Albania SDG Acceleration Fund Phase I (2007-2024) Final Report

### Table of contents

1.	Introduction	.3
2.	Rationale and value added of the Albania SDG Acceleration Fund	.4
3.	Cooperation Framework	.5
4.	Results Reporting	.6
5.	Management Arrangements of the Albania SDG Acceleration Fund	.6
6.	Contributing donors and areas of support	.9
7.	Benefits within the UN System	13
8.	Evaluations and key recommendations	13
9.	Way Forward	16
10.	Conclusions	16

### List of Abbreviations

DVAVALinking Violetic Against wonten in ArbaniaEU4GEEuropean Union for Gender EqualityGBVGender-Based ViolenceGoAGovernment of AlbaniaINSTATInstitute of StatisticsJECJoint Executive CommitteeJPJoint ProgrammeJWPJoint Work PlanLGULocal Gender Action PlanLGULocal Government UnitMoHSPMinistry of Health and Social ProtectionMJMinistry of JusticeMPTFMulti-Partner Trust FundPUNOParticipating UN OrganizationRCResident CoordinatorSDGsSustainable Development GoalsSAAStandard Administrative ArrangementUNUnited NationsUNAAUnited Nations Development Assistance FrameworkUNDAFUnited Nations Development ProgrammeUNEPUnited Nations Population FundUNICEFUnited Nations Children's FundUNIDOUnited Nations Children's FundUNIDOUnited Nations Office on Drugs and CrimeUNSDGUnited Nations Sustainable Development GroupUNNDCFUnited Nations Sustainable Development GroupUNNDCUnited Nations Sustainable Development GroupUNNDCUnited Nations Sustainable Development GroupUNNDCUnited Nations Sustainable Development G	APR CEDAW CPD CSO DRR EVAWA	Annual Progress Report Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women Commissioner for the Protection from Discrimination Civil Society Organization Disaster Risk Reduction Ending Violence Against Women in Albania
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VAW Violence Against Women		
	VAW	Violence Against Women

## Introduction

The Albania SDG Acceleration Fund, initially established as the One UN Coherence Fund in 2007 with Albania as a pilot country for the Delivering as One" approach<sup>1</sup>, has played a pivotal role in supporting the country's development agenda through strengthened UN coordination and integrated resource mobilization. Over the span of 17 years, the Fund has successfully driven progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), aligning closely with Albania's national priorities and its EU accession process.

In 2018, the Fund underwent a strategic transformation, transitioning from the One UN Coherence Fund to the Albania SDG Acceleration Fund. This change was not merely a rebranding exercise but reflected a broader shift in approach aimed at strengthening the Fund's alignment with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The rebranded Fund emphasized a stronger focus on accelerating progress toward nationalized SDG targets, fostering multi-sectoral investments, and ensuring that no one is left behind.

This transition marked a significant evolution in how development financing is structured in Albania. By adopting a more results-oriented framework, the Fund became better equipped to support cross-cutting priorities such as gender equality, climate resilience, social inclusion, and sustainable economic growth. The rebranding also facilitated stronger engagement with international partners by demonstrating Albania's commitment to advancing the SDGs through a transparent and efficient funding mechanism. It allowed for expanded partnerships beyond traditional donors, including engagement with private sector actors and local communities, positioning the Fund as a catalyst for innovative financing and enabling Albania to explore new modalities such as blended finance, impact investing, and public-private partnerships.

In addition to broadening its funding base, the SDG Acceleration Fund introduced enhanced accountability measures, ensuring that all financed projects contributed meaningfully to the Government of Albania's development priorities and the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework objectives. This shift allowed for more strategic allocation of resources, ensuring that interventions had a lasting and transformative impact on Albania's development trajectory. The transformation from the Coherence Fund to the SDG Acceleration Fund has been widely recognized as a positive step in enabling a more adaptive, responsive, and forward-looking approach to development financing. The Fund is now better positioned to support Albania's continued progress toward the SDGs, addressing both immediate needs and long-term sustainability challenges.

