promotion of cooperative models that allow women to collaborate and increase their market presence.

Financing Opportunities Access to finance remains one of the main constraints faced by women in rural areas[55], including the artisan women in Ostren.[56]

At present, financial resources for handicraft businesses are scarce, particularly for women artisans operating informally. Despite this, there are several potential financing opportunities that could support the sector. These include government grants and subsidies from the Ministry of Economy, Culture, and Innovation, small loans or microcredit schemes designed specifically for women entrepreneurs, and partnerships with private-sector stakeholders such as craft retailers, fair-trade organizations, and NGOs.

Microcredit often serves as the only option for informal women artisans to access funding, allowing them to purchase raw materials, improve their workspaces, acquire necessary equipment, and expand their businesses. However, the high interest rates[57] applied by microcredit institutions often make these loans unaffordable for low-income families, limiting their ability to make full use of such financial support.

To address this challenge, the establishment of a dedicated financial support mechanism tailored specifically for women artisans could significantly ease their access to funds. This mechanism could include low-interest loans, grants, and financial education programs aimed at equipping women artisans with the knowledge and skills needed to better manage their finances and grow their businesses sustainably.

Additionally, developing cooperative models in which women artisans can collectively apply for financial

55. Overview of Women Entrepreneurs and Entrepreneurship – Factsheet. UN Women, 2021. See: https://eca.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Field%20Office%20ECA/Attachments/Publications/2021/8/Expo%20Report/ALBANIA_Factsheet-min.pdf

56. Findings from the interview with women in Ostren revealed that none of them had ever received financial support.

assistance could increase their bargaining power and reduce individual risks. By joining forces, women artisans would be able to pool resources, share costs, and secure more favorable terms, thus allowing them to invest in their businesses and enhance their economic stability.

In summary, this approach would not only improve financial access for women artisans but also contribute to their economic empowerment, helping them to thrive within the formal market system and achieve long-term success.

2.2 RECOMMENDED INTERVENTION FOR THE HANDICRAFTS VALUE CHAIN IN BULQIZË

1. Support Women Grouping:

- **Capacity building**: There is a need to provide capacity-building programs for women artisans. These programs should focus on key aspects such as business planning, establishing business relations, marketing strategies, and identifying financing opportunities. This will help women artisans build the necessary skills to manage and grow their businesses in the short, medium, and long term.

- **Support grouping of women artisans**: In order to improve the representation of women in the market system, efforts should be made to encourage the formation of groups of women artisans. These groups will allow women to have a stronger voice and better representation within the marketplace. This initiative should start in the medium term but continue to grow in the long term.

- **Registration as a recognized unit**: It is essential to support women artisans in registering as a recognized unit. This will give them legal recognition and help them become more competitive and integrated into the formal market system. This process should start in the medium term and continue into the long term.

2. Technical Assistance:

- **Introduce new models**: The market is constantly evolving, and to keep pace, women artisans should be introduced to new models based on current market demands. This includes diversifying the types of handicrafts produced and adapting to modern trends. It's crucial to implement these models in the short term and continue to evolve them in the medium and long term.

- **Small grants for improvement**: To improve the working conditions, production capabilities, and quality of products, women artisans should receive small grants. These grants can be used for upgrading tools, equipment, or workspace, and are essential for fostering growth in the short, medium, and long term.

- **Training on new models and processes**: Continuous training should be provided to artisans on new models and additional production processes. This will help them remain competitive and innovative in the market. These training programs should be implemented in the short term, with continued investment over the medium and long term.

- **Common workspace for women**: It is important to create shared workspaces for women artisans, in collaboration with local administration. These spaces would enable artisans to work in a collaborative environment, share resources, and increase production efficiency. The development of such workspaces should be pursued immediately and continue into the long term.

3. Certification:

- **Support women in certification**: Women artisans

57. Albania Credit Guarantee Scheme Assessment. International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank Group 2020. See: https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/907601595607606723/pdf/Albania-Credit-Guarantee-Scheme-Assessment.pdf

should be supported in obtaining certification through the National Certification Center (NCC). This certification process validates the skills of artisans and ensures their products meet quality standards. It should be a focus in the medium term and continue to be developed over the long term.

- **Coaching and mentoring**: Providing coaching and mentoring to women artisans will help them improve their skills and knowledge. This will guide them in obtaining certifications and navigating the complexities of the market. Coaching should start in the medium term and continue in the long term for long-lasting benefits.

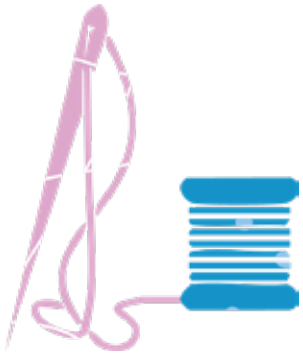
4. **Marketing:**

- **Market linkages**: Establishing market linkages is critical for women artisans to expand their reach and access new buyers. Efforts should be made to support women in connecting with larger networks, distributors, and other market players. This should begin in the short term and continue to develop throughout the medium and long term.

- **Digital marketing and e-commerce**: As the world becomes more digital, artisans should be supported in using digital marketing strategies and setting up e-commerce platforms to sell their products. This will help them reach a broader audience, both locally and internationally. This initiative should start in the medium term and continue to grow over the long term.

- **Advance agreements with market operators**: Supporting women artisans in establishing advance agreements with market operators ensures they have a reliable and consistent market for their products. This can help them plan production and secure income. This initiative should be implemented in the short term, with ongoing support in the medium and long term.

- **Promotional activities and fair participation**: Finally, it is crucial to support promotional activities and encourage women artisans to participate in fairs and exhibitions. This will help raise awareness of their products and build a reputation in the marketplace. These activities should begin in the medium term and continue as a long-term strategy to sustain and grow their market presence.



The handicrafts value chain can grow stronger by empowering women artisans through targeted training, business support, certification, and access to markets.

These recommendations provide a comprehensive approach to improving the handicrafts value chain by empowering women artisans through training, support, certification, and market access.

Table 8. Recommendations for the Handicrafts Value Chain

No.	Activity	Impact		
		Short-Term	Medium-Term	Long-Term
1	**Support women grouping**			
1.1	Capacity building for women artisans related to basic knowledge of business planning, business relations, marketing, financing opportunities, etc.	X	X	X
1.2	Support grouping of women artisans for better representation in the market system		X	X
1.3	Support registration as a recognized unit		X	X
2	**Technical assistance**			
2.1	Introduce new models based on market demand	X	X	X
2.2	Small grants for improving women working conditions, production and quality	X	X	X
2.3	Training on new models and additional processes	X	X	X
2.4	Support establishing a common work space for women in cooperation with local administration	X	X	X
3	**Certification**			
3.1	Support women in obtaining the certification process through NCC		X	X
3.2	Coaching and mentoring.		X	X
4	**Marketing**			
4.1	Support in establishing market linkages	X	X	X
4.2	Support in digital marketing and ecommerce		X	X
4.3	Support in advance agreements with market operators	X	X	X
4.4	Support promotional activities and participation in fairs		X	X

Local Partners/collaboration: The National Chamber of Crafts; Bulqizë Municipality and Ostren AU; the Ministry of Economy, Culture, and Innovation; points of sales; VC associations; etc.

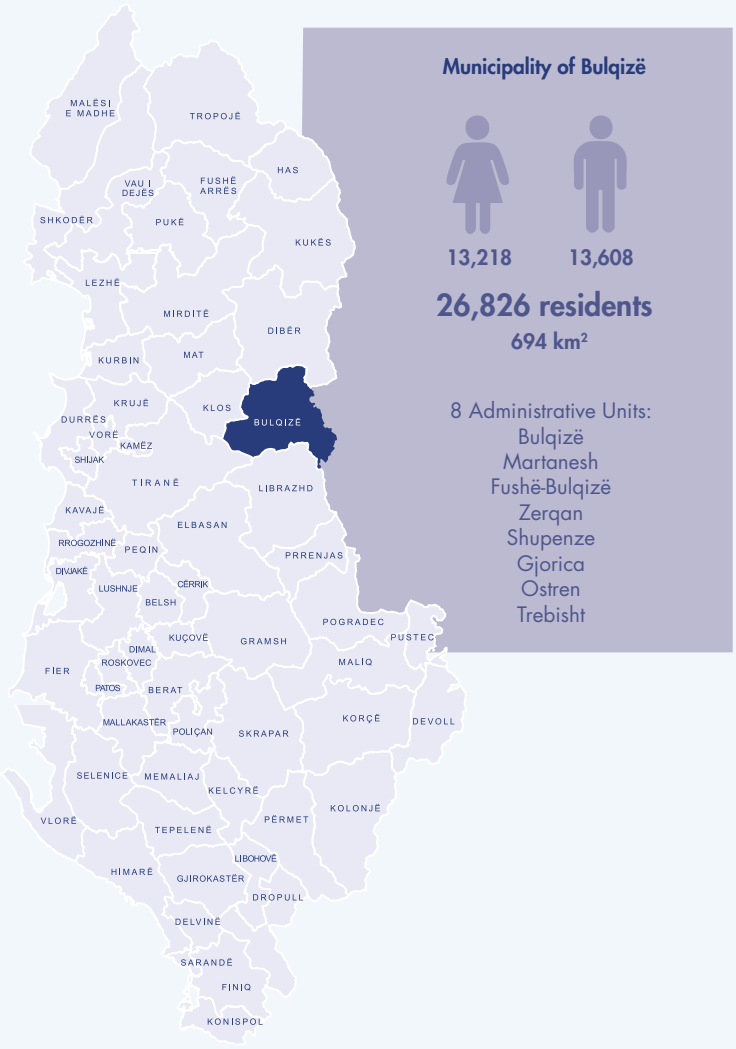
Part 4
Annexes

Annex 1. General Background of Bulqizë Municipality

The municipality of Bulqiza lies in the northeastern region of Albania. To the north it is bordered by the municipality of Dibër, to the east by the Republic of North Macedonia, to the south-west by the municipality of Tirana, to the south by the municipality of Librazhd and to the west by the municipality of Klos. The landscape in Bulqiza Municipality consists of a hilly-mountainous relief, with heights ranging from 420 m to 2101 m above sea level. The tallest mountain has a height of 2115 m above sea level. In this territory lies the Bulqiza Valley stretching from west to east and with a length of 25 km and a width of up to 1 km. This valley is crossed by Zalli i Bulqizës Brook, which flows into River Drin i Zi. The Bulqiza Municipality territory also includes the Martanesh and Golloborda highlands. The tallest peaks are in the south of Allaman mountains: Maja e Kreshtës (Kreshta Peak, 2101m, the highest in the territory); Mali i Lopës (Mount of Lopa, with its highest peak, Maja e Dhoksit (2020m); and Mount Kaptina (1873m).

