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Empowering Women for Rural Development in Northern Albania

Gender-Sensitive Value Chains Analysis in the Malësi e Madhe Municipality

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Municipality of Malësi e Madhe

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Empowering Women for Rural Development in Northern Albania

Gender-Sensitive Value Chains Analysis in the Malësi e Madhe 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
VIS Albania	VIS - Volontariato Internazionale per lo Sviluppo - an Italian NGO active worldwide and present in Albania since 1994.
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 independence 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 study analyses in the municipality of Malësi e Madhe 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 Development Cooperation 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

Malësi e Madhe is located in the north-western part of Albania, bordered to the north, north-west, and north-east by Montenegro, to the south-west by Lake Shkodra, and to the south and south-east by the Shkodra Municipality. The territory of the Municipality of Malësi e Madhe has an area of 951 km^2, which is divided into 6 Administrative Units: Kelmend, Kastrat, Shkrel, Koplik, Qendër, and Gruemirë, consisting of 2 towns, Koplik and Bajzë, and 56 villages. The municipality has a population of 21,684 residents (10,879 males and 10,805 females),5 with the highest population density concentrated in the lowland area of the municipality's territory.

Malësi e Madhe, is characterized by a diverse economic structure, with agriculture, small enterprises, and services playing significant roles. The local economy is predominantly agricultural, with a substantial portion of the population engaged in farming activities. This sector remains a vital source of income and sustenance for the community, reflecting the region's reliance on agricultural productivity. In addition to farming, the area also sees a notable presence of small and medium-sized enterprises, with a growing number of both male and female entrepreneurs contributing to local economic activities. In recent years, the municipality has witnessed an increase in the number of active businesses, with a shift toward service providers, particularly in the sectors of commerce, construction, and hospitality. The labor market in Malësi e Madhe faces challenges related to employment rates, with men generally experiencing higher employment opportunities than women. The enterprises data reflects that while men continue to dominate the entrepreneurial sector, women have shown modest growth in active enterprises, indicating a positive trend in female participation in business. However, the gender gap remains evident, with men owning a significantly larger share of the businesses (394 men and 132 women owned businesses). The 2023 labor force indicators for the Shkodër region, which includes Malësi e Madhe, show that the total participation rate in the labor force was 63.8%, with a notable difference between men (72%) and women (56%). The employment rate was 59.4% overall, with a higher rate for men (67.5%) compared to women (51.7%).

The inactivity rate, representing individuals not participating in the labor force, was 36.2% in total, with women showing a higher inactivity rate (44.0%) compared to men (28.0%). The overall unemployment rate was relatively low, at 6.9%, with a slightly lower rate for men (6.2%) compared to women (7.8%). This data illustrates the gender gaps in employment, where men have higher participation and employment rates, while women experience more inactivity and higher unemployment. However, disaggregated labor market data specifically for Malësi e Madhe are not formally available and proved difficult to find, making it necessary to rely on regional-level indicators.

Total labor force participation rate: 63.8%, where women's participation rate is 56% and men's is 72%.

Regarding tourism Malësi e Madhe, is renowned for its stunning natural landscapes, rich cultural heritage, and diverse tourism opportunities. With its unique geographical location, characterized by mountainous terrain, pristine lakes, and picturesque rivers, the area offers a wide range of tourism experiences throughout the year. From water-based activities on Lake Shkodra and the River Cem, to hiking in the Albanian Alps, and exploring historical and cultural landmarks, Malësi e Madhe is an ideal destination for nature lovers, adventure enthusiasts, and those seeking a deeper understanding of Albania's rich traditions. Notably, the administrative units of Kelmend and Shkrel, being mountainous

5. INSTAT Census.

regions, also have a dedicated website, www.kelmend-shkrel.org, where all the tourist resources of these areas are thoroughly listed. Agriculture and livestock farming are integral components of the economy in Malësi e Madhe, offering diverse opportunities for local communities, especially in rural areas. Agriculture and livestock farming are integral components of the economy in Malësi e Madhe, offering diverse opportunities for local communities, especially in rural areas. The official data[6] reveal the diversity and scale of agricultural activity in the region, emphasizing its reliance on animal husbandry as a significant component of the local economy. Among the livestock, small ruminants, such as sheep (14,927) and goats (8,900), dominate the figures, highlighting the region's traditional focus on these animals, likely due to the mountainous terrain which supports their grazing needs.

The significant number of dairy goats (5,188) further underscores the importance of milk production in the local economy. Cattle farming is also prominent, with 3,552 heads, of which 3,015 are cows, indicating a focus on dairy and meat production. Pig farming, although smaller in scale, contributes to the agricultural diversity with 3,175 pigs and 238 breeding sows.

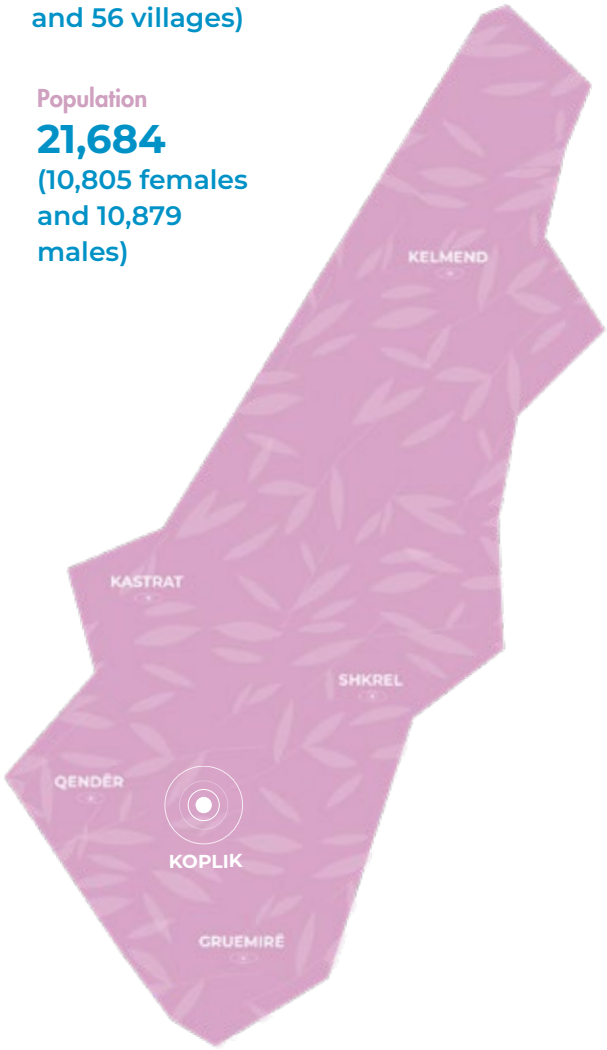
The total milk production in Malësi e Madhe reached 8,177 tons in 2023, with cow milk dominating at 5,724 tons. Sheep and goat milk accounted for significant portions, with 1,209 and 1,244 tons respectively. This balance suggests a robust dairy sector catering to a variety of market demands, particularly for traditional and artisanal dairy products. Forage crops, cultivated on slightly over 3,000 hectares of land, indicate the importance of livestock for the rural families. With over 5,200 hectares under cultivation, medicinal and aromatic plants are the leading agriculture and industry activity in the area. Malësi e Madhe remains the undisputed leader in MAP production, accounting for more than two-thirds of Albania's total cultivated MAPs. The region's favorable climate, tradition in MAP cultivation, and strong network of farmers and processors have solidified its role as the country's most important MAP-producing area.

The largest MAP exporters and processors like Relikaj, Muçaj, and MEIA (the only company focused exclusively on essential oil production) are concentrated in Malësi e Madhe.Additionally, other major companies located in different regions of Albania, such as AlbKalustyan, Filipi, and Gjedra, source significant amounts of sage raw materials from Malësi e Madhe. Sage is by far the most widely planted MAPs in Malësi e Madhe and serves as the main source of income for the local farmers due to its large-scale cultivation. The growing economic significance of plant extracts and essential oils has led in recent years to an expansion of areas cultivated in Malësi e Madhe with immortelle (Helichrysum italicum), lavender (Lavandula spp.), rosemary (Rosmarinus officinalis), savory (Satureja montana), and bay laurel (Laurus nobilis).

Malësi e Madhe Municipality

Area
951 km²
(6 administrative units and 56 villages)

Population
21,684
(10,805 females and 10,879 males)



6. INSTAT.

Main Findings

Finding I Stakeholders confirmed the potential of medicinal plants, livestock and dairy farming, artisanal and traditional handicrafts, and agritourism as significant value chains for economic growth and women inclusion in economic activities in the municipality. Meeting with VIS participants highlighted specific barriers and opportunities: Women primarily focus on traditional food preservation, chestnut collection and MAPs.

Finding II Women are involved in the collection and production stages while decision-making largely remains with men. The community is interested in expanding the production of medicinal plants but faces challenges in knowledge, cultivation techniques, and market access. Women work for the industry in the morning and cultivate their own plots (0.2 to 0.4 ha in size) in the afternoon. Limited participation of women and youth in traditional sectors (agriculture). The owner of Mediterranean Exports Imports Albania (MEIA) is eager to cooperate in introducing new and high market value plants in cooperation with the women. Main barriers are the seedling costs and lack of expertise. Long term B2F contracts to women could be provided by the company. During the interviews, both the women and the company emphasized their interest in single-harvest crops (thymus), that could allow women to offer their services to the industry and at the same time cultivate their plots for additional income.

Finding III Tourism-related businesses (guesthouses, restaurants, handicrafts) provide employment opportunities for women,[7] though there are entry barriers such as limited access to finance, marketing and selling platforms. A few women in Tamarë are engaged in collection of wild fruits and processing of jams, compotes, juices, and other local products, still, the few of them, rely to a man-led informal entrepreneurship in promoting and selling their products. Besides agri-food processing they are also occasionally engaged in handicraft works like embroidery. The Mishavinë cheese is produced especially in the area of Kelmendi. This cheese has received the GI protected certification. However, given the traditional technology used and existing market demand, this product hardly finds a market outside of the area. Despite the area's local production potential in Tamarë, there is no dedicated market where to showcase and sell products to tourists. Local guesthouses have started to produce their own products limiting the market for local producers. Establishing a common point of sale (local market) would be a good "km 0" market opportunity for the local women and boost small-scale production. High migration numbers limit the area's economic potential.

Finding IV Xhubleta takes around six months to complete, requiring: loom, wool, spinning process, skilled workers, and a traditional equipment (vajanicë). The price of one original xhubleta varies from €10,000 to €15,000. Still there are processes that are hard to be completed.
In absence of producing the original xhubleta, some artisans are producing replicas that are demanded in the market with a lower price between €350-500. The Municipality is implementing a project funded by the Ministry of Tourism, to establish a xhubleta skills center in Koplik and train around 30 women and youth with the final goal of producing one xhubleta.

7. Market System Analysis Tourism sector in Albania and business constraints to growth. Risi Albania. See: https://www.risialbania.al/media/668e6468a03ce.pdf

Finding V Beekeeping (Bajzë): There are about 10 family-based beekeeping holdings. It appears that the data provided by AZHBR regarding the number of beekeepers might be somewhat inflated and does not fully reflect the reality on the ground. The local beekeepers' association is not active; cooperation among beekeepers is lacking; laboratory tests of bees or final product are not applied; honey is mainly traded in plastic bottles; inexistent extension service on bees; inadequate treatment for bees; and absence of quality honey storage facilities (stainless steel containers, centrifuges for harvesting, etc.).

Finding VI Dairy (Hot - Veleçik Farm): Around 60-70 farmer families supply milk to the Veleçiku dairy facility. Women are primarily engaged in animal care and milking. The women farmers located nearby the facility deliver the milk themselves. One liter of milk is purchased at 60 ALL, but price fluctuations and unfair competition impacts the dairy business. There is a labor shortage due to migration. The facility can increase production if they ensure more milk, the market can absorb more product. They plan to expand the facility. Main issues are related to the use of plastic containers for milk collection and transport; need for a small laboratory unit for milk quality control and traceability; good dairy farming practices for most of the livestock farmers. Reci dairy, located in Reç, cooperates with an additional 25 livestock farmers. Findings and constraints in the value chain are the same as with Veleçiku dairy.

Finding VII A 500-ha chestnut forest provides work for families for about a month during harvest time in the Reç area. About 15 women are actively engaged as workers at the Agro Reçi facility and collection point, earning ALL 3,000 per day during peak periods for MAPs and chestnut collection and export. Chestnut harvesting provides seasonal employment for around 220 families in the area, with women playing a larger role in the manual collection process. The Agro Reçi cooperative, registered as an Agricultural Cooperation Association (SHBB), has 220 members, the majority of whom are male heads of households. Chestnuts are exported to Italy, Germany, and Switzerland (150 tons in 2024). Price for high quality product is €5/kg. Between 10-15% of the low quality (small sized) product is barely sold at 1/5 of the price. During meeting, the cooperative representative emphasized the need for a small-scale chestnut milling equipment to add value to the low-quality product by processing to chestnut flour. Migration reduces workforce availability. Women in Reç also cultivate sage and lavender on their small plots and some rent additional land. Recent decline in sage prices and crop quality issues have drastically affected them. Data from the interviews revealed that seedlings cost between ALL 10 and15 per unit, and dried sage sold at 50 ALL/kg does not justify the year around cultivation costs. Lack of contracts with the industry has limited them in cultivation of other plants (immortelle). A number of them have started small scale packaging with simple labelling (informal) of MAPs for trade fairs and direct sale to customers coming to their facility. The cooperative representative is eager to support the women in case the opportunity arises to establish a small processing unit inside the facility.

Challenges and Solution Productive discussions with stakeholders underscored the collaborative spirit in addressing identified challenges and scaling up solutions:

- Limited decision-making power for women and limited know how, despite their active role in production.
- Lack of access to structured markets and fairs to showcase and sell local products.
- Insufficient infrastructure, access to training and financial support for women-led businesses.
- Limited employment prospects in Malësi e Madhe push people towards migration (especially youth).

Part 1
Methodology

This analysis was conducted by UN Women Albania within the framework of the Empowering Women for Rural Development in Northern Albania project, funded by Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation through the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS Tirana). With the support of the Municipality staff and collaboration from key value chain (VC) stakeholders, this study aimed to identify economic sectors with potential for growth and women's empowerment in Malësi e Madhe Municipality. Specifically, it assessed women's participation in these sectors, the constraints they face, and selected high-potential value chains for targeted development. Furthermore, it provided gender-responsive recommendations to enhance women's roles and eliminate gender biases in the market system. A gender-sensitive approach was applied throughout the analyses to ensure that women's voices, challenges, and opportunities were fully integrated into the value chain assessment.

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 analyses employed a qualitative research methodology, integrating secondary and primary data sources to provide a comprehensive understanding of economic and gender dynamics in Malësi e Madhe Municipality. A participatory approach was used to capture the perspectives of key stakeholders, ensuring the findings reflect real-world experiences. Secondary data sources included official reports and statistics from the Institute of Statistics in Albania (INSTAT), the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, the Ministry of Tourism and Environment, and previous studies and projects related to gender-sensitive economic development. Additionally, municipal reports, such as the Operational Plan of Local Development – Municipality of Malësi e Madhe, General Local Plan of Malësi e Madhe (2017),[8] Local Area Social Plan (2020-2023),[9] and Medium-Term Budget Program (2024-2026)[10] as well as annual budgets, provided valuable insights into the economic structure and development priorities of the area.

To complement secondary data, primary research was conducted through stakeholder engagement, site visits, and participatory consultations. The data collection process took place in two phases. The first phase involved an initial assessment of potential economic sectors and value chains, conducted through consultations with municipal representatives and supporting organizations. Key discussions took place with Deputy Mayor Brunilda Isufaj, General Secretary Emanuela Smakaj, and representatives from VIS Albania (office of Koplik), focusing on key constraints, economic opportunities, and gender-related barriers in various value chains.

This phase helped identify sectors with high potential for women's economic empowerment and set priority areas for further investigation. During the field research and value chain assessments conducted in the municipality of Malësi e Madhe a total of 62 individuals were directly engaged through interviews, site visits, and meetings, 54 women and 8 men. Primary data collection efforts were divided in 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 value chains 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, and traditional**

8. See: https://planifikimi.gov.al/index.php?id=732
9. See: https://bashkiamalesiemadhe.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Vendim-Nr-15-30.04.2020.pdf
10. See: https://bashkiamalesiemadhe.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/06.pdf

handicrafts. The above 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.

The second phase involved in-depth value chain selection and stakeholder engagement. Field visits were conducted in key economic sectors based on economic potential, sectoral diversity, and the presence of women-led initiatives. These visits included semi-structured interviews, group consultations, and site observations with women entrepreneurs, farmers, cooperative members, and business owners to gain insights into their experiences, challenges, and opportunities.

The key meetings and site visits included:

February 5, 2025:

- Meeting with NGO VIS Albania office in Malësi e Madhe representative Anna Carboni and team (five women).
- Group meeting and interviews with 33 women in the Medicinal and Aromatic Plants (MAPs) sector in Koplik (Kalldrun, Kamicë Flak, and Pjetroshan).
- Interview with Emiland Skora, owner of Mediterranean Exports Imports Albania (MEIA) – MAPs essential oil exporter.
- Site visit to Tamarë, Kelmend AU, engaging with *xhubleta*-making artisans and agri-food producers Drita Bujaj, Rok Bujaj, and Dila Vacaj.

March 5, 2025:

- Site visit and interviews at Veleçik Milk in Hot (Kastrat AU), meeting owner Prelë Hasanaj and three women workers.
- Site visit to agricultural cooperative/association "Reçi Prodhimtar" (Shkrel AU) engaging with a cooperative representative and four women members.
- Site visit to the Skaqaj family beekeeping business in Bajzë (Kastrat AU), where both male and female entrepreneurs were interviewed.

To ensure the accuracy and reliability of the findings, a triangulation process was applied by cross-referencing primary data (field research) with secondary data (official reports and statistics). This strengthened the study's validity and provided a well-rounded analysis of the gendered dimensions of the selected value chains. The findings highlight significant opportunities for women's economic empowerment in Malësi e Madhe Municipality, emphasizing the need for gender-responsive policies and targeted interventions to remove market constraints and increase women's participation in economic activities.

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 in developing the chain?
- Is there a link between what women are doing and prospects for growth/diversification in the value chain?

The involved stakeholders actively contributed to identifying all key components of the value chains' market system, discussing both the constraints and the role of women at different stages of the processes. Through on-site visits, direct observation of activities and work environments, and semi-structured interviews using tailored questionnaires for various value chain actors, an assessment was conducted on women's empowerment and gender equality across the main identified key value chains: MAPs and Milk/Dairy farming.

Overall, the process followed these steps:

1. **Objectives & 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 criteria of selection:

2. **Target group:** women and women's groups in the northern rural areas;
3. **Criteria:** the importance of the value chain in creating economic empowerment opportunity 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 belonging to the selected sectors;

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

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

Figure 1. Methodological Approach

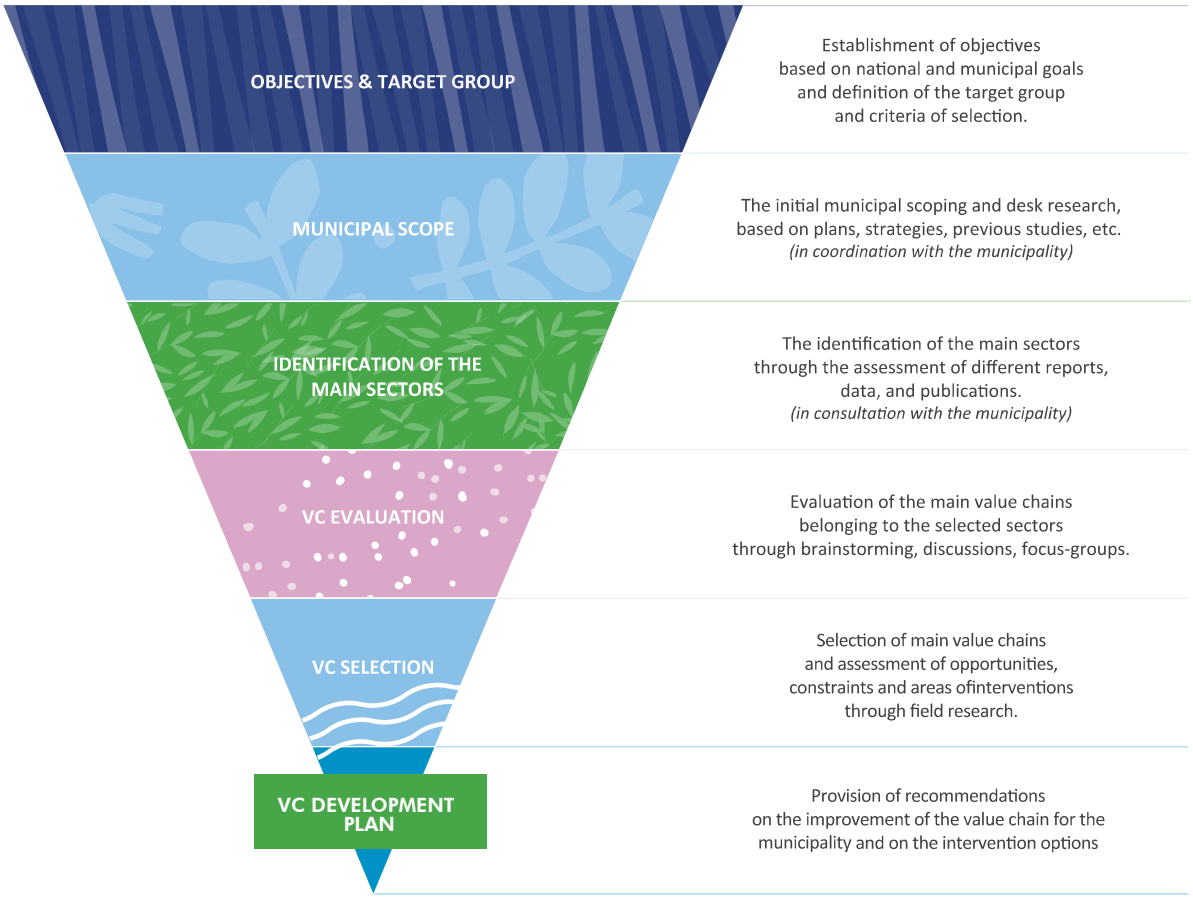


Table 1. Ranking and selection of value chains using gender-sensitive criteria

Criteria	MAPs	Milk/Dairy farming
Is there a link between what women are doing and prospects for growth/ diversification in the value chain?	Women participate in most stages of the value chain, including cultivation, harvesting, and primary drying. Few of them have started small scale packaging with simple labelling (informal) of MAPs for trade fairs and direct customers visiting the facility, which presents opportunities for further growth and diversification.	Women contribute significantly to animal care, feeding, cleaning barns, milking, and a few of them working in dairy facilities. Their involvement in these core activities creates opportunities for growth, particularly by increasing production with application of good dairy farming practices.
Do women have (or can they acquire) the skills needed for value addition through processing or product diversification?	More knowledge is needed, especially in the application of standards, certification, and application of best practices in all cultivation and post-harvest activities, and processing, packaging, and branding for end-market consumers.	Women lack control on assets, knowledge on good dairy farming practices, and especially tools and equipment to reduce their workload and increase productivity. They can increase skills with additional training in best practices, including good dairy farming practices, hygiene standards, and farm management.
Does this value chain offer new opportunities for women?	Yes. In large scale by engaging with the industry in contracted cultivation of specific plants, and potentially in small-scale processing (Reç).	Average. By equipping women with the necessary knowledge and skills in best practices especially in good dairy farming they can increase productivity and quality, as well as lower their workload.
Can the chain improve livelihood conditions for women/families?	MAP-related activities represent the primary source of income for many families in the area. Sustainable cultivation (by applying GAP) in addition to services for the industry, would increase income and enhance the sustainability of the VC.	Yes. Milk, especially from small ruminants, is a highly demanded product by the local dairies and can generate considerable income, increase production and herd size, without adding more workload to women with increased knowledge and equipment, can improve their living conditions and increase income.
Is there a motivated organization in the value chain that can support/ represent value chain actors that can move forward development?	There are local consolidators interested in supporting the VC, and women in Reç could be organized for better representation.	Yes. Local dairies Veleçiku and Agro Reçi are highly motivated and interested to further support the actors in the VC. In addition, grouping of local women livestock farmers could further strengthen their role.
Is there an opportunity to make changes with small investments?	Yes, support women with materials & equipment, offer training and capacity building sessions and support market promotion.	Yes. Small investments for the necessary milking equipment, tools, and standardized containers for milking and transportation, potentially a small milk testing laboratory for traceability to ensure quality and food safety.