The Fund operates with a strong commitment to human rights principles, emphasizing gender equality and women's empowerment. With "Leave No One Behind" as the overarching principle, these values are seen as pivotal for achieving sustainable economic growth, poverty eradication, and overall sustainable development. Moreover, with its emphasis on transparency, accountability, and sustainability, the Fund serves as a model for innovative financing—ensuring that no one is left behind in the country's development journey. Originally, the Fund was intended to cover activities through 31 December 2021, but it was extended twice, ultimately allowing the completion of Phase I activities by 31 December 2024. This extension enabled the Fund to provide critical support to Albania's post-2019 earthquake recovery efforts and other emerging priorities, further solidifying its role in addressing unforeseen challenges.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> The Delivering as One UN initiative is a response to the request of UN Member States that the UN development system accelerates efforts to increase coherence and effectiveness of its operations at country level. Following a request from the Albanian Government to the United Nations, Albania was selected as one of eight countries around the world to pilot UN efforts to Deliver as One UN in January 2007. Albania's request to participate as a One UN Pilot country demonstrated its long-standing, strong commitment to UN reform. The Government's on-going reforms place great emphasis on the coordination and alignment of external assistance and integrating national planning and resource allocation. The One UN pilot falls very much within this broader national effort.

### Rationale and value added of the Albania SDG Acceleration Fund

In tandem with global efforts, the rationale for establishing and using the Albania SDG Acceleration Fund was to create the potential to bring the UN together, strengthen coherence, reduce fragmentation, broaden the donor base, spread risk across partners, and tackle multidimensional challenges with comprehensive and innovative solutions.

The Albania SDG Acceleration Fund was of significant benefit to the UN Country Team, as it:

- Offered a flexible, transparent mechanism to mobilize resources and channel them to cooperation priorities, where the UN system had comparative advantages to achieve sustainable results.
- Supported implementation of the guiding programme principles and mutually reinforcing strategies for cooperation, as described in the Cooperation Framework.
- **4** Enhanced the ability of the UN system to respond to emerging priorities and needs.
- Strengthened the work of outcome results groups to undertake joint planning, implementation, monitoring, learning, and reporting.
- Leveraged finance and consolidated contributions in coordinated action at the global, regional, or country level from multiple partners.
- **4** Reduced transaction costs by using pre-agreed harmonized templates and harmonized reporting.

The Albania SDG Acceleration Fund complemented the funding received from bilateral donors, as well as thematic, vertical, and global pooled funds (i.e., the Joint SDG Fund, Peacebuilding Fund, and other pooled funds), with a focus on the highest priority items that could unlock progress towards the SDGs. It served as an 'integrator' that promoted the joined strength of the UNCT towards the achievement of CF results and country-led SDG actions overall, in close coordination with national stakeholders. This was clearly linked to the interconnected nature of the SDGs and the need to attract diversified multi-partner financing that stimulated integrated actions amongst stakeholders.

Moreover, it assured the advancement of norms and standards in line with the overall UNCT-focused agenda. An impartial RC, working closely with the Government, ensured full trust in the pooled fund and provided assurance of a meritocratic allocation of funding. The Albania SDG Acceleration Fund aligned with a theory of change focusing on SDG acceleration to bring overall coherence and clarity to the intent of the fund.

The fund did not affect the ability of UNCT members to fundraise locally and individually for their own or joint programmes with other organizations. The fund was structured, governed, and managed to support coordinated resource mobilization and the transparent allocation and disbursement of resources to achieve the proposed signature initiatives. These were anchored by the Cooperation Framework results framework and joint work plans (JWP). Preparation of joint programmes followed the UNSDG guidance for joint programmes and aimed at the achievement of joint output and outcome-level results of the Cooperation Framework.

The Fund's financing modality evolved significantly, shifting from largely un-earmarked, activity-based support to more earmarked contributions at the output level. The 2010 Delivering as One evaluation highlighted that the One UN Coherence Fund's initial design operated as a single pooled funding mechanism without earmarking, enabling resources to be allocated flexibly to priority activities in line with national development strategies rather than donor-specific preferences. This pooled approach was formalized through a common Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) among participating UN agencies and a Standard Administrative Arrangement (SAA) with each donor, which together set the Fund's governance structure.

As the One UN Programme progressed, however, development partners increasingly opted for "soft" earmarking of their contributions at the output or thematic level (i.e directing funds to gender equality outcomes) while still channeling resources through the joint fund mechanism. This transition was accompanied by a rise in the Fund's strategic importance: it became more closely aligned with Albania's evolving national priorities and reform agendas, and it fostered stronger engagement from donors who recognized the Fund's effectiveness in delivering coordinated results. By 2016, the pooled Fund had not only sustained its role in filling critical financing gaps – covering the bulk of unfunded program needs – but had also "surpassed expectations" as a driver of aid coherence and results, reinforcing its added value as a trusted, country-led financing instrument.