The climate in the entire territory of the municipality of Bulqiza is cold continental with harsh winters and dry summers. The average annual temperature is 10°C, with the highest summer temperatures recorded reaching up to 35°C and the lowest winter temperatures down to -18°C and an average annual rainfall of 980 mm.

Figure 4. General information on Bulqizë Municipality



The municipality covers an area of 694 km^2 and is divided in eight administrative units: Bulqizë, Martanesh, Fushë-Bulqizë, Zerqan, Shupenzë, Gjoricë, Ostren and Trebisht. The Municipality includes two small towns (Bulqiza and Krasta) and 63 villages and is part of Dibra district. According to the administrative division, the Municipality is as 26.9% urban and 73.1% rural.

A snapshot of Bulqizë Municipality[58]

The Bulqizë Municipality is characterized by a predominantly rural and relatively young population, and a high rate of depopulation. The proportion of individuals with secondary and higher education is lower than the regional and national averages.

Economic activities in the municipality include agriculture, livestock farming, mining, forest exploitation, medicinal plant collection, services, etc. The area is known for its beautiful landscapes, mountainous environment, and rich cultural and natural resources, with potential for the development of tourism. Agriculture consists mainly of small family farms with limited and fragmented arable land and much of it undivided. Approximately 34.5% of the employed population works in agriculture. The irrigation system is outdated and there is a lack of infrastructure for collecting, packaging, and processing agricultural products. Management and maintenance of the irrigation infrastructure is considered inadequate. A prevailing individualistic mentality exists among farmers and there are no joint work approaches. Livestock farming is an important activity in the region, but not all stages of the production chain are in place. The absence of pastures, inadequate infrastructure, poor promotion, lack of branding, and emigration of the labor force are seen as major concerns by local farmers.

At present, the mining industry is not making a significant contribution to the local economy due to the failure to extract mining rents. Tax collection by the municipality is low due to the poor financial situation of the household units. The number of businesses per capita is small, and supportive schemes are lacking.

The level of social development and human resources is not very high. Unemployment, poverty, and social exclusion are concerning phenomena. Education and employment levels, especially for women, are low due to a prevailing patriarchal mindset and the limited economic development of the region, which is primarily focused on heavy industry, forestry, and hydropower energy production.

The need for building human resource capacities through vocational education, training in project management, European integration, etc., is essential. The balanced participation of men and women in decision-making falls far below the legal requirements. The economy's reliance on mining and limited employment opportunities call for the diversification of the municipality's economy into other sectors, such as services, tourism, agribusiness, handicrafts, etc.

Educational, social, cultural, sports, and healthcare infrastructure is old and requires improvement. There is an evident need for public transportation in the town, as well as for transporting students to and from remote rural areas. Tourism is almost nonexistent due to the lack of organization in the value chain, poor road and tourist infrastructure, and the absence of visibility and territorial marketing.

Serious environmental problems exist due to an unsustainable and unplanned use of natural resources, including minerals, forests, and water. Uncontrolled deforestation is a critical problem that harms both the environment and long-term development prospects of the municipality. There is strong commitment from local leaders for diversified and sustainable economic, social, and environmental development. Local planning exists at the administrative unit level, but planning at the municipal level is seen as a necessity, emphasizing a participatory process. Local development agencies or community-driven local development practices, such as Local Action Groups (LAGs), do not exist.

58. Bulqizë Municipality, Medium-Term Budgetary Program 2025-2027. See: https://bulqiza.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/PBA-2025-2027.pdf

History

Bulqiza is a region dating back to ancient Illyrian-Roman times, as is also evidenced by the archaeological ruins from ancient civilizations, particularly the Middle Ages, when a large population lived here. Bulqiza is also known as the site where Skanderbeg fought his battles. Archaeological research in the Bulqiza area has uncovered a fortification from the Skanderbeg period. Survey work by archaeologists at a hill known by the name "Shkëmbi i Kullës së Skënderbeut" (Skanderbeg's Tower Rock) revealed ruins of a fortification which they believe served the national hero in the two battles he led against Ballaban Pasha in Vajkal. At the beginning of the century, this place was not known as a town but as Hani i Duriçit and Hani i Bobës (Duriçi Inn and Boba Inn), and was a transit route for those who traded to Tirana and Durrës.

Bulqiza was initially born as a workers' settlement between two villages: Duriç and Vajkal in 1950. The town began with wooden barracks in 1949-1950 and subsequently a number of one-story buildings, a school, kindergartens and a nursery school were built. With the continuous increase in the labor supply in the town, workers would come from farther afield, mainly from the Dibra area, bringing with them the need for more facilities, housing and social services.

During the period from 1948 to 1990, this small town in northeastern Albania became known as the Miners' Town, which expanded even further in 1970-1983, with new residential buildings. Bulqiza is the municipality with the largest chromium reserves in Albania.

Population

According to the 2023 Census, Bulqiza has a population of 26,826[59] inhabitants, with a fairly balanced gender distribution (13,608 males and 13,218 females). This balance between genders reflects a stable demographic structure without significant gender imbalances that are sometimes observed in rural areas. The municipality has witnessed a 27.4% population decrease over the last decade due to migration, as many individuals leave in search of better opportunities in larger cities or abroad. This migration trend, coupled with a reliance on mining as a major local industry, has impacted overall community growth and prosperity.

1. Children (0-14 years): The age group with the smallest share of the total population is the younger cohort (0-14 years), with a total of 4,732 children (2,477 males and 2,255 females).

2. Working-age adults (15-64 years): This group makes up the majority of the population, accounting for 17,481 individuals (8,954 males and 8,527 females).

3. The elderly (65+ years): The elderly population totals 4,613 (2,177 males and 2,436 females) and making up approximately 17% of the total population.

Overall, this demographic distribution highlights several key aspects:

- A high proportion of working-age adults, but with potential challenges due to migration trends that may impact the available labor force.

- A relatively low proportion of children, indicating potential concerns about the future growth of the municipality unless measures are taken to support families and improve local opportunities.

- A significant elderly population, which may require more attention in terms of social services, healthcare, and community support initiatives, especially given the rural nature of Bulqizë.

As per municipal records, the population and number of families in each administrative unit are as follows:

59. According to the Civil Register, the population is 30,100 inhabitants.

Table 9. Population of Bulqizë (2023)

Age Group	Male	Female	Total
Total	13,608	13,218	26,826
0-14	2,477	2,255	4,732
15-64	8,954	8,527	17,481
65+	2,177	2,436	4,613

Source: INSTAT (2024)

Administrative Unit	Number of Families
Bulqizë	2,960
Martanesh	590
Fushë-Bulqizë	920
Zerqan	1,210
Gjoricë	1,210
Ostren	1,100
Shupenzë	1,520
Total[60]	9,510

Source: Bulqizë Municipality (2023)

This disparity between urban and rural administrative units points to a concentration of people in the more central, accessible areas (like Bulqizë and Shupenzë) and a higher level of depopulation in more remote or less economically developed areas.

Around 10% of households in the municipality are headed by single mothers with children, which is a notable demographic factor when considering social services and support mechanisms needed for vulnerable groups in the region. These statistics point to challenges in rural development, where economic, educational, and healthcare services may be more difficult to access.

INFRASTRUCTURE: WATER, ELECTRICITY, AND SOCIAL LIFE

Utilities: Water and Electricity Services[61]

Access to reliable utilities such as water and electricity is essential for women's economic participation. In rural and mountainous areas of Bulqizë, women are traditionally responsible for water collection. Improving water infrastructure can significantly reduce the time and effort spent on these tasks, freeing up women's time for income-generating activities and education. Similarly, reliable electricity is crucial for home-based businesses and activities such as agribusiness and medicinal herb processing, as it supports productivity and connectivity.

60. AU of Trebisht is missing from municipal data.
61. General Territory Development Plan, Bulqizë Municipality.

Public Infrastructure[62]

Bulqizë's urban layout presents challenges for social engagement, particularly for women. Lack of communal spaces and cultural venues restricts women's ability to socialize and participate in community life. The absence of safe public spaces further limits women's freedom to engage in social activities, build networks, and access support services.

Unemployment

Unemployment remains a significant challenge in Bulqizë, with 38% of women and 62% of youth (15-24 years) facing joblessness, according to the Operational Plan for Local Development[63]. The gender gap in unemployment reflects the broader issue of limited job opportunities for women, especially in formal sectors. Women's unemployment is often tied to traditional gender roles, lack of access to education and training, and barriers to entering male-dominated industries such as mining and construction.

Gender-sensitive employment policies should focus on increasing women's access to job opportunities in both traditional and emerging sectors. Initiatives such as vocational training, apprenticeships, and support for women in non-traditional sectors like technology, agritourism, and sustainable agriculture can help bridge the gender gap in employment. Additionally, creating more inclusive local development plans that incorporate gender analysis and prioritize women's economic empowerment would help address these challenges.