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

Questions	Score*	Weight	Total	Narrative
Is the share of women employed in the value chain relatively high?	4	2	8	A significant proportion (at least 70%) of individuals engaged in the MAPs value chain are women.
Are there many female entrepreneurs in the value chain?	2	2	4	Women participate in most stages of the value chain, including cultivation, harvesting, and primary drying. Few of them have started small scale packaging with simple labelling (informal) of MAPs for trade fairs and direct customers visiting the facility, which presents opportunities for further growth and diversification. There are also others that cultivate their own plots or have rented additional land.
Do women control equipment and assets?	2	2	4	Average. Land ownership remains an issue, limiting control over assets. Equipment and tools are jointly controlled.
Do women have (or can they acquire) the skills needed for interesting value addition through processing or product diversification?	4	1	4	Women can increase their skills by applying best practices in cultivation and by engaging in small-scale processing for end-market consumers.
Do women control the sales income and the enterprise?	2	2	4	Average. During interviews with women, some highlighted that they manage the income themselves, others manage jointly with the head of the family (men).
Can the work take place close to home?	3	1	3	Yes.
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. Especially if engaged in perennial plants. Main costs are related to land preparation, seedlings (higher share of costs), and labor force.
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 cultivation and also working for the industry. However, access to information, extension services, equipment and credit remain a barrier.
Does this value chain offer new opportunities for women?	2	4	8	Average, except if women aim for the end markets (local).
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	High. 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.

Questions	Score*	Weight	Total	Narrative
Are there gender norms (for example stuck in 'women's work') that prevent women from taking full advantage of value chain opportunities?	3	2	6	The industry is controlled by men. Still, there are no additional norms preventing women from taking advantage of value chain opportunities, especially in small-scale processing for end-market consumers (local).
Overall total for gender potential			**63/102**	

* 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.[11]

Table 3. Assessment of women's empowerment and gender equality in the milk/dairy farming VC

Questions	Score*	Weight	Total	Narrative
Is the share of women employed in the value chain relatively high?	3	2	6	Yes. During the field visit, it was highlighted that women play a crucial role in livestock related activities.
Are there many female entrepreneurs in the value chain?	2	2	4	At least 90 women are engaged in dairy farming providing milk supply to two local dairy facilities.
Do women control equipment and assets?	2	2	4	Average. Considering that in most cases men are the farm owners, women lack property rights. Still, they control the equipment used in the stages they are involved.
Do women have (or can they acquire) the skills needed for interesting value addition through processing or product diversification?	3	1	3	Women own basic skills in farming practices, but through necessary training they can further develop their skills towards Good Dairy Farming Practices, especially in Animal care; Milking Hygiene, food safety, and traceability; Environment; and Socio-Economic Management.
Do women control the sales income and the enterprise?	2	2	4	Average. Income control varies between independent management and joint decision-making.
Can the work take place close to home?	3	1	3	There are also families that manage livestock in a stall-feeding system, but sometimes small ruminant's herds are located far from home.
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)?	2	1	2	Starting a herd from the ground it is of high cost for poor entrepreneurs. I.e. a high-milk-yield dairy goat can cost up to 35,000 ALL.

(Continues on the next page)

11. 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.

Questions	Score*	Weight	Total	Narrative
Is this a value chain with low entry barriers for women (time and mobility, access to technology and assets, cultural constraints)?	4	2	8	Depending on the size of the herd, but it is still considered a family activity. Access to technology is average and no cultural constraints are evident.
Does this value chain offer new opportunities for women?	3	4	12	Moderate. Women can increase their skills by training on good farming practices and add income by improving herd welfare and enhancing milk yield.
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. Dairy farming ensures a steady year-round income, particularly through stall-feeding system.
Is there a linkage between what women are doing and prospects for growth/diversification in the value chain?	4	1	4	Yes. By introducing good dairy farming practices to ensure animal welfare, milking practices and new technologies to ensure food safety and lower time and workload of women, record keeping for effective herd management.
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. Women are already actively engaged in livestock farming and milk production without major cultural restrictions. .
Overall total for gender potential			**66/102**	

* 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.[12]

12. 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 MAPs 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.[13]

Over 60,000 women are directly involved in the medicinal and aromatic plants (MAPs) value chain, from collection to export.

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. The total number of women directly involved exceeds 60,000 (AGT-DSA, 2021)[14]. 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 and 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 and medicinal plants reached the value of 63 million Euros, with an increase of 6.7% from the previous year (59 million Euros).[15]

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 Malësi 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.).[16] Even though 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 gr.[17]

During the centralized economy approximately 110,000 people in rural areas were employed by the collection centers, forestry enterprises, and warehouses or processing factories, operating within the MAPs processing and export network (Skënderi, 1991).[18] The supply network was well-organized through a single government-administered enterprise and a single state-controlled exporter, Albanian Import Export (ALIMPEKS), which connected Albania to global markets for the sale of MAPs. Until the 90s,

13. 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
14. THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN ASSURING QUALITY - Empowering women in the Medicinal and Aromatic Plants (MAPs) sector. DSA 2024. See: https://hub.unido.org/sites/default/files/publications/Gender%20Report%20brochure%20WEB.pdf
15. Biofach 2024. AIDA. See: https://aida.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/BIOFACH-24-broshure-1.pdf
16. INSTAT - Agriculture Statistical Yearbook, 2023.
17. Medicinal And Aromatic Plants Sector Study. Aasf, 2023. See: https://aatsf.com.al/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/4Mapcover-EN.pdf
18. Medicinal Plants from Albania. ALIMPEKS, Tirana, Albania. Skënderi, G., 1991.

approximately 5,000-7,500 tons of MAPs were exported, making Albania one of the largest exporters of MAPs to Europe with annual exports reaching around 70 million USD (Skënderi, 1991). MAPs exports involved about 176 species, tanniferous plants, essential oils, and nearly 300 medicinal drugs derived from both wild and cultivated MAPs such as bay laurel, rosemary, thyme, lavender, German chamomile, and myrtle, cultivated on a fairly large scale by some cooperatives. Cultivated MAPs covered roughly 3,000 hectares in specialized regions across the country, particularly in Durrës, Lushnjë, Gramsh, and Belsh. Only thyme was both cultivated and harvested in the wild, while all other species were collected from the wild. During 1990-91 period, the entire Albanian economy, including the agri-food sector, collapsed as it transitioned from a centralized to a marked oriented economy, which led to partial or complete closure of state-run enterprises. As a result, the cultivation of MAPs nearly ceased, and the infrastructure was almost destroyed. MAPs export declined drastically, which negatively affected the quality and reliability of steady supplies to demanding markets.[19]

The challenges faced created opportunities for individual private entrepreneurs to become major exporters of MAPs leading to the inception of the private MAPs industry. During this period, distilleries with substantial capacities, notably in Vlorë and Shkodra, were established, contributing to the growth of the industry. During the first decade of transition to market economy (1990 – 2000), AlbDucros Enterprise emerged as a quasi-monopoly on MAPs exports, maintaining also a certain value chain governance and a stronger position in the export market. However, after 2000, more than two dozen exporters of different sizes appeared in the MAPs market. Their appearance led to fierce competition for raw wild MAPs, lack of coordination and enforcing standards. The increasing demand for MAPs associated with a decrease in collection of MAPs in the wild pushed these exporters to encourage the cultivation of MAPs. Gradually, the MAPs industry began to recover, leading to the first steps of full industrialization, primarily focusing on the collection of MAPs in the wild and their processing and with millions of Euros invested in technology and new constructions, especially after 2014.[20]

With increasing MAP cultivation replacing wild collection, women's roles have expanded into farming and processing, particularly in leading regions like Malësi e Madhe.

During early transition to the market economy, the collection of MAPs in the wild dominated the exports due to the (i) large population still residing in rural areas thus becoming a major source of income in the face of scarce alternative employment opportunities, and (ii) growing demands. About 200 different MAPs were collected from the spontaneous flora and traded internationally mainly from forests, pastures and the wilderness areas and dominated by about 8 major species. Between 2015 and 2022, the cultivation of medicinal and aromatic plants (MAPs) in Albania expanded rapidly, driven by government subsidies and a decline in wild collection caused by rural-to-urban migration. As more people moved away from traditional foraging areas, cultivation became the primary method of MAP production, ensuring a stable supply for both domestic and export markets. Among the regions that saw the most significant growth, Elbasan and Korça experienced the highest expansion in cultivated MAP areas, increasing by 294% and 177%, respectively. However, Shkodër region, particularly Malësi e Madhe, remained the undisputed leader in MAP production, accounting for more than two-thirds of Albania's total cultivated MAPs. The region's favorable climate, tradition in MAP cultivation, and strong network of farmers and processors have solidified its role as the country's most important

19. 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

20. Imami, D., Ibraliu, A., Gruda, N.S., Shkreli, E., Fasllia, N.,2015/ Analysis of the MAPs Value Chain in Albania. Gesunde Pflanzen. 67:155–164. See: https://www.academia.edu/80658249/Erratum_to_Analysis_of_the_Medicinal_and_Aromatic_Plants_Value_Chain_in_Albania

MAP-producing area. Not surprisingly, the largest MAP exporters and processors like Relikaj, Muçaj, and MEIA (the only company focused exclusively on essential oil production) are concentrated in Malësi e Madhe. Additionally, other major companies located in different regions of Albania, such as AlbKalustyan, Filipi, and Gjedra, source significant amounts of sage raw materials from Malësi e Madhe. Sage is by far the most widely planted MAP in Malësi e Madhe and serves as the main source of income for the local farmers due to its large-scale cultivation.

The growing economic significance of plant extracts and essential oils has led in recent years to an expansion of areas cultivated in Malësi e Madhe with immortelle (Helichrysum italicum), lavender (Lavandula spp.), rosemary (Rosmarinus officinalis), savory (Satureja montana), and bay laurel (Laurus nobilis). The increase in both MAP cultivated areas and number of cultivated MAP species could potentially counterbalance the combined effects of growing demand for MAPs and decreasing number of individuals or family-based wild MAPs collectors.[21] As the production and trade in medicinal and aromatic plants (MAPs) in Albania continue to grow, so do the challenges posed by stricter regulations, particularly in the European Union (EU) market. These new rules are reshaping the way Albanian producers operate, forcing them to adapt to higher safety, sustainability, and traceability standards.

One of the biggest hurdles for Albanian MAP exports has been the introduction of stricter food safety regulations, especially concerning allergens and toxic substances.[22] In 2022, the EU implemented Regulation No. 2020/2040, which limits the presence of Pyrrolizidine Alkaloids (PA) in certain foods, including spices, dried herbs, teas, and herbal supplements. These compounds, which can contaminate MAPs through naturally occurring weeds, have created serious export challenges for Albanian producers. Many exporters and industry experts point to high PA levels as one of the most significant barriers to accessing EU markets. At the same time, new microbiological safety measures now require mandatory heat treatments to eliminate foodborne pathogens, replacing traditional chemical-based methods. While this shift aligns with growing consumer demand for cleaner, more natural products, it also presents a major financial challenge for Albanian businesses. Heat treatment technologies require significant investment, making it difficult for smaller producers to comply with EU standards without external support. Beyond safety requirements, the demand for organic and sustainably grown MAPs has never been higher.[23]

Consumers across Europe are increasingly looking for certified organic products, driven by health concerns and environmental awareness. Exporters confirm that buyers now expect proof of sustainable farming practices and organic certification, pushing Albanian farmers to rethink their cultivation methods. For those able to meet these standards, new market opportunities are opening up, but for many small-scale producers, transitioning to organic farming remains a complex and costly process.[24]

Another growing concern is traceability and transparency across the supply chain. European buyers want to know exactly where and how MAPs are grown, harvested, and processed. However, contract farming—a key mechanism for ensuring supply chain traceability—is still underdeveloped in Albania. Without clear agreements between farmers and buyers, tracking products from field to final export destination becomes difficult, posing yet another challenge for the sector.

For Albanian MAP producers and exporters, navigating these regulatory changes is essential for remaining competitive in the international market. Investing in quality control, modern processing technologies, organic certification, and transparent supply chain management will be crucial in overcoming these obstacles and securing a strong future for Albania's MAP industry.

21. 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

22. CBI,2023. Which trends offer opportunities or pose threats on the European spices and herbs market? See: https://www.cbi.eu/market-information/spices-herbs/trends

23. See: https://www.giz.de/en/downloads/giz-2021-en-practical-market-insights-into-the-product-group-of-medicinal-and-aromatic-plants.pdf; https://www.londondaily.news/global-organic-food-market-growth-trends-and-future-projections-2025-2034/; https://www.skaleu-rope.org/news/the-booming-economics-of-organic-food-in-europe/

24. 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

Table 4. SWOT analysis of the maps value chain

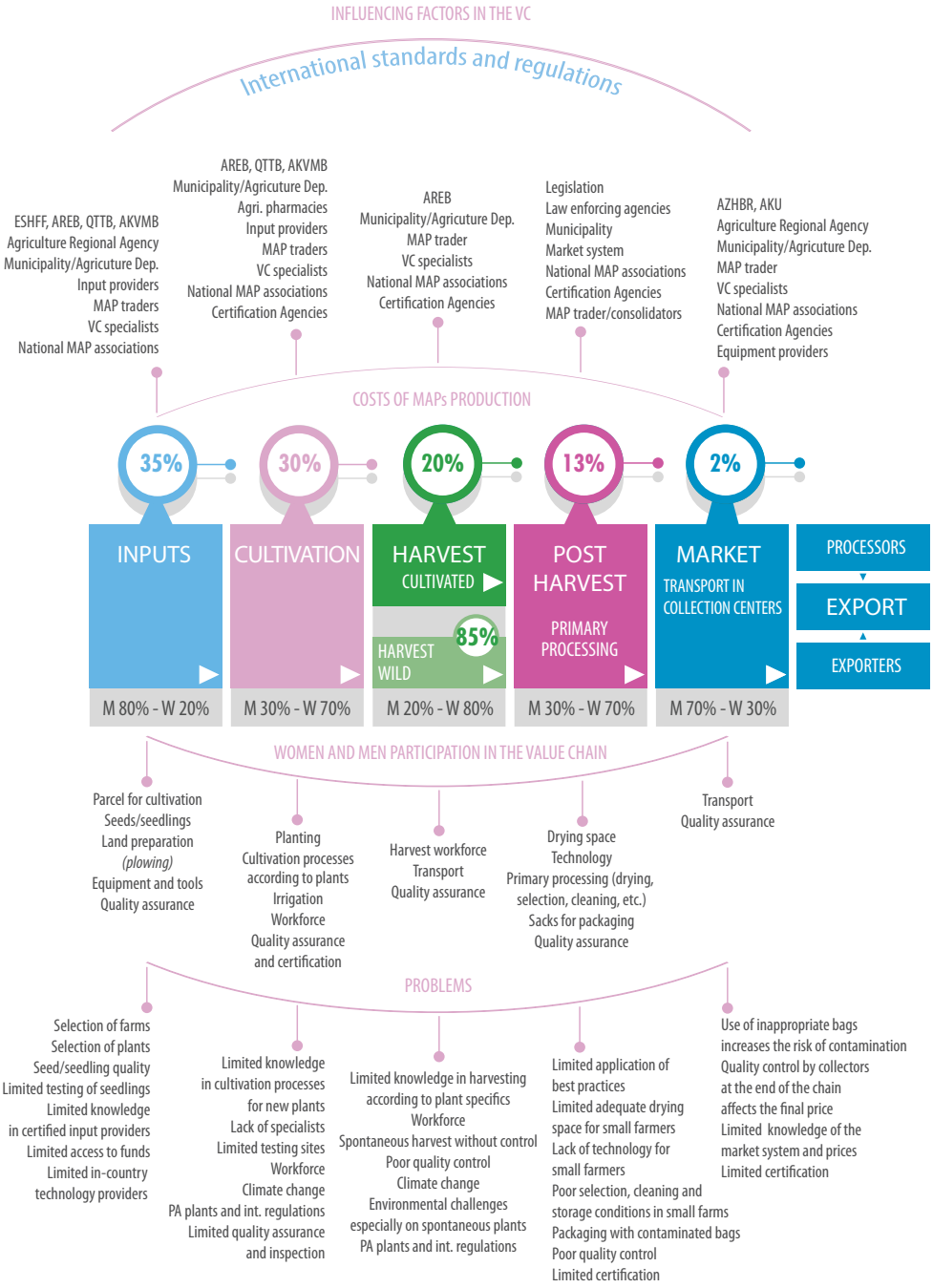
Strengths	Weaknesses
Rich biodiversity and favorable climate. Around 400 types of medicinal plants grow in the country, representing approximately 15% of the total flora, and over 200 of them are collected and traded.	**Lack of access to finance opportunities** for small-scale and poor farmers, especially women.
Proximity to European markets.	**Informal operation of women** in the market system.
Main industry is concentrated in the area.	**Information asymmetry** regarding market developments.
Good examples and rapid expansion of cultivated areas and extended cultivation experience in the area.	**Climate vulnerability** may affect MAP production.
MAPs are considered one of the key renewable potentials for the socio-economic development of rural areas.	**Hard work and poor working conditions,** especially for women.
Willingness of the industry to collaborate with local farmers.	**Lack of youth interested** in MAPs.
Willingness of women and farmers to cultivate perennial plants, in order to lower costs and labor force.	**Lack of access to reliable output price information,** seasonal fluctuations in prices, coupled with perceptions of being 'cheated' by vendors.
Commitment of key value chain actors to continuously improving product quality to meet international market requirements and standards.	**Lack of access to certified inputs material** especially for poor farmers.
Women's involvement in different stages of the value chain and increasing awareness of their crucial role and contribution.	**High price of seedlings and mechanization costs** affect engagement of poor farmers in cultivation.
A growing market demand for high quality products certified on sustainable and environment-friendly production	

Opportunities	Threats
Wide diversity of medicinal and aromatic plant (MAP) species in the area show potential for cultivation.	**Endangered plant species** (wild collection);
Focus on cultivation of perennial plants.	**Factors negatively affecting the biodiversity and natural habitat:** overharvesting of wild MAPs and environmental degradation can threaten the long-term sustainability of wild MAPs production.
Good opportunity to make a difference with small investments, including training in application of good agriculture practices, especially for women farmers.	**High migration rates** affecting the labor force.
Innovative developments and advancements in MAP post-harvest processes (drying, treatment, and distilling of essential oils).	**Climate dependency:** climate change poses a significant threat; particularly as changing weather patterns may affect plant growth and yields.
High demand for MAPs (domestically and internationally).	**Fluctuating market trends** (international).
Small-scale processing (women) in Reç for local end-market consumers.	**Application of more strict international regulations** and standards.

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 Malësi e Madhe is organized into the key levels, namely:

- Input
- Cultivation
- Wild plant collection and harvest
- Post-harvest (drying or distilling)
- Market

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.

Salvia Nord, based in Koplik, has been conducting research and development on indigenous Albanian medicinal and aromatic plants in Malësi e Madhe region for approximately four decades. The area's dry, alkaline, and limestone-rich soils, though less suitable for many traditional crops, provide an ideal environment for these native species that have thrived there for millennia. Salvia Nord has identified and cultivated high-quality, high-yield varieties, collaborating with over 1,000 Albanians.

Annually, they supply millions of seedlings of native plants, including the "Salvia Nord" sage variety, immortelle (Helichrysum italicum), hybrid lavender, thyme, white oregano, elderberry, and rosemary.

In addition, big companies engaged in export of MAPs provide (sell) seedlings to farmers based on their market demand on specific plants and harvest quantities. MEIA LTD administrator Emiland Skora, highlighted that the company provides(sell) seedlings (immortelle, bay laurel, savory, etc.), to their contracted farmers as per company needs.

Agro Line is a prominent supplier of organic fertilizers and plant protection products (PPPs) in Albania, catering to the increasing demand for organic medicinal and aromatic plant production. Ensuring that inputs like fertilizers and PPPs are approved for organic farming is crucial for maintaining organic certification standards. Several other Albanian companies provide organic agricultural inputs. For instance, AgroBlend offers high-quality pesticides, fertilizers, seeds, and irrigation systems, all certified according to European health standards for agriculture. Additionally, resources like the Farmer Portal[25] provide information on approved plant protection products, which can assist farmers in selecting appropriate inputs for organic production. Collaborating with reputable suppliers and consulting official resources can help ensure compliance with organic standards in medicinal and aromatic plant cultivation.

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.

GULIT Ltd is an Albanian company specializing in the manufacturing of paper and polypropylene packaging products. The company's product range includes paper bags and sacks, as well as polypropylene bags which, among other things, are used also for packaging food products, animal feed, and agricultural goods. These products are manufactured using high-quality machinery and in accordance with EU standards. Real A&B is a company specialized in the production of shutters, automatic doors, and solar greenhouses since 1994. In the recent years, the company has been one of the main providers of solar drying tunnels for MAPs by producing several small and larger drying models throughout the country. More technology and equipment providers can be found in: https://acp.al/company-listing/

25. See: https://agroalbania.al/en/prodhimi.php

Cultivators The increasing demand from the commercial trades for a wide variety of wild species such as sage, oregano, immortelle, juniper, winter savory, and gentian has increased the awareness about the over-exploitation of some species. Efforts to cultivate them have already started with certain estimates indicating a number of about 6,000 farmers. Most farms cultivating MAPs are up to 1 ha in size, while less than 200 farms have more than 2 ha (AGT-DSA, 2021). Most processing of MAPs by these farms constitutes drying and storing at home before selling to collectors or processors. The farmers who cultivate sage and immortelle have used domesticated genetic material (seeds and seedlings) from local genotypes or from mother plants derived from natural populations in order to preserve the quality (Ibraliu, 2018). In Malësi e Madhe, the cultivation of MAPs involves a mix of small-scale farmers and larger entrepreneurs. The majority of the farmers, both men and women, live in rural areas and tend to their plots where they grow MAPs. These farmers sell their harvests either fresh for distillers, or dried to local collectors or processing companies. In addition to these small-scale operations, there are also larger entrepreneurs and companies in the region. These businesses have expanded their operations by purchasing or renting additional land, which enables them to increase their cultivation capacities. This dual approach—combining small family-run farms with larger, more industrialized operations—helps to meet the growing demand for MAPs and supports the local economy in Malësi e Madhe.