### **Cooperation Framework**

Phase I of the Fund was implemented through three successive cooperation frameworks that guided its strategic direction:

- One UN Programme (2007–2016): This framework laid the foundation for an integrated UN approach in Albania, emphasizing enhanced coordination and resource efficiency across UN agencies. It established principles of joint planning, budgeting, and implementation, which later evolved into a more structured model of cooperation.
- **Programme of Cooperation for Sustainable Development (PoCSD) 2017–2021:** Building on earlier successes, this framework aligned the UN's work with Albania's EU accession priorities and the emerging SDG agenda. It focused on governance reforms, social protection, and economic resilience, ensuring that UN-supported interventions directly contributed to national priorities.
- United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) 2022–2026: This latest framework leverages the Fund's strengths to keep interventions responsive to Albania's development needs while maintaining coherence with global sustainability objectives.

Each framework played a vital role in defining the Fund's priorities and ensuring effective resource allocation. By fostering partnership and collaboration, the Fund enabled Albania to implement multi-sectoral strategies essential for sustainable and inclusive development. The alignment of the Fund's objectives with national and international frameworks ensured consistency in Albania's development trajectory while maintaining a clear focus on results.

Crucially, the Fund was established to streamline and enhance resource mobilization, ensuring that Albania's development priorities are well-funded and aligned with national strategies and global goals. By pooling resources from multiple donors, it created a more predictable and efficient financing structure, reducing transaction costs and improving coordination among UN agencies and government stakeholders. Beyond the financial inputs, the Fund has supported governance and institutional reforms and improved public service delivery, contributing to Albania's socio-economic transformation. It reinforced the "Delivering as One" principle, promoting cross-sectoral collaboration and ensuring that interventions addressed key areas such as governance, economic resilience, social protection, and environmental sustainability.

Aligned with the 2030 Agenda, the Fund has been crucial in advancing Albania's sustainable development and EU integration efforts. By embedding transparency and accountability in its operations, the Fund not only mobilized resources effectively but also established institutional mechanisms that serve as a model for donor coordination and resource management in the country.

### **Results Reporting**

The Fund's achievements<sup>2</sup> have been consistently documented in the UN Annual Progress Reports<sup>3</sup>, which were formally approved by the Government of Albania and shared with donors and key stakeholders. These reports have played a crucial role in ensuring transparency and accountability in fund management, providing a clear overview of fund allocations, project outcomes, and emerging challenges. These annual reports were published and are available on <u>Albania SDG Acceleration Fund</u> page and UNINFO.

Over time, the reports have demonstrated the increasing effectiveness of the Fund in fostering UN coherence, aligning projects with national development strategies, and ensuring measurable impact. They have highlighted the Fund's success in scaling up joint initiatives, which has led to a more integrated approach to development interventions. The reports have also show-cased the Fund's ability to attract new partnerships and expand its reach across different sectors, reinforcing its position as a trusted financing mechanism for sustainable development.

A notable trend observed in recent years has been the rise in the number of joint projects and flagship initiatives supported through the Fund. These collaborative efforts have enhanced synergies across UN agencies, allowing for more holistic and impactful interventions. The increase in joint programming has not only amplified development results but has also demonstrated the Fund's adaptability to evolving national priorities and emerging challenges.

Moreover, the annual reports have emphasized the need for continuous improvements in monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. Moving forward, there will be a stronger focus on refining impact assessment methodologies and ensuring that funding allocations remain aligned with evidence-based priorities.

### Management Arrangements of the Albania SDG Acceleration Fund

The operational structure of the pooled fund includes:

**Steering Committee**: The Joint Executive Committee,<sup>4</sup> in its role as overseer of the overall contribution of the UN to Albania's development via the One Programme, decides on specific allocations of resources from the Albania SDG Acceleration Fund. The allocation decisions are based on the relevant priority activities, including respective budgets and implementation partners, set out in the cooperation frameworks and government strategies in place.

**Results (Outcome) Groups:** These groups contribute to specific Cooperation Framework outcomes through coordinated and collaborative planning, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation. Outcome Group responsibilities are aligned with the CF results matrix. Members (comprised of ministerial representatives and representatives from the UNCT and Output Working Group) advise the Steering Committee and UNCT on opportunities and challenges linked to CF implementation, programme management issues, and training opportunities for staff and national partners.

All actions of the UN in Albania are organised through four Outcome workplans, corresponding to the four Outcomes of the One Programme. Actions financed by the Albania SDG Acceleration Fund are included in these workplans, which are prepared jointly with the government counterparts and signed by the UN RC,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup>Results are available in the UN reporting platforms: <u>Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office | Gateway</u>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> <u>https://albania.un.org/en/key-initiatives</u> and <u>https://albania.un.org/en/resources/publications</u>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Co-chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister and UN RC (and composed of government and UNCT).

and government Outcome Co-Chairs. Government has a critical role in the discussion of priorities, monitoring of progress and mid-course adjustment.