Employment Gaps

According to the Operational Plan for Local Development,[64] some 38% of women and 62% of youth (ages 15-24) remain unemployed. While youth unemployment is a significant concern, the gendered dimension of unemployment must also be addressed. Women in Bulqizë, particularly in rural areas, often face additional barriers to employment, such as traditional gender roles that prioritize their responsibilities in the home or in caregiving roles, limited access to education, and a lack of professional networks or support for female entrepreneurs.
Additionally, women in rural areas may be excluded from non-traditional sectors such as mining, which is a major industry in Bulqizë. Employment opportunities in the agriculture and services sectors, such as agritourism, may be more accessible but are often undervalued and underfunded. Gender-sensitive employment policies that focus on creating opportunities for women, particularly through vocational training, mentorship programs, and support for women-owned businesses, are essential to reducing the gender gap in unemployment.
Special programs targeting young women and marginalized groups—such as Roma and Egyptian women—can further ensure inclusivity. Programs that encourage women to explore non-traditional occupations and improve their access to financial resources for entrepreneurial ventures could help shift gender roles and create more diverse job opportunities.

SOCIAL SERVICES AND ECONOMIC AID

Economic Aid

In 2023, approximately 2,200 families, or around 9,500 individuals, in Bulqizë benefited from economic aid programs.[65] These programs are vital for alleviating poverty, particularly among households struggling due to unemployment, economic instability, and other social challenges. However, economic aid distribution in Bulqizë may not be gender-sensitive, which could lead to unintended gender biases in the allocation of resources.

62. Ibid.
63. Operational Plan for Local Development, Bulqizë Municipality, 2020.
64. Bulqizë Municipality, 2020.
65. Social Care Sector, Bulqizë Municipality.

Women in Bulqizë, particularly in rural areas, face significant economic hardships due to limited access to resources, social services, and income-generating opportunities. Women-headed households, in particular, are more likely to experience poverty, as they have less access to employment or financial support compared to male-headed households.

The gendered challenges in accessing economic aid include:[66]

- Access to resources: Women often face barriers in accessing land, credit, and property, particularly in rural areas where traditional gender roles are more rigid.
- Household and family roles: Women are often the primary caregivers within households, limiting their ability to participate in economic aid programs or training that could enhance their financial independence.
- Lack of gender-sensitive policies: Economic aid programs that do not account for gender disparities may unintentionally exclude women, especially those without male support who may be the primary breadwinners in their families.

Education

Bulqizë Municipality has three kindergartens, 51 nine-year schools, and six high schools, with 88% of these institutions located in rural areas. The geographic spread of the region requires long travel distances for students in remote villages to attend school. In harsh winter conditions and adverse weather, many students are forced to walk or use makeshift transportation. Educational infrastructure in the municipality is often outdated, with a lack of modern sports facilities such as gyms and sports fields. Likewise, libraries are generally absent in schools, despite efforts to improve the educational and cultural level of the youth.

Table 10. Pre-School Education

Type of institution	Number of institutions	Total children	Girls	Boys
Public kindergartens	3	264	116	148
Preparatory groups	7	432	238	194

Table 11. Primary and Secondary Education (2018)

Education level	Number of schools	Total students	Girls	Boys
Primary education	51	3,876	1,769	2,107
Secondary education	6	1,095	534	561

Source: Bulqizë Municipality "Social Plan 2020-2023".

Educational attainment in Bulqizë is low compared to both the district and national averages. Only 22.7% of the population aged 15 and above has completed secondary education, and 4.0% has completed university or postgraduate studies. For comparison, the district averages are 24.26% and 5.2%, while the national averages are 31.4% and 11.8%, respectively.

66. Ibid.

Table 12. Geology and Mining and Social Services Vocational School

Social services		Geology and mining	
Male	Female	Male	Female
6	19	28	-

Source: Bulqizë Municipality

The Geology & Mining Vocational School in Bulqizë has been supported by the Alb Crom (ACR) company, which awards scholarships to students. The program lasts for four years, with an annual enrolment of about 120 students, with 35 to 40 students per academic year. Nearly 100% of students find employment after graduation, reflecting the strong partnership between education and the local mining sector.

Healthcare

In Bulqizë, there are 750 registered persons with disabilities. Healthcare facilities are limited, with one hospital in the main town and a health center only in one of the seven administrative units outside the town. The municipality employs 15 doctors and 120 nurses serving a population with significant healthcare needs.[67] While these resources are valuable, the healthcare system's gendered impact must be considered.

Women, especially those in rural areas, face particular challenges in accessing healthcare services. They are often the primary caregivers for children, the elderly, and disabled family members, and are more likely to experience health issues related to reproductive health, such as maternal care, family planning, and menopause. Additionally, women with disabilities may face compounded difficulties in accessing specialized care, as healthcare facilities may not be equipped with the necessary resources or staff training to accommodate their needs.

In Bulqizë, tackling issues like unemployment, economic aid reforms, and healthcare access requires a gender-sensitive approach to ensure that women are not disproportionately affected by social and economic challenges. Addressing the barriers women face in the labor market, ensuring they are included in economic aid programs, and improving healthcare access for women—especially those in rural areas and with disabilities—are essential steps toward creating a more inclusive and equitable community. Gender-sensitive policies and reforms must be central to any development initiatives to ensure that women in Bulqizë can achieve social and economic empowerment.

Local Business Landscape and Economic Activity

Economic activities are oriented towards agriculture, livestock farming and the mining industry.[68] Agriculture is organized in small-sized family farms with limited arable land. The area has suitable climate for the cultivation of crops, fodder, fruits, viticulture, etc. About 34.5 per cent of employed people in Bulqizë are engaged in the agricultural sector.[69] Another important resource for the development of the economic activities in this area are agribusinesses, as well as cultivation and primary processing of medicinal plants, with which the area is quite rich. The town is built around its mining industry and large chrome reserves. Thanks to this wealth, in Bulqizë, 40 per cent of enterprises are connected with the mining industry which employs about 77 per cent of the active work force in the area. The number of active enterprises has remained stable over the past three years, fluctuating slightly from 548 in 2021 to 556 in 2023. A closer look reveals that male-led enterprises consistently outnumber those led by women, with 417 male-led businesses in 2021, growing to 430 in 2023, while female-led businesses slightly declined from 131 in 2021 to 126 in 2023.

67. Social Care Directory, Bulqizë Municipality.
68. General Territory Development Plan, Bulqizë Municipality.
69. Ibid.

Table 13. Active Enterprises

Active Enterprises	2021	2022	2023
Men	417	427	430
Women	131	131	126

Active enterprises by economic activity, indicator, and year	2021	2022	2023
I. Producers of goods	147	152	154
II. Producers of services	401	406	402

Source: INSTAT (2024).

Agriculture

Bulqizë has a total of 8,050 hectares of agricultural land; the absence of officially registered farms, however, remains an unresolved issue. The area is characterized by a single-season agriculture due to the long winter. Women, particularly in rural areas, face substantial barriers in having access to land, as traditional land ownership rights are typically passed down to male family members. As a result, women often lack control over agricultural decision-making and over the income generated from farming, despite their significant contribution in it.

In terms of agricultural production, Bulqizë Municipality has seen fluctuating trends in crop cultivation from 2021 to 2023. The area cultivated with cereals increased from 1,303 hectares in 2021 to 1,364 hectares in 2022, with a slight decrease to 1,306 hectares in 2023. Similarly, cereal production rose from 7,919 tons in 2021 to 8,159 tons in 2022, maintaining that level in 2023. The key cereals include wheat, maize, rye, barley, and oats.

- Wheat production, for instance, saw a slight increase in 2022 to 1,374 tons, but dropped again to 1,230 tons in 2023.
- Maize cultivation remained steady, with a production of 6,499 tons in 2021, rising slightly to 6,505 tons in 2022, and then reaching 6,870 tons in 2023.
- Rye, which saw a significant increase in acreage in 2022, fell back in 2023.

As regards vegetable cultivation, the area planted with vegetables grew from 253.6 hectares in 2021 to 279.8 hectares in 2022, with production rising from 6,844.9 tons in 2021 to 7,030 tons in 2022, and further increasing to 7,450 tons in 2023.

Table 14. Data on agricultural production (2023)

Crop	Area under production (ha)	Production (tons)
Cereals	1306.0	8330
- Wheat	270.0	1233
- Maize	960.0	6870
- Rye	52.0	154
- Barley	4.0	15
- Oats	20.0	61
Vegetables	278	7450
Potatoes	155	5030

(Continues on the next page)

Crop	Area under production (ha)	Production (tons)
White Beans	25	37
Forage	6234	143225
Medicinal Plants	1	9

Source: INSTAT 2024.

One noteworthy development is that of the untapped potential of medicinal and aromatic plants. In 2021 and 2022, these plants were cultivated in 0.3 hectares, with a minimal production of 0.6 tons. In 2023, however, the MAP cultivated area increased to 1 hectare, with production rising significantly to 9 tons (fresh product). There is one main collection center of medicinal and aromatic plants established recently in Bulqizë. The main supply for this facility comes from wild collection while cultivation is slowly developing. The cultivation of medicinal plants presents a promising field for economic growth. These plants are valuable for local medicinal and cosmetic products, and could provide new opportunities for women's economic empowerment, especially in rural areas where women have traditionally played a role in medicinal plant cultivation.The vineyard area under cultivation remained stable at 28 hectares from 2021 to 2023, indicating no expansion or reduction in vineyard size during this period. However, production levels fluctuated, increasing slightly from 303 tons in 2021 to 305 tons in 2022, before declining to 260 tons in 2023, representing a drop of approximately 14.75% compared to the previous year.

Table 15. Vineyard production

	Area in Production (ha)			Production (tons)		
Year	2021	2022	2023	2021	2022	2023
Vineyards	28	28	28	303	305	260

Source: INSTAT, 2024.

The total fruit-tree cultivated area in Bulqizë increased marginally from 314 hectares in 2021–2022 to 315 hectares in 2023. The area in production also grew slightly from 247 hectares in 2021 to 255 hectares in 2023. Total fruit production showed fluctuations, rising significantly from 4076 tons in 2021 to 5046 tons in 2022, before declining slightly to 4957 tons in 2023.

