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FRUITS AND VEGETABLES AGRIBUSINESS IN ALBANIA: A SOURCE OF BETTER AND INCLUSIVE JOBS FOR YOUNG WOMEN AND MEN



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This report describes the intervention of RisiAlbania in the Albanian fruits and vegetable sector. The aim of the project was to increase youth employment in the sector by facilitating a transition to a quality management system and more modern supply chain management, with exporters better positioned and able to sell to EU markets. This case study is intended to serve as both a documentation of systemic change and a practical resource for market systems development (MSD) practitioners. It synthesizes lessons learned, captures examples of adaptive programming, and reflects on attribution, sustainability, and scaling. The structure follows a strategic logic that progresses from diagnosis to intervention, outcomes, and future directions.

List of Acronyms

| ACRONYM | FULL NAME |
|---------|--|
| BDS | Business Development Services |
| BPO | Business Process Outsourcing |
| CBS | Creative Business Solutions |
| CHF | Swiss Franc |
| EU | European Union |
| GAP | Good Agriculture Practices |
| GoA | Government of Albania |
| GRASP | GLOBALG.A.P. Risk Assessment on Social Practice |
| Ha | Hectares |
| ICT | Information and Communication Technology |
| INSTAT | Albanian Institute of Statistics |
| IT | Information Technology |
| JICA | The Japan International Cooperation Agency |
| KASH | Albanian Agribusiness Council |
| MAPs | Medicinal and Aromatic Plants |
| MARD | Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development |
| MSD | Market System Development |
| NTWG | National Technical Working Group |
| PSD | Private Sector development |
| QMS | Quality Management system |
| QR | Quick Response |
| SDC | Swiss Development Cooperation |
| SMETA | Sedex Members Ethical Trade Audit |
| SRD | Sustainable Rural Development |
| UNIDO | United Nations Industrial Development Organization |
| WB | Western Balkans |

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

RisiAlbania, a youth employment project funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), aimed to stimulate job creation in Albania's fruits and vegetable sector by enabling access to higher-value export markets, particularly the EU. The project adopted a **Market Systems Development (MSD)**¹ approach, working with exporters, service providers, and government institutions to catalyse sustainable and inclusive change in the **fruits and vegetables (F&V) subsector**.

Market constraints at the project's inception in 2018 included fragmented production, weak access to quality standards and high costs of certification (e.g., GlobalG.A.P), low packaging sophistication, and limited EU buyer linkages. **Farmers operated informally**, with poor agronomic practices and minimal support services, while exporters were largely tied to regional markets with few incentives to improve quality.

The **strategic interventions** focused on enabling systemic change by partnering with dynamic exporters to pilot **group certification** and establish formal supply chains; supporting the development of **local certification, information and knowledge transfer through embedded services** to reduce reliance on costly international experts; facilitating **market access** through export readiness training and participation in key trade events such as Fruit Logistica; catalysing a shift **toward recyclable, branded packaging** to meet EU standards; and institutionalising food **safety standards** via a National Technical Working Group in coordination with Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development(MARD).

The project delivered strong **results between 2018 and 2024**. GlobalG.A.P- certified production area rose from 40 to over 700 hectares - the majority of produce group certified. The export value of F&V

to the EU doubled, from €32 million in 2018 to €85 million in 2024². More than 1'200 new jobs were created, 72% of which were filled by women. In addition, 70% of exporters upgraded their packaging quality, and 30% invested in modern packing line technology. **A sustainable ecosystem of advisory and certification services** is now operational within Albania.

The project catalysed **systemic change** in business behaviour, value chain coordination, market orientation and triggered regulatory changes(GlobalG.A.P is part of national support schemes and National Rural Development Strategy). Exporters now invest in upgrading supply chains, farmers adhere to international standards – an increasing number registering and becoming a legal entity, and buyers increasingly see Albania as a credible sourcing destination. Informal practices have been replaced by **formal contracts, trust, and long-term planning**, resulting in improved incomes and higher resilience.

Key lessons for MSD projects include the importance of starting with high-leverage actors to build early proof points; embedding services within commercial business models to ensure sustainability; using **export market demand** as a change driver; and managing adaptively to respond to market shifts and implementation learning.