**Resident Coordinator:** Manages and coordinates the Albania SDG Acceleration Fund in consultation with Participating United Nations Organizations. The Resident Coordinator leads the United Nations to effectively deliver development outcomes at the country level.

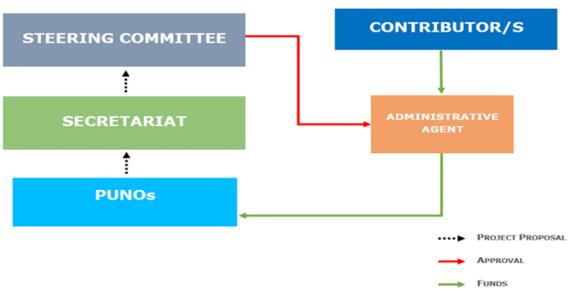
**Contributors**: The donors/ contributors who wish to contribute to the Fund, conclude a contribution agreement to capitalize the fund, (following Standard Administrative Agreement- SAA8 rules). Private sector contributors are subject to an additional due diligence process, for amounts higher than 10,000 USD.

**Participating UN Organizations** - the UN Entities that are signatory in the CF, are Participating UN Agencies referring as, PUNOs, which sign a Memorandum of Understanding for participation in the pooled fund.

**Implementing partners** - Implementing partners (IPs) may receive funds through the PUNOs. IPs are: National, regional or international government or non-government organizations, civil society organizations (CSOs), including employers' organisations, trade unions and private sector partners (as permitted by the rules and regulations of PUNOs).

Administrative Agent: The fund is managed by an Administrative Agent, that provides financial administration of the fund, in an independent, transparent manner. On behalf of the UN in Albania, accountability lies with the UN RC for overall management of the Fund, with the UN RC Office serving as Secretariat. It is administered by the Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office in UNDP in New York, as Administrative Agent.

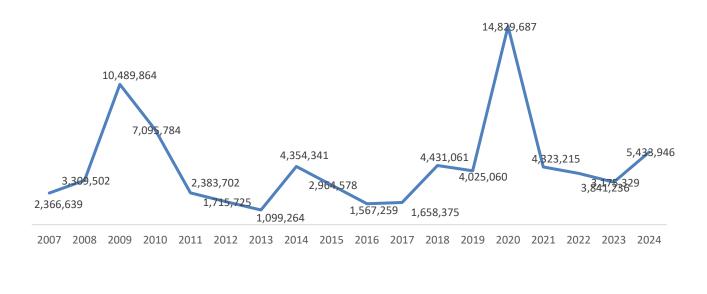
**Fund Secretariat** - The fund secretariat provides technical and administrative support to the Fund subcommittee. It is responsible for day-to-day operation of the fund, including: support for resource mobilization efforts, appraisal of fund proposals, coordination, report consolidation, and fund monitoring. Generally, the Resident Coordinator Office acts as Fund Secretariat.

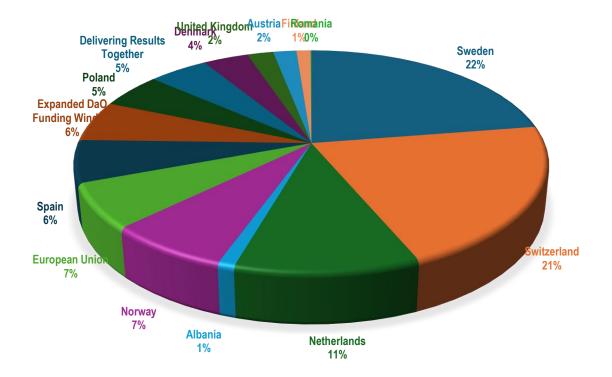


#### COUNTRY POOLED FUND ARCHITECTURE

### Contributing donors and areas of support

Throughout its operational period, the Fund received contributions from a broad coalition of international partners, including the European Union, Switzerland, Sweden, Poland, the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway, the United Kingdom, Finland etc., alongside contributions from the Government of Albania. From 2007 to 2024, overall contributions from 16 partners to the Fund reached almost USD 80 million.