Table 16. Fruit production

Fruit Type	Total Area (ha)			Area in Production (ha)			Production (tons)		
Year	2021	2022	2023	2021	2022	2023	2021	2022	2023
Apple	86	86	6	7	7	79	676	1702	1786
Plum	69	69	69	61	61	61	345	1697	1273
Cherry	56	56	56	47	47	49	312	584	286
Nectarine/peach	0	0	0	0	0	0	56	47	68
Chestnut	27	27	27	26	26	26	100	238	294
Walnut	70	70	70	33	33	34	168	372	539
Total fruit trees	**314**	**314**	**315**	**247**	**249**	**255**	**4076**	**5046**	**4957**

The data shows the distribution of farmers by gender across different administrative units within Bulqizë Municipality. Out of a total of 6,737 farmers, 5,730 are male (85.1%), while 1,007 are female (14.9%), reflecting a significant gender disparity in agricultural participation. The numbers emphasize a pronounced gender gap in farming across Bulqizë, with male farmers consistently outnumbering female farmers in all areas. This trend suggests that women have limited participation in agriculture, which may be influenced by societal norms, access to resources, or economic opportunities.

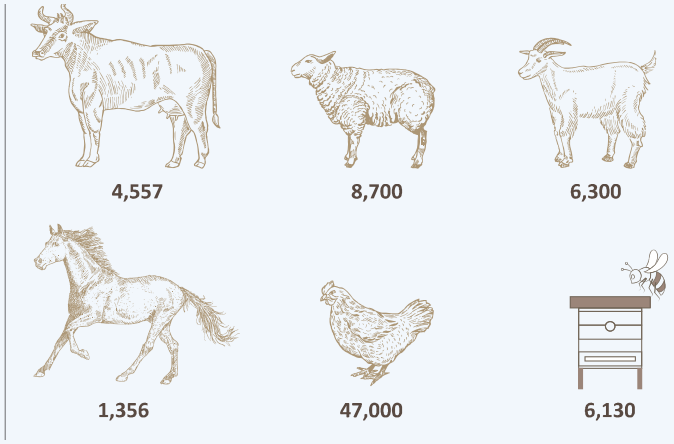
Table 17. Farmers in Bulqizë by administrative unit and gender

AU	Farmers	Male	Female
Bulqizë Vajkal 1 &2	305	260	45
Martanesh	106	91	15
Fushë Bulqizë	1229	1045	184
Zerqan	1500	1275	225
Suspense	1166	992	174
Gjoricë	1429	1215	214
Ostren	761	647	114
Trebisht	241	205	36
Total Bulqizë	**6737**	**5730**	**1007**

Source: Bulqizë Municipality 2023.

According to INSTAT data, there are only 449 NUIS-registered farmers in the entire territory of the municipality. The number of livestock and other animal heads in Bulqizë Municipality speaks of a diverse agricultural subsector:

- Cattle: There are 4,557 heads of cattle, reflecting the significance of cattle farming, particularly for meat and milk production.
- Sheep: With 8,700 heads, sheep farming plays a notable role, contributing to meat, wool, and milk production.
- Goats: The region recorded 6,300 heads, underscoring their importance in providing meat and milk, particularly in hilly or mountainous areas.



- Equidae: A total of 1,356 heads indicates their continued use, likely for transportation and agricultural work in rural areas.
- Laying hens: The presence of 47,000 hens points to substantial poultry farming activity, especially for egg production, which reached 6.345 million units in 2023.
- Beehives: With 6,130 beehives, beekeeping remains an important niche activity, contributing to honey production (55 tons).

In 2023, the total meat production (live weight) in Bulqizë Municipality reached 1,448 tons, reflecting contributions from various types of livestock.

- Cattle accounted for the largest share, producing 1,017 tons, highlighting the dominance of cattle farming in the area.
- Sheep farming contributed 210 tons, followed by goats, which produced 127 tons of meat.
- Poultry accounted for 94 tons, representing a smaller yet significant part of meat production.
- There was no recorded production of pork during the year, indicating a lack of pig farming activity in the region.

Table 18. Production of meat (live weight) in 2023 (tons)

Total	Cattle	Sheep	Goats	Poultry
1,448	1,017	210	127	94

Source: INSTAT database.

Total milk production in Bulqizë Municipality reached 12,232 tons, with cows being the primary source of milk:

- Cows contributed the vast majority, producing 11,205 tons, highlighting the dominance of cattle farming in milk production.
- Goats produced 615 tons, indicating their role as a supplementary source of milk, particularly in areas where goat farming is prevalent.
- Sheep contributed 413 tons, reflecting their smaller but notable share in overall milk production.

Table 19. Milk production in 2023 (tons)

Total	Cows	Sheep	Goats
12,232	11,205	413	615

Source: INSTAT database.

There are only five dairy facilities in the territory of Bulqizë, located one in Zerqan AU, one in Bulqizë, and three in Martanesh. Livestock raised for milk production in Bulqizë Municipality included:

- Cows: A total of 4,150 cows were milk cows, highlighting the central role of cattle farming in milk production, which accounted for the majority of the 12,232 tons of milk produced.
- Milk sheep: There were 7,500 milk sheep, reflecting their contribution to sheep milk production (413 tons).
- Milk goats: With 5,300 milk goats, goat farming provided an additional source of milk, contributing 615 tons to the total output.

Table 20. Livestock raised for milk in 2023

Cows	Milk sheep	Milk goats
4,150	7,500	5,300

Source: INSTAT database.

The Bulqizë Municipality recorded notable outputs in other livestock-related products. Egg production was significant, amounting to 6.345 million eggs, highlighting the role of poultry farming in the local economy. Wool production reached 19 tons, reflecting the presence of sheep farming, albeit on a relatively small scale. Additionally, honey production totaled 55 tons, showcasing the contribution of beekeeping to agricultural diversification in the area.

Table 21. Other livestock products in 2023 (tons)

Eggs (in 000)	Wool	Honey
6,345	19	55

Source: INSTAT database.

The data regarding livestock provided by the agriculture department in the municipality of Bulqizë is slightly different from the information published in the agriculture database of INSTAT.

Table 22. Livestock in Bulqizë 2024

AU	Farmers	Cattle	Sheep	Goat	Equidae	Poultry	Beehives
Bulqizë	294	368	210	11	20	4,417	47
Fushë Bulqizë	625	578	406	200	212	11,964	434
Zerqan	919	515	448	299	265	12,004	1,755
Shupenzë	1,063	311	669	494	201	10,560	485
Gjoricë	820	482	821	436	143	13,592	335
Ostren	437	364	2,170	728	211	2,529	800
Trebisht	172	147	1,346	35	111	1,025	417
Martanesh	192	302	633	588	47	2,196	642
Total Bulqizë	**4,522**	**3,067**	**6,703**	**2,791**	**1,210**	**58,287**	**4,915**

Source: Bulqizë Municipality 2024.

Tourism

Bulqiza and the surrounding areas offer countless opportunities for tourism, mainly mountain tourism, which remains the most favorite choice both for foreign tourists and local ones. The area's high mountains, rich biodiversity, nature, and climate make it a very popular tourism spot in every season of the year. The fantastic and untouched nature of Bulqiza is a valuable treasure. According to data from Bulqizë Municipality, approximately 19,690 visitors visited and explored the area in 2024.[70]

70. Information provided by Haxhi Pulja, Deputy Mayor during the meeting of 21.01.2025

With the construction of the *Rruga e Arbrit Motorway, tourism can take on another dimension, as this road provides infrastructural facilities for visiting the area and serves as a good bridge for the exchange of cultures and for the promotion of the beauty of this area. Liqeni i Zi (The Black Lake) is one of the natural wonders in Bulqiza that is worth visiting. Steep slopes covered in beech and pine forests and the crystal-clear waters create an incomparable landscape. It is called The Black Lake because of its depth and chromite deposits on the sole, which give it a dark color – a natural attraction that welcomes all nature lovers. Another reason to visit Bulqiza are the wonderful views offered by the River Drin i Zi Valley. Rafting enthusiasts will find here an opportunity to enjoy paddling with rafting boats. Hiking enthusiasts can cross the road that leads to Liqeni i Thatë (The Dry Lake), located on Mount Kamavec. The Duriçi waterfall is another tourist attraction in Bulqiza, located on the northern slope of Mount Kaptina, near the town. The waterfall has its source in the Liqeni i Zi (The Black Lake) and offers stunning views. The Dhoksi lakes are another tourist attraction in Bulqiza. Centuries-old (traditional stone houses) also attract many visitors to Bulqiza. The most famous are the 200-year-old kulla, located in the Fushë-Bulqizë administrative unit and Salë Marka's kulla in Zogë village, built in stone. Converted into guesthouses, these two kullas have become the most important attractions for local and foreign tourists for years now. In addition to learning about the history and tradition of the kullas, tourists can also enjoy the local and traditional cuisine of the area.*[71] According to the data on the Protected Areas Network provided by the Ministry of the Environment, there are two very important environmental and tourist areas in Bulqizë Municipality: Shebenik-Jabllanicë, an area of 167.6 ha; and Mali me Gropa-Bizë-Martanesh, an area of 9,036 ha. There are several geo-monuments such as caves, stones, rocks, pits, etc., declared as natural monuments. The area boasts a total of 17 natural monuments.[72] **According to the Operational Plan for Local Development (OPLD) (Bulqizë Municipality, 2016), the monuments of this municipality are:**