Malësi e Madhe is the leading region in Albania for the cultivation of medicinal and aromatic plants, with over 5,200 hectares dedicated to mainly sage, lavender, immortelle, etc. This makes it the largest area under MAP cultivation in the country. The region is home to more than 4,000 farmers engaged in MAPs, with over 50% of them being women.[26] *These farmers are primarily engaged in cultivation but also participate in other stages of the value chain, such as collection, drying, and primary processing. Malësi e Madhe has an overall dominant position in MAP cultivation: not only the majority of growers are located in that region, but also the quasi-totality of farms having MAPs cultivations larger than 1ha is located there*[27]*. Women are involved in cultivation, harvest, and post-harvest stages while decision-making largely remains with men (almost all the industry is man-owned). Most women work for the industry in the morning and cultivate their own plots (0.2–0.4 ha in size) in the afternoon.*

Cultivation enhances opportunities for women to work and generate income in more comfortable conditions compared to the collection of wild MAPs. The industry's shift from wild plant harvesting to cultivation has strengthened women's roles in production. Engaging in MAP cultivation enables women to manage their home responsibilities simultaneously, as most work occurs on plots close to the house (GIZ, 2021).

In small cultivation farms, women are more engaged in labor-intensive activities such as weeding, harvesting, and post-harvesting processes compared to men. In large farms, their roles focus on tasks requiring bending and concentration, such as planting, hoeing, and harvesting, while men are more inclined to handle tasks requiring strength, such as stone removal, transplanting, and transport. Additionally, women often supervise and monitor the work of other women on large farms. In some cases, women administrators are employed to manage rented labor, which is significant. Groups or brigades of women workers are often managed by contracted parties who oversee recruitment and transport (GIZ, 2021). Given their involvement, especially in post-harvest and processing stages where much of the labor is rented, it is evident that women's contribution to rented labor is higher. Planting is done during spring, with most propagation carried out using farmers' own plants, while a smaller portion purchase seedling.

Propagation involves combined efforts: men usually carry the saplings, while women plant them. Labour is needed for both maintenance and harvesting, as the presence of dense stones on the surface prevents mechanization, making the process labor-intensive.

26. Findings from interviews with VC actors, stakeholders, and specialists.

27. "The residents in Malësi e Madhe did not abide by Law No. 7501 and reverted to the old land boundaries previously held by their ancestors and, as a result, the land was distributed according to those claims. It is noted that 97% of the residents of Malësi e Madhe received land based on the old boundaries. 30% of the residents received land (based on the old boundaries) that was less than the per capita norm defined for the area. Consequently, 70% of residents received significantly more land than the per capita norm established." Çështje Gjinore të Pronësisë mbi Tokën në Zonën e Malësisë së Madhe (Gender Issues in Land Ownership in the Malësi e Madhe Region). The Center for Legal Civic Initiatives (CLCI) & OXFAM Italia (OIT). See: https://www.qag-al.org/publikime/ceshtjet_gjinore_pronesise.pdf

At the farm level, post-harvesting tasks are managed by women, who clean the plants and lay them out to dry on simple blankets placed under the sun on terraces, porches, or under roofs. Women involvement is also very significant in farm processing or warehouse-based processing. In warehouses, women are responsible for drying the product taken from bags, cleaning the dried product, cleaning the ground output, and packaging it in paper or chemical-free bags. Men handle moving heavy bags and operating transporting and loading machines. Cutting and grinding are led by men who are knowledgeable about equipment use and repair, while women assist by managing product waste and selection. Packaging and labelling are done by women, with inventory often managed jointly with the management team.[28]

The region is home to more than 4,000 farmers engaged in MAPs, with over 50% of them being women

Wild collectors (harvesters). Rural households, farmers, and residents (women and men) in mountainous regions in silvo-pastoral communities are the primarily collectors of MAPs in the wild including limited urban households especially during the collection season. They dry and store the plants in their homes until they sell them to local collectors or processors. Previous estimates have shown that around 100,000 individuals or 20,000 farming households participate in this activity (Imami et al., 2015). However, the numbers have sharply declined due to demographic trends, but no recent data are available.

In Malësi e Madhe, local harvesters gather wild medicinal and aromatic plants from the region's diverse and mountainous landscapes. These plants, including varieties like sage, thyme, and red oregano are collected seasonally, with harvesters typically working in remote areas. The harvesters are engaged in seasonal work, and their activities complement the cultivation of MAPs by farmers. Many of these wild plants are collected during specific periods of the year when they are most abundant. The gathered plants are then sold to local collectors, traders, or processing companies, which add value to the raw material through additional processing or distillation. In Malësi e Madhe, the collection of wild MAPs also provides additional income opportunities for rural communities, especially for women and other vulnerable groups. Sustainable harvesting methods are essential to ensure that these valuable plants continue to thrive in the wild, contributing to both environmental conservation and the livelihoods of local harvesters.

Local consolidators (150)[29] 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.

Regional consolidators (10)[30] 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.

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 supplying 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,

28. THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN ASSURING QUALITY - Empowering women in the Medicinal and Aromatic Plants (MAPs) sector. DSA 2024. See: https://hub.unido.org/sites/default/files/publications/Gender%20Report%20brochure%20WEB.pdf.
29. Biofach 2024. AIDA. See: https://aida.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/BIOFACH-24-broshure-1.pdf
30. 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.[31]

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.[32]

The majority of consolidators, processors, and exporters are either located in Malësi e Madhe, or have a close relationship with the farmers of the area. The largest MAP exporters and processors like Relikaj, Muçaj, and MEIA (the only company focused exclusively on essential oil production) are concentrated in Malësi e Madhe.

Additionally, other major companies located in different regions of Albania, such as AlbKalustyan, Filipi & Co, and Gjedra, source significant amounts of sage raw materials from Malësi e Madhe directly from farmers or through local consolidators.

Retail market The market is export-driven – only a small share is oriented towards the supply of domestic supermarkets, green markets and HoReCA. There are a few companies and several producer groups that sell a wide range of packed herbs (e.g. Natyral and ATC), tea infusions (e.g. Craco) and a limited variety of essential oils (mostly the larger exporters, but also small processors). While export markets are the primary destination for MAPs, there is also an increasing demand within the local market. Processed or fresh MAPs, used mainly as tea infusions and flavoring agents, are sold via different retail outlets. As the retail sector is consolidating, supermarket chains are also becoming an important outlet for these products.

Several supermarkets sell MAPs supplied by local processors. However, groceries, drug stores, restaurants, pharmaceutical shops and specialized shops remain relevant outlets for food processing companies. Worth mentioning here are Neranxi and Merja, which operate a specialized retail chain. Some varieties of MAPs are sold in the fresh fruit and vegetable markets.[33]

In the administrative unit of Reç, some of the women part of Agro Reçi cooperative, have started small scale packaging with simple labelling (informal) of MAPs for trade fairs and direct customers coming to their facility. The cooperative representative is eager to support the women in case the opportunity arises to establish a small processing unit inside the facility.

Salvia Nord, a family business located in Koplik mainly operating as seedling provider, has lately started small-scale packaging of spices and essential oils. They operate mainly through direct contacts with customers, fairs, and points of sales.[34]

31. 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

32. Ibid.

33. 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

34. See: https://www.salvianord.com/

2.2 SUPPORT AND CONTROL SERVICES

The four Regional Agricultural Extension Agencies (AREB),[35] located in Shkodër, Lushnjë, Korçë, and Tiranë, operate under Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, in accordance with Decision of the Council of Ministers No. 147, dated 13.03.2018, "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:

- Provision of information and advisory services on the technical and technological development of farms to enhance competitiveness in agriculture.
- Provision of information and assistance to farmers in benefiting from national support schemes, IPARD, and other projects in agriculture and rural development.
- Encouragement and support for the creation and functioning of various forms of farmer cooperation.
- Organizing and conducting professional training for farmers in agriculture and rural development.
- Ensuring access to information on standards related to the environment, quality, marketing, organic farming, and products with geographical indications.
- Informing and advising farmers on the selection and use of agricultural machinery and equipment, providing free technical assistance.

The AREB local office in Malësi e Madhe is composed of 10 extension officers (3 women and 7 men).

The five Agricultural Technology Transfer Centers (QTTB),[36] 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, Food, and Consumer Protection." The main responsibilities of the QTTBs include:

- Identifying, testing, adapting, and introducing new agricultural methods and inputs into farming practices.
- Developing technological packages for key agricultural crops and livestock breeding.
- Conducting research and testing on farms to address issues raised by farmers in the respective regions.
- Providing training for agricultural specialists, farmers, agricultural science students, and other interested parties.
- Ensuring technical expertise for advisory service structures and farmers.
- Demonstrating new cultivation technologies for agricultural crops and livestock breeding.
- Preparing and publishing informative materials for agricultural specialists and farmers.
- Supporting policymaking by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) in the areas of agriculture, food, consumer protection, and rural development.

The National Authority for Veterinary and Plant Protection (AKVMB)[37] 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,

35. 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
36. See: https://bujqesia.gov.al/qendrat-e-transferimit-te-teknologjive-bujqesore-qttb/
37. See: https://akvmb.gov.al/

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 through the General Directorate, and at the regional level via four regional veterinary and plant protection directorates in Elbasan, Vlorë, Tirana, and Shkodër (which covers also Malësi e Madhe), along with direct veterinary service units. Regional directorates operate within their jurisdiction and carry out the following tasks:

- Assessing the needs and issues related to veterinary and plant protection services, proposing solutions to the General Directorate.
- Planning and submitting needs assessments for veterinary and plant protection services to the General Directorate.
- Coordinating and monitoring the delivery of veterinary and plant protection services in their territory.
- Preparing reports on sample collection, pathological materials, and test results for suspected and confirmed diseases.
- Providing periodic reports on plant infection rates and plant product status.
- Detailing and implementing work plans approved by the General Directorate in compliance with current legal frameworks.
- Issuing documents and certificates according to legal provisions, sub-legal acts, and authorizations from the General Directorate.
- Performing additional tasks assigned by law or the General Directorate.

The National Food Authority (AKU)[38] 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 "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

38. See: https://aku.gov.al/

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),[39] 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 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.

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

HACCP[40] 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[41] and 852/2004,[42] as well as National Guideline No. 20, dated November 25, 2010, by the Minister of Agriculture, Food, and Consumer Protection.[43] The HACCP certification process typically takes between 14 to 30 days, depending on the specific requirements of the business, and includes:

- **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.

39. See: http://www.eshff.gov.al/
40. See: https://aku.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Udhezim_Nr.20.pdf
41. See: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32002R0178
42. See: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32004R0852
43. See: https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/alb144203.pdf

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"[44]. 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.
- **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 takes 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.[45]

Associations There are only two main associations: The Essences Producers and Cultivators Association (EPCA) and the Association of MAPs of Albania (AMAP). 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.

44. 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 labelling 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

45. 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

2.3 RESEARCH FINDINGS

Based on fieldwork, observations, and interviews conducted with key value chain actors (48 women and 7 men), including producers and processors, and specialists of MAPs value chain, the following data were identified:

Opportunities:

- Increase in the 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.

- MEIA LTD, the biggest company operating in distilled oil, is eager to cooperate in introducing new and high market value plants like savory (Satureja montana) in cooperation with the women. Both women and the company are interested in such perennial and single-harvest crops, that would allow women to offer their services to the industry and at the same time cultivate their plots for additional income.

- Cultivating according to best agricultural practices increases production quantities while ensuring quality in line with international market demands.

  - Women could increase income and improve working conditions. 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.[46]

  - Women in this VC suggested the need for more knowledge, especially in the application of standards, certification, and application of best practices in all stages in cultivation.

  - Attention is needed in drying and primary processing stages, where according to the local consolidators, the risk for contamination and loss of quality is higher.

- Organizing farmers, especially women, into groups reduces costs in securing inputs, sharing equipment, and markets, 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 expanding the small-scale processing of MAPs in the women group of Agro Reçi for local end-user market.

- Opportunities in applying GAP in cultivation of MAPs:

  - Improve working conditions of women engaged in the 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.)

46. *'Although part of the volume exported is 'conventional,' meaning without stringent standards (e.g., certification and traceability), an increasing portion of the quantity sold abroad is certified and traced. All exporters state that certification: i) minimizes impediments to trade ii) increases added value (e.g., some organic products are priced 30%-100% more)".* 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

Limitations:

- Most activities are informal, meaning that workers and producers (especially women) are not often 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.

- There are failure cases where small-sized farmers have engaged in cultivation without an agreement with companies, resulting in low selling prices to the point of no interest in harvesting the cultivated plants. Other cases with locally produced seedlings resulting to loss of plants in the second year and financial incapability of replanting the plants.

- According to farmers, input phase has the highest financial cost.

- Often, involvement in this activity is the primary source of income for the majority of families. Due to informality or lack of land ownership rights, residents are also excluded from subsidy schemes and financial opportunities, especially women farmers.

- Low quality, resulting in low prices. The lack of professional skills and quality certification directly impacts the quality of the products, especially for women. There are cases of organic certification in groups of farmers, mainly facilitated by projects or the companies, still the practice is not widely spread due to related costs and information.

- Lack of youth interested in agriculture, adding to the high migration rates, limits the labor force.

Below are the main problems identified for the cultivation of MAPs in Malësi e Madhe. 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)

Cultivation phase:
- Skills for cultivation and harvesting especially for non-traditional plants (how, when, why, what)
- Adequate working tools and equipment for women
- Lack of service providers in application of good agriculture practices
- Infrastructure (equipment) and qualifications for the post-harvest process in small-sized farms

Post-harvest and drying phase:
- Lack of quality control
- Lack of adequate facilities and limited post-harvest and processing equipment in small-sized farms
- Lack of quality packaging
- Limited knowledge in the above processes

Marketing phase:
- Lack of branding, labelling and packaging according to legal requirements (small-scale processing for end-market consumers with focus on women group of Reç)
- Appropriate final product storage capacities
- Market linkages
- 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 women are involved in most stages of the value chain with a focus in cultivation and partly in post-harvest mainly in small-scale (own farms), while also contributing to household chores.

There are opportunities for cultivating plants, with limited added burden for women, in cooperation and agreement with the industry, as well as they could be additionally engaged in proper small-scale processing and marketing of MAPs for local market which could result in improved quality, quantity, and resource control for women, as well as increased income.

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, financing opportunities are very low, especially for women that in most cases lack control over assets and resources.

2.4 RECOMMENDED INTERVENTION FOR THE MAPS VALUE CHAIN

Below are some general recommendations regarding women empowerment and the development of the maps value chain in the municipality of Malësi e Madhe, categorized by their impact:

1. Support in Cultivation

Enhance Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) in the cultivation of MAPs, focusing on improving harvesting techniques and post-harvest handling (drying, storage, transportation), with a strong emphasis on supporting women farmers.

- Conduct plot management assessments (history, inspection, soil testing, contamination risk assessment) with a focus on women-led farms.
- Provide targeted support for women in selecting plant varieties suitable for local agrotechnical conditions and market demand.
- Train women farmers on cultivation practices (field preparation, certified seeds/seedlings, sowing, irrigation, fertilization, plant protection, and weed management to ensure compliance with European regulation No. 2020/2040 on pyrrolizidine alkaloids (PA) and tropane alkaloids (TA).
- Improve harvest and post-harvest processes (efficient harvesting, primary processing, drying, packaging, storage, transport) with women's participation in decision-making.
- Deliver specialized training for women on agrochemical/fertilizer management, hygiene, and first aid, ensuring safe and sustainable farming practices.

Impact: Increased participation of women in MAP cultivation, improved agricultural skills, and enhanced marketability of women-produced MAPs.

2. Technical Assistance

Provide technical support tailored to women MAP producers to improve production efficiency and sustainability.

- Conduct soil analysis to guide women farmers in making informed planting decisions.
- Establish demonstration sites showcasing best practices with selected plants, prioritizing women-led initiatives.
- Support women's access to certified propagation material and enable on-site seedling replication for sustainable production.
- Facilitate small grants specifically for women farmers to improve harvest and post-harvest practices (equipment for storage, transport, eco-friendly drying, processing, branding, and packaging for local markets, focusing on women's groups in Reç and other regions).
- Provide personal protective equipment (PPE) for women farmers, ensuring safe handling of agrochemicals and farm equipment.

Impact: Strengthened technical capacity of women farmers, increased productivity, enhanced safety, and improved sustainability of women-led MAP farming.

3. Certification of Quality and Safety Standards

Strengthen certification and compliance processes to enable market access and premium pricing for women-led MAP businesses.

- Conduct targeted awareness sessions for women farmers on the importance of certification and necessary steps for compliance.
- Provide direct support for women in obtaining organic certification and ensuring adherence to quality standards.
- Offer coaching and mentoring programs focused on women entrepreneurs in the MAP sector, helping them navigate certification and business development.

Impact: Increased certification rates among women farmers, improved competitiveness, and greater access to high-value markets.

4. Supportfor Women Production Groups

Strengthen women's roles in MAP value chains by fostering producer groups, enhancing collective bargaining power, and promoting market integration.

- Organize women into production groups to increase representation, leadership, and decision-making power.
- Deliver gender-responsive capacity-building programs on business planning, marketing, financial literacy, and access to financing for women farmers.
- Develop partnerships between women's production groups and industry stakeholders to facilitate advance agreements and long-term business relationships.
- Support women-led enterprises in accessing new markets, with a focus on direct-to-consumer sales and branding initiatives that highlight women's contributions.

Impact: Strengthened economic empowerment of women in the MAP sector, improved networking opportunities, and increased profitability for women-led businesses.

These recommendations provide a structured, women-centered approach to enhancing the MAP value chain through targeted interventions in cultivation, technical assistance, certification, and producer group support, aiming their increased participation, access to resources, and market opportunities in the MAP value chain.

Table 5. Recommendations for the MAP Value Chain

No.	Activity	Impact		
		Short-Term	Medium-Term	Long-Term
1	**Enhance good agricultural practices (gap) in the cultivation of maps with a strong emphasis on supporting women farmers**			
	Increased participation of women in MAP cultivation, improved agricultural skills, and enhanced marketability of women-produced MAPs.			
1.1	Provide targeted support for women in selecting plant varieties suitable for local agrotechnical conditions and market demand.	X	X	X
1.2	Conduct plot management assessments (history, inspection, soil testing, contamination risk assessment) with a focus on women-led farms.	X	X	X
1.3	Train women farmers on cultivation practices (field preparation, certified seeds/seedlings, sowing, irrigation, fertilization, plant protection, and weed management to address pyrrolizidine alkaloids (PA) and tropane alkaloids (TA) in compliance with European regulation (n°2020/2040).	X	X	X
1.4	Improve harvest and post-harvest processes (efficient harvesting, primary processing, drying, packaging, storage, transport) with women's participation in decision-making.	X	X	X
1.5	Deliver specialized training for women on agrochemical/fertilizer management, hygiene, and first aid, ensuring safe and sustainable farming practices.	X	X	X
2	**Provide technical support tailored to women map producers to improve production efficiency and sustainability**			
	Strengthened technical capacity of women farmers, increased productivity, enhanced safety, and improved sustainability of women-led MAP farming.			
2.1	Conduct soil analysis to guide women farmers in making informed planting decisions.	X	X	X
2.2	Establish demonstration sites showcasing best practices with selected plants, prioritizing women-led initiatives.	X	X	X
2.3	Support women's access to certified propagation material and enable on-site seedling replication for sustainable production.	X	X	X
2.4	Facilitate small grants specifically for women farmers to improve harvest and post-harvest practices (equipment for storage, transport, eco-friendly drying, processing, branding, and packaging for local markets, focusing on women's groups in Reç and other areas).		X	X

(Continues on the next page)

No.	Activity	Impact		
		Short-Term	Medium-Term	Long-Term
2.5	Provide personal protective equipment (PPE) for women farmers, ensuring safe handling of agrochemicals and farm equipment.	X	X	X
3	**Strengthen certification and compliance processes to enable market access and premium pricing for women-led map businesses**			
	Increased certification rates among women farmers, improved competitiveness, and greater access to high-value markets.			
3.1	Conduct targeted awareness sessions for women farmers on the importance of certification and necessary steps for compliance.	X	X	X
3.2	Provide direct support for women in obtaining organic certification and ensuring adherence to quality standards.		X	X
3.3	Offer coaching and mentoring programs focused on women entrepreneurs in the MAP VC, helping them navigate certification and business development.		X	X
4	**Strengthen women's roles in map value chains by fostering producer groups, enhancing collective bargaining power, and promoting market integration**			
	Strengthened economic empowerment of women in the MAP sector, improved networking opportunities, and increased profitability for women-led businesses.			
4.1	Organize women into cooperative production groups to increase representation, leadership, and decision-making power.		X	X
4.2	Deliver gender-responsive capacity-building programs on business planning, marketing, financial literacy, and access to financing for women farmers.	X	X	X
4.3	Develop partnerships between women's production groups and industry stakeholders to facilitate advance agreements and long-term business relationships.	X	X	X
4.4	Support women-led enterprises in accessing new markets, with a focus on direct-to-consumer sales and branding initiatives that highlight women's contributions.		X	X

Local Partners/Collaboration: National, regional, and local producer associations of MAPs; the municipality; relevant sector's public institutions, industry, points of sale. These recommendations provide a structured, women-centered approach to enhancing the MAP value chain through targeted interventions in cultivation, technical assistance, certification, and producer group support, aiming their increased participation, access to resources, and market opportunities in the MAP value chain.

Part 3

Analysis of the Dairy Farming and Milk Value Chain

1. Gender Sensitive Analysis of Dairy Farming and Milk Value Chain

In 2023, Albania's livestock sector was dominated by dairy-producing animals across different categories. The total number of cattle reached 263,385, with dairy cows representing the majority at 88.24% of the total herd. Sheep farming remained a significant component of the sector, with a total of 1,206,206 sheep, of which 83.43% were dairy sheep. Similarly, the goat population stood at 640,242, with dairy goats making up 79.96% of the total. The pig population in 2023 was 114,833, with breeding sows accounting for 9.18% of the total herd. These figures highlight the continued emphasis on dairy production within the country's livestock sector, with cows, sheep, and goats primarily raised for milk production.[47]

The milk industry experienced a notable decline in collection volumes across all categories in 2023. A total of 101 thousand tons of milk were collected, reflecting an 8.0% decrease compared to the previous year. This downward trend was evident in cow's milk, which accounted for 80 thousand tons, marking a 7.6% decline. Similarly, sheep's milk saw a 10.6% drop, with 13 thousand tons collected, while goat's milk decreased by 8.2%, reaching 8 thousand tons. Of the total milk collected, 13 thousand tons were designated for direct human consumption, while the remaining quantity was processed. The majority of the milk produced for consumption was processed whole milk (88.2%), followed by semi-skimmed milk (8.1%), raw milk (3.2%), and skimmed milk (0.5%). Overall, there is a general decline in milk collection, suggesting potential challenges in the dairy sector. Despite this, the processing industry remains dominant, with most of the milk undergoing transformation before reaching consumers.[48]

Livestock is a very important agri-food sector in Albania - about ½ of the farmers are engaged in the livestock including the dairy sector. Dairy products represent an important part of the Albanian household consumption basket. Milk production is by far dominated by cows' milk (more than 4/5). Overall, dairy production is destined to the domestic markets, thus the production increase is mainly triggered by increase in the domestic demand, while the dairy trade balance shows a structural deficit. The dairy value chain is considered a priority sector considering import substitution potential.[49]

Women play a central role in the value chain, taking on responsibilities that range from animal care and milking to milk delivery.

The small ruminant production is done in several ways: a) extensive system with the transhumance 6 to 8 months (all regions); b) the semi-intensive system to transhumance 5 to 6 months; c) grazing system on permanent pasture near to the farm; d) natural pasture within walking distance, with the return of sheep or goats in the evening on the farm. However, for the time being, sheep and goat milk production is organized almost totally as extensive breeding and milk yield per ewe with about 58 liters/year and per doe with about 112 liters, are also low. Comparing Albanian small ruminants' productivity with that one in EU member states is more difficult, as yields are quite

47. INSTAT. See: https://www.instat.gov.al/media/13520/statistikat-e-blegtoris%C3%AB-2023.pdf
48. INSTAT. See: https://www.instat.gov.al/al/temat/buja%C3%ABsia-dhe-peshkimi/blegtoria/
49. Milk Sector Study. AASF, 2019. See: https://aatsf.com.al/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/8Milkcover-EN.pdf

variable even in regions with a similar production structure and similar natural conditions, but it is safe to state that available data show yields that range among 30% to 70% of average yields in EU member states comparable regions.[50]
Livestock production efficiency is affected by limited knowledge of farmers on modern farm management.

The improvement of farmers' knowledge should start with enhancing the role and performance of the public extension service, the motivation of the advisors and the financial support of the service. In the process of approximation to the European Union, the country is seeking to increase the competitiveness and food standards.[51]

1.1 SITUATION OF DAIRY FARMING/MILK VALUE CHAIN IN MALËSI E MADHE

Malësi e Madhe has a long-standing tradition of livestock farming, particularly cattle, sheep, goats, and other small ruminants. Dairy farming is a major economic activity, producing milk, cheese, yogurt, and butter. Women are involved in milk processing, cheese making, and caring for smaller livestock like goats and sheep.

Agriculture and livestock farming are integral components of the economy in Malësi e Madhe, offering diverse opportunities for local communities, especially in rural areas. The official data[52] reveals the diversity and scale of agricultural activity in the region, emphasizing its reliance on animal husbandry as a significant component of the local economy. Key categories include cattle, small livestock (sheep and goats), pigs, poultry, and beekeeping, with detailed numbers for each type.

Among the livestock, small ruminants, such as sheep (14,927) and goats (8,900), dominate the figures, highlighting the region's traditional focus on these animals, likely due to the mountainous terrain which supports their grazing needs. The significant number of dairy goats (5,188) further underscores the importance of milk production in the local economy.
Cattle farming is also prominent, with 3,552 heads, of which 3,015 are cows, indicating a focus on dairy production. The total milk production in Malësi e Madhe reached 8,177 tons in 2023, with cow milk dominating at 5,724 tons.

Sheep and goat milk accounted for significant portions, with 1,209 and 1,244 tons respectively. This balance suggests a robust dairy sector catering to a variety of market demands, particularly for traditional and artisanal dairy products.[53][54]

52. Agriculture Statistical Yearbook 2023. INSTAT 2024. See: https://www.instat.gov.al/en/themes/agriculture-and-fishery/agriculture/
53. According to the data from the website of the municipality, there are only 2 large cattle farms and 39 small ruminants' farms with over 100 heads. See: https://bashkiamalesiemadhe.gov.al/2016/05/26/bujqesia/
54. According to the Farmers Portal, there are only four local dairies in Malësi e Madhe. See: https://agroalbania.al/
50. Milk Sector Study Report. MOARD, 2021. See: https://ipard.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/06-Milk-Sector-Study-Final.pdf
51. Ibid.

Findings

Finding I In Malësi e Madhe, dairy farming is deeply rooted in the livelihoods of small-scale farmers.[53] Around 60-70 farming families supply milk to the Veleçiku dairy facility, while another 25 families work with Agro Reçi dairy in Reç.[54] Women play a central role in the value chain, taking on responsibilities that range from animal care and milking to milk delivery for those living near the dairy facilities. Despite their involvement, they lack control over key resources, have limited access to modern tools, and often miss out on training opportunities that could improve efficiency and ease their workload.

Finding II The dairy value chain holds significant growth potential, with Veleçiku planning to expand operations through IPARD funding once the program becomes available again. The market can absorb more high-quality dairy products, creating an opportunity to increase production and boost incomes for farming families. However, several structural and technical challenges hinder this growth, requiring targeted interventions to ensure sustainability and stronger participation of women in the value chain.

Finding III Milk production continues to rely on traditional practices, with manual milking being the norm. The use of plastic or outdated containers for collection and transport increases the risk of contamination, compromising milk quality and safety. Limited knowledge of good dairy farming practices further affects productivity, as most farmers have little to no training in farm management, hygiene standards, or disease prevention. The limited extension services mean farmers lack technical guidance, leaving them unable to adopt modern, more efficient farming techniques.

Finding IV For Veleçiku and Agro Reçi dairies, expanding production depends on ensuring a steady supply of high-quality milk. However, fluctuating prices and unfair competition create instability for farmers, while labor shortages due to migration further strain operations. Addressing these issues will require investments in modern equipment, structured training programs, and better market access. A small laboratory unit for milk quality control and traceability, in the dairy facilities, could significantly improve compliance with market standards and enhance consumer confidence in local dairy products.

Table 6. SWOT analysis of the milk value chain

Strengths	Weaknesses
Dairy farming is a widely spread activity Malësi e Madhe. **Women are actively engaged** in all stages of the value chain, from animal care, milking and delivery to the dairy facility. **Women have traditional skills** and knowledge in livestock. **Existence of examples in good dairy farming practices** and modern stables in the area (farm of Veleçiku dairy) and in the country. **Favorable climatic conditions** and tradition in livestock breeding. **Considerable number of small ruminants'** breeds that are well adapted to local conditions. **Willingness of local dairy facilities** to collaborate with dairy farmers. **Commitment of key value chain actors** to increasing quantity and improving product quality. **High demand for milk from the local facilities** and final products from the market. (The Veleçiku dairy facility has a large portfolio of niche products and a well-established market network). **Increasing market demand** for dairy byproducts.	**Lack of financial resources.** Small-sized farmers (less than 10 cattle or 100 small ruminants) are excluded from the agricultural support scheme 2025. **Absence of a testing lab** in the dairy facility. **Inadequate raw milk monitoring system:** farm and milk production registers are often incomplete, raw milk quality controls are often not made using proper sampling system. **Existence of limited knowledge** in good dairy farming practices. **Underdeveloped raw milk collection systems** and poor infrastructure for milk collection in mountainous areas. **Milking is largely done by hand by women,** and most farmers use plastic and old containers that result to reduce the milk quality and high risk of contamination **Low compliance with raw milk health** and hygiene standards. **Low level of farmers knowhow on milk minimum standards,** hygiene in milk collection, animal husbandry, management of manure and waste. **Difficulty to source** quality milk from small farmers (hygiene). **Most dairy farms do not use milking equipment** and cooling tanks which pose a risk to food safety. **Limited attention paid** to animal welfare. **Low level of extension services.** **Commodity chain governance** and law enforcement still insufficient, especially milk traceability. **High informality** in the milk supply chain. **High seasonal fluctuations** in milk production. **Hard work and poor working conditions,** especially for women. **Women lack control on assets,** knowledge on best practices in animal husbandry, and especially tools and equipment to reduce their workload and increase productivity. **Lack of present financial opportunities** (IPARD) limits expansion of local dairy facility. **Lack of youth interested** in dairy farming and high migration affect the workforce.
Opportunities	**Threats**
Existence of examples in good dairy farming practices and modern stables in the region (farm of Veleçiku dairy) and in the country could serve as replication models. **The legal framework is being broadly harmonized to the EU acquis,** which also includes gender equality provisions, providing an opportunity to mainstream gender considerations in national agricultural and dairy development policies.[55] **Increasing milk supply** from the dairy farmers could increase dairy facility final production. **Opportunity of post-project sustainability** through the local dairy facilities Veleçiku and Agro Reçi. **Overall consumers preference** for domestic and niche dairy products. **Small-sized farmers can increase productivity by applying good dairy farming practices,** especially in animal care, milking hygiene, environment; and socio-economic management.	**High seasonal fluctuations in milk production** can negatively affect the supply chain. **Unresolved issues of property rights management** affect investments in stables and perennial forage crops, especially for women **Environment pollution** due to overall farming and industry. **Inadequate monitoring of protection products,** additives and antibiotics residues. **Animal feed and inputs price** increases. **High migration rates** affecting the labor force. **Interests of small-sized dairy farmers** (especially women farmers) are scarcely represented by agriculture and sectoral representatives and advocacy groups. **Climate change poses a significant threat;** particularly as changing weather patterns may affect fodder cultivation.

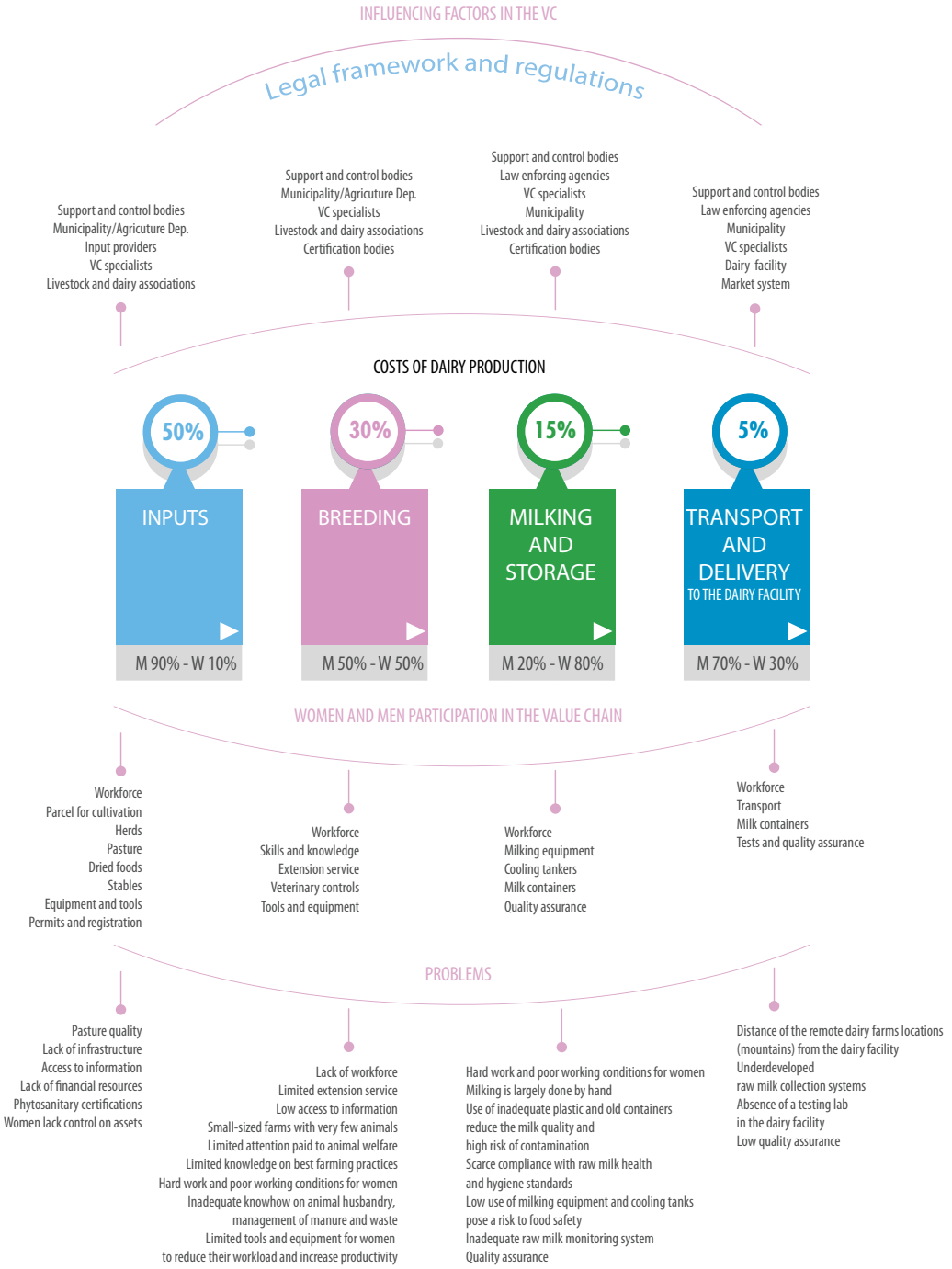
55. Alignment of Chapter 11 with EU GAP III indicators, EU CAP Gender indicators, and SDG indicators. Gender Mainstreaming Guidance: Agriculture and Rural Development. UN Women. 2023. See: https://albania.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-05/ard_web_final.pdf

2. Mapping of the Milk Value Chain in Malësi e Madhe

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 Milk Value Chain



2.1 VALUE CHAIN ACTORS

As seen in the diagram above, the milk value chain in Malësi e Madhe is organized into the key levels, namely:

- Input
- Livestock breeding
- Milking and storage
- Transport and delivery (to the dairy facility)

Below is a brief description of each value chain actor and supporting agencies in the market system, from input, production, and market distribution.

Input Suppliers: Inputs and services in dairy production comprise access to genetic material, feed (both roughage and concentrate), seeds, fertilizers and plant protection products, farm tools and equipment, veterinary medicines, vaccines, and veterinary services. In addition to making these inputs and services available, it is also important to secure their accessibility and convenience to all producers in need. Albanian agricultural production is dependent on imported agrochemical products, seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, semen and most of the animal feed or ingredients, which makes the sector subject to international price volatility. As in other emerging countries, the farmers and input dealers in Albania, face major constraints in getting high-quality, consistent supplies. This is caused by financial constraints, low input quality, as well as by limited level of technical information and knowledge. Comparatively high-priced inputs are only available for cash, so the limited purchasing power of farmers restricts their use. In many cases farmers complain about the low quality of forage seeds, pesticides, animal feed, veterinary medicines, and bull semen. Usually, such inputs are supplied by local input suppliers, which are: i) importers/wholesalers and retailers for seeds and pesticides; ii) feed mills or importers for animal feed; iii) veterinary pharmacies for the medicines and iv) importers of livestock or inseminators for the bull semen. Many small farmers have the tendency to buy the cheapest inputs, in order to reduce production cost, but in most cases, they end up with losses due

Women are central to the value chain, yet they lack control over resources, have limited access to modern tools, and miss training opportunities that could enhance efficiency and reduce their workload.

to weak production performance. Small farmers do not have information about inputs and have difficulty finding information, as the public extension services do not have the resources to reach out to all farmers. Farmers lack knowledge and finances in the use the appropriate quantity and quality of animal feed; as a result, the improvements recorded in the genetic potential of milking breeds was not paralleled by improvement in milk yields, as poorly fed animals are not enabled to express their full genetic potential. As a result, milk yields are among the lowest in the region. Most small size dairy farms have scarce information about inputs and find it difficult to find it. Some of input retailers in rural areas are not competent in what they may advise farmers.[56]

Dairy farmers: The livestock production of small ruminants is generally well adapted to the geographic and climatic conditions of Albania. The small ruminants bring value to the natural grasslands and have performances in line with the level of (poor) feeding. They are able to use limited food resources during winter or dry summer periods, to move for long distances during transhumance and resist diseases and parasites. Many breeders prefer local breeds. On

56. Milk Sector Study Report. MOARD, 2021. See: https://ipard.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/06-Milk-Sector-Study-Final.pdf

the other hand, the productivity of these local breeds is low, and the potential is limited, although not yet fully exploited. The predominant farming system in hill and mountain regions of Albania is the extensive one. The management of the small ruminants is based on traditional rearing and the new technologies are little known by the farmers. The reproducers' selection is done by the farmers themselves based on their experience and their empiric information. Animal feeding is mostly based on the utilization of pastoral reserves as the small ruminants are kept in summer pastures for five to six months (from April to October).

Farmers having very few heads do not migrate animals and they use communal pastures. The most labor-consuming process in sheep/goat farming, for example milking, is done manually. There is a limited awareness apo knowledge about requirements, minimal standards and good practices in different aspect of animal husbandry, use of inputs and milking practices.Milk primary production development has been hampered for years by several factors, the main ones being: i) high fragmentation of production and small scale of farming, ii) poor farm management practices, especially feeding, iii) limited access to high-quality inputs, iv) aging farm owners, which slow down process of change and reduce the scope for investments, v) inadequate service provision (veterinary service, extension service, natural mating and/or breed) and, vi) lack of farmers' organization and inadequate value chain coordination.

These factors lead to lower productivity and farm efficiency; the specific aspects of the most important issues are detailed below. The low capital intensity of production for both dairy cattle and small ruminant farms resulted in low productivity, relatively high production costs and low profitability, which in turn prevents the accumulation of capital for new investments, thus perpetuating the low production and productivity levels on many dairy farms. Small farms are currently at a turning point, facing the challenge to decide whether to grow and develop to meet the standards or to terminate commercial production. As a specific case, farms that rear small flock may hardly find themselves as prospective farms. In general, they have tendency to quit this activity as soon as they find another opportunity. Many of the challenges – such as low milk quality, low average yields and a high degree of seasonality – are linked to the small scale of farming operations. Investments in milking and cold storage equipment, improvements in feed and forage practices, introduction of specialized dairy breeds and, advanced techniques for animal husbandry are essential to face this challenge. However, such investments and improvements are unlikely, or even impossible on the small-scale dairy farms that dominate the dairy sector.[57]

In Malësi e Madhe, dairy farming is deeply rooted in the livelihoods of small-scale farmers. Around 60-70 farming families supply milk to the Veleçiku dairy facility, while another 25 farmers work with Agro Reçi dairy in Reç. Women play a central role in the value chain, taking on responsibilities that range from animal care and milking to milk delivery for those living near the dairy facilities. Despite their involvement, they lack control over key resources, have limited access to modern tools, and often miss out on training opportunities that could improve efficiency and ease their workload. Milk production continues to rely on traditional practices, with manual milking being the norm. The use of plastic or outdated containers for collection and transport increases the risk of contamination, compromising milk quality and safety. Limited knowledge of good dairy farming practices further affects productivity, as most farmers have little to no training in farm management, hygiene standards, or disease prevention. The limited extension services mean farmers lack technical guidance, leaving them unable to adopt modern, more efficient farming techniques.

Dairy facilities: The milk processing industry in Albania is characterized by a large number of small dairy processing plants (so-called "baxho"), many of which are semi-informal or informal businesses. Medium and large-sized plants are much less numerous; they are devoting efforts and investments in growth and improved compliance with standards and represent the core of the dairy industry. The small plants/unit are in rural and remote areas. Most of them in mountain regions are seasonal ones, as they mainly as are process sheep and goat milk; during the production season they also process small quantities

57. Milk Sector Study Report. MOARD, 2021. See: https://ipard.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/06-Milk-Sector-Study-Final.pdf

of cow milk. They use old/traditional technology, apply inadequate food safety and quality standards. Hygiene is an issue in most of these plants. These plants do not have adequate storage capacities and milk is processed according to the plant capacity. They face also the marketing problems. Their customers are small shops in urban areas but not in the main regions. They usually have several month delay payments to farmers, who on the other hand do not have the opportunity to buy feed and other materials for their animals.

On the other hand, they are much less demanding in terms of raw milk quality, as compared with larger and more formalized dairy plants: they measure only density and fat content of milk, but do not test the milk for SCC and microbiological load; in order to ensure food safety, they apply pasteurization for several minutes, thus affecting quality; the water used for dairy processing is not pre-treated; inputs and technological management are approximate. Wastewater management is not applied.[58]

The Hasanaj family established the Veleçiku dairy facility in the late 2000s, marking the beginning of a transformative journey for the local dairy value chain. As the first and only dairy in the area, it provided a much-needed market for local farmers, enabling them to expand their livestock and secure a stable income. The presence of Veleçiku has transformed the local dairy value chain, allowing farming families to increase their livestock holdings, including cows, sheep, and goats, and secure a reliable source of income. With a guaranteed market for their milk, local farmers have found stability in dairy production, strengthening their economic resilience.

Veleçiku has embraced both tradition and innovation in cheese-making. While they continue to produce traditional white cheese, they have also introduced unique, artisanal cheeses, including spicy cheese, sage cheese, nut cheese, sesame cheese, dried tomato cheese, etc. This commitment to quality and creativity has set their products apart, making Veleçiku cheese a recognized brand beyond their community.

Thanks to its distinct taste and growing reputation, Veleçiku cheese is now widely available, reaching shops, markets, supermarkets, and restaurants in Tirana, Durrës, Shkodër, and beyond. What started as a small family-run dairy has evolved into a successful agribusiness, demonstrating the power of local entrepreneurship in driving rural economic development and sustainable dairy farming.The dairy value chain holds significant growth potential, with Veleçiku planning to expand operations through IPARD funding once the program becomes available again.

The market can absorb more high-quality dairy products, creating an opportunity to increase production and boost incomes for farming families. However, several structural and technical challenges hinder this growth, requiring targeted interventions to ensure sustainability and stronger participation of women in the value chain.

Agro Reçi Dairy is a key player in the dairy value chain of Malësi e Madhe, working closely with 25 farming families to source high-quality milk. The dairy has created a stable market for local farmers, enabling them to sustain and expand their livestock production while securing a reliable income. Similar to Veleçiku Dairy, Agro Reçi faces challenges related to milk supply, traceability, and fluctuating market conditions. The majority of farmers still rely on manual milking and outdated plastic containers, which impacts milk quality and food safety. Additionally, the lack of farm management knowledge and extension services limits productivity and prevents farmers from adopting Good Dairy Farming Practices.

For Veleçiku and Agro Reçi dairies, expanding production depends on ensuring a steady supply of high-quality milk. However, fluctuating prices and unfair competition create instability for farmers, while labor shortages due to migration further strain operations. Addressing these issues will require investments in modern equipment, structured training programs, and better market access. A small laboratory unit for milk quality control and traceability, in the dairy facilities, could significantly improve compliance with market standards and enhance consumer confidence in local dairy products.

58. Ibid.

2.2 LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The legal framework governing livestock and dairy farming in Albania is structured through a combination of national laws, government regulations, and EU alignment processes. The legal framework focuses on agricultural development, livestock welfare, food safety, and sustainable farming practices. The Strategy on Agriculture, Rural Development and Fisheries is a national policy with a cross-sectoral approach. The timeframe of the policy is 7 years between 2021 and 2027. The purposes of this policy are to ensure the sustainable development of the agri-food sector to meet the needs of people facing medium and long-term challenges related to food security, livelihoods, climate change, and biodiversity loss, and to develop rural households and become more competitive in rural areas, based on policies that support sustainable use of natural resources, efficient use of agricultural and fishing inputs, and agricultural knowledge and innovation.[59] Law No. 9441, dated November 11, 2005, "On the production, collection, processing, and marketing of milk and milk-based products in Albania". The primary objectives of this law are to ensure the proper production of milk on farms, its collection, processing, and marketing of both raw and processed milk, as well as milk-based products. The law aims to maintain controlled quality in the production and marketing processes, meeting the required standards for both domestic and international markets. It also focuses on regulating the licensing of dairy farms and the centers responsible for milk collection, standardization, and processing. Another key goal is to guarantee consumer safety by ensuring that milk and its derivative products meet stringent safety standards, protecting the health and well-being of the public.[60]

Law No.10465 dated 29.9.2011, "On the veterinary service in the Republic of Albania". The Law sets out the framework for the protection of animal health and well-being according to the WOAH and EU standards and the organization, functioning and financing of the veterinary service and inspectorate and protection of public health against zoonotic diseases transmitted from animals.[61]

Law No. 9863/2022 "*On food*". This Law aims at ensuring high levels of protection of human health and consumers' interests with respect to food products. It lays down rules governing food hygiene, business operators' responsibilities, food quality standards, registration of geographical designations of origin, food labelling and marketing standards. The Law also defines the system of food inspection and sets up the National Food Authority. Final provisions deal with offences and penalties.

Law No. 38/2013 amending Law No. 9693 "*On the pasture fund*". This Law concerns the administration and protection of pastures and meadows. It defines tasks and duties of central and local government bodies in this sector and makes provision on specialized research institutions.[62]

Law No. 10431/2011 "*On protected areas*". Protects the environment and biodiversity in Albania, regulating the use of land for farming and ensuring that pastures used for livestock do not negatively impact protected areas and natural habitats. The Law sets out the framework for providing a high-level protection for the environment, its preservation and improvement, prevention and reduction of the human health-associated risks and improvement of the life quality of today and next generations as well as ensuring sustainable development.[63]

As Albania progresses toward EU membership, it is aligning its agricultural and livestock legislation with EU regulations to ensure access to European markets. This includes adopting EU standards for food safety, animal welfare, sustainable farming practices, and market access. Albanian laws on dairy and livestock production are increasingly in line with EU laws governing animal health, veterinary checks, traceability, and hygiene standards. Key changes focus on improving food safety, ensuring humane treatment of animals, promoting sustainable farming, and implementing stricter controls on animal health and veterinary inspections.

59. See: https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/alb211951.pdf
60. See: http://aku.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/LIGJI-Nr.9441-per-qumshtin.pdf
61. See: https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/alb113038.pdf
62. See:https://www.fao.org/faolex/results/details/en/c/LEX-FAOC132117/#:~:text=Law%20No.%2038/2013%20amending%20Law%20No.%209693%20on%20the%20Pasture%20Fund
63. See: https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/alb112561.pdf

2.3 SUPPORT AND CONTROL SERVICES

The Livestock Production Sector, in alignment with the requirements of Article 95 of the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) and in support of the Government's program, aims to analyze, identify, and develop sectorial policies and strategies for the development of livestock farming. This includes guiding and supporting local and national efforts to meet market demands for livestock products through the rational use of resources and the introduction of new techniques and technologies in production.[64] The sector focuses on:

- Harmonizing legislation with EU standards in the context of development and integration policies, through the proposal, development, and implementation of laws and sublegal acts in the field of livestock farming.
- Developing policies and programs for the improvement of animal breeding and production.
- Preparing an appropriate legal framework for the implementation of development policies in the livestock sector.
- Strengthening monitoring systems and enforcing animal husbandry standards.
- Promoting and consolidating sustainable livestock production systems, including specialized farms and industrial complexes for egg, meat, and feed production.
- Properly managing cultivated and indigenous animal genetic resources.
- Improving the control system for the quality and marketing of animal breeds in line with established standards.
- Evaluating trends in livestock development through studies, analyses, and setting priorities for livestock production.

The Livestock Production Sector operates based on the Law No. 9426, dated October 6, 2005, "On animal husbandry" (amended by Law No. 9864, dated January 28, 2008) and several other laws, including Law No. 10137, dated May 11, 2009, regarding licenses, authorizations, and permits in Albania, as well as a series of secondary legal acts. The institutions involved in implementing livestock-related objectives are:

- The General Directorate of Agricultural Policies within the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, which is the competent authority for livestock activities, through:
  - The Livestock Production Sector
  - Livestock specialists in Regional Agricultural Directorates
  - Agricultural Technology Transfer Centers
  - Public and/or private advisory services

The Livestock Production Sector is responsible for the sustainable development of livestock production in the country through the creation of legislation, sectoral strategies, and development policies, as well as programs for the protection, improvement, and preservation of the quality of animal genetic resources. Its goal is to promote the growth of livestock production, the establishment and spread of breed values, and the preservation of the genetic diversity of farm animals. The Livestock Production Sector is responsible for:

- Developing strategies and policies for the livestock sector
- Monitoring, evaluating, and systematically renewing policies and strategies related to livestock production
- Conducting necessary analyses for policy development and creating programs for implementing livestock development policies for the proper breeding of animals

64. See: https://www.bujqesia.gov.al/bujqesia-dhe-blegtoria/

- Drafting and harmonizing legislation in the livestock sector
- Evaluating genetic progress to determine the profitability of breeds, setting priorities for breed management strategies
- Identifying indigenous and cultivated genetic resources and proposing protective measures for them
- Monitoring and implementing legislation on animal breeding and genetic improvement, as well as protecting and developing indigenous genetic resources, and implementing measures related to animal breeding standards.

Regional Directorates of Agriculture (RDA): At the Regional Directorates of Agriculture, livestock specialists (zootechnic experts) carry out their activities ensuring:

- The implementation of legislation in the livestock sector
- Meeting the conditions for sustainable breeding of farm animals
- Breed improvement
- Animal feed and nutrition
- Trade of breeding materials

Private Zootechnical Service: The Private Zootechnical Service operates in the field of animal reproduction, where 480 qualified inseminators, certified by the Agricultural Technology Transfer Centers (public service), conduct their activities. The Private Zootechnical Service operates within farms, livestock facilities, and animal breeding organizations, with its program approved by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development.

The five Agricultural Technology Transfer Centers (QTTB)[65] 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, Food, and Consumer Protection." The main responsibilities of the QTTBs include:

- Identifying, testing, adapting, and introducing new agricultural methods and inputs into farming practices.
- Developing technological packages for key agricultural crops and livestock breeding.
- Conducting research and testing on farms to address issues raised by farmers in the respective regions.
- Providing training for agricultural specialists, farmers, agricultural science students, and other interested parties.
- Ensuring technical expertise for advisory service structures and farmers.
- Demonstrating new cultivation technologies for agricultural crops and livestock breeding.
- Preparing and publishing informative materials for agricultural specialists and farmers.
- Supporting policymaking by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) in the areas of agriculture, food, consumer protection, and rural development.

The Agricultural Technology Transfer Centers in Fushë-Krujë and Korçë are structures for the transfer of livestock technologies under the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. The Fushë-Krujë QTTB is the National Reference Center (NRC) for:

- Controlling the feed used in livestock production;
- Controlling of breeding materials (semen, eggs, embryos). QTTBs perform their activities in accordance with policies for the development of livestock production.

The Advisory Service: The Advisory Service is involved in the structures of the Regional Directorates of Agriculture (DRB), where zootechnic experts operate, providing guidance and services at the local (communal) level.

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

The Livestock Council: The Livestock Council is an advisory body appointed by the Minister for a four-year term with the possibility of re-election, in accordance with Article 73 of Law No. 9864, dated 28.01.2008, "On amendments to Law No. 9426, dated 06.10.2005, 'On livestock breeding'." The Council's responsibilities include:

- Advising the Minister on livestock-related policies
- Offering opinions on:
  - Agricultural policies regulating the livestock sector
  - Long-term development programs
  - Proposed breed programs for approval
  - Annual reports on activities related to breed programs
  - Important regulations in the livestock sector
  - Recognition of indigenous breeds
  - Animal feed and nutrition
  - Changes in or introduction of new methods for breed valuation and animal assessment.

Legislative measures: The Livestock Production Sector, following the commitments stemming from the implementation of the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA), has aimed to implement several policies related to the adoption of a series of legislative initiatives aimed at aligning national legislation with EU standards.

In the legislative measures, the process of harmonizing the legal framework has focused on the development of basic legislation in livestock production related to the zootechnical standards for purebred reproductive animals. It also includes setting criteria for the use of purebred animals for breeding purposes, as well as establishing zootechnical standards and conditions for the trade of breeding materials, including requirements for the use of purebred animals for natural breeding and/or artificial insemination, and for the use of their sperm.

Legislative measures will further aim to align Albanian legislation in the livestock sector with EU regulations and improve inter-institutional coordination for its implementation.

The current policies in the Livestock Production Sector primarily focus on increasing the number of livestock (cattle and small ruminants) within livestock farms, aiming to consolidate these farms and orient them towards the market. Additionally, the support for the production of purebred livestock aims to create and promote breed associations and the development of a domestic market for animals with identified genetic value.

Legislation on Livestock Production

1. Law No. 9426, dated 06.10.2005, "On livestock breeding," amended by Law No. 9864, dated 28.01.2008 "On amendments and additions to Law No. 9426, dated 06.10.2005, 'On Livestock Breeding,'" and Law No. 10137, dated 11.05.2009, "On amendments to the legislation in force regarding licenses, authorizations, and permits in the Republic of Albania."

2. Ministerial Order No. 4, dated 09.09.2008, approving the regulation on "Minimum standards for breeding of domestic animals (Minimum standards for the breeding of cattle—calves)."

3. Decision of the Council of Ministers No. 1708, dated 29.12.2008, "On the implementation of programs for the in-situ conservation of indigenous livestock breeds."

4. Decision of the Council of Ministers No. 436, dated 02.06.2010, "On amendments to Decision No. 1634, dated 17.12.2008, of the Council of Ministers, 'On the procedures and methods for financial support for the preservation of the genetic reserve of indigenous livestock breeds.'"

5. Ministerial Order No. 3, dated 05.08.2008, approving the regulation on "certification of purebred animals of cattle, sheep, goats, horses, and pigs, and their sperm, eggs, and embryos."

6. Ministerial Order No. 1, dated 04.03.2009, approving the regulation on "Standards for breeding of pigs and poultry for reproduction."

7. Ministerial Order No. 2, dated 22.07.2008, approving the regulation on "Reproduction of farm animals, production, and trade of breeding materials."

8. Ministerial Order No. 422, dated 17.12.2009, approving the regulation on "Conditions for the registration of purebred breeders of cattle, sheep, goats, horses, pigs, and hybrid pigs in the genealogical register."

9. Ministerial Order No. 83, dated 16.03.2010, approving the regulation on "animal breeding organizations."

10. Ministerial Order No. 300, dated 08.10.2010, approving the regulation on "Methods for measuring and evaluating production and other traits, as well as methods for evaluating the genetic values of purebred cattle breeders."

11. Ministerial Order No. 333, dated 17.11.2010, approving the regulation on "Methods for measuring and evaluating production and other traits, as well as methods for evaluating the genetic values of purebred sheep and goats."

12. Ministerial Order No. 332, dated 17.11.2010, approving the regulation on "Methods for measuring and evaluating production and other traits, as well as methods for evaluating the genetic values of purebred pigs and hybrid pigs."

13. Ministerial Order No. 303, dated 04.11.2011, approving the regulation on "Zootechnical standards for purebred reproductive cattle species."

14. Ministerial Order No. 318, dated 14.11.2011, approving the regulation on "Zootechnical standards for purebred reproductive sheep and goat species."

15. Ministerial Order No. 6, dated 09.01.2012, approving the regulation on "Determining criteria for the use of purebred cattle for breeding purposes."

16. Ministerial Order No. 360, dated 27.12.2011, approving the regulation on "Determining criteria for the use of purebred sheep and goats for breeding purposes."

17. Ministerial Order No. 237, dated 26.07.2012, approving the regulation on "Zootechnical standards for purebred pigs for breeding purposes."

18. Ministerial Order No. 298, dated 10.10.2012, approving the regulation on "Determining criteria for the use of purebred pigs for breeding purposes."

19. Ministerial Order No. 346, dated 13.12.2012, approving the regulation on "Determining criteria for the use of hybrid pigs for breeding purposes."

The Veterinary Service in Albania is regulated by Law No. 10465, adopted on 29.09.2011, which aims to protect the health and welfare of animals, as well as control infectious diseases in animals. The main authority in this field is the Directorate of the Veterinary Service (DSHV), which is responsible for:

- Development of health policies and strategies for animals:
  - Creating programs for the prevention and control of infectious diseases in animals.
  - Proposing improvements to veterinary legislation in line with European Union legislation.
  - Monitoring the epidemiological situation of infectious diseases and informing the relevant institutions.

- Supervision of veterinary activities:
  - Control of sanitary-veterinary conditions and food safety for animals.
  - Registration of farms and livestock facilities, entities that trade animals, and individuals who transport animals.
  - Supervising the work of official veterinarians and monitoring animal health in rural and public areas.

- Regional Veterinary Service:
  - The regional veterinary service is organized under the Regional Directorates of Agriculture and has representatives in each district of Albania. They perform functions such as controlling sanitary conditions, protecting against infectious diseases, and monitoring animal husbandry conditions.

- Animal identification and registration system:
  - This sector is responsible for the identification and registration of animals and livestock farms, as well as the implementation of national legislation regarding these processes.

- Control of animal trade and transport:
  - The veterinary service supervises the trade and transport of animals and embryonic products to ensure that they meet safety and animal welfare requirements.

- **Monitoring and control of infectious diseases:**
  - The veterinary service is responsible for monitoring parasitic and infectious diseases and implementing measures to prevent and control them.
  - In this context, the DSHV is a key structure to ensure the health of animals and protect against diseases, aiming to safeguard public health and the sustainable development of the livestock sector.

The Institute of Food Safety and Veterinary Services (ISUV) is the national reference laboratory center for veterinary services (according to Law No. 10465). It operates under the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development and is responsible for developing strategies for tracking and combating infectious and parasitic diseases in land animals, aquatic animals, and poultry, in collaboration with the Directorate of Veterinary Services (DSHV). The Institute conducts veterinary diagnoses and health prophylactic tests for animals in accordance with the national program. It also conducts testing programs for controlling epizootic diseases, veterinary medicines, and general disease diagnoses. Additionally, it carries out testing of food products of animal origin in cooperation with the Institute of Public Health. ISUV collaborates with FAO, WHO, OIE, and other reference laboratories for confirming various infectious diseases.

The Department of Animal Health at ISUV consists of six sectors: bacteriology, virology, parasitology, mycology, veterinary epidemiology, and veterinary medicine control. This department employs 28 individuals, including 23 specialists and 5 laboratory technicians. Also, part of ISUV is the sector for biopreparations production, which consists of 11 people, including 3 specialists and 8 laboratory technicians. ISUV follows a quality management system based on the ISO 17025:2005 standard. The Quality Management Department at ISUV consists of 5 specialists and 13 quality officers (one for each sector at ISUV). Currently, 6 tests have been accredited by the General Directorate of Accreditation (the national accreditation body), and these tests have also been accredited by an external accreditation body (Accredia – the national accreditation body in Italy).

The State Veterinary Control Laboratory (LSHKV) is part of the veterinary service and is responsible for controlling veterinary medical products (medications and bioproducts) produced domestically or imported. Biopreparations in the country are produced by units authorized by the Ministry and are used only after being tested by LSHKV. The fees for conducting analyses are set by a joint directive from the Minister of Agriculture and the Minister responsible for finance.

Main Laws on the Veterinary Service

Law No. 10465, dated 29.09.2011, "*On veterinary services in the Republic of Albania*":

- This law establishes the basic principles for the protection of animal health and welfare, according to the international standards of the World Organization for Animal Health (WOAH; formerly OIE) and the European Union.
- It regulates and organizes veterinary services, determining responsibilities, rules, and procedures to protect animal health and welfare.
- It ensures public health protection in Albania from zoonotic diseases transmitted by animals, in alignment with EU legislation.

Law No. 8702, dated 01.12.2000 "*On the system of identification and registration of animals*":

- The aim of this law is to regulate the movement of livestock through individual identification.
- It establishes the registration of livestock farms and assigns them a unique registration number.
- It ensures fast and accurate exchange of data on animal location for veterinary, zootechnical, and statistical purposes.
- It regulates the relationship between the responsible state institution and livestock farm owners.

Decisions of the Council of Ministers (DCM)

- DCM No. 646 of 1995, "On the adaptation of EU directives in the field of seafood products".
- DCM No. 320, dated 19.03.2008, "On the system of identification of animals and the registration of livestock farms".
- DCM No. 198, dated 19.02.2009, "On an amendment to DCM No. 320, dated 19.03.2008, on the system of identification of animals and registration of livestock farms".
- DCM No. 831, dated 29.07.2009,"On an

addition to DCM No. 320, dated 19.03.2008, on the system of identification of animals and registration of livestock farms".

- DCM No. 408, dated 08.05.2013, "On compensation for culled animals".
- DCM No. 230, dated 20.03.2013, "On the determination of functions, specific duties, and standards of the local government veterinary service".
- DCM No. 41, dated 02.04.2013, "On the establishment of an inter-ministerial task force for the coordination and control of the oral vaccination campaign against rabies in Albania".
- DCM No. 283, dated 1.4.2015, "On the determination of types, rules, criteria, and procedures for the construction of facilities for the production, storage, and processing of agricultural and livestock products on agricultural land" (Amended by Decisions No. 592, dated 1.07.2015; No. 956, dated 25.11.2015; No. 734, dated 20.10.2016; No. 373, dated 5.6.2024). This decision sets out the legal framework governing the construction of facilities intended for the production, storage, and processing of agricultural and livestock products on agricultural land. It establishes the types of permitted facilities, specifying which constructions are allowed within agricultural zones, rules and technical criteria for ensuring environmental sustainability, food safety, and compliance with national and EU standards, and procedures for obtaining permits and approvals from relevant authorities.

Within the framework of the Stabilization and Association Agreement, its Article 70 regarding the alignment of legislation and Article 95 "Agriculture and the agro-industrial sector", several byelaws have been adopted in accordance with Law No. 9308, dated 04.11.2004 "On the veterinary service and inspection" and, later, following its abrogation, in line with Law No. 10465, dated 29.09.2011 "On veterinary services in the Republic of Albania." These acts aim to improve standards in animal health protection, especially regarding zoonotic diseases with a negative impact on human health, and to strengthen official control, enhancing the protection of public health and consumer interests.

The four Regional Agricultural Extension Agencies (AREB)[66], located in Lushnjë, Korçë, Tiranë, and Shkodër (which also covers Malësi e Madhe), 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:

- Provision of information and advisory services on the technical and technological development of farms to enhance competitiveness in agriculture.
- Provision of information and assistance to farmers in benefiting from national support schemes, IPARD, and other projects in agriculture and rural development.
- Encouragement and support for the creation and functioning of various forms of farmer cooperation.
- Organizing and conducting professional training for farmers in agriculture and rural development.
- Ensuring access to information on standards related to the environment, quality, marketing, organic farming, and products with geographical indications.
- Informing and advising farmers on the selection and use of agricultural machinery and equipment, providing free technical assistance.

The AREB local office in Malësi e Madhe is composed of ten extension officers (three women and seven men).

66. 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

The National Authority for Veterinary and Plant Protection (AKVMB)[67] 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 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 through the General Directorate, and at the regional level via four regional veterinary and plant protection directorates in Elbasan, Vlorë, Tirana, and Shkodër (which covers also Malësi e Madhe), along with direct veterinary service units. Regional directorates operate within their jurisdiction and carry out the following tasks:

- Assessing the needs and issues related to veterinary and plant protection services, proposing solutions to the General Directorate.
- Planning and submitting needs assessments for veterinary and plant protection services to the General Directorate.
- Coordinating and monitoring the delivery of veterinary and plant protection services in their territory.
- Preparing reports on sample collection, pathological materials, and test results for suspected and confirmed diseases.
- Providing periodic reports on plant infection rates and plant product status.
- Detailing and implementing work plans approved by the General Directorate in compliance with current legal frameworks.
- Issuing documents and certificates according to legal provisions, sub-legal acts, and authorizations from the General Directorate.
- Performing additional tasks assigned by law or the General Directorate.

The National Food Authority (AKU)[68] 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 "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

67. See: https://akvmb.gov.al/
68. See: https://aku.gov.al/

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.

Certification HACCP[69] 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[70] and 852/2004,[71] as well as National Guideline No. 20 of the Minister of Agriculture, Food, and Consumer Protection, dated November 25, 2010.[72] The HACCP

Women play key roles in production but lack support to meet food safety standards, limiting market access.

certification process typically takes between 14 to 30 days, depending on the specific requirements of the business, and includes:

- **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.

69. See: https://aku.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Udhezim_Nr.20.pdf
70. See: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32002R0178
71. See: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32004R0852
72. See: https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/alb144203.pdf

2.4 RESEARCH FINDINGS

Based on the fieldwork, direct observations, and interviews conducted with key value chain actors—including dairy producers, processors, and technical specialists—a number of key findings have been identified. These findings highlight both the opportunities for growth and sustainability within the milk value chain, as well as the persistent limitations and gender-related challenges that must be addressed.

Opportunities:

Investments in infrastructure, such as milk collection systems, cooling tanks, and testing laboratories, present a significant opportunity to improve milk quality, ensure food safety, and enhance compliance with health standards.

Strengthening value chain governance and establishing traceability mechanisms can help address structural weaknesses in the milk supply chain. These measures would contribute to greater transparency, quality assurance, and long-term sector sustainability. Expanding milk supply from local dairy farmers would increase production capacity for existing facilities such as Veleçiku and Agro Reçi. This expansion can be market-driven, supported by strong consumer preference for domestic dairy products, and holds potential for post-project sustainability.

Existing best practices in dairy farming, including the modern stable managed by Veleçiku, serve as replicable models for smallholder farmers in the region, offering practical examples of scalable, high-quality production.

Women's engagement across the value chain—from animal care and milking to milk delivery—represents a significant but underleveraged asset. While women actively contribute to daily operations, they often lack access to tools, equipment, and decision-making power. With targeted training and support, women could enhance their productivity, improve quality standards, and gain greater control over income and resources. Improved adoption of Good Dairy Farming Practices among smallholders offers potential for both quality improvement and increased yields. Targeted interventions in animal care, hygiene, environmental management, and socio-economic skills could enhance sustainability and resilience. Specific opportunities exist in the following domains:

- **Animal care** – Ensuring adequate nutrition, veterinary care, and humane treatment of livestock.
- **Milking hygiene** – Promoting cleanliness in handling and equipment to ensure product safety.
- **Environmental management** – Implementing sustainable waste and water management systems.
- **Socio-economic management** – Enhancing farmers' capacity in business planning, budgeting, and accessing markets.

Limitations:

Regarding the LIMITATIONS faced by the value chain, they can be summarized as follows:

- A significant portion of dairy farming activities remains informal. Many producers—particularly women—are not registered with tax authorities or local institutions. As a result, they are excluded from formal support systems, including subsidies, health insurance, pensions, and other national or donor-funded programs.
- Small-scale farmers who own fewer than ten cattle or fewer than 100 small ruminants are ineligible for the 2025 agricultural support scheme.[73] This exclusion reduces access to essential financial support. Additionally, the milk supply chain is marked by a high level of informality, limited extension services, and weak governance—particularly in areas such as milk traceability and enforcement of quality control regulations.

73. See: https://azhbr.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/vendim-2025-03-06-150.pdf

- Raw milk quality assurance is weak. Many farms lack proper recordkeeping, and sampling methods are inconsistent or outdated. No laboratory testing is conducted at the dairy facility, and milking is often performed manually with outdated tools, raising contamination risks. In remote areas, underdeveloped milk collection systems and the absence of cooling tanks compromise milk safety. Seasonal fluctuations and inconsistent milk supply further constrain production capacity, especially in small local dairy facilities.

- A general lack of awareness and technical knowledge among farmers regarding Good Dairy Farming Practices contributes to low milk yield and quality, especially for women farmers. Poor hygiene during milking, limited understanding of food safety standards, and ineffective waste management are widespread. This is particularly evident in small ruminant farms.

- Women in the value chain face hygienically unsafe conditions and demanding working hours. They lack control over productive assets and have limited access to equipment that would improve efficiency. Youth participation in dairy farming is also minimal, largely due to high migration rates and a lack of targeted incentives, undermining the long-term sustainability of the sector.

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

Building on the socio-economic and institutional limitations described above, gender-specific barriers further hinder the inclusive growth of the dairy sector in Malësi e Madhe. Insights from field interviews and focus group discussions underscore the persistent gender disparities across all stages of the value chain. Women play an active role across all stages of the milk value chain, including animal husbandry, milking, and the transportation of milk to collection centers and dairy processing facilities. Despite their central role, women have limited control over productive assets, decision-making authority, and access to critical inputs such as modern equipment, training, or financial services. Their contributions are often undervalued and undercompensated.

The data show that women typically rely on intermediaries – mostly men – to sell their milk, negotiate prices, and make business decisions. This dependency reinforces their exclusion from financial planning, market linkages, and formal recognition as economic actors. Furthermore, women are seldom represented in cooperative structures or local farming networks, limiting their visibility and ability to advocate for their needs.

While many women possess strong foundational skills in dairy farming, they lack opportunities for technical upskilling, particularly in animal health, hygiene standards, and entrepreneurial competencies. The absence of tailored training programs and access to tools not only hampers productivity but also increases their workload and reinforces gendered labor burdens.

Compounding this issue is the demographic challenge posed by rural youth migration. The outflow of younger generations reduces the labor force available for dairy farming and creates a gap in generational knowledge transfer. Together, these factors threaten the long-term sustainability and gender equity of the milk value chain in the region.

Financing opportunities for dairy farmers

Access to finance remains one of the most significant constraints for smallholder dairy farmers in Malësi e Madhe. For many rural families, dairy farming is the primary or only source of income, with profits dependent on milk sales to local processing facilities. However, a large portion of these producers—particularly those managing fewer than 10 cattle or 100 small ruminants—face considerable financial limitations.

These challenges are compounded by their exclusion from the 2025 national agricultural support scheme, which restricts their eligibility for direct subsidies and institutional assistance. The informality of the milk supply chain and the absence of formal governance—especially regarding traceability and enforcement of quality standards—further diminish opportunities to secure external financing.

One of the key barriers is the lack of formal contracts between farmers and dairy facilities, which makes it difficult for producers to demonstrate business viability. Without structured agreements, transparent pricing, or production records, smallholders are often viewed as high-risk borrowers by financial institutions. In this context, microcredit has emerged as an important alternative financing mechanism. Microfinance institutions offer small, accessible loans that are better

suited to farmers who lack collateral, formal business registration, or credit history. These loans can be used to purchase essential tools, invest in infrastructure, or expand production.

However, several limitations hinder the effectiveness of microcredit in rural areas. First, awareness of available microfinance products remains low, particularly in remote and mountainous areas. Second, the interest rates offered by microcredit institutions are often higher than those of traditional banks, increasing the financial burden on small farmers. Third, many farmers (especially women farmers) have limited financial literacy and lack the knowledge needed to assess loan conditions, manage repayments, or evaluate investment returns, increasing the risk of over-indebtedness.

Addressing these issues requires targeted support to increase awareness, build capacity, and develop tailored financial products. By improving financial inclusion, smallholder dairy farmers—particularly women—could enhance their productivity, resilience, and long-term economic independence.

2.5 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STRENGTHENING THE MILK VALUE CHAIN

To unlock the full potential of the dairy sector in Malësi e Madhe and ensure its inclusive, sustainable development, a series of targeted interventions is recommended. These actions aim to improve productivity, enhance milk quality, promote gender equality, expand access to finance, and build long-term sector resilience.

1. Enhance the Application of Good Dairy Farming Practices

Training and capacity-building programs should be delivered regularly to smallholder farmers – particularly women – focusing on best practices in animal care, milking hygiene, waste management, and animal welfare. In addition, pilot farms (women-owned) should be established to demonstrate modern equipment, proper housing, and hygienic milking processes. These sites can serve as role models to encourage broader adoption of Good Dairy Farming Practices (GDFP).

Access to basic tools and modern equipment for women farmers, including milking machines, cooling tanks, gloves, and safe storage containers, should be facilitated through microcredit schemes and municipal partnerships. Supporting women in particular with this equipment will not only enhance productivity but also reduce the physical burden of their work.

2. Improve Infrastructure and Milk Quality Control Systems

Investment in infrastructure is essential to improve both the quantity and quality of milk production. Setting up a milk testing laboratory within the dairy facility is a key measure to ensure compliance with safety standards and to empower women with the skills and capacity to perform quality testing. This should be coupled with improvements in the raw milk collection system—especially in mountainous areas where transport is slow and milk is vulnerable to spoilage.

Introducing a hygienic and efficient milk transport system, and equipping farms with cooling tanks, will help minimize post-milking losses and maintain product integrity throughout the supply chain.

To ensure that women farmers—who are often engaged in small-scale dairy farming and milk handling—benefit equitably from these improvements, targeted support should be provided to enhance their access to on-farm cooling equipment and shared transport systems. This includes subsidized or collective-use cooling tanks for women-led farms, strengthening women's cooperatives, and ensuring their inclusion in technical training on hygiene, milk quality, and infrastructure use.

3. Expand Access to Financial Services for Small Farmers

It is essential to increase financial inclusion for smallholder farmers through tailored microcredit schemes. These should be designed with affordable interest rates and flexible terms for purchasing equipment, improving stables, or enhancing productivity. Financial literacy training should also be

provided to ensure women farmers understand how to manage loans, assess repayment plans, and make informed investment decisions.

In parallel, efforts should be made to advocate for the inclusion of small-scale farmers—especially women—in national agricultural support schemes. This inclusion would significantly improve their financial sustainability and access to public subsidies and grants.

4. Promote Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality

Women should be supported to take on more active roles in decision-making processes within households, farms, and local institutions. Initiatives to establish women's producer groups, cooperatives, or savings circles can promote knowledge sharing, collective action, and joint investments. Equipping women with tools and modern milking equipment will reduce their workload, increase efficiency, and improve the quality of milk delivered.

5. Strengthen Local and Institutional Capacity

The capacity of local agricultural extension services should be enhanced to provide technical support, regular field visits, and ongoing advisory services to dairy farmers. These services are particularly important in remote and underserved communities. Collaborative platforms should be established to connect farmers, dairy processors, local authorities, and financial institutions, encouraging information exchange and coordinated action.

6. Build Environmental and Climate Resilience

To prepare farmers for climate-related challenges, sustainable and climate-smart practices must be promoted. Training programs should focus on water-efficient irrigation, fodder production, and the use of drought-resistant crops. Proper waste management systems, composting techniques, and the use of organic fertilizers can further reduce the environmental impact of dairy farming. These interventions should not only mitigate negative environmental effects but also enhance long-term farm viability.

Given that women often play a key role in on-farm activities such as feeding livestock, water use, and waste handling, it is essential that they are actively included in climate-smart agriculture training. Tailored capacity-building sessions for women farmers—delivered in accessible formats and locations—should address their specific roles, constraints, and knowledge gaps. Moreover, women's participation in designing and implementing these sustainable practices can lead to more inclusive and effective climate adaptation strategies.

Strong multi-actor partnerships are crucial for advancing the Dairy Value Chain in Malësi e Madhe, enabling women farmers to benefit from solutions to local challenges and to access emerging market opportunities.

7. Ensure Labor Sustainability and Youth Engagement

Efforts to improve labor conditions in dairy farming must include the introduction of labor-saving technologies that specifically reduce the physical burden on women—who often perform the most labor-intensive and time-consuming tasks such as milking, feeding, and cleaning. Ensuring fair compensation and decent working conditions for all workers is also critical. At the same time, strategies should be developed to engage youth through vocational training, internships, and awareness campaigns highlighting modern opportunities in the dairy sector. These strategies should actively promote the inclusion of young women, by addressing barriers to their participation, featuring female role models, and creating safe and supportive training and work environments. Creating youth-oriented career pathways in agriculture will help counteract rural migration and ensure a stable labor force in the future. This intervention plan offers a comprehensive and gender-sensitive roadmap for strengthening the dairy value chain in Malësi e Madhe. By simultaneously addressing production bottlenecks, social inequalities, environmental risks, and financial access, the proposed actions aim to enhance the sector's long-term resilience, inclusivity, and profitability.

Table 7. Recommendations for the Milk Value Chain

No.	Activity	Impact		
		Short-Term	Medium-Term	Long-Term
1	**Enhance the knowledge and application of good dairy farming practices to increase productivity and ensure better quality milk and dairy products.**			
1.1	Training and Capacity Building o Organize training workshops for farmers, especially women, on good dairy farming practices, including animal care, milking hygiene, and socio-economic management. o Provide training on modern milking techniques and the importance of hygiene standards in dairy farming. o Offer specialized training in animal husbandry, waste management, manure management, and animal welfare.	X	X	X
1.2	Pilot Programs for Good Dairy Practices o Implement pilot programs in selected farms where farmers can showcase modern practices and act as role models for the community. o Introduce modern stables and cooling tanks at pilot farms to demonstrate their effectiveness.	X	X	X
1.3	Support for Equipment and Tools o Support access to milking equipment, cooling tanks, and hygienic containers through microcredit schemes, partnerships with municipality, projects and local grants. o Support with basic tools (such as gloves, proper containers, etc.) to women farmers to reduce the risk of contamination.	X	X	X
2	**Improve the infrastructure and quality monitoring systems to enhance production capacity and product quality**			
2.1	Support establishing a testing laboratory to ensure the quality and safety of raw milk before processing in the dairy facilities.	X	X	X
2.2	Develop Raw Milk Monitoring System o Improve milk collection infrastructure, particularly in mountainous areas, to ensure better access and reduce milk spoilage. o Support the development of a transport system for timely and hygienic delivery of milk to the dairy facility.		X	X
3	**Improve farmers' access to financial resources to enhance their productivity and sustainability**			
3.1	Promote Financing Schemes: o Work with microcredit institutions to provide tailored financial products for small farmers, such as low-interest loans for equipment purchase and farm improvements. o Organize financial literacy training for farmers to understand the microcredit system, loan application processes, and repayment plans.	X	X	X
3.2	Advocate for the inclusion of small-sized farmers, especially women, in the agricultural support scheme to help them access necessary financial assistance		X	X
4	**Empower women and enhance gender equality**			
4.1	Promote Women's Leadership in Decision-Making o Facilitate women's involvement in decision-making processes, both at the farm level and within the dairy facility's management. o Create women's group for knowledge exchange, joint decision-making, and collective investments.		X	X

No.	Activity	Impact		
		Short-Term	Medium-Term	Long-Term
4.2	o Conduct women-only training sessions on advanced dairy farming techniques, asset management, and entrepreneurship. o Provide women with skills in managing milk quality, farm finances, and business strategies.		X	X
4.3	Support for Women's Access to Tools and Equipment o Ensure women have access to the tools and equipment they need to improve productivity and reduce their workload, such as milking machines, proper containers, and cooling tanks.	X	X	X
5	**Build local and institutional capacity to ensure long-term sustainability and resilience of the dairy farming**			
5.1	Enhance Extension Services and Increase Stakeholder Collaboration o Strengthen the local extension service infrastructure to provide ongoing support and advice to dairy farmers, particularly in remote areas. o Organize regular field visits, demonstrations, and farmer exchange programs to promote knowledge sharing. o Foster collaboration between dairy farmers, the dairy facility, agricultural authorities, and financial institutions to ensure long-term success and sustainability. o Advocate for better governance within the milk supply chain to enhance traceability and quality controls.	X	X	X
6	**Build resilience to environmental challenges and reduce the environmental impact of dairy farming**			
6.1	Promote Climate-Resilient Farming Practices o Introduce practices that help farmers adapt to climate change, such as water-efficient irrigation, improved fodder management, and climate-resilient crops. o Provide training on sustainable farming techniques to mitigate the impact of climate change on fodder cultivation.		X	X
6.2	Encourage Environmental Sustainability o Support the development of waste management and recycling systems on farms to reduce pollution. o Promote the use of organic and sustainable fertilizers and animal feed to lower environmental impacts.		X	X
7	**Ensure a stable and sustainable labor force by addressing migration issues and improving working conditions**			
7.1	Attract Youth to Dairy Farming o Develop incentives to encourage youth participation in dairy farming, such as scholarships for training programs, mentorship, and career development pathways in agriculture. o Promote the dairy sector as a viable career choice for young people by organizing awareness campaigns about opportunities in dairy farming.		X	X
7.2	Improve Working Conditions for Women: o Implement labor-saving technologies and practices, especially for women, to reduce their workload and improve working conditions. o Advocate for better labor rights and fair wages for women working in the dairy sector.		X	X

The success of the dairy GSVC in Malësi e Madhe relies on strong partnerships between key local actors, including the municipality, relevant sector agencies, local dairy facilities, and other sector's stakeholders. These collaborations are essential in addressing the challenges faced by small-scale dairy farmers, particularly women farmers, while capitalizing on existing strengths and market opportunities.

These recommendations are designed to provide holistic support to dairy farmers, with a strong emphasis on women's empowerment. They focus on improving dairy farming practices, enhancing infrastructure, facilitating financial access, promoting gender equality, and ensuring environmental sustainability. By tackling these key areas, the plan aims to build a more resilient, competitive, and profitable dairy value chain that recognizes and strengthens women's critical role in dairy farming.

A critical component of this approach is the active participation of women farmers, ensuring they have access to capacity-building initiatives, modern equipment, and financial support. Women are the backbone of dairy farming in Malësi e Madhe, engaging in animal care, milking, and milk delivery, yet they often lack control over assets, decision-making power, and access to resources. These recommendations prioritize training, financial inclusion, and cooperative organization to enhance their productivity, independence, and leadership within the dairy sector. By fostering collaboration, innovation, and sustainability, this intervention seeks to create long-term positive impacts for women farmers, smallholder families, local dairy businesses, and the broader rural economy in Malësi e Madhe.

Part 4
Annexes

Annex 1. Municipality of Malësi e Madhe: General Background

Malësi e Madhe is located in the north-western part of Albania, bordered to the north, north-west, and north-east by Montenegro, to the south-west by Lake Shkodra, and to the south and south-east by the Shkodra Municipality. The territory of the Municipality of Malësi e Madhe has an area of 951 km^2, which is divided into 6 Administrative Units: Kelmend, Kastrat, Shkrel, Koplik, Qendër, and Gruemirë, consisting of 2 towns, Koplik and Bajzë, as well as 56 villages. The municipality has a population of 21, 684 residents, with the highest population density concentrated in the lowland area of the municipality's territory.[74]

The municipality has economic, infrastructural, and social interactions with the Shkodra region and Montenegro, thereby creating a strong connection between these countries. In the western part of the municipality, the major infrastructural and economic axis passes through, linking Podgorica, passing through Malësi e Madhe, continuing to Shkodra, and then extending to Lezha, Tirana, and eventually to Durrës. Additionally, of great importance is the scenic route, an international road passing through the western region of Malësi e Madhe, creating a scenic link with Montenegro, which includes the Alpine territory in the Balkan Peace Park.

The Alpine-Lake itinerary is an important part of tourist routes due to the connection between lake tourism and mountain tourism. This itinerary includes various trails in Malësi e Madhe, extending to the areas of Guci, continuing to the mountain areas of Kolashin in Montenegro, to the north of the Municipality of Malësi e Madhe, and to the east of the municipality, continuing with Tropoja to connect with Fierza and Kukës, where it also intersects with the boat route.[75] This boat itinerary follows water routes, ending the journey on the shores of Lake Shkodra and further to the Buna River.

The territory of the municipality has a very low population density and over 70% of it is natural, metabolic movements are also limited and scattered, as are the distribution of settlements. From a metabolic analysis, it is very important to preserve water resources, especially underground water sources, as the impact of pollution would have consequences for the Lake Shkodra ecosystem. After agriculture, tourism has the greatest potential for development, which is why flows have been analyzed not only in terms of movement but also the location of areas with tourist potential and regions that should be preserved as high natural potential.

Demography and Population

According to the 2023 Census, the municipality has a total population of 21,684, with a slightly higher number of males (10,879 males) compared to females (10,805 females).

74. See: https://bashkiamalesiemadhe.gov.al/
75. Territorial Development Strategy, Municipality of Malësi e Madhe.

Table 8. Population by age group and gender

Age Group	Total Population	Males	Females
0-4	870	438	432
5-9	1,005	491	514
10-14	1,082	570	512
15-19	1,322	655	667
20-24	1,332	631	701
25-29	1,201	671	530
30-34	1,062	644	418
35-39	974	548	426
40-44	975	465	510
45-49	1,166	525	641
50-54	1,647	726	921
55-59	1,935	913	1,022
60-64	2,179	1,096	1,083
65-69	1,660	835	825
70-74	1,229	656	573
75-79	904	473	431
80-84	721	328	393
85+	420	214	206
Total	**21,684**	**10,879**	**10,805**

Source: INSTAT 2024.

The total population of Malësi e Madhe in 2023 was 21,684. The data in the table illustrate the demographic structure, with the largest concentration of individuals in the 15-19 age group (1,322 people), highlighting a relatively young population structure. As age increases, there is a noticeable decline in the number of people, particularly in the older age groups. Additionally, the table reveals gender trends across different age categories. While males tend to dominate in younger age groups, females are more prevalent in the older age groups, especially after the 50-54 age range, where the female population significantly exceeds that of males. The 85+ age group shows an atypical trend, with a slightly higher number of males than females.

Table 9. Marital Status, 2023

Marital status	Total	Males	Females
Single	7,404	4,267	3,137
Married	12,414	6,158	6,256
Divorced/separated	120	64	56
Widowed	1,746	390	1,356

Source: INSTAT 2024.

In Malësi e Madhe, the singles population totals 7,404 individuals, with a higher proportion of males (4,267) compared to females (3,137), reflecting a gender disparity where men are more likely to remain unmarried. Married individuals constitute the largest group, comprising 12,414 people, with a nearly equal distribution between males (6,158) and females (6,256), suggesting gender parity in marital status. In contrast, the divorced or separated population is minimal, with only 120 individuals, with a slightly larger number of males (64) than females (56). The widowed population, however, reveals a significant gender imbalance, with 1,746 individuals, of whom the majority are females (1,356), compared to only 390 males.

Table 10. Population by family status, 2023

Family nuclei composition (2023)	Total	Married or cohabiting couples without children	Married or cohabiting couples with children	Single parent
Total family nuclei	6,558	2,837	3,174	547
No children	2,837	2,837	..	..
1 child	1,729	..	1,350	379
2 children	1,197	..	1,076	121
3+ children	795	..	748	47

Source: INSTAT 2024.

Family composition patterns in 2023 provides notable insights into household structures in Malësi e Madhe, which are essential for understanding socio-economic dynamics and gender roles within the community. The total number of family nuclei is 6,558 and they are categorized into three main groups: married or cohabiting couples without children, married or cohabiting couples with children, and single-parent households. Married or cohabiting couples without children form a substantial portion of the total, with 2,837 family nuclei. Couples with children account for 3,174nuclei, indicating the prevalence of child-rearing households in the region. Single-parent families, a smaller yet significant segment, total 547. Further analysis by number of children provides additional granularity. There is a total of 1,729 one-child households, with the majority consisting of married or cohabiting couples (1,350), while single-parent households account for 379 households. The total number of family nuclei with two children is 1,197, predominantly couples (1,076) and fewer single-parent households (121). Families with three or more children amount to 795 nuclei, mostly couples (748), with a minimal representation of single-parent households (47). These patterns highlight the predominance of nuclear families with children and the smaller proportion of single-parent households.

Table 11. Number and distribution of household members, 2023

AU	Total	Without a family nucleus	With one family nucleus	With two or more family nuclei
Malësi e Madhe	21,107	1,720	16,637	2,750
Gruemirë	6,630	495	5,194	941
Kastrat	4,335	378	3,442	515
Kelmend	1,464	125	1,181	158
Koplik	2,990	246	2,399	345
Qendër Koplik	3,610	282	2,832	496
Shkrel	2,078	194	1,589	295

Source: INSTAT 2024.

The data provides insights into the distribution of households across Malësi e Madhe and its administrative units in 2023. A total of 21,107 households are recorded in the municipality. Of these, 1,720 households have family nucleus, 16,637 have one family nucleus, and 2,750 have two or more family nuclei, indicating that most households in Malësi e Madhe are structured around a single-family unit.

Gruemirë represents the largest administrative unit with 6,630 households. Of these, 495 households lack a family nucleus, 5,194 households have one family nucleus, and 941 households have two or more family nuclei. This distribution highlights the predominance of single-family nucleus households in the area.

Kastrat comprises 4,335 households. Of these, 378 households lack a family nucleus, 3,442 households have one family nucleus, and 515 households contain two or more family nuclei. The data reflects a strong tendency towards single-family households.

In Kelmend, there are 1,464 households in total. Of these, 125 households do not have a family nucleus, 1,181 have one family nucleus, and only 158 have two or more family nuclei. The data suggests a smaller, more uniform household structure compared to other regions.

Koplik is home to 2,990 households. Of these, 246 do not have a family nucleus, 2,399 have one family nucleus, and 345 have two or more family nuclei. The majority of households are single-family units, with a smaller proportion of complex family structures.

Qendër Koplik has 3,610 households, with 282 having no family nucleus, 2,832 comprising one family nucleus, and 496 comprising two or more family nuclei. This distribution mirrors the overall trend of a high prevalence of single-family nucleus households.

In Shkrel, there are 2,078 households, of which 194 do not have a family nucleus, 1,589 consist of one family nucleus, and 295 have two or more family nuclei. Similarly, to the situation in other administrative units, single-family nucleus households dominate.

Across Malësi e Madhe, the predominant household type consists of those with one family nucleus, reflecting a traditional family structure. A smaller proportion of households do not have a family nucleus, indicating the presence of individuals or non-traditional living arrangements. Households with two or more family nuclei, although present, remain a minority, suggesting a lesser prevalence of extended family living in the municipality. This pattern is consistent across all administrative units, with Gruemirë having the highest concentration of households and Kelmend having the smallest.

Socio-Economic Context

The provision of social services in Malësi e Madhe focuses on promoting inclusivity, reducing poverty, and creating opportunities for sustainable development. Core initiatives include economic assistance programs, support with housing, and targeted interventions for families with special needs. These programs are vital in bridging the gaps in access to resources, particularly for inhabitants of remote areas who often face barriers to essential services.

Social Services and Economic Aid

The table provides a detailed demographic breakdown of the population in Malësi e Madhe Municipality for the year 2023. The total population of the municipality is 18,727, with 1,275 individuals (6.8%) identified as having disabilities.

Table 12. Population by AU, gender and disability status, 2023

Administrative Unit	Total population	With disabilities	Without disabilities	Males (total)	Males (with disabilities)	Males (without disabilities)	Females (total)	Females (with disabilities)	Females (without disabilities)
Malësi e Madhe	18,727	1,275	17,452	9,380	596	8,784	9,347	679	8,668
Gruemirë	5,656	424	5,232	2,695	196	2,499	2,961	228	2,733
Kastrat	3,727	270	3,457	1,838	122	1,716	1,889	148	1,741
Kelmend	1,251	77	1,174	620	35	585	631	42	589
Koplik	2,565	220	2,345	1,240	109	1,131	1,325	111	1,214
Qendër Koplik	3,135	158	2,977	1,511	66	1,445	1,624	92	1,532
Shkrel	2,393	126	2,267	1,476	68	1,408	917	58	859

Source: INSTAT 2024.

In terms of gender, the population is almost equally divided between males (9,380) and females (9,347). Among the males, 596 (6.4%) have disabilities, while 679 females (7.3%) report having disabilities, revealing a slightly higher incidence of disability among women.

From an examination of the population by administrative unit, Gruemirë has the largest population, with 5,656 inhabitants, of whom 424 (7.5%) are living with disabilities. The Kastrat administrative unit has 3,727 residents, of which 270 (7.2%) have a disability. Kelmend, with a population of 1,251, has 77 (6.2%) persons with disabilities, the smallest proportion in the municipality. Koplik, with a total of 2,565 residents, has 220 (8.6%) persons with disabilities, while Qendër Koplik has 3,135 residents, with 158 (5%) of them reporting some form of disability. Finally, Shkrel has a population of 2,393, with 126 (5.3%) persons with disabilities.

Table 13. Families benefiting economic assistance

Category	Total	Koplik	Kastrat	Shkrel	Gruemirë	Qendër	Kelmend
Applicant families	850	148	142	155	135	140	130
Beneficiary families	741	113	136	133	117	120	122
Rural beneficiaries (%)	87%	-	-	-	-	-	-
'NE' beneficiaries (6%)	58	10	11	8	10	9	10

Source: MTBP 2021-2023, Municipality of Malësi e Madhe.

Rural families make up 87% of the beneficiaries, highlighting the concentration of economic assistance in underserved, agricultural communities. In rural areas, women often manage household responsibilities, including childcare and subsistence farming. Targeting these beneficiaries could help empower women through income-generating activities or skills development. The 6% of beneficiaries classified as 'NE' (in "extreme need") indicate a critical subgroup requiring targeted support.

According to data provided by the municipality, there are 60 families in Malësi e Madhe[76] currently living in inadequate housing conditions and are in need of shelter. According to the information, no families currently benefit from existing housing programs in the municipality.

There are 1,284 individuals with disabilities in Malësi e Madhe, with a slightly higher number of females (682) compared to males (602). This may indicate that females might face a higher burden in managing disabilities, which can influence their access to services, economic participation, and well-being.

Table 14. Persons with disabilities by gender

Category	Total	Males	Females
Persons with disabilities	1,284	602	682
Visually impaired	346	164	182
Hearing impaired	335	161	174
Mobility/walking issues	931	399	532
Memory issues	285	141	144
Self-care Issues	403	188	215
Communication issues	256	125	131

Source: INSTAT 2024.

Vision impairments affect 346 individuals, with 164 males and 182 females. This suggests that women may have a slightly higher incidence of vision-related disabilities.

335 individuals suffer from hearing impairments, with 161 males and 174 females. Similar to vision impairments, more females are affected, indicating that women may face unique challenges related to communication, particularly in community and workplace settings.
The highest number of disabilities is related to walking, affecting 931 individuals in total. Of these, 399 are males, and 532 are females. This suggests a significant gender gap, with more women facing challenges related to mobility. 285 individuals have memory-related disabilities, with 141 males and 144 females. 403 individuals experience challenges with self-care, with 188 males and 215 females.
256 individuals have communication difficulties, with 125 males and 131 females. Similar to other categories, women experience a slightly higher rate of communication difficulties, which can impact their access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities.

Education

Educational attainment is a key indicator of a community's overall development, influencing individual opportunities, economic growth, and social equity. In the case of Malësi e Madhe, educational attainment reflects both progress and ongoing challenges. Over the years, the region has made strides in improving access to education, yet barriers still exist, especially in rural areas, where socio-economic factors, infrastructure, and cultural norms can influence educational outcomes. This overview of educational attainment in Malësi e Madhe examines the distribution of educational levels across the population in 2023, focusing on the differences between men and women. The data highlights the number of individuals who have completed primary, secondary, and higher education, as well as the gender disparities that exist within these groups.

76. Municipality of Malësi e Madhe, Social Services Sector.

Table 15. Educational attainment by gender, 2023

Education level	Total	Males	Females
Primary education	1,003	523	480
Nine-year education	902	490	412
Secondary education	856	498	358
Higher education	586	201	385
Short-cycle higher education	24	11	13
Bachelor	436	141	295
Master or Doctorate Degree	126	49	77

Source: INSTAT 2024.

The table above presents data on educational attainment in Malësi e Madhe in 2023, broken down by gender. It offers an insight into the population's level of education across various educational levels.

A total of 1,003 individuals have completed primary education. Among them, 523 are male and 480 are female, showing a fairly balanced gender distribution, with a slight advantage for males in completing primary education. A total of 902 individuals have completed nine-year education. Of these, 490 are male and 412 are female. Gender disparities are smaller compared to primary education, but males still slightly outnumber females.

Regarding secondary education: 856 individuals have completed this level. Of these, 498 are male and 358 are female. The gap between males and females is more noticeable here, with males significantly outnumbering females in secondary education.In the category of higher education, 586 individuals in the municipality hold a higher education qualification. Females outnumber males in this category, with 385 females and 201 males. This marks a positive shift toward increased female participation in higher education.

In the short-cycle higher education category, 24 individuals attended these programs, of whom 11 are males and 13 females. Although this number is small, it shows a slight female advantage in this educational category. In terms of university (Bachelor) degrees, 436 individuals in the municipality hold a bachelor's degree, of whom 141 are males and 295 females. Finally, in the category of Master's or Doctoral Degrees, 126 individuals have attained such qualifications, of whom 49 are males and 77 females. Similarly to the bachelor's degree category, females outnumber males in postgraduate education.

Table 16. Number of nurseries and kindergartens

No.	Administrative Unit	No. of kindergartens	Capacity	No. of children	No. of teachers	No. of children per teacher
1	Koplik	1	150	112	8	14
2	Qendër	6	150	96	7	14
3	Kastrat	6	185	104	9	12
4	Shkrel	4	105	65	4	16
5	Gruemirë	11	345	179	15	12
6	Kelmend	1	25	16	1	16
Total		**29**	**960**	**572**	**44**	**13**

Source: Municipality of Malësi e Madhe.

The municipality has 29 kindergartens with a total capacity of 960 children; currently serving 572 children. Only 15% of children in the 0-6 age group (totaling 4,045) attend kindergartens. The municipality preschool teacher-to-children ratio averages to one preschool teacher for 13 children, with slight variations between units. The ratio ranges from 12 children per preschool teacher in Kastrat and Gruemirë to 16 children per preschool teacher in Shkrel and Kelmend.

Table 17. Number of schools

No.	Administrative Unit	No. of schools	No. of students	No. of teachers	Students per teacher
1	Koplik	1	521	39	13
2	Qendër	3	228	36	6
3	Kastrat	6	524	64	8
4	Shkrel	6	297	51	6
5	Gruemirë	6	710	85	8
6	Kelmend	6	228	40	6
Total		**28**	**2,508**	**315**	**8**

Source: Municipality of Malësi e Madhe.

The municipality has 28 schools across six administrative units. Gruemirë, Kastrat, Shkrel, and Kelmend have six schools each, while Koplik has only one. A total of 2,508 students are enrolled across the municipality. Gruemirë has the highest number of students (710), while Kelmend and Qendër have the lowest (228 each).

The overall student-to-teacher ratio is 8:1, reflecting a manageable teaching load. Koplik has the highest ratio (13 students per teacher), whereas Qendër, Shkrel, and Kelmend have the lowest (6 students per teacher). The distribution of 315 teachers appears equitable across units, with each unit maintaining ratios conducive to effective learning.

Table 18. Secondary Schools in Malësi Madhe AUs

No.	Administrative unit	No. of schools	No. of students	No. of teachers	Students per teacher
1	Koplik	1	350	29	12
2	Qendër	0	0	0	-
3	Kastrat	2	189	17	11
4	Shkrel	2	164	11	15
5	Gruemirë	1	92	13	7
6	Kelmend	1	55	4	13
Total		**7**	**850**	**74**	**12**

Source: Territorial Development Strategy, Municipality of Malësi e Madhe.

A total of 850 students attend secondary schools, representing 33% of the eligible age group registered in civil status records. However, population mobility likely affects this percentage. The municipality lacks vocational schools, limiting opportunities for students seeking professional or technical education

Healthcare

In Malësi e Madhe, a rural municipality in northern Albania, the provision of health services has seen both progress and challenges. While the region benefits from a range of health facilities, including primary healthcare centers and specialized services, certain barriers persist, particularly in remote areas, affecting the accessibility, quality, and efficiency of healthcare delivery.This introduction explores the current state of health services in Malësi e Madhe, focusing on key aspects such as the number and types of healthcare facilities, the availability of medical staff, and the delivery of services to the population. The data shows the distribution of health services across administrative units, including the presence of healthcare professionals, medical specialists, and emergency response capabilities. Despite the efforts to strengthen healthcare infrastructure, the region faces ongoing issues such as limited resources, insufficient medical staff, and disparities in healthcare access, particularly for vulnerable populations.

Table 19. Health services

No.	Administrative Unit	Health centers	Ambulances	Total medical staff	Doctors	Nurses
1	Kelmend	1	6	12	2	10
2	Kastrat	1	11	29	5	24
3	Koplik	1	1	9	4	5
4	Qendër	1	6	11	2	9
5	Shkrel	1	10	11	3	8
6	Gruemirë	1	10	11	5	6
Total	-	**6**	**44**	**83**	**21**	**62**

Source: Territorial Development Strategy, Municipality of Malësi e Madhe.

There are seven health centers and 44 ambulances across the administrative units, serving a total population of 47,394. The municipality has 21 doctors, 62 nurses, and no specialized doctors or hospital beds. Larger populations, like in Gruemirë, have similar staff numbers compared to smaller areas, highlighting potential inequities in resource distribution.

Economic activity

Malësi e Madhe, is characterized by a diverse economic structure, with agriculture, small enterprises, and services playing significant roles. The local economy is predominantly agricultural, with a substantial portion of the population engaged in farming activities. This sector remains a vital source of income and sustenance for the community, reflecting the region's reliance on agricultural production. In addition to farming, the area also has a notable presence of small and medium-sized enterprises, with a growing number of both male and female entrepreneurs contributing to local economic activities. In recent years, the municipality has witnessed an increase in the number of active businesses, with a shift toward service providers, particularly in the sectors of commerce, construction, and hospitality. The labor market in Malësi e Madhe faces challenges related to employment rates, with men generally experiencing higher employment opportunities than women.

Table 20. Active enterprises by gender 2023

Indicator	2021	2022	2023
Malësi e Madhe (total)	524	535	526
Men	394	400	394
Women	130	135	132

Source: INSTAT 2024

The above table provides insights into the gender distribution in active enterprises in Malësi e Madhe:
The number of enterprises owned or run by men remains consistently high, with a slight increase from 394 in 2021 to 400 in 2022, before returning to 394 in 2023. The number of enterprises owned or run by women also shows steady figures, it increased slightly from 130 in 2021 to 135 in 2022, before slightly decreasing to 132 in 2023. The data reflects that while men continue to dominate the entrepreneurial sector, women have shown modest growth in active enterprises, indicating a positive trend in female participation in business. However, the gender gap remains evident, with men owning a significantly larger share of the businesses.

Table 21. Active enterprises by economic activity

Indicator	2021	2022	2023
Malësi e Madhe (total)	524	535	526
Producers of goods	84	84	79
Producers of services	440	451	447

Source: INSTAT 2024

The total number of enterprises slightly increased from 524 in 2021 to 535 in 2022, before stabilizing at 526 in 2023. *Producers of goods*: The number of enterprises engaged in goods production remained relatively stable at 84 in 2021 and 2022 but decreased slightly to 79 in 2023. *Producers of services*: The number of enterprises in the service sector showed steady growth, increasing from 440 in 2021 to 451 in 2022, with a slight decrease to 447 in 2023. This indicates a dominance of service-based enterprises in the region, which could reflect an increasing shift toward service-oriented activities in the local economy, potentially driven by factors such as consumer demand and market trends.

Table 22. Active Enterprises by number of employees

Indicator	2021	2022	2023
Malësi e Madhe (total)	524	535	526
1-4 employees	458	468	457
5-9 employees	29	28	33
10+ employees	37	39	36

Source: INSTAT 2024

This table provides insights into the size distribution of active enterprises in Malësi e Madhe over the years (2021-2023).

Enterprises with fewer than five employees make up the majority, with a slight decrease from 458 in 2021 to 457 in 2023.

The number of enterprises with five to nine employees increased slightly from 29 in 2021 to 33 in 2023.
Larger enterprises (those with ten or more employees) experienced minor fluctuations, ranging from 37 in 2021 to 36 in 2023.

The dominance of small enterprises (with 1-4 employees) indicates a prevalent trend of micro and small businesses within the local economy. The increase in the number of medium-sized enterprises (5-9 employees) could suggest growth in the local business sector, while the stability of larger firms implies consistent, albeit limited, employment in more substantial operations.

Labour market, Employment and Unemployment in Malësi e Madhe

Labor force indicators for the Shkodër district, which includes Malësi e Madhe, for the year 2023 show that the total participation rate in the labor force is 63.8%, with a notable difference between men (72%) and women (56%).

Table 23. Labor market indicators, Shkodër region, 2023

Indicator	Total	Men	Women
Labor force participation rate	63.8%	72.0%	56.0%
Employment rate	59.4%	67.5%	51.7%
Inactivity rate	36.2%	28.0%	44.0%
Unemployment rate	6.9%	6.2%	7.8%

Source: INSTAT, 2024.

The employment rate is 59.4% overall, with a higher rate for men (67.5%) compared to women (51.7%). The inactivity rate, representing individuals not participating in the labor force, is 36.2% in total, with women showing a higher inactivity rate (44.0%) compared to men (28.0%). The overall unemployment rate is relatively low at 6.9%, with a slightly lower rate for men (6.2%) compared to women (7.8%). This data illustrates the gender gaps in employment, where men have higher participation and employment rates, while women experience more inactivity and higher unemployment. These trends may reflect societal and economic factors influencing labor market participation in Malësi e Madhe and the broader Shkodër district.

Infrastructure: Land, Water, Electricity, and Social Life integrated systems in Malësi e Madhe

Malësi e Madhe has diverse and integrated systems, each contributing to the region's economic development, environmental sustainability, and livelihoods. The natural system provides vital ecological services, while the agricultural system is essential for local food production. The urban system reflects the growing population and urbanization trends, and the water system is crucial for both consumption and irrigation. Finally, the infrastructure system underpins the region's economic activities, improving connectivity and access to services.

Table 24. System distribution in Malësi e Madhe

System type	Area covered (ha)	Key characteristics
Natural system	77,293	Prevalent in northeastern and southeastern parts, especially in mountainous areas. Includes landscapes, forests, and conifers.
Agricultural system	15,093	Widespread throughout the municipality, concentrated in lowland areas, extends into the mountainous region.
Urban system	3,570	Urbanized areas near Koplik and other administrative units, linked to migration from remote areas.
Water system	601	Includes rivers, streams, reservoirs, and part of Lake Shkodra. Areas with sufficient water supply, though some lack it.
Infrastructure system	256	Includes roads, railways, water supply, sewage, irrigation, electricity, and telecommunications networks. Major road links and local roads also part of this system.

Source: Territorial Development Strategy[77]

77. Territorial Development Strategy, General Local Plan, Malësi e Madhe.

The natural system (77,293 ha): The natural system is the most dominant feature in the municipal landscape. It spans a vast area, primarily covering the northeastern and southeastern regions, particularly in the mountainous areas. This system includes diverse landscapes such as plains, forests (including both broadleaf trees and conifers), and other natural features. It represents a significant portion of the municipality's territory, providing ecological resources and supporting biodiversity.

The agricultural system (15,093 ha): The agricultural system is another major feature of the territory, with agriculture being a central sector for local development. Covering around 15,093 hectares, this system is present across the entire municipality but is mainly concentrated in the lowland areas. The agricultural system extends into the mountainous regions as well, contributing to food production, local livelihoods, and the economy. Agriculture remains a priority for development within the municipality.

The urban system (3,570 ha): The urban system covers a smaller area, 3,570 hectares, and has undergone significant changes, especially since the 1990s. Due to migration from the isolated mountainous areas to more accessible regions, such as the Koplik town area and surrounding administrative units like Kastrat and Gruemirë, urbanization has increased. These areas offer better employment opportunities and improved service provision. The table indicates the presence of growing urban centers within these regions, linked by road networks and serving as economic hubs.

The water system (601 ha): The water system includes various natural water bodies such as rivers, streams, reservoirs, and part of Lake Shkodra, covering 601 hectares. The majority of the municipality is well-supplied with water, though some areas lack sufficient water sources. Rivers like the River Cem, River Vermosh, and Lumi i Thatë (The Dry River), and others, as well as the Koplik Spring, contribute significantly to the municipality's water resources. This system is critical for both irrigation and water supply for local communities.

The infrastructure system (256 ha): The infrastructure system in Malësi e Madhe spans 256 hectares and supports various essential functions. Key components of the infrastructure include transport networks (both road and rail), water supply, sewage, irrigation and drainage systems, electricity networks, and telecommunications. The municipality has a well-connected road network, with a main road axis linking Malësi e Madhe to Shkoder and Podgorica. Local roads connect villages, tourist areas, and the Lake Shkodra region. The railway provides international connections, further facilitating development. Additionally, water supply systems differ by region, with some areas using wells, pipelines, or water tanks. The municipality also has a widespread network of irrigation and drainage canals, although some require maintenance or improvements.

Utilities: Water and Electricity Services

In rural areas of Malësi e Madhe, residents have faced issues with water supply, particularly during adverse weather conditions. The local government has taken steps to manage and improve water supply and sewage systems in villages, aiming to provide more reliable access to clean water for residents.

Table 25. Housing units and water supply systems, 2023

Category	Occupied housing units	Family units
Total	**6,294**	**6,510**
Indoor water supply	1,748	1,863
Water supply outside the house but within the building	1,305	1,322
Water supply outside the building	2,104	2,162
Other water supply systems	1,072	1,097
No water supply system	65	66

Source: INSTAT, 2024.

The data highlights the disparities in access to water supply in Malësi e Madhe, which significantly impacts gender roles, particularly for women and girls.
Only 27.8% of occupied housing units and 28.6% of family units have an indoor water supply. This limited access increases the burden on women, who are traditionally responsible for managing household water needs.
With over 33.4% of housing units and 33.2% of family units relying on water supply located outside the building, women and girls may spend substantial time fetching water.
Approximately 17% of households and family units depend on alternative water supply systems, while 1% lack any supply system. This lack of infrastructure exacerbates vulnerabilities, especially during droughts or emergencies, disproportionately affecting women's health and livelihoods.

Public Infrastructure and Social Life

Malësi e Madhe faces several challenges in the areas of services, economy, and tourism. Key issues include the lack of designated parking spaces and a multimodal terminal, as well as an underdeveloped urban transport system. There are significant problems with road signage, dedicated lanes, and a lack of modernization and standardization at the national level. The region also struggles with infrastructure in the electricity and telecommunications networks, poor street lighting, and the aging existing infrastructure, which results in significant energy losses. Additionally, the risks of electrical equipment malfunctioning due to unstable voltage and contact with power lines and cabinets further exacerbate the situation.[78][78]
These infrastructure deficiencies impede the growth of the local economy, disrupt daily life, and hinder the development of tourism, which could otherwise benefit from improved services and facilities. Addressing these challenges is crucial for the region's modernization and the overall improvement of its public services. In rural areas, the problem is more pronounced, with women experiencing greater social isolation and reduced access to essential services. These limitations affect their mental well-being, economic opportunities, and participation in decision-making processes within their communities.

Tourism, Cultural and Historical Heritage

The natural landscape in Malësi e Madhe is rich and diverse, offering various resources that hold the potential for both conservation and development, particularly in terms of biodiversity preservation and the promotion of eco-tourism. The presence of the Albanian Alps and Lake Shkodra are key highlights, alongside protected areas like the National Park of the Albanian Alps and the Shkrel Regional Park, which contribute significantly to both environmental sustainability and local development.

Malësi e Madhe Municipality is a region with exceptional natural and scenic values, thanks to its geographic position, diverse and favorable terrain, the presence of Lake Shkodra and mountains, its temperate climate, and natural monuments found in the area. The hard work of its inhabitants has also revealed the immense potential of this region for development. Key Natural Resources:

- Alpine areas and Lake Shkodra: One of the notable natural resources of the municipality is its inclusion in the Albanian Alps and the proximity to Lake Shkodra, both important for Albania's biodiversity.

- National Park of the Albanian Alps: This park, which stretches across three countries, covers a significant area within the municipality of Malësi e Madhe. The creation of this park aims not only to protect the territory but also to promote sustainable development within the region.

- Shkrel Regional Park: Another important area in Malësi e Madhe Municipality is the Shkrel Regional Park, which is crucial for preserving the region's rich biodiversity. The park's status helps in the conservation and protection of these natural resources, while also supporting the promotion and development of mountain tourism.

78. Territorial Development Strategy, Municipality of Malësi e Madhe.

The municipality is rich in natural monuments, that are key elements of the region's natural heritage and play an important role in its ecological and cultural identity.

Table 26. Natural monuments in Malësi Madhe

Name of natural monument	Kanioni i Bashkimit, Vermosh (The Confluence Canyon, Vermosh)
Syri i Sheganit (The Shegan Eye)	*Mrizi (ahu) i Pleshtit, Bogë (Pleshti Beech Tree) (Bogë)*
Vulfenia e Shtegut të Dhenve (The Sheep Path Wulfenia)	*Mullarët e Radit, Rapsh (Radi Haystacks)*
Fortesa e Kelmendit (Kelmendi Fortress)	*Arra e Madhe (The Big Walnut Tree)*
Burimet e Koprishtit (Koprishti Springs)	*Foljeta e Lohjes (Lohja Oak Tree)*
Syri i Gjonit (Gjoni's Eye)	*Shpella e Pucit (Puci Cave)*
Shpella e Krevenicës (Krevenica Cave)	*Pusi i Xhek Markut (Xhek Marku's Well)*
Morenat e Razmës (Ramza Moraines)	*Shpella e Njerëzve të Lagur (Wet People's Cave_*
Cirku i Livadhit të Bogës (Meadow Circle at Boga)	*Kanioni i Poicës (Poica Canyon)*
Burim i Vuklit (Vukli Spring)	*Mullarët e Gurtë të Bajzës (Bajza Stone Stacks)*
Blini i Bzhetës (Bzheta Linden Tree)	*Pusi i Cilikokajve (Cilikokaj's Well)*
Vidhat tek pusi i Markajve (The Elms at Markaj's Well)	*Kalaja e Shtegut të Dhenve (The Castle at the Sheep Path)*
Ahu i Geçes (Mri i Geçes) (Geçe's Beech Tree)	*Lugu akullnajor i Runicës (Runica Glacial Valley)*
Carraca e Vrithit (Vrithi's Hackberry)	*Depozitimet fluvio-glaciale të Bogës (Fluvio-Glacial Deposit at Boga)*
Tarraca e Greçës (Greça's Terrace)	*Lugu akullnajor i Seferçës (Seferça Glacial Valley)*
Shpella e Gjolajve (Gjolaj Cave)	*Gështenja e Reçit (Reçi Chestnut Trees)*

Source: Territorial Development Strategy, Malësi e Madhe.

As regards tourism, Malësi e Madhe is renowned for its stunning natural landscapes, rich cultural heritage, and diverse tourism opportunities. With its unique geographical location, characterized by mountainous terrain, pristine lakes, and picturesque rivers, the region offers a wide range of tourism experiences throughout the year. From water-based activities on Lake Shkodra and River Cem, to hiking in the Albanian Alps, and exploring historical and cultural landmarks, Malësi e Madhe is an ideal destination for nature lovers, adventure enthusiasts, and those seeking a deeper understanding of Albania's rich traditions.

Notably, the administrative units of Kelmend and Shkrel, being mountainous regions, also have a dedicated website, www.kelmend-shkrel.org, where all the tourist resources of these areas are thoroughly listed.

All the tourist villages have internet access, as well as mobile numbers and email addresses, making it easy for tourists to make reservations, even in the most remote village of Vermosh.

Table 27. Types of tourism

Tourism Type	Description
Water tourism	Tourism centered around major water bodies such as Lake Shkodra and the River Cem, offering beaches and water-based activities.
Green and white tourism	Focuses on natural landscapes, including mountains and forests, for activities like hiking and exploration.
Historical-cultural tourism	Exploration of the region's rich history, culture, and traditions through landmarks, festivals, and local heritage.
Sports tourism	Involves outdoor sports activities, including mountain biking, hiking, and other adventure sports in the natural surroundings.
Geo-archaeological tourism	Tourism centered on the geological and archaeological sites in the region, offering insight into the area's past.

Source: Municipality of Malësi e Madhe.[7979]

Key features are Lake Shkodra, which stretches approximately 30 km from Vraka-Gril (Gruemirë administrative unit) to Han i Hotit (Kastrat administrative unit), and the River Cem, which spans around 31 km through Kelmend administrative unit. Lake Shkodra has several beaches, such as Gril and Grizhë (Gruemirë administrative unit), Culaj (Koplik administrative unit), Stërbeq, Kamicë (Qendër administrative unit), as well as Shegan and Hot (Kastrat administrative unit).

The area is well-serviced daily, with numerous local establishments offering traditional and contemporary food, particularly focusing on the preparation of fish dishes, such as carp, trout, and fish from the River Cem and Lake Shkodra.

The opportunities for elite tourism in Malësi e Madhe continue to increase, promising to ensure high-quality experiences for both local and foreign visitors who choose the area for all types of tourism.

Agriculture and Livestock Farming

Agriculture and livestock farming are integral components of the economy in Malësi e Madhe, offering diverse opportunities for local communities, especially in rural areas. The table below reflects the livestock and poultry statistics in Malësi e Madhe for 2023. The data demonstrates the diversity and scale of agricultural activity in the region, emphasizing its reliance on animal husbandry as a significant component of the local economy. Key categories include cattle, small livestock (sheep and goats), pigs, poultry, and beekeeping, with detailed numbers for each type.

79. Municipality of Malësi e Madhe website: https://bashkiamalesiemadhe.gov.al/turizmi/

Table 28. Livestock numbers

Category	Type	Number of heads (2023)
Cattle	**Total cattle**	**3,552**
	Cows	3,015
Small Livestock	Total small ruminants	23,827
	Sheep	14,927
	Goats	8,900
	Dairy goats	5,188
Pigs	Total pigs	3,175
	Breeding sows	238
Equines	Horses and donkeys	836
Poultry	Total poultry	206,213
	Chickens	202,088
	Turkeys	0
Beekeeping	Beehives	13,684

Source: INSTAT 2024.

The agricultural sector in Malësi e Madhe demonstrates a well-established foundation. Among the livestock, small ruminants, such as sheep (14,927) and goats (8,900), dominate the figures, highlighting the region's traditional focus on these animals, likely due to the mountainous terrain which supports their grazing needs. The significant number of dairy goats (5,188) further underscores the importance of milk production in the local economy.

Cattle farming is also prominent, with 3,552 heads, of which 3,015 are cows, indicating a focus on dairy and meat production. Pig farming, although smaller in scale, contributes to the agricultural diversity with 3,175 pigs and 238 breeding sows.

Poultry farming, particularly chicken farming, is the most substantial segment, with over 200,000 chickens, which suggests a strong emphasis on poultry meat and egg production for both local and broader markets. The absence of turkey farming could indicate a lack of focus or demand for this specific poultry type.

Beekeeping, with 13,684 beehives, is another significant sector, reflecting the region's capacity for honey production, supported by its rich biodiversity and natural flora.

Overall, the data portrays Malësi e Madhe as a region with a balanced and diverse agricultural profile, making it a key contributor to Albania's livestock and poultry industry.

Table 29. Livestock products

Category	Type	Production (2023)
Milk (total)	**Total milk**	**8,177.0 tons**
	Cow milk	5,724.0 tons
	Sheep milk	1,209.0 tons
	Goat milk	1,244.0 tons
Meat (total)	**Total meat**	**1,233.0 tons**
	Beef	366.0 tons
	Mutton	390.0 tons
	Goat	210.0 tons
	Pork	205.0 tons
	Poultry	62.0 tons
Eggs	Total eggs	49,915,000 units
Wool	Total wool	33.6 tons
Honey	Total honey	154.0 tons

Source: INSTAT 2024.

The total milk production in Malësi e Madhe reached 8,177 tons in 2023, with cow milk dominating at 5,724 tons. Sheep and goat milk accounted for significant portions, with 1,209 and 1,244 tons respectively. These amounts suggest a robust dairy sector catering to a variety of market demands, particularly for traditional and artisanal dairy products.

The total meat production stood at 1,233 tons, with mutton (390 tons) and beef (366 tons) being the primary contributors. Goat meat (210 tons) and pork (205 tons) also play important roles in the regional diet and economy. Poultry meat, though comparatively lower at 62 tons, reflects a smaller but valuable segment of the market.

With nearly 50 million eggs produced in 2023, poultry farming appears to be an essential component of agricultural activities in Malësi e Madhe, providing a reliable source of protein for local and regional consumption. Wool production amounted to 33.6 tons, reflecting the significance of sheep farming beyond meat production. Meanwhile, honey production at 154 tons underscores the region's capacity for high-quality apiculture, likely benefiting from the diverse flora of the area.

Table 30. Field crops

Crop category	Area (ha)	Production (tons)	Yield (tons/ha)
Cereals (total)	405.0	1,895.0	..
- Wheat	267.0	905.0	33.9
- Maize	138.0	990.0	71.7
Vegetables (total)	457.0	6,678.0	..
Potatoes	528.0	11,933.0	226.0
Beans	372.0	415.0	11.2
Tobacco	172.0	254.0	14.8
Forage crops	3,018.0	57,104.0	..
Medicinal and aromatic plants	5,200.0	12,150.0	23.4

Source: INSTAT 2024.

The agricultural profile of Malësi e Madhe in 2023 reveals a balanced mix of staple crops, high-yield vegetables, and specialized plants. While crops like potatoes and medicinal plants are thriving, there is:

Cereal cultivation, spanning 405 hectares, yielded 1,895 tons. Maize had the highest yield at 71.7 tons per hectare; followed by wheat with a respectable yield of 33.9 tons per hectare. Other cereals like rye and barley were not reported.

Vegetable farming covered 457 hectares, producing 6,678 tons, reflecting their significant contribution to the local diet. Potatoes stood out, with 528 hectares yielding 11,933 tons, making them a key crop with a remarkable yield of 226 tons per hectare.

Beans were cultivated over 372 hectares, but their yield was relatively low at 11.2 tons per hectare, suggesting scope for improvements in farming practices. Tobacco, grown on 172 hectares, achieved a yield of 14.8 tons per hectare, underlining its niche significance.

Spanning 5,200 hectares, medicinal and aromatic plants are a prominent feature of the region's agriculture, yielding 12,150 tons at 23.4 tons per hectare. This sector highlights the area's potential for high-value crops. With 3,018 hectares devoted to forage crops, the production of 57,104 tons highlights their importance in supporting the region's robust livestock sector.

Table 31. Vegetable cultivation in Malësi e Madhe (2023)

Category	Area (ha)	Production (tons)
Total vegetables (field + greenhouse)	**475.0**	**6,678.0**
Fresh vegetables (field + greenhouse)	285.0	3,870.0
Dried vegetables grown in open fields	190.0	2,808.0

Source: INSTAT 2024

The vegetable cultivation in Malësi e Madhe demonstrates a significant focus on both fresh and dried vegetables. A total area of 475 hectares is dedicated to vegetable cultivation, producing 6,678 tons in total. However, detailed data on greenhouse-specific production is unavailable. Fresh vegetables occupy 285 hectares, yielding 3,870 tons, accounting for a large portion of the total vegetable output. The contribution of greenhouses to this category is unspecified.
Field-cultivated dried vegetables cover 190 hectares and produce 2,808 tons, demonstrating their substantial role in the local agricultural sector.

The data highlights the importance of vegetable cultivation in the agricultural landscape of Malësi e Madhe, emphasizing the potential for future development, particularly in greenhouse farming, which currently lacks detailed data for analysis.

Table 32. Fresh vegetables, production and yield in Malësi e Madhe (2023)

Category	Area (ha)	Production (tons)	Yield (tons/ha)
Total fresh vegetables	**285.0**	**3,870**	**..**
Tomatoes	68.0	1,088	160.0
Cucumbers	40.0	716	179.0
Peppers	70.0	860	122.9

Source: INSTAT 2024

Malësi e Madhe dedicates 285 hectares to fresh vegetables, producing a total of 3,870 tons. Data on greenhouse-specific cultivation and yield is not provided, indicating a gap in greenhouse data collection.
Tomatoes are grown on 68 hectares, yielding 1,088 tons. The average yield is 160 tons per hectare, highlighting efficient production practices. Cucumber cultivation covers 40 hectares, producing 716 tons. The yield per hectare is 179 tons, the highest among the listed vegetables, which indicates high productivity.
Peppers are cultivated over 70 hectares, yielding 860 tons. The average yield is 122.9 tons per hectare, slightly lower than that of tomatoes and cucumbers. The high yield rates for tomatoes and cucumbers indicate efficient agricultural practices in open fields. While the area planted with peppers is the largest among the listed crops, its yield is comparatively lower, suggesting a need to explore ways to enhance productivity.

Table 33. Fruit trees and production in Malësi e Madhe (2023)

Category	Total area (ha)	Production area (ha)	Production (tons)
Total fruit trees	**496**	**163**	**6,464**
Apples	12	12	324
Plums	66	34	1,030
Cherries	28	17	162
Figs	..	..	961
Nectarines/peaches	9	10	609
Chestnuts	1	1	1,241
Walnuts	182	4	315

Source: INSTAT 2024.

In 2023, in Malësi e Madhe, 496 hectares of land were dedicated to fruit tree cultivation out of which 163 hectares were in production, yielding a total of 6,464 tons.

- Chestnuts dominated production with 1,241 tons, despite being grown on only one hectare of land, reflecting their high productivity.
- Plums were the second most significant culture, contributing 1,030 tons from 34 hectares.
- Apples, all of which were cultivated on 12 hectares of land, produced 324 tons.
- Cherries, with a smaller production area of 17 hectares, yielded 162 tons.
- Fig production amounted to 961 tons, but no specific data is available on the actual cultivation or production area.
- Walnuts were grown over a significant area (182 hectares); however, only 4 hectares were in active production, yielding 315 tons.

With ten hectares in production, nectarines/peaches yielded 609 tons, indicating moderate productivity.
A substantial portion of the total area allocated to fruit trees (333 hectares) is not yet in production, indicating potential for future growth in yield. The exceptionally high yield of chestnuts suggests their importance as a specialty crop in the region.

Malësi e Madhe has a total vineyard area of 376 hectares, with 334 hectares currently in production. This indicates that approximately 89% of the vineyard-cultivated area is actively contributing to grape production. The vineyards yielded 1,770 tons of grapes in 2023. The productivity per hectare is approximately 5.3 tons per hectare, reflecting moderate vineyard production efficiency. About 42 hectares of vineyard land remain non-productive, representing an opportunity for future cultivation and increased yield. The substantial vineyard-cultivated area highlights the significance of viticulture in the region's agricultural landscape.

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.[80]

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

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, as regards 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.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;[81] 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 .9 % 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.[82]

- 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.[83]

- 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 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.[84] 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.[85]

81. INSTAT Business Registers, 2023. https://www.instat.gov.al/al/temat/industria-tregtia-dhe-sh%C3%ABrbimet/regjistrat-e-biznesit/#tab3
82. Women and Men in Albania, 2022, https://www.instat.gov.al/en/themes/demography-and-social-indicators/gender-equality/#tab3
83. Ibid.
84. Gender Mainstreaming Guidance: Agriculture and Rural Development, UN Women, 2024
85. Ibid.

- 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.[86] 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.[87]

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.[88] It remains a pivotal sector of the country's economy and engages 33.9 per cent of its active workforce.[89] 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.[90] 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.[91] 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).[92] […] Although women bear a significant share and burden of agricultural labor, their contribution remains largely unappreciated in economic terms.[93] […][94]

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

86. Ibid.
87. Ibid.
88. INSTAT [online]. National Accounts (GDP) 2023 data. See: https://www.instat.gov.al/en/themes/economy-and-finance/national-accounts-gdp/
89. 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/
90. FAO (2011). The Role of Women in Agriculture. See: https://openknowledge.fao.org/items/a605b688-83e0-4e3a-ad47-874f0d6f63b1
91. INSTAT (2023). Labour Market, 2022. Available at: https://www.instat.gov.al/en/publications/books/2023/labour-market-2022/
92. 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
93. 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
94. Gender Mainstreaming Guidance: Agriculture and Rural Development. UN Women. 2023. https://albania.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-05/ard_web_final.pdf

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);[95] (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.[96] […][97]

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.[98] 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.[99] Since then, the share of women beneficiaries of extension services has further shrunken and reached just 8 per cent in 2023.[100] As a result of limited access to agricultural and market information, women's productivity levels remain low. […][101]

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.[102] Yet, data on women's (co-)ownership of land is unavailable. Currently, 10 percent of land titles are digitally registered, 10 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.[103] […] In turn, this has barred

95. 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

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

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

98. 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

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

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

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

102. 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.

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

women farmers from accessing benefits like agricultural extension services, financial support, and formal contracts with traders, negatively impacting on women's productivity.[104] 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. […][105]

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.[106] The bulk of women's contribution to the agricultural sector is through informal employment in family farming.[107] 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".[108] 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.[109] 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.[110] 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. […][111]

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-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.[112] 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

104. 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

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

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

107. *Ibid.*

108. 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

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

110. *Ibid.*

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

112. 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

rural areas reported having a bank account, compared to 44.7 per cent women and 48.2 per cent men among urban residents.[113] 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.[114] The lack of rural connectivity in Albania has been identified as one of the gaps hampering growth in the country.[115] 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.[116] 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.[117] […] 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. […][118]

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.[119] In addition, poor water and sanitation infrastructure, lack of time-saving technologies, insufficient early childcare provision, unsafe 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.

113. *Ibid.*
114. *Ibid.*
115. 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
116. 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
117. *Ibid.*
118. Gender Mainstreaming Guidance: Agriculture and Rural Development. UN Women. 2023. https://albania.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-05/ard_web_final.pdf
119. 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

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).[120]

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. […][121]

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[122], 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.[123] 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.[124] […]

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.[125] It refers to the respective international framework Aide-Mémoire[126] on gender mainstreaming in the UN Disaster Risk Reduction Action Plan, the obligations under the EU Gender Action Plan III[127], and activities and results foreseen under the National Strategy for Gender Equality (2021-2030), Objective 3.1 "Economic empowerment of women in rural areas".[128]

120. 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

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

122. 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

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

124. 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

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

126. 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

127. 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

128. 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

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.

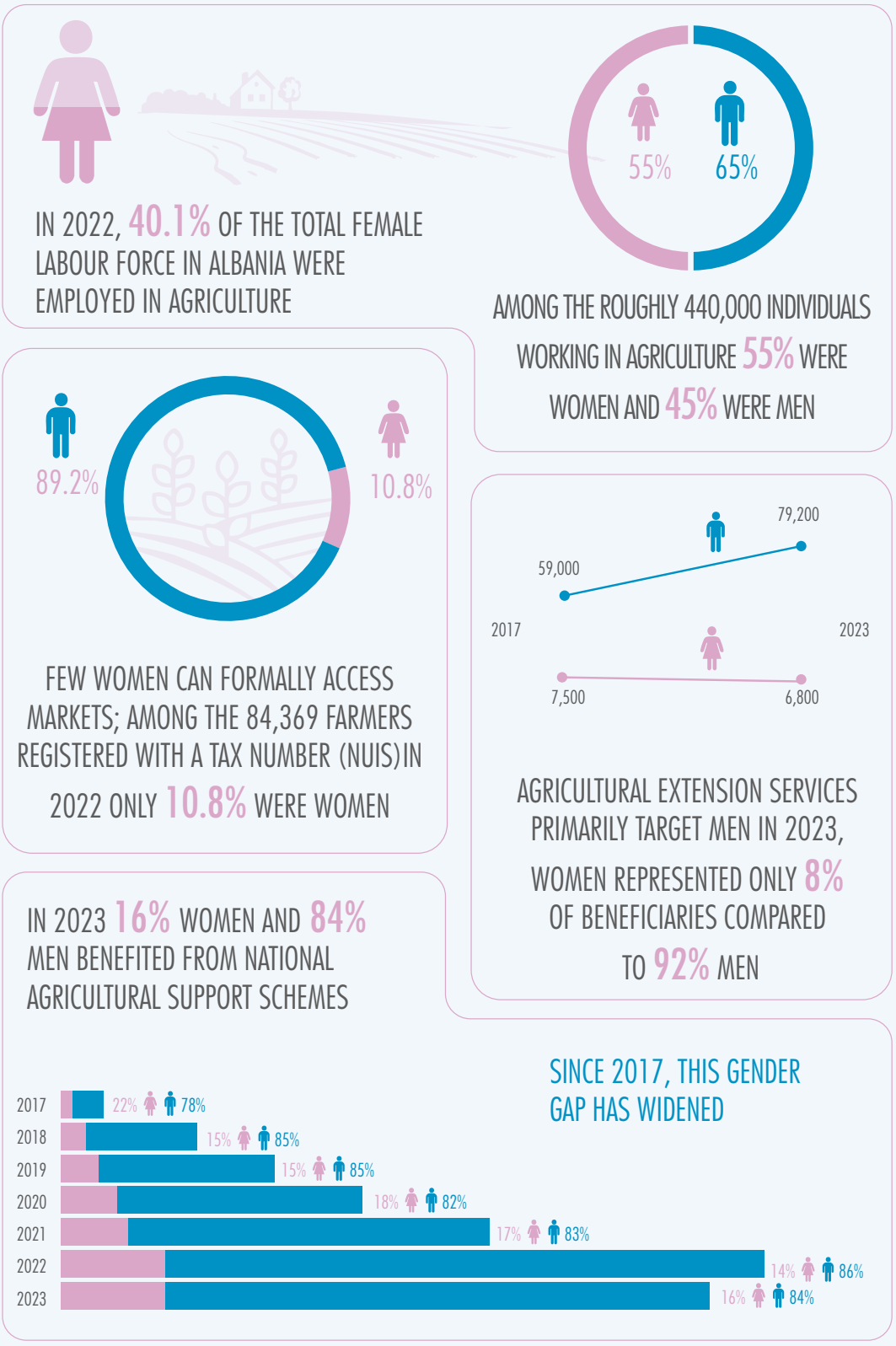
Gaps in gender statistics and data on agriculture and rural development

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.[129] [...][130]

129. 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]

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

Figure 4. Women, men and agriculture in Albania



Source: 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 in Northern Albania

SHKODËR DIBËR MALËSI E MADHE BULQIZË

Ambasciata d'Italia
Tirana

AGENZIA ITALIANA
PER LA COOPERAZIONE
ALLO SVILUPPO

MINISTRY OF HEALTH
AND SOCIAL PROTECTION

MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE
AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

UN WOMEN