Contributor/Partner		Commitments	s Deposits
Sweden		\$ 14,643,453	\$ 14,643,453
Switzerla	nd	\$ 13,710,564	\$ 13,710,564
Netherla	nds	\$ 7,090,218	\$ 7,090,218
Mania Albania		\$ 6,653,747	\$ 653,747
Norway		\$ 4,717,336	\$ 4,717,336
Europear	1 Union	\$ 4,258,456	\$ 4,258,456
spain		\$ 4,000,000	\$ 4,000,000
(@) Expande	d DaO Funding Window	\$ 3,825,000	\$ 3,825,000
Poland		\$ 3,296,176	\$ 3,296,176
(a) Deliverin	g Results Together	\$ 3,116,750	\$ 3,116,750
Denmark	:	\$ 2,361,647	\$ 2,361,647
United Ki	ingdom	\$ 1,360,700	\$ 1,360,700
Austria		\$ 1,214,737	\$ 1,214,737
Finland		\$ 735,014	\$ 735,014
Romania		\$ 45,266	\$ 45,266
Total		\$ 71,029,064	\$ 65,029,064

These pooled resources were invested in a range of joint programmes addressing Albania's development priorities. The Fund's interventions had the most significant impact in the following areas:

**Governance reforms**: *Strengthening institutional capacities, enhancing transparency, and supporting democratic processes.* 

The Fund contributed to more accountable and transparent governance by bolstering democratic institutions and human rights mechanisms. It supported the Parliament and independent oversight bodies like the People's Advocate (Ombudsperson) and the Commissioner for Protection from Discrimination, improving their capacity to uphold human rights and the rule of law. Fund-supported initiatives enhanced Albania's compliance with international norms – for instance, by improving reporting on treaties such as CEDAW and the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), and by establishing systems to monitor human rights recommendations. These efforts aligned governance processes with EU accession requirements and strengthened accountability to citizens. Overall, the Fund's support for policy reforms and capacity-building in public institutions has made governance more transparent, evidence-informed, and responsive to citizen needs.

# **Social Protection:** *Expanding access to essential services for vulnerable populations, including health care, education, and social welfare programs.*

Fund investments significantly improved social welfare systems, expanding essential services for vulnerable groups. Joint programmes under the Fund piloted and scaled up community-based social services across Albania. For example, the "Leave No One Behind" Phase II programme (2021–2025) enabled over 21,000 home visits by social and health workers, reaching nearly 3,904 children in

marginalized communities. It also helped establish 27 new social service projects in 22 municipalities, benefiting more than 4,110 individuals including people with disabilities, at-risk youth, and families in need. These interventions strengthened local capacity to support those at risk of being left behind. The Fund also enhanced child protection and gender-based violence response services. In municipalities affected by the 2019 earthquake, for instance, dedicated child protection workers were deployed and referral services for domestic violence were expanded, ensuring that vulnerable children and women received support even during crises. Through such efforts, the Fund has improved the coverage and quality of social protection in Albania, laying the foundation for an integrated social care system at the local level and building the resilience of communities to socio-economic shocks.

## **Education and Health**: *Improving learning outcomes, strengthening healthcare infrastructure, and ensuring equitable access to services.*

The Fund significantly contributed to strengthening education and health systems in Albania, ensuring more equitable access to quality services. In the education sector, Fund-supported interventions helped rebuild and modernize infrastructure damaged by the 2019 earthquake — notably, three schools were reconstructed with inclusive, child-friendly designs, restoring access to education for over 850 children. Beyond infrastructure, the Fund supported early childhood education by contributing to the expansion of pre-primary school enrolment, which increased from 65% in 2009 to 88% in 2016. It also backed national reforms to improve learning outcomes, such as capacity building for teachers and updated curricula aligned with EU standards. In health, the Fund played a pivotal role in strengthening maternal and child health services through community-based outreach models like the UPHV (Universal Patronage Health Visitor), which conducted over 21,000 home visits in underserved areas. These efforts enhanced immunization coverage, early childhood development, and health awareness among families. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Fund enabled rapid UN support for essential health system needs, including protective equipment, risk communication, and continued access to essential services. Across both sectors, the Fund prioritized equity, ensuring that rural populations, marginalized children, and vulnerable women received targeted support — thus contributing meaningfully to Albania's human development gains.

# **Gender Equality**: *Promoting women's empowerment, combating gender-based violence, and promoting gender mainstreaming considerations across policy areas.*