Table 23. Monuments in municipality of Bulqizë

Natural monuments	Geo-monuments	Cultural monuments
The Black Drin Valley	The Cave at Town Bridge	The Bllaca Masjid
The Prati Highlands	The Town Rock	Father Shehu's Masjid (Boçevë)
The Peladhi Plateau	Xixëll Martanesh	The church of Kovashica
Mount Homeshi	The Gjuras Cold Cave	The Vleshë Mosque
Bllaca Waterholes	Xixëll Cave (Valikardhë)	The Krajkas Traditional Kulla
Delgjurra		
Liqeni i Zi (The Black Lake)	Hydro Monuments:	The Castle Plain
Liqeni i Bardhë (The White Lake)	The three Springs at Zerqan	Kaziaku Church
Zabeli i Madh (The Great Grove)	Duriçi Falls	Maja e Varrezave (Cemetery Peak) (Sofraçan)
Zalli i Bulqizës Brook	The Spring at Zerqan Sacred Tomb	The Gurrës Fence
	The Black lake	
Drini i Zi	Bio Monuments:	The Partisan Battalion Memorial
Zalli i Okshtunit	Pepeja Embankment	Mane Kazani's Monument
Mali i Ramnagores	Muharrem's Grove	Tercilio Cardinale's Monument
River Black Drin	The Kovashica Grove	
Okshtuni Brook	The Gjinoveci Grove	
Mount Ramnagores		
	The Zogje Pine Forest	Markaj's Traditional Kulla
	Peladhi Grove	Kurtaj's Traditional Kulla (Shupenzë).
	The Great Brook of Zerqan	

71. See: https://bulqiza.gov.al/turizmi-bulqize/; https://turizmi.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Databaze-e-burimeve-turistike_18OCT.-2017_Brr-Diber.pdf; https://agroturizem.gov.al/kulla-hupi/

72. USAID's PLGP municipal assessment 2019.

Divizioni - The Retro Bulqizë 2024 Thematic Park Project [73]

The Retro Bulqizë 2024 Thematic Park project is an innovative tourism initiative that aims to transform a previously degraded military area into a new destination for visitors and tourists, especially from northern Albania and, in particular, the Dibër region. The completion of the Rruga e Arbrit Motorway has already brought significant changes to many aspects of life in the area. The project will revitalize a former mining zone, creating a new tourism asset called "Divizioni," which will become one of the key hubs for tourism development.

The revived Division will feature a hospitality destination, including a market for local products, hotels, and services, catering to visitors who wish to stop briefly or stay longer while exploring the area's stunning natural beauty.

The project aims to bring retro-style hotel rooms, high-capacity rooms for group stays (hostels), as well as a museum room containing furniture and technology from the communist period. Also, the plan is to integrate new units for breakfast and cafeteria, space for administration and reception, as well as separate and shared toilets to meet the needs of visitors.

Culture and tradition

Handicrafts have a special place in the cultural heritage of Bulqiza Municipality. Folk costumes are a true exhibition of folk art. Prepared with great effort, full of style and beauty, today they convey the rich tradition of this area. The variety of color combinations and details make these costumes amazing. In each of their elements will find a piece of art which stems from the rich spirit of the Bulqiza girls and women.

The women of the area continue to engage in handicrafts today. Folk costumes of the Bulqizë area are among the most unique in Albania. They continue to be sewn by the artisans in the area and some of them are sold, turning this craft into a small family business. The costumes are commonly worn seen in wedding ceremonies and are a way to preserve the tradition of the ancestors.

Bulqiza women's folk costume consists of a woolen *qasha, black for women and red for girls, a vest decorated with silver, a white front bodice with a red woolen sash around the waist, a satin shirt with long sleeves, a brightly colored jepek (head scarf), white underskirt and socks, colored mittens, or tabes instead of a shirt.*

One of these elements of the folk costume, the qasha, is a garment that has been passed down from generation to generation and was even used after the 1990s. According to popular tradition, the qasha is a key element of the folk costume, inherited from the times of Skanderbeg.

* * *

The ethnographic region of Golloborda is located in the southeastern part of Dibra. Golloborda preserves ancient traces of civilization, along with a rich heritage of both material and spiritual culture.
The traditional attire of the women in this region reflects an ancient tradition of aesthetic expression, highlighting some of the oldest and most meaningful elements of traditional artistry. The motifs found in this folk art are closely linked to the history of the region and the broader cultural and artistic phenomena of the local population.
Historical sources have allowed us to trace the artistic expression embedded in this attire, which has been preserved in its purest form throughout the entire area of Golloborda. The diverse embroidered motifs, rich in unique symbolism, testify to the exceptional craftsmanship and historical mastery that date back to antiquity.

73. See: https://www.kryeministria.al/en/newsroom/prezantohet-projekti-per-parkun-tematik-retro-bulqize-2024-nje-destinacion-turistik-mikpritjeje-dhe-motor-i-ri-ekonomie-per-zonen-e-bulqizes/

Through the embroidery of symbols and patterns, this attire conveys social psychology, where decorative elements are carefully adapted to popular traditions and the history of the region. It is well known that spiritual heritage is not static; it evolves over time, incorporating new elements throughout different historical periods. However, in this traditional attire, the original features have been carefully preserved since ancient times.

The crafting process places great emphasis on maintaining tradition, the technique of workmanship, the precision of embroidered motifs, and the quality of the chosen materials. As a form of folk art, traditional attire represents a significant part of material culture, while the artistic motifs expressed in these garments serve as an essential component of the spiritual heritage of a community or ethnic group.

Annex 2. National Context on Gender Equality

The legal framework in Albania, especially in relation to gender equality, is built on constitutional and legislative provisions aimed at ensuring equal rights for men and women.

Article 18(2) of the Constitution of the Republic of Albania, establishes the principles of equality and non-discrimination, stating that all individuals are equal before the law, and no one should face unfair discrimination based on gender, race, religion, ethnicity, language, political beliefs, or other characteristics.

Over time, Albania has made continuous efforts to align its national legal framework with international standards concerning gender equality and combating gender-based discrimination, violence, and domestic abuse. The key legislative acts contributing to this legal framework include:

1. **Law No. 9970/2008,** *"On gender equality in society"*: This law addresses fundamental issues of gender equality in public life, ensuring equal opportunities for men and women in exercising their rights and contributing to various sectors of society. It also mandates temporary special measures, including a 30% gender quota for political and decision-making positions.

2. **Law No. 10019/2008,** *The Electoral Code of the Republic of Albania*: This code, with the amendments made in 2012 introduced gender quotas in the electoral process, ensuring that neither gender is represented by less than 30% in political party candidate lists for parliamentary elections. Besides, specific provisions to guarantee the gender quota were introduced during 2020 and 2024 amendments. Amendments made in 2015 and 2020 further expanded gender quotas, including a 50% male and 50% female quota for candidates in local elections.

3. **Law No. 57/2016,** *"On amendments and additions to Law No. 9936, dated 26.06.2008* 'On the management of the budget system in the Republic of Albania,' as amended, for the first time includes the concept of gender-responsive budgeting in the management of the budget system, by adding gender equality as a principle of its functioning, ensuring that men and women enjoy equal opportunities and access to rights and benefits of the same nature.

4. **Law No. 68/2017** *'On the finances of local self-government'* has created opportunities for the effective inclusion of gender-responsive budgeting in all phases of the local financial management cycle (annual and medium-term budget programming, monitoring and reporting, evaluation, and auditing). Among other things, this law aims to ensure that through the creation and distribution of financial resources to local self-government units, gender equality is accelerated and achieved.

5. **Law No. 7961/1995**, *The Labour Code*: The Labour Code prohibits discrimination in employment, mandates reasonable accommodations for people with disabilities, and prohibits moral harassment and sexual harassment in the workplace. It also includes provisions to promote gender equality in employment and professional rights.

6. **Law No. 93/2014**, "*On persons with disabilities*": This law guarantees equal opportunities and access for persons with disabilities, including ensuring that women with disabilities have the same opportunities as men with disabilities in accessing the rights guaranteed by this law.

7. **Law No. 104/2014**, "*On social security*": This law recognizes the rights of both mothers and fathers for parental leave, including the extension of maternity leave to 63 days and the introduction of bonuses for mothers with newborns.

8. **Law No. 9669/2006**, "*On measures against domestic violence*": This law aims to prevent and reduce domestic violence in all its forms, offering protection to victims through quick, affordable, and simple procedures. Amendments in 2018 and 2020 enhanced the provisions related to domestic violence prevention and victim protection.

9. **Law No. 221/2010**, "*On protection from discrimination*," as amended. According to this law, no one can be discriminated against on the grounds of gender, race, color, ethnicity, language, gender identity, sexual orientation, political, religious, or philosophical beliefs, economic, educational, or social status, pregnancy, parental affiliation, parental responsibility, age, family or marital status, civil status, residence, health status, genetic predisposition, disability, membership in a specific group, or for any other reason. This law was also improved by Law No. 124/2020 "On amendments and additions to law No. 221/04.02.2010 on protection from discrimination," which further clarifies the scope of this law, adds definitions, emphasizes hate speech, provides a definition for severe forms of discrimination, etc.

10. **Law No. 22/2018**, "*On social housing*," which emphasizes the principle of non-discrimination in planning, equipping, distributing, and managing housing for social groups in need of accommodation. The specialized housing program benefits vulnerable groups, including victims of trafficking, domestic violence, and young mothers.

11. **Law No. 110/2018**, "*On notaries*", which empowers women's economic independence and is the main guarantor of their property rights, introducing innovations in gender equality issues concerning the protection of assets.

12. **Law No. 111/2018**, "*On cadaster*", which also addresses gender equality issues related to the registration of joint community property.

13. **Law No. 15/2019**, "*On employment promotion*," where victims or potential victims of trafficking, gender-based violence, domestic violence, or mothers under the age of 18 are specified as special groups of job seekers/disadvantaged job seekers in the labor market, who benefit from employment promotion services and programs.

14. **Law No. 57/2019**, "*On social assistance in the Republic of Albania*," which defines as beneficiaries of economic assistance, among others, victims of trafficking who have left social care institutions until they are employed, as well as victims of domestic violence, for the period of validity of a protection order or immediate protection order, who are not treated in social care institutions.

15. **Law No. 34/2019**, "*On the administration of seized and confiscated assets*," which emphasizes the proper administration and efficient, effective, and economic use of assets seized and confiscated by the judiciary and assets seized by the order of the Minister responsible for finance, the return of illegally acquired assets to the community, and the financial compensation of crime victims.