Looking ahead, a scenario of **steady growth** is the most likely. This will be driven by further consolidation among exporters, greater compliance with EU requirements, and continued alignment of national policy with European standards. However, risks such as **labour shortages**, erosion of standards but also **climate change** remain. Future interventions should focus on a general awareness for quality standards, therefore the supply of certified product to national markets , improving **traceability** for all produce, promoting **youth engagement**, expanding digital advisory services and unlocking **resilient financial tools** to secure long-term sector competitiveness.

1 The Market Systems Development (MSD) approach aims to reduce poverty sustainably by improving how market systems function for the poor, focusing on systemic change rather than direct service delivery. It emphasizes facilitation, local ownership, and scalability. See [Beam Exchange](#) for more.

2 <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat>

1. Background on RisiAlbania and Agribusiness in Albania

RisiAlbania is an innovative youth employment project supported by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), in partnership with the Ministry of Economy, Culture, and Innovation, and is implemented by Helvetas and Partners Albania. The overall goal of the project is to provide more employment opportunities for young women and men in Albania, aged 15-29, in a socially inclusive and sustainable way. The project addresses shortfalls in labour markets from three angles; the development of professional skills, labour mediation/ career guidance and supporting private sector actors (PSD) to create jobs, whereby the agribusiness is one third of the PSD portfolio, besides the engagement in tourism and ICT/ BPO (Business process outsourcing).Over the past two decades, Albania's agriculture sector has undergone significant transformation, driven by modernization efforts and a growing alignment with European Union standards. Following the post-communist transition the sector remains highly fragmented, with an average farm size of just 1.2 hectares. As shown in Figure 1, the majority of farms approximately 86% are small (under 2 hectares) and family-owned.

One of the structural challenges in the sector is the lack of farmer organization. Most small farms are not part of cooperative models, due to limited trust and collaboration among farmers, as well as lingering negative perceptions associated with cooperatives from the communist era.

Agricultural production in Albania is diverse: 48% comes from livestock, 14.6% from field crops, 18.3% from vegetables, and 18.9% from fruit trees. Notably, vegetable production in solar greenhouses has expanded considerably in recent years. An estimated 8'000 to 10'000 farmers are currently engaged in greenhouse vegetable farming, most of them operating on very small plots of less than 0.2 hectares (Figure 2)

The sector holds a comparative advantage in fruits and vegetables particularly in the production of fresh fruits, vegetables, and aromatic plants offering considerable employment potential. In recent years, increased investment in basic greenhouse infrastructure has further supported the growth of export-oriented production.

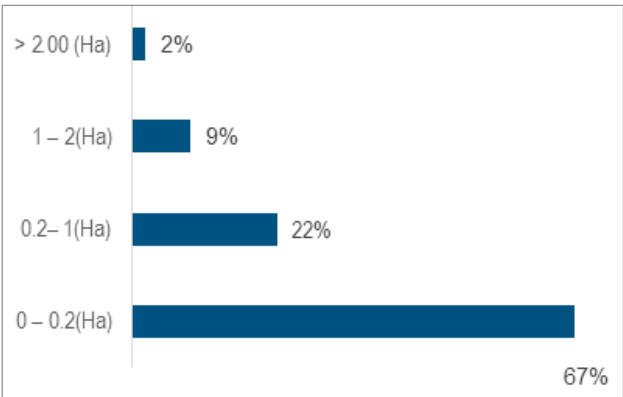


Figure 1: Structure of farms

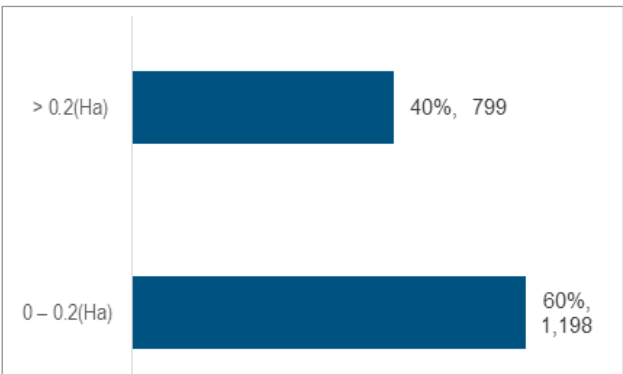


Figure 2: Greenhouse farm areas

While Albania's agriculture sector has strategic potential, it has traditionally suffered from fragmentation, low value-addition, few investments, low mechanisation and weak integration with export markets. Youth disinterest in agriculture is compounded by social norms, informality, and limited access to modern advisory and financial services. These challenges informed the initial market systems analysis that guided RisiAlbania's entry into the fruits and vegetables (F&V) sector.

Employment in agriculture continues to play a crucial role, especially for rural communities. According to INSTAT data for 2023, Albania had a total of 1'327'042 employed individuals³, of whom 46.1% were women. Of these, 32.3% approximately 428'000 people were employed in agriculture (employment in agriculture takes many forms from employment with a contract to self-employment and employed in the family farm). Women make up the majority of the agricultural workforce, accounting for 53.2% of those employed in the sector, with most being self-employed or engaged in informal work. From the total 351'000 agriculture

3 If a person owns or uses agricultural land, is counted as self-employed in agriculture.

farms in Albania, more than 2/3 are producing fruits and vegetables. In 2024, Albania's agricultural exports reached a record €570 million, reflecting the growing importance of the export market as a key sales channel.

Investments in technology and agribusiness infrastructure, are increasing, aiming to attract a younger workforce and new, younger investors to the sector. However, cultural trends and employment opportunities in cities are resulting in a large move of youths away from rural areas and thus agriculture

When RisiAlbania began its intervention (2018) in the fruits and vegetables sector, agribusiness in Albania was already experiencing positive development trends. At that time, exports had risen, reaching approximately €72.5 million in 2018, from only €29.7 in 2014, representing an average annual increase of 25% in the period prior to Risi Interventions⁴. This was beginning to present exciting and more formal opportunities for youth employment in the sector, not just in agricultural cultivation, but also other functions within the market system, such as management, marketing, supply chain, business development services, certification, logistics, technology and innovation⁵. Further developing and scaling these employment opportunities for youth in Albania is core to Risi Albania's vision of creating a profitable, modernized, formalized and attractive sector for young people to work.

1.1 General description of fruit and vegetables value chain before the intervention (2018)

Albania's fresh fruits and vegetables sector demonstrates strong production potential, with a cultivated area in 2018 of 40'000 hectares yielding approximately 1.2 million tons annually, in open-field and greenhouse production. Greenhouse production in Albania covers approximately 3'300 hectares⁶ and contributes around 254'481 tons to the agricultural output. As shown in Figure 4, certain regions of the country are specifically focused on export-oriented production.

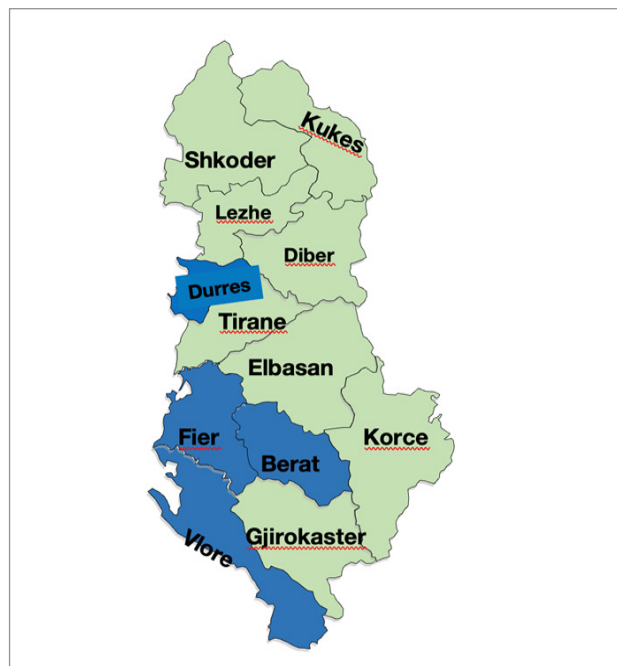


Figure 3: Map of Albania, in blue main fruits and vegetables export-oriented production areas

While production volumes were growing steadily, the quality of supply chains and compliance with international standards remained stagnant. Albania's comparative advantage in proximity to EU markets was not being translated into market share or export revenue. The absence of trusted market signals, weak coordination mechanisms, and limited private sector investment meant that young people, especially women, saw little opportunity for formal employment or entrepreneurship within fruits and vegetables sector.

4 <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat>

5 <https://www.risialbania.al/empowering-youth-to-engage-in-agribusiness-through-good-agricultural-practices/?lang=en>

6 Instat, 2023. Cultivated area with vegetables in greenhouses include first and second area sown with vegetables

2. Market System Analysis

In 2018, as an initial step before the intervention started, the project analysed the situation in the market system so that it could diagnose the systemic constraints and identify some options to intervene. Overall, the project found the following situation in the main parts of the market system.

Entrepreneurial capacity and market-oriented value chains. Many rural dwellers begin engaging in income-generating activities, often starting from their family farms. However, due to a lack of long-term vision, limited knowledge of production, marketing, and quality standards, these activities frequently were informal. With low awareness of the benefits of formalization and little understanding of market requirements, they saw no incentive to comply with regulations or invest in quality improvements. Sales were typically opportunistic, poorly planned, and inconsistent from year to year.

Farm technology and facilities: Most of the fruit and vegetable production was done in open field which requires little technology. Covered production for smallholders was simple: metal frame, crossbeams made locally from concrete reinforcing bars, plastic sheets with simple hand roller for ventilation on the sides. Simple, thin, plastic, flexible tubes were used for irrigation with drip points for each plant. This was connected to a pump for water supply from a tank in which liquid fertiliser was added. Farmers learn about these technologies from each other in the community or from the input sellers in the nearby town. The market for agronomic and agricultural technology advisory services was small and focuses on larger farms. Importers of technology market their products to larger farmers providing advice on design specifications. Only a few large farms use IT apps to manage the growing conditions: temperature, humidity, soil moisture.

Agricultural inputs: The market was well-established having developed with the agriculture sector. Farmers can access inputs from shops close to the farm. However, regulations regarding fake or banned chemicals were not enforced by the government with negative consequences for the fruits and vegetables sector's growth. Also, input providers were self-taught on technologies and application methods, leading to variability in the quality of advice given to farmers. There was no formal link between the input sector and the exporters of fruits and vegetables to EU. So, there were delays in the introduction of technologies

compatible with EU market requirements.

Advisory consulting services to exporters: Business development service providers in Albania have a long track record in providing services to urban customers. However, expanding to rural based exporters was still perceived as risky and unprofitable.

Advisory consulting services to farmers: Business development services were not available for farmers. Agronomic advice was obtained from neighbouring farmers and from input sellers.

Financial services: Generally, small and medium-sized farmers were unable to access financial services (loans, insurance) to support their business. Some larger farmers, with significant fixed assets suitable for collateral were able to access financial services. Insurance for production risks was not available. Exporters were mainly medium to large-sized businesses (€ 100'000 - € 2'000'000) and were able to access loans depending on the collateral they were able to provide. However, the administration delays were considerable. If possible, these businesses try to get a grant from an aid project, instead.

Land tenure: This was a complex part of the market system which has implications for farmers ability to obtain finance, expand their farming area and have long-term business confidence. The roots of the complexity lie in the communist history of the country and the previous culture of customary, family ownership; absent landowners and inadequate land title records and administration compound the situation.

Production and export standards: Farmers and exporters had a low understanding, interest or adoption of growing and handling standards suitable for EU markets. There were limited certification bodies, particularly for more complex certifications. This was due to the fact that, even though the market for certification was growing, it remained a small opportunity for international certification bodies to expand into. As such this meant that exporters had to pay additional costs for international certification bodies to travel and stay in Albania to provide their services. Certification was only viable for larger farms with capacity to invest relatively large sums of money in certification over longer timeframes. Most farms were small (86% of farmers with less than 2ha.) which meant that there

was very limited demand for more advanced and complex certification schemes.

Packaging: This industry was not developed. The range of packaging was limited and was not tailored to sophisticated market requirements, such as the E.U. Large, unlabelled, simple cardboard boxes with no QR or barcode or branding were commonly used. In sheds, female workers would fill boxes manually on the floor. Labour conditions were bad and damage to produce and contamination from floor dirt was frequent. The leading manufacturer of boxes, Pik Industry supplied about 60% of demand. It had visited more sophisticated markets and knew what improvements could be offered but there was no demand from exporters in Albania as they were supplying the regional market that was satisfied with simple packaging.

Social norms affecting the market system: The agriculture sector was not seen as progressive by business-people, investors or labour (especially youths). Business culture was deliberately informal and trust-based making it hard to create a dynamic, open competitive marketplace. Albania was deemed by EU importers as unreliable, risky place with which to do business. Leading exporters in Albania frequently faced unfair business practices from regional buyers (e.g. not being paid).

The diagnostic confirmed that while key functions of the market system (input supply, basic finance, advisory) existed, they were either underdeveloped, uncoordinated, or not incentivised to deliver value for export-oriented producers. Importantly, the project applied a systemic lens to distinguish between symptoms (e.g., low EU exports) and root causes (e.g., lack of certification incentives, misaligned business models, trust-based informality).

The project concluded that the fruits and vegetables sector was established but was not changing it was generally stagnant. It continued to supply domestic and regional demand with production systems that were traditional or moderately improved (lacking market orientation). There were few innovations in production, harvesting, collection, processing, packing or trade. Exporters were not able to get greater returns and business stability from accessing the EU market, and farmers remained vulnerable to market and worsening climate conditions, and the overall economic value-added did not increase. Also, the unregulated over-use of agrochemicals was harming the biological and physical environment and creating a health risk for farm labourers and consumers.

2.1 Intervention Strategy

Building on a thorough analysis of Albania's fruits and vegetables market system and drawing on international experience, the project designed a strategy to foster inclusive, sustainable growth and job creation. The focus was to make the sector more competitive, profitable, and attractive — especially for young women and men — by strengthening value chains and opening opportunities for smallholder farmers and rural enterprises.

The project deliberately partnered with a small number of capable exporters, recognizing them as the key drivers of change. These firms, often managed by young, dynamic entrepreneurs with strong export experience, combined an understanding of international buyer requirements with established relationships upstream. Their leadership provided the foundation for developing stronger, more reliable value chains — reducing acquisition costs, increasing planning security, and improving predictability for both farmers and collectors. This reliability was critical for both day-to-day transactions and for encouraging long-term investment by all actors.

The intervention was not geographically restricted. Instead, it targeted Albania's fruits and vegetables production zones wherever export potential existed, particularly for EU markets. Beyond creating economic opportunities, the project aimed to break socio-cultural barriers by making farming a viable and attractive profession for young people and women, who often face mobility constraints in rural areas.



is an internationally recognized certified standard that ensures Good Agricultural Practices. GlobalGAP. outlines international standards that act as a safe-guard for food safety, workers' health and safety, animal welfare, and environmental protection.

The core of the strategy was to promote a more formal and competitive agricultural economy by improving access to EU and other high-value markets through the adoption of quality and social standards particularly GlobalG.A.P. certification, along with GRASP and SMETA, which are among the most widely adopted and required production standards in the EU. Going beyond standards compliance, the project catalysed improvements in agronomic and business advisory services, smallholder group certification, packaging, and formalisation of relationships along the entire value chain. Crucially, the project helped farmers shift from subsistence and informal production to market-oriented farming. The project's facilitation strategy was rooted in Market Systems Development (MSD) principles: leveraging private sector incentives, enabling crowding-in, avoiding substitution, and ensuring sustainability. By focusing on exporters as the primary agents of change, RisiAlbania aimed to create a catalytic effect — where initial success would be visible, replicable, and attractive to peers. This design intentionally avoided “projectisation,” instead embedding support through business relationships and performance-linked co-investments. This often-enabled young people to take on new managerial roles within family farms, challenging traditional patterns and fostering innovation.

While the project did not directly provide training, it placed strong emphasis on **embedded services**, encouraging exporters to access high-value markets by meeting quality and social standards and obtaining certifications like GlobalG.A.P.(group model⁷), implementing Quality Management Systems (QMS) and contract farming. This strengthened the capacity of farmers while keeping advisory systems sustainable and market driven.

From the outset, the project adopted a “**pull**” **strategy** — stimulating change through demonstrated market demand and the leadership of exporters. This approach was chosen deliberately to encourage imitation and reduce long-term dependency on project support. Higher and more stable prices were important motivators, but equally important were the prospects of value addition, better linkages, and improved business practices that could make agriculture a more secure and rewarding livelihood.

Besides traditional MSD tools like facilitation among

market actors, research or communication for development, the project also applied clear principles regarding **financial contributions**. Risi used financial support sparingly as seed money to unlock ventures that aligned youth employment objectives with the sustainable business growth of its partners. Support was always anchored in a jointly agreed objective and developed business plans, with strict conditions: contributions covered a maximum of 50% of investment costs (cost of certification, capacity building, consultancy for the implementation), excluded operational costs, and were disbursed only after verified achievement of milestones following robust financial standards. Risi consistently positioned itself as a facilitator, not a bank, and referred partners needing investment capital to commercial banks or microfinance institutions.

Importantly, the project chose **not** to intervene directly in improving access to finance or in the supply of agricultural inputs. Both areas were already the focus of government and other donor efforts, and the project instead influenced them indirectly through the upgrading of market standards and practices.

Collaboration was central throughout. Risi actively worked with other development partners and the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development to promote sector-wide improvements. For example, the project shared knowledge and models with GIZ's Sustainable Rural Development (SRD) project and UNIDO's Global Quality and Standards Programme, supporting the development of a domestic certification system aligned with international norms. Such partnerships helped reinforce lasting change and ensure broad ownership across the sector.

The project identified the following risks to the success of its strategy:

Scepticism Toward GlobalG.A.P Based on Past Failures. Exporters may not be willing to try GlobalG.A.P again. It had been introduced to the market before and not been accepted due to the high costs of certifying individual farms. The traditional and rigid stance of exporters with a strong alignment to domestic and regional markets might mean they would not be unaware of the potential value of the EU market and would not be interested to re-consider adopting GlobalG.A.P as a route to reaching the EU market. Whilst the project was confident that it could succeed, it only had ‘group certification’ as an innovation to attract exporters. The project hoped that if it could get one or two exporters to pilot the change and succeed, then others would want to crowd-in.

7 In group certification, farmers together with the exporter form an organized group that operates under a unified Quality Management System (QMS).

Weak Advisory Market and Knowledge Retention by Consultants. The implementation of GlobalG.A.P standards may not be done well as GlobalG.A.P advisory firms may not be ready to fully share their knowledge to exporters and farmers, preferring to keep them dependent on the advisory service. The project aimed to reduce this risk by introducing many consultancies into the market and developing a local resource of consultants to support the growth and competitiveness of the advisory service market.

Limited Market Access Capacity of Exporters. Exporters may not be able to find buyers in the EU market, particularly retailers rather than wholesale buyers. Exporters do not have much experience, knowledge or relevant skills related to the EU market. However, their business drive and ability may be sufficient to help them succeed. RisiAlbania will monitor this risk and potentially add an activity after the pilot to reduce the barriers to entering the EU market.

Perceived regulatory burden and mistrust. For many farmers, the introduction of standards was perceived less as a tool for market access and more as a form of external control associated with excessive paperwork, inspections, and the fear of exposure to tax authorities reflecting a longstanding mistrust toward formal systems and government-led initiatives.

One unique feature of the intervention was its intentional flexibility. Risi Albania adopted an adaptive management approach, iterating based on feedback loops, market signals, and exporter behaviour. This allowed it to adjust tactics such as incorporating packaging improvements, expanding media campaigns, and redefining the consultant model without losing strategic coherence.