Advancing gender equality was a central focus of the Fund, yielding transformative changes in laws, institutions, and communities. Fund-supported initiatives helped strengthen the legal and policy framework for gender equality – including the introduction of gender quota provisions in electoral law and the integration of Gender-Responsive Budgeting into the national budget process. To combat gender-based violence, the Fund enabled the establishment of Albania's first public shelter for domestic violence survivors and the creation of coordinated referral mechanisms in many municipalities, which improved how local authorities, police, and service providers assist survivors. A flagship achievement was the opening of the LILIUM Center in Tirana, a one-stop facility providing medical, legal, and psychosocial support to women survivors of violence. Through these efforts and nationwide awareness campaigns (such as the annual "16 Days of Activism" campaign), institutions were better equipped to prevent and respond to gender-based violence, and more women are empowered to seek help. The Fund also promoted women's economic and political empowerment. Hundreds of women entrepreneurs gained access to training, grants, and markets — for example, 180 rural women benefited from gendersensitive value chain development projects in 2021-2023 and a Competitive Fund for Women Entrepreneurs was established to spur women-led startups. Women's representation in decision-making improved markedly alongside these efforts. By 2015, women held 23% of parliamentary seats (up from 16.7% in 2007) and 34.7% of local council seats (up from 12.5% in 2010), and for the first time about 15% of mayors were women in 2015. As of January 2025, Albania ranks 23rd for Women in Cabinet Ministers and 44th for Women in Parliament, dropping 23 and 2 places respectively since 20235. Despite this, Albania surpasses the EU average for Women in Parliament (35.7% vs. 31.8%) and has notable female leadership, including the Speaker of Parliament<sup>6</sup>. These gains are linked to Fund-backed advocacy and capacity-building that supported enforcement of gender quotas and encouraged political participation by women. In sum, the Fund's comprehensive approach — spanning legal reforms, expanded services for survivors, and empowerment programs — has embedded gender equality and women's rights as cross-cutting priorities in Albania's development trajectory.

The fund also supported the implementation of the UN Joint Programme "EU for Gender Equality in Albania" led by UN Women and implemented with UNFPA. This was the first time that EUD contributed directly to the fund, the project supported gender mainstreaming in EU integration process across policy areas, engaging central level institutions as well as LGUs in increasing their understanding of gender mainstreaming and key EU tools to promote gender equality. Several knowledge products on gender mainstreaming were developed in sectoral areas including support to women's economic empowerment and youth empowerment. Notably, six municipalities signed the European Charter of Equality of Women and Men in Local Life, and five Local Gender Action Plans were developed and approved as a direct result of the programme's support. The programme produced detailed Gender Mainstreaming Guidance Notes for multiple sectors (justice, anti-corruption, digitalization, climate change, health, etc.), and trained over 30 government officials on how to apply EU gender mainstreaming requirements in their work.

While significant progress was made, time constraints limited the full institutionalization of some efforts — for example, additional mentoring for ministries had to be extended due to implementation delays. Establishing permanent gender focal points in key institutions to maintain momentum, ensuring the implementation of the local gender action plans, and continuing close collaboration with the EU Delegation to keep gender equality high on the EU integration agenda is recommended. The successes of EU4GE, in driving local ownership of gender equality commitments and improving inter-ministerial coordination, were highlighted as a model to replicate in other policy areas.

# **Inclusive Economic Development**: Supporting job creation, entrepreneurship, and sustainable economic growth.

The Fund's support for job creation, skills training, and inclusive market access has contributed to more equitable economic growth. Joint programmes under the Fund improved employment opportunities for youth, women, and marginalized communities. For instance, a UN joint programme on Youth Employment and Migration aligned Albania's policies with EU and MDG targets, modernizing vocational training and career services. As a result, post-vocational training employment rates rose from 59% in 2012 to 65% in 2016, indicating better integration of graduates into the labor market. The Fund also catalyzed local economic development by supporting entrepreneurs and small businesses. Notably, the number of new enterprises owned by women doubled during the Fund's early years driven by targeted support such as business incubators and micro-grants for women entrepreneurs. In rural areas, agricultural livelihoods were boosted by extending advisory services and resources to previously underserved farmers (female beneficiaries of agricultural extension services increased from 10% to 15% by 2016). The Fund promoted innovation and diaspora engagement as well — for example,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> UN Women. (2025). Women in politics: 2025. UN Women. <u>https://www.unwomen.org/women-in-politics-2025</u> and UN Women. (2023). Women in politics map: 2023. UN Women. <u>https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2023/03/women-in-politics-map-2023</u>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> IPU Parline. Global data on national parliaments, 2025

facilitating the launch of Albania's first diaspora investment platform to attract investments from Albanians abroad. Through these efforts, the Fund has helped diversify the economy, support small and medium enterprises, and ensure that the benefits of growth are more widely shared across regions and social groups.

# **Environmental sustainability**: Enhancing disaster resilience, promoting sustainable resource management, and addressing climate change impacts.

The Fund has enhanced Albania's capacity to withstand disasters while promoting long-term environmental stewardship. In the wake of the November 2019 earthquake, the Fund rapidly mobilized resources for recovery and reconstruction. Three destroyed schools were rebuilt to modern, resilient standards, restoring safe education for over 850 children in affected areas. The Fund also financed the construction and equipping of three new fire and rescue stations, expanding emergency response coverage to roughly 45% of the country's population. To revive livelihoods, more than 1,000 farmers and small businesses received assistance — including grants, training, and equipment — to help them recover their incomes. All earthquake recovery efforts funded through the SDG Acceleration Fund applied "build back better" principles, incorporating disaster risk reduction (DRR) measures and social inclusion (e.g. gender and disability considerations) into reconstruction plans. Beyond the earthquake response, the Fund supported broader environmental initiatives to ensure sustainable development. It contributed to the establishment of Albania's first marine national park (Karaburun-Sazan) and supported the implementation of a National Waste Management Plan. Fund-backed projects promoted climate change adaptation and mitigation — for example, rehabilitating riverbanks to reduce flood risk for 160,000 people and introducing cleaner production practices to industries to reduce pollution. By integrating DRR into development projects and championing environmental protection, the Fund has helped Albania build resilience to natural hazards and advance toward its climate and environmental goals.

The Fund's ability to attract sustained donor interest highlights its credibility as a trusted mechanism for development financing. Its flexible structure allowed donors to target specific areas while benefiting from the efficiencies of a pooled financing approach. The areas supported through the Fund not only addressed immediate development challenges but also contributed to long-term resilience and institutional capacity building. By focusing on both short-term interventions and systemic reforms, the Fund has helped create an enabling environment for sustainable growth.

### Benefits within the UN System

The SDG Acceleration Fund's pooled financing mechanism benefited a diverse set of UN agencies in Albania, fostering inter-agency collaboration and enhancing collective impact. In total, 18 UN agencies received funding to implement joint initiatives spanning governance, social inclusion, economic empowerment, and environmental protection. By consolidating resources, the Fund empowered agencies to work synergistically, leveraging their respective expertise to address complex development challenges. This collaborative approach improved coherence within the UN Country Team and maximized the comparative advantages of each agency, resulting in more integrated and efficient support to Albania's development.

#### Evaluations and key recommendations

The effectiveness and impact of the Fund have been assessed through several key evaluations, which provided insights into the Fund's strengths and areas for improvement. These evaluations have been instrumental in shaping subsequent phases and ensuring that the Fund continually learns and adapts.

**Evaluation of One UN Coherence Fund (2007–2011):** A country-led evaluation of Albania's Delivering as One pilot phase found that the One UN Programme and the accompanying Coherence Fund improved UN coordination and alignment with national priorities. The pooled funding mechanism was seen to reduce duplication of efforts and foster innovation through joint programming. The evaluation noted strengthened Government–UN collaboration under the One UN approach but also highlighted the need to simplify fund management procedures and increase national ownership of the Fund. Key recommendations included involving the government more in fund decision-making, reducing administrative burdens for UN agencies, and enhancing performance monitoring to better track the Fund's development results. These early lessons informed of adjustments in the Fund's governance and operations in subsequent years.

**Evaluation of Swedish Support to One UN in Albania** – **2017:** This evaluation examined the impact of Sweden's contributions to the Fund, particularly regarding gender equality and policy reform outcomes. It found that the Fund significantly contributed to establishing institutional frameworks and advancing legislation for gender equality, thereby enhancing public institutions' capacity to promote women's rights. The evaluation highlighted the Fund's role in strengthening public oversight bodies (like Parliament and the Ombudsperson) to enforce gender policies and legal protections for women and marginalized groups. It noted the Fund was instrumental in aligning national policies with international commitments, including EU accession benchmarks. However, the evaluation identified gaps in translating gender mainstreaming efforts into sustainable changes on the ground. It recommended bolstering capacity-building within government institutions, improving data collection on gender indicators, and setting clearer accountability mechanisms to track progress on gender equality commitments.

Evaluation of UN Joint Programme "Ending Violence Against Women in Albania (EVAW)" (2019-2022: This evaluation assessed a major Fund-supported joint programme aimed at eliminating violence against women. It was found that the EVAW programme was highly responsive and adaptable, effectively adjusting to challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure continuity of critical services for survivors of violence. The evaluation concluded that EVAW achieved substantial results: a stronger policy and legal framework on domestic violence is now in place, institutional capacities (police, judiciary, social services) have been significantly strengthened through training and protocols, and multi-sectoral coordination mechanisms (Coordinated Referral Mechanisms) for domestic violence cases are operational nationwide. The programme introduced innovative tools and approaches, including standardized procedures for case management and the integrated service model of the LILIUM Center for survivors. The evaluation also noted that EVAW applied an intersectional approach, extending support to rural women, women with disabilities, and other vulnerable groups. Key recommendations from this evaluation were to secure sustainable funding for services established (so that shelters and counseling centers can continue beyond the project life), intensify prevention efforts by engaging men and boys, and further strengthen data systems for tracking and addressing violence against women. These recommendations have been taken into account in planning follow-up initiatives on gender-based violence.

**Evaluation of UN Earthquake Recovery Response (2020–2024):** Following the November 2019 earthquake, this evaluation assessed how effectively the Fund supported Albania's emergency response and long-term recovery. It found that the Fund was crucial in mobilizing and coordinating resources from multiple donors, enabling a swift, targeted UN response in areas such as education, social protection, economic recovery, and disaster risk reduction. The evaluation highlighted the Fund's flexibility in reallocating funds to meet urgent needs and its role in avoiding overlaps among UN agencies. Key achievements noted included the reconstruction of schools and health centers, livelihood assistance for thousands of affected families, and strengthened disaster preparedness systems at the local level. The evaluation also pointed out areas for improvement to increase resilience to future disasters. It recommended greater investment in disaster risk reduction and preparedness (e.g. supporting local emergency planning and early warning systems), improved coordination mechanisms between UN agencies and municipal

authorities, and better integration of gender equality into recovery efforts (ensuring women and vulnerable groups benefit equally from recovery programs). These findings informed the design of new DRR-focused initiatives and guided resource allocation decisions for continuing earthquake recovery work under the Fund.

The recommendations from all these evaluations have been incorporated into the design of Phase II of the Fund, ensuring that lessons learned from Phase I inform future strategies and improvements in fund management.

### Way Forward

The Albania SDG Acceleration Fund has been a cornerstone of the country's development journey, demonstrating the value of pooled financing in achieving strategic and sustainable outcomes. By fostering enhanced coordination, improving aid effectiveness, and promoting innovative solutions, the Fund has positioned itself as a model for development financing in the region.

As Albania moves into Phase II of the Fund (2021–2027), the legacy of Phase I will continue to shape development efforts. Phase II provides a robust framework for ongoing resource mobilization and joint program implementation. Ensuring the Fund's continued relevance will require a commitment to adaptive management, strategic partnerships, and a sustained focus on long-term impact. Building on the successes and lessons of Phase I, the SDG Acceleration Fund is well-positioned to support Albania's ambitions for the SDGs and to contribute to a more prosperous, inclusive, and resilient future.

A key focus moving forward will be enhancing local ownership and ensuring the sustainability of results beyond donor funding. Phase II will also emphasize innovation in financing mechanisms — leveraging blended finance approaches and forging new partnerships with the private sector — to further accelerate progress towards the SDGs. By integrating lessons learned and reinforcing principles of transparency, accountability, and efficiency, the Albania SDG Acceleration Fund is set to continue making meaningful contributions to Albania's development trajectory in the years ahead.

#### Conclusions

The 2030 Agenda underscores the need for integrated policy measures across the economic, social, and environmental pillars of sustainable development. Country-level pooled funds like the Albania SDG Acceleration Fund align well with these requirements by providing flexible, integrated financing within the context of national SDG priorities. The transformative impact of such funds is evident in examples across the Europe and Central Asia region — including Albania, Moldova, Montenegro, and Uzbekistan — where significant results in various sectors and cross-sectoral areas have been achieved through the combined expertise, efforts, and resources of multiple UN agencies working together.

In times of crisis — be it a pandemic like COVID-19, conflict shocks such as the war in Ukraine, or natural disasters — pooled funds have proven to be swift and coherent responders to country needs. They uphold high standards of accountability and transparency in fund utilization, while bolstering the achievement of the shared vision outlined in UN Cooperation Frameworks.

Since their inception, these funds have garnered increasing interest from partners, as evidenced by growing contributions. All such funds have received support from their respective governments, underscoring the trust that national authorities place in these innovative financing mechanisms. Pooled funding mechanisms not only drive transformative action on the ground but also enhance national ownership, empower Resident Coordinators and UN Country Teams, and strengthen the UN's integrated and coherent approach at the country level.

In light of the outcomes of the 2023 SDG Summit and the anticipation of the Summit of the Future, UN Country Teams are expected to pivot around transformative entry points — or key transitions — requiring accelerated efforts that leverage multiple policy levers across development domains. Country-level pooled funds can serve as quick and trusted financial enablers of such integrated efforts, helping countries like Albania to accelerate progress on the SDGs through unified and strategic support.