The National Strategy on Gender Equality 2021-2030 (NSGE) serves as a roadmap towards a society where all individuals—women, men, youth, girls, boys – regardless of age, gender, origin, place of residence, ethnic or social group, disabilities, religious affiliation or belief, gender identity expression, sexual orientation, or other personal characteristics, are provided with equal opportunities to develop their potential; participate equally in political and public decision-making; choose and be chosen; receive education and lifelong learning; be employed and employ others, advancing towards new professions while challenging stereotypes and gender-based division of labor; influence the socio-economic development of the country and receive support for their social and economic development; create healthy families where parents share responsibilities equally and communication is key to solving problems; live free from harmful practices and violence; and where vulnerable groups are prioritized and supported until they are empowered and enjoy equal rights and opportunities in all areas of life—essentially, a society where equality is not confused with uniformity and where no one is left behind.[74] At a local level, promoting inclusion and gender equality is a component of legal and policy frameworks, which underline the obligations of local government units in the area of gender equality (UN Women, 2019). For example, the Law "On gender equality" elaborates on the need for promoting gender equality in local governance. Special units that are responsible for the presentation, supervision, and monitoring of performance and service, including gender equality. Efforts have been made by several municipalities to meet the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) regulations and EU standards, with a clear structure, priorities, responsibilities, and budgets that respond to the needs of women, men, girls and boys equally (UN Women, 2018). Eighteen LSGUs have signed the European Charter for Equality of Women and Men in Local Life, several of them with assistance of UN Women, and 15 have developed a Local Gender Action Plan. As a result of these laws, policies, and plans, Albania has seen improvements in many aspects of gender equality, for example, women's role in private sector development. The percentage of enterprises owned or run by women has increased in all regions of Albania. However, successful decentralization and implementation of legal and development frameworks are still challenging, and the pace of change in women's economic empowerment through private sector development is slow, especially for rural women. Gender norms, roles, responsibilities and gender bias in women's access to productive resources (such as land, finance, networks, technology, and equipment) and business services mean that there is still not a level playing field for women and men in economic and social spheres.[75]

Some impacts of gender bias visible in Albania in economic empowerment through enterprise development are, for example:

- 31.2% of enterprises are managed by females[76]; The percentage of women owners or administrators in 2022 has decreased, compared to 2021, both in terms of businesses with productive economic activity and the service sector. The number of businesses with women owners or administrators is greater in the Service Sector than in the Manufacturing Sector, respectively 33.4 % and 17.1 %.
- The employment rate for the population in 2023 aged 15-64 is 72.9 % for men and 61.8 % for omen in this age group. The structure of employees according to activity status shows that 45.4% of women are employed with a salary, while 23.5% of them are unpaid workers in the family business[77].
- In Albania, households headed by men are 4 times larger than households headed by women. The age group 55-64-year-old presents the highest number of families with men heads of households and the age group 74+ year old for women. For all age groups, the number of male-headed households is higher[78].

Women play an important role in agriculture and rural development in Albania making up a significant share of the agriculture workforce, although in most cases informal. In 2023, 37.3 % of employed women will be employed in the agricultural sector, experiencing an increase of 0.1 percentage points, compared to the previous year. Agriculture is the most important source of work for women living in rural areas. Gender inequalities in agriculture are also often

74. DCM No. 400, dated 30.06.2021 "On the adoption of the he National Strategy for Gender Equality, 2021–2030, and Its Action Plan"

75. Gender Sensitive Value Chain Analysis (GSVCA) in the Municipality of Shijak. UN Women, 2021. See: https://albania.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-12/GSVCA%20Shijak%20eng%20web.pdf

76. INSTAT Business Registers, 2023. See: https://www.instat.gov.al/al/temat/industria-tregtia-dhe-sh%C3%ABrbimet/regjistrat-e-biznesit/#tab3

77. Women and Men in Albania, 2022. See: https://www.instat.gov.al/en/themes/demography-and-social-indicators/gender-equality/#tab3

78. Ibid.

perpetuated by discriminatory administrative procedures. These include practices that (i) prevent women from (co-) owning land; (ii) inhibit women earn personal income or access support schemes (e.g., through being refused the use of a tax number); (iii) training programs and extension services that ask for "farmer certification" as a criterion for participation; and (iv) water user associations that use land ownership as a criterion for membership[79]. Unavailability of public transport in rural areas and restrictions on mobility are further inhibiting factors. In Albania, men own and drive the vast majority of motor bikes and cars, and the prevailing social norm is that it is not suitable for women to travel alone. Limited mobility makes it difficult for women to access markets[80]. Many women are still not registered as (co-)owners of their houses, land, and other property, which largely remain registered under the name of men spouses or other male relatives. Among women who do own property, the majority (approximately 76 per cent) have their names on the property title or deed for a house, not land.[81] Women play a crucial role for the development and economic growth of rural communities. Yet their key role - especially in agricultural production - is often 'invisible' and not recognized.[82]

Annex 3. Agriculture and rural development: Key gender issues in Albania

Women's work in agriculture substantially contributes to the economy, yet their role remains largely unrecognized

In 2022, agriculture represented 17.7 per cent of Albania's GDP.[83] It remains a pivotal sector of the country's economy and engages 33.9 per cent of its active workforce.[84] Women comprise 40.1 per cent of the agricultural labor force, compared to 28.7 per cent for men. Agriculture is the most important source of work for women living in rural areas. Similar to other sectors, the agricultural industry is characterized by gender segmentation of the labor market. Women employed in agriculture are more likely to hold low-wage, part-time, seasonal jobs, whereas men tend to occupy more rewarding and higher skilled positions.[85] Overall, women are overrepresented in informal employment, in unpaid work, and as contributors in family work. Analysis of the structure of employment and activity status of employees reveals that 23.5 per cent of women are family workers while the share of male family workers is significantly lower at 13.2 per cent. The sector is additionally characterized by a considerable amount of women's unpaid work.[86] In informal employment, the share of women contributing as family workers is twice as high as men's (54 per cent versus 28 per cent).[87] […] Although women bear a significant share and burden of agricultural labor, their contribution remains largely unappreciated in economic terms.[88] […][89]

79. Gender Mainstreaming Guidance: Agriculture and Rural Development, UN Women, 2024. See: https://albania.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-05/ard_web_final.pdf
80. Ibid.
81. Ibid.
82. Ibid.
83. INSTAT [online]. National Accounts (GDP) 2023 data. See: https://www.instat.gov.al/en/themes/economy-and-finance/national-accounts-gdp/
84. INSTAT [online]. Employment and unemployment, Quarterly Labour Force Survey Q3–2023. See: https://www.instat.gov.al/en/themes/labour-market-and-education/employment-and-unemployment-from-lfs/
85. FAO (2011). The Role of Women in Agriculture. See: https://openknowledge.fao.org/items/a605b688-83e0-4e3a-ad47-874f0d-6f63b1
86. INSTAT (2023). Labour Market, 2022. Available at: https://www.instat.gov.al/en/publications/books/2023/labour-market-2022/
87. ILO estimation for the year 2019 (ILOSTAT). See: ILO (2023). Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A Statistical Update. Available at: https://www.ilo.org/publications/women-and-men-informal-economy-statistical-update
88. FAO (2016). Gender, Agriculture and Rural Development in Albania. See: https://albania.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-05/no.52-%20Gender%2C%20agriculture%20and%20rural%20development%20in%20Albania.pdf
89. Gender Mainstreaming Guidance: Agriculture and Rural Development. UN Women. 2023. https://albania.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-05/ard_web_final.pdf

Gender stereotypes and discriminatory practices limit women's access to essential resources for basic agricultural production

At the root of discriminatory practices is the entrenched preconception that women are supplementary workers to men, who are considered the main breadwinners in Albanian households. Thus, while male household heads often own and manage household assets and agricultural inputs (e.g., seeds, fertilizer, agricultural machines), women in those households are often not free to use the resources or jointly decide on crop varieties, types of fertilizers and chemicals used, or the timing of their application. In such cases, women cannot use their knowledge and experience for productive activities. […] Gender inequalities in agriculture are also often perpetuated by discriminatory administrative frameworks. These include practices that (i) prevent women from (co-)owning land; (ii) inhibit women earn personal income or access support schemes (e.g., through being refused the use of a tax number)[90]; (iii) training programs and extension services that ask for "farmer certification" as a criterion for participation; and (iv) water user associations that use land ownership as a criterion for membership. Unavailability of public transport in rural areas and restrictions on mobility are further inhibiting factors. In Albania, men own and drive the vast majority of motor bikes and cars, and the prevailing social norm is that it is not suitable for women to travel alone. Limited mobility makes it difficult for women to access markets.[91] […][92]

Agricultural extension services predominantly cater to men

Under the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, the National Agricultural Extension Service (NAES) operates through four regional agricultural extension agencies (RAEAs) and, at local level, agricultural information centers. The public advisory service also includes five specialized agricultural technology transfer centers. […] gender capacity and skills are not yet among the required qualifications of staff, and respective trainings are lacking. Weak gender-responsiveness of the service, in conjunction with women's social status and low levels of land titling, has resulted in women's limited access to support.[93] Agricultural extension services have primarily targeted and supported men: among the 70,000 farmers contacted and assisted by extension services in various regions in 2016, just around 11 per cent were found to be women.[94] Since then, the share of women beneficiaries of extension services has further shrunken and reached just 8 per cent in 2023.[95] As a result of limited access to agricultural and market information, women's productivity levels remain low. […][96]

The current level of farm (co-)registration limits women's access to economic opportunities

The legislation guaranteeing women's equal property and inheritance rights has improved considerably.[97] Yet, data on women's (co-)ownership of land is unavailable. Currently, 10 percent of land titles are digitally registered, 10

90. Guideline No.19, 'Implementation of a special regime of compensation scheme for agriculture producers for the purpose of value added tax', dated 03/09/2014, requires farmers who sell their products to register at the tax offices and hold a unique taxpayer identification number. The registration is obligatory for farmers to benefit from national support schemes. The vast majority of tax number holders is men, even though, in principle, co-registration of (women) spouses is permitted/possible. See: https://www.tatime.gov.al/c/3/12/23/fermere

91. FAO and UN Women (forthcoming). National Gender Profile of Agriculture and Rural Livelihoods Albania.

92. Gender Mainstreaming Guidance: Agriculture and Rural Development. UN Women. 2023. https://albania.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-05/ard_web_final.pdf

93. FAO (2024). Ensuring that rural advisory services are responsive to women: good practices from FAO experiences in Europe and Central Asia. See: https://openknowledge.fao.org/items/c69ef2a6-4381-4e16-b624-a090e94b5710

94. UNDP & UN Women (2016). Albania Gender Brief. See: https://eca.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2016/10/albania-gender-brief

95. Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, 2024 data, cited in: FAO and UN Women (forthcoming). National Gender Profile of Agriculture and Rural Livelihoods Albania.

96. Gender Mainstreaming Guidance: Agriculture and Rural Development. UN Women. 2023. https://albania.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-05/ard_web_final.pdf

97. Law No.111/2018 on Cadaster, adopted 02/02/2019. Available at: https://www.ashk.gov.al/2021/04/16/2066/. (English version at: https://www.fao.org/faolex/results/details/en/c/LEX-FAOC220473/); and Law No.110/2018 on Notary, adopted 20/12/2018. Available at: http://www.nchb.al/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Ligj-nr.-110-2018-Per-Noterine.pdf. (Unofficial English translation at: https://euralius.eu/index.php/en/library/albanian-legislation?task=download.send&id=160&catid=25&m=0). The new legislation aims to protect women from alienation, acquirement and relinquishment of their immovable property including land. It foresees the application of a one-stop-shop system for land transactions in public notary and the introduction of a comprehensive system to ensure the accountability of notaries.

per cent are not registered at all, while 80 per cent are registered in paper format only. […] Many women are still not registered as (co-)owners of their houses, land, and other property, which largely remain registered under the name of men spouses or other male relatives. Among women who do own property, the majority (approximately 76 per cent) have their names on the property title or deed for a house, not land.[98] […] In turn, this has barred women farmers from accessing benefits like agricultural extension services, financial support, and formal contracts with traders, negatively impacting on women's productivity.[99] Women also encounter challenges in accessing formal credit from commercial banks, primarily due to inadequate collateral, which is exacerbated by weak or non-existent de facto property rights. Achieving greater equality concerning land rights and access to credit would significantly enhance women's profitable participation in the agricultural economy. Lack of land ownership also affects women's membership in farmer organizations, such as irrigation and water user associations and producer associations. Since these organizations often require land ownership or household headship to qualify as a member, it is difficult for women to join. When extension services only target registered farmers or association members, women are automatically excluded due to their ineligible status and, therefore, do not benefit from such services. […][100]

Women have limited (co-)ownership of farms and agricultural enterprises

In 2022, of the 84,369 farmers officially registered with tax offices in Albania, 10.8 per cent were women.[101] The bulk of women's contribution to the agricultural sector is through informal employment in family farming.[102] In this type of farming, men tend to be identified as farm managers and "heads of household" while women are registered as "helpers" under the category of "contributing family workers".[103] Men typically control agricultural assets, decision-making, finance, and tasks involving mobility, while women predominantly handle manual agricultural work such as pre- and post-harvest activities, food processing, and household chores. This unequal division of labor restricts women's access to agricultural assets. Enterprises that operate under the economic activity of "Agriculture, Forestry, and Fishing" represent just 1 per cent of total active enterprises.[104] More than 80 per cent of active agricultural enterprises are owned and/or managed by men: in 2022, women (co-)owned just 18,5 per cent of the active enterprises in agriculture, forestry, and fishing.[105] Since 2016, the overall share of women business owners and managers in Albania has increased. Yet, the scope and pace of women's economic inclusion through private sector development remains slow, especially for women in rural areas. The impact of restrictive gender norms that result in women's direct and indirect discrimination is apparent at all levels of the rural economy. […][106]

Women in rural areas have limited access to the resources required to engage in business

Many women in Albania face issues of access to business resources. Those who do not have a bank account, or land for collateral, face limited access to financial services, which makes it difficult to start, manage, and expand their businesses.

Bank accounts are generally required in order to receive financial services. However, there is a clear rural-

98. INSTAT (2018). Albania Demographic and Health Survey II (2017-2018). See: https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FR348/FR348.pdf

99. UN Women (2016). National Study: Economic Diversification for Women Living in Albanian Rural Areas. Available at: https://albania.un.org/en/46581-economic-diversification-women-living-albanian-rural-areas

100. Gender Mainstreaming Guidance: Agriculture and Rural Development. UN Women. 2023. https://albania.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-05/ard_web_final.pdf

101. INSTAT (2022). Business Registers, 2022. Available at: https://www.instat.gov.al/en/publications/books/2023/business-registers-2022/

102. *Ibid.*

103. FAO (2016). Gender, Agriculture, and Rural Development in Albania. See: https://albania.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-05/no.52-%20Gender%2C%20agriculture%20and%20rural%20development%20in%20Albania.pdf

104. INSTAT (2022). Business Registers, 2022. Available at: https://www.instat.gov.al/en/publications/books/2023/business-registers-2022/

105. *Ibid.*

106. Gender Mainstreaming Guidance: Agriculture and Rural Development. UN Women. 2023. https://albania.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-05/ard_web_final.pdf

urban divide: in 2017, just 31 per cent of the population living in rural areas reported having a bank account, compared to 52 per cent among the urban population.[107] In addition, a significant gender gap is apparent: among the age group 15-45 years, only 17 per cent of women and 25.9 per cent of men living in rural areas reported having a bank account, compared to 44.7 per cent women and 48.2 per cent men among urban residents.[108] These findings illustrate the intersecting disadvantage that arises from characteristics of gender (i.e., being a woman) and residence (i.e., living in a rural area). Furthermore, rural women are faced with limited access to training on business-related knowledge and skills, such as those used for processing and marketing. In order to effectively market a business, it is important to get timely and accurate information through a mobile phone, radio, or information and communications technology (ICT). Whether a woman has such sources can influence her business's success.

Although the use of ICT for marketing is progressing overall, rural women have limited access to the internet and ICT. Overall, ICT infrastructure is well developed in urban centers. However, in rural areas, where electricity coverage and broadband infrastructure are less well developed, costs can be high and penetration low – and fewer individuals have access to and use of the internet. Among households in rural areas, less than 10 per cent have access to Internet, while only 28 per cent have a computer.[109] The lack of rural connectivity in Albania has been identified as one of the gaps hampering growth in the country.[110] In addition, when a family has only one mobile phone, the male household head often uses it while female family members cannot do so freely. Studies on rural women's internet access and ICT use are currently lacking.

Women farmers are weakly represented in rural organizations, associations, and decision-making bodies

Despite rural Albanian women's important roles in agricultural production, their participation in decision-making at the household, community, and administrative levels tends to be limited. Women are rarely members of, or represented in, formal associations or committees, and they remain significantly underrepresented in decision-making and leadership positions.[111] At the community level, men are the leaders of producer groups and cooperatives while women are directly or indirectly excluded from decision-making. Farmer organizations usually have small numbers of female members since predominantly male household heads join these associations. Thus, women are rarely present in discussions, and their knowledge, perspectives, needs, and entitlements are not reflected in group decisions. There is also concern about the lack of participation of women in processes related to natural resource management, such as integrated water management, and the weak inclusion of rural women in climate change and biodiversity and cultural heritage preservation initiatives.[112] […] Furthermore, women also lack economic power, political clout, and information on decision-making processes. Finally, due to limitations to women's mobility, physical distance from administrative centers - where decisions are made - further limits women's opportunities to participate. […][113]

Rural service provision and infrastructure do not meet women's and girls' needs

In Albania, limited access to basic services such as health care, sexual and reproductive healthcare, and social protection in rural and remote areas - especially for women and girls - remain a concern.[114] In addition, poor water and sanitation infrastructure, lack of time-saving technologies, insufficient early childcare provision, unsafe

107. INSTAT, Institute of Public Health, and ICF (2018). Albania Demographic and Health Survey *2017-18*. Available at: http://www.instat.gov.al/media/5050/adhs-2017-18-pdf.pdf

108. *Ibid.*

109. *Ibid.*

110. ITU (2022). Albania – Digital Development Country Profile. See: https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Regional-Presence/Europe/Documents/Publications/2022/Digital%20Development/Digital%20Development%20Country%20Profile_Albania_final_02.22.pdf

111. UN Women (2020). Albania Country Gender Equality Brief 2020. See: https://albania.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/12/country-gender-equality-brief-albania-2020-0

112. *Ibid.*

113. Gender Mainstreaming Guidance: Agriculture and Rural Development. UN Women. 2023. https://albania.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-05/ard_web_final.pdf

114. UN CEDAW (2023). Concluding Observations on the Fifth Periodic Report of Albania, 2023. Available at: https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW%2FC%2FALB%2FCO%2F5&Lang=en

transportation infrastructure, and lack of affordable public transport all have direct negative impacts on women's ability to dedicate time to productive and paid work, and to access markets.

Agricultural vocational education does not support career perspectives for women and girls

As Albania aspires to join the EU common market, new levels of professional training are required so young women and men can engage as farm-level workers, technicians, agricultural business entrepreneurs, and rural development decision-makers. Vocational schools play an important role in building qualified human capacity and equipping young women and men with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that the market needs. However, despite promotional activities and support to encourage students from rural areas of Albania to participate in vocational education and training (VET), attendance in vocational schools has dropped. The decrease in enrolment was particularly pronounced among vulnerable groups (minus 30 per cent).[115] There are eight agricultural vocational schools in Albania, and they remain heavily male dominated. Girls' participation is low (roughly 16 per cent), with negligible participation of those from rural areas. […][116]

National policies, programs, budgets, and support schemes in agriculture respond insufficiently to women's needs

Overall, policies, plans, programs, and budgets in Albania tend to be developed on the assumption that all individuals engaging in farming are men. As evidenced by the 2021-2027 Strategy for Agriculture, Rural Development and Fisheries[117], strategic documents cater to the male farmer. Officials and extension workers disseminating agricultural technologies, policies, information, and innovations to farmers also tend to be men. While the overall number of women benefiting from National Support Schemes increased during the period 2018–2023, women's share among total beneficiaries dropped from 22 per cent in 2018 to 16 per cent in 2023.[118] To encourage women's participation, the Agriculture and Rural Development Fund (ARDF) awards additional scoring points ("bonus") to women applicants. However, the reported share of women applicants and women beneficiaries of ARDF programs remains extremely low.[119] […]

The Rural Development Programme 2021-2027 under the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance of the Republic of Albania (IPARD III) makes explicit reference to gender equality obligations and goals.[120] It refers to the respective international framework Aide-Mémoire[121] on gender mainstreaming in the UN Disaster Risk Reduction Action Plan, the obligations under the EU Gender Action Plan III[122], and activities and results foreseen under the National

115. European Commission (2023). Albania Report 2023. See: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/ea0a4b05-683f-4b9c-b7ff-4615a5fffd0b_en?filename=SWD_2023_690%20Albania%20report.pdf

116. Gender Mainstreaming Guidance: Agriculture and Rural Development. UN Women. 2023. https://albania.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-05/ard_web_final.pdf

117. Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (2022). Strategy for Agriculture, Rural Development, and Fisheries 2021–2027, approved by Decision No.460, dated 29 June 2022. Available at: https://qbz.gov.al/eli/fz/2022/100/6dea9d2c-c264-48a8-a9e1-d041781a823c;q=strategjia%20e%20bujqesise%20dhe%20zhvillimit%20rural

118. Agriculture and Rural Development Agency, 2024 data, cited in: FAO and UN Women (forthcoming). National Gender Profile of Agriculture and Rural Livelihoods Albania.

119. In 2018, 779 women applied for the national agricultural support schemes, out of whom 627 became beneficiaries. Five women each benefited from "Support for investments in agritourism", "Incubator support to produce local traditional products", and "Support to build or reconstruct rural tourism premises with at least six to ten rooms". In 2019, the share of women applicants for ARDF subsidies was 19 per cent. Source: Agriculture and Rural Development Agency, 2019 data; and: Ombudsperson of the Republic of Albania (2020). Alternative report on the implementation of the CEDAW convention in Albania 2016 – 2020. Available at: https://albania.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/12/alternative-report-on-the-implementation-of-the-cedaw-convention-in-albania

120. Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (2022). See: https://bujqesia.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Programi-IPARD-III_2021-2027_English.pdf

121. UN Women - Women's Resilience to Disasters Knowledge Hub (2017). Aide-Memoire on integrating gender equality in the UN plan of action on disaster risk reduction for resilience. Available at: https://wrd.unwomen.org/practice/resources/aide-memoire-integrating-gender-equality-un-plan-action-disaster-risk-reduction

122. European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (2020). Objectives and Indicators to Frame the Implementation of the Gender Action Plan III (2021–2025), p.27. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020SC0284

Strategy for Gender Equality (2021-2030), Objective 3.1 "Economic empowerment of women in rural areas".[123] The overall aim of IPARD III is to increase employment and income "generated by women and young entrepreneurs in rural areas". The document defines the regulations for accessing IPARD III funds, which include:

- Explicit adherence to standard EU gender equality requirements, i.e., gender mainstreaming across programs;
- Gender analysis;
- Sex-disaggregation of data;
- Use and monitoring of gender indicators;
- Gender mainstreaming training for Operating Structures;
- Cooperation with women's organizations/associations;
- Women's equal participation in official groups and bodies (such as Local Action Groups);
- Women's representation in leadership and decision-making positions;
- The involvement of government bodies responsible for promoting gender equality;
- Affirmative action (quota, preference to women applicants);
- Reporting on gender equality outcomes.

Information on the level of adherence to and compliance with the set of gender equality regulations during IPARD III implementation is unavailable. In 2023, IPARD III was suspended by the European Commission and remains inactive.

The EU regulations defined under IPARD III for addressing and promoting gender equality in agriculture serve as valuable guidance for aligning with EU standards. National policy responses and regulations are needed that result in closing the gender gap and fostering an environment in which women can equitably access resources so they can effectively contribute to agricultural production, competitiveness, growth, and rural development.

Gaps in gender statistics and data on agriculture and rural development

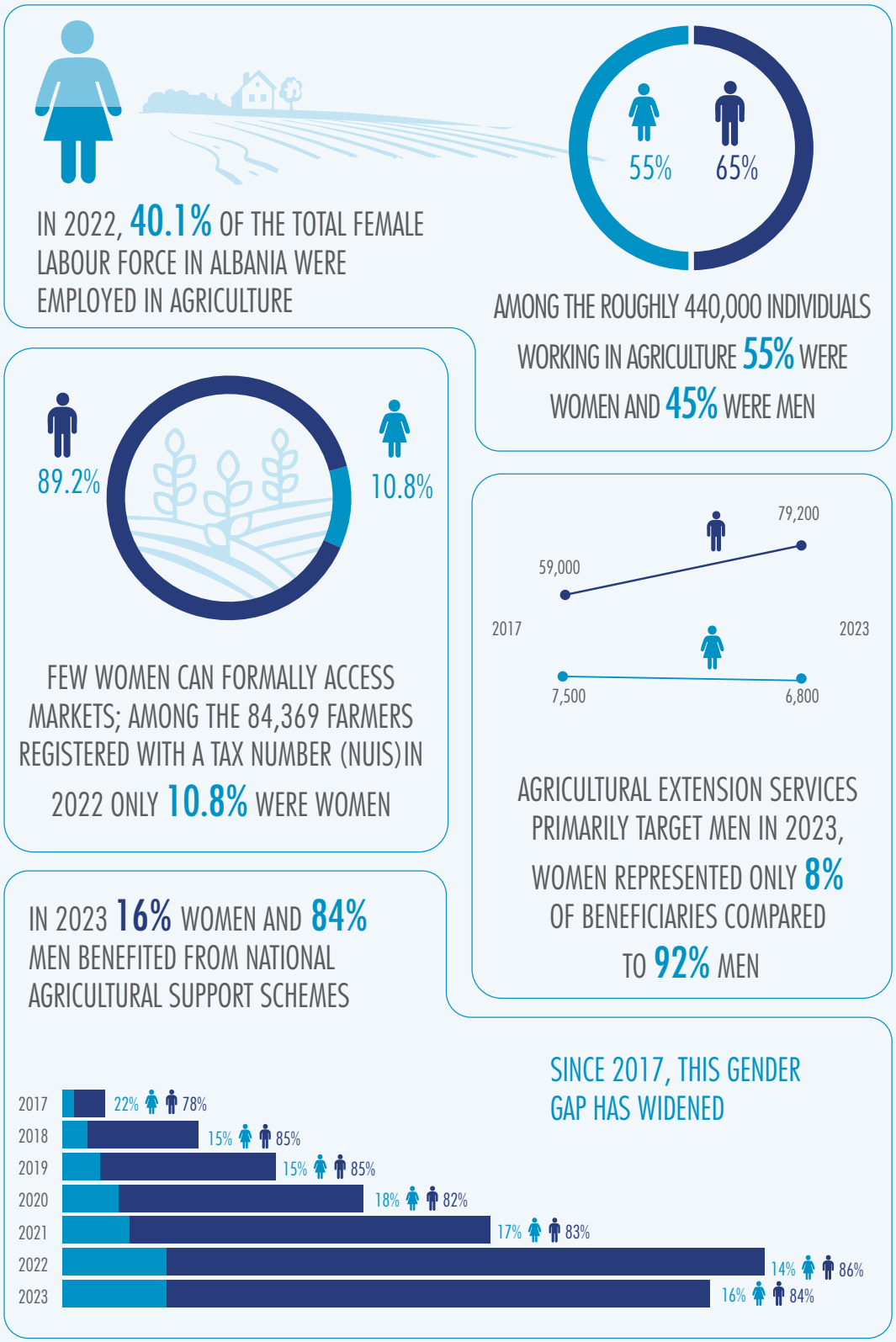
Sex-disaggregated data and gender statistics are essential for understanding the situation women and men face in Albania's ARD sector. They are also key to conducting gender analysis, developing gender-responsive policies, and designing measures that address inequalities and gender-specific challenges. However, current data gaps hinder the design and implementation of policies, programs and budgets related to agriculture and rural development that adequately address inequalities, tackle gender-specific challenges, and monitor progress in closing gender gaps.[124] [...][125]

123. National Strategy for Gender Equality 2021–2030, published in the Official Gazette No.112, dated 15/07/2021. See: https://qbz.gov.al/eli/fz/2021/112. The English version is available at: https://albania.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/WEB_Strategjia%20Kombetare%20-%20EN.pdf

124. UN CEDAW (2023). Concluding Observations on the Fifth Periodic Report of Albania, 2023. Available at: https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW%2FC%2FALB%2FCO%2F5&Lang=en]

125. Gender Mainstreaming Guidance: Agriculture and Rural Development. UN Women. 2023. https://albania.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-05/ard_web_final.pdf

Figure 5. Women, men and agriculture in Albania



Source: INSTAT (2023). Labour Market, 2022; Agriculture and Rural Development Agency, 2024 data, cited in: FAO and UN Women (forthcoming). National Gender Profile of Agriculture and Rural Livelihoods Albania.

Empower Women for Rural Development

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ALLO SVILUPPO

MINISTRY OF HEALTH
AND SOCIAL PROTECTION

MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE
AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

UN WOMEN