

An aerial night photograph of a mountain village. Several tall, stone towers are illuminated from within, casting a warm glow. The houses and buildings are also lit up, and the surrounding landscape is dark with some greenery visible. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

# Vibrant Mountain Communities

Regional Development in Mountains:  
Realizing Potentials, Tackling Disparities

Sustainable Mountain  
Development Series



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The high-mountain town of Mestia (1 500 m asl) in the Upper Svaneti region of Georgia, a UNESCO World Heritage site. Agriculture is a pillar of the region's economy (GTW/shutterstock.com)

# Scenarios to steer and support development of mountain regions in Albania

Anila Gjika and Fiona Imami

Creating development scenarios was key to addressing increasing disparities in northern Albania's mountainous Shkodra county. The scenarios helped to identify Shkodra's development potentials and initiate promising pilot projects towards sustainable and balanced socio-economic development. The approach was scaled up and incorporated into Albania's upcoming Regional Development Policy (2021–27), which aims at taking advantage of the region's endogenous resources to improve people's well-being.

Rehabilitated road in Qender Village. Supporting the Regional Agricultural Department of Shkodra to rehabilitate infrastructure, with particular focus on areas with high potential to cultivate medicinal plants and tobacco (O. Haub)

In the last 30 years, Albania has experienced high outmigration from peripheral mountain areas towards the country's centre and its western coast. Economic activities became clustered in the recipient areas, and the development of other regions lagged behind. Since 2002, the Government of Albania (GoA) has undertaken efforts to promote a more balanced regional development. However, the reforms implemented were either top-down or entirely local, fragmented and lacking in essential national-level ownership that would enhance cohesion and ensure sustainability. In response, since 2010 the Regional Development Programme (RDP) has been supporting Albania's Regional Development Reform through piloting a comprehensive process in Shkodra and Lezha counties in northern Albania and strengthening coordination, capacity and institutions countrywide (Box). The approach has flowed into the Regional Development Policy, which, once approved, will cover the years 2021 to 2027.

Shkodra county (or "qark", in Albanian) is characterized by mountainous terrain and, despite its diverse potentials, faces challenges to promote a sustainable and competitive economy. First, travel between the region and urban hubs is lengthy and difficult. Second, its rural areas have among the highest unemployment rates (16.6 percent compared to the national average of 10.3 percent), high migration rates (–20.8 percent for 2001–2017) and low economic performance (GDP per capita has been 25–30 percent lower than the national average for the last 15 years). And third, while the region is quite rich in natural and cultural/heritage potentials (10 protected areas and 210 natural monuments), the tourism sector remains fragmented and underdeveloped.



While numerous strategic documents were developed in the past to guide the development of Shkodra qark, there was no action plan to harmonize all these strategies. In 2010, the authorities of Shkodra qark initiated a future-oriented strategic process, assisted by the RDP, to coordinate and promote development in the region effectively. The process involved the following steps:

- a) **Identifying territorial potentials** by analysing the existing Regional Development Strategic Concept [1] and the region's economic patterns and territorial resources. The aim was to define the overall development goal and sectoral objectives towards regional development; central and local government institutions and socio-economic development partners in the region actively participated in the analysis.
- b) **Identifying key development actors** in the regions through an in-depth stakeholder assessment. The aim was to involve them in outlining development scenarios.
- c) **Designating subregions with similar potentials and challenges** as well as major sectors within these regions requiring development support as based on previous assessments. Four subregions and three major sectors (agriculture, tourism and environment) were eventually selected.
- d) **Elaborating a development scenario** for each of three sectors in the four subregions/territories together with the key development actors [2].
- e) **Determining development needs** and specific interventions to achieve the development goals set out in the scenarios.
- f) **Drafting a Regional Activity Plan** to prioritize projects and identify funding opportunities for implementation.
- g) Supporting the **implementation of Priority Projects** by local government institutions in partnership with other socio-economic partners (spanning NGOs, the business sector, academia, vulnerable groups, etc.).

The Shkodra Regional Activity Plan identified 35 Priority Projects, of which 22 were already funded by the RDP's grant scheme. These projects supported capacity building and employment of women in mountainous areas, small-scale enterprises focused on endogenous natural resources (medicinal herbs), mountain tourism through rehabilitation of existing infrastructure, and protection of the region's natural habitat.

- Previously, large rural and mountainous areas of Albania did not benefit from development growth. Bringing decision-making closer to local and regional actors helped to address the regions' development challenges.
- Only projects with solid local support should be funded through regional development funds. Apart from guaranteeing local ownership, this makes benefits more likely to be felt by local people and society.
- The experience of the Regional Development Programme in northern Albania shows that a development process designed with local and regional institutions, and based on a coaching approach, can lead to significant improvements in capacity and skills because of its practical orientation.



Promoting tourism in Albania's mountain areas, Eco-Park in Shkrel village (O. Haub)

### The Regional Development Programme in Albania (RDP; 2010–2023)

The Regional Development Programme is a joint and long-term effort to reduce disparities among Albania's regions. It is implemented in partnership with GoA and co-funded by the Austrian Development Agency (ADA) and Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC).

RDP I (2010–2015) supported Shkodra and Lezha qarks in northern Albania, a mountainous area, in developing effective and participative mechanisms for regional coordination across all government levels based on a comprehensive review of the qarks' potentials and competencies. RDP II (2015–2017) helped GoA to clarify and define the countrywide regional development approach and prepare guidance for the reform. RDP III (2017–2019) served as a preparation phase, setting up a legal and financial framework, piloting a grant fund mechanism and strengthening institutional capacities at regional and central level. RDP IV (2019–2023) supports the development and implementation of the national regional development policy and law through coordination of regional and local stakeholders, capacity building and financing of effective projects at the local level [3].

## References and further reading

Note: URLs were last checked on 23 September 2020.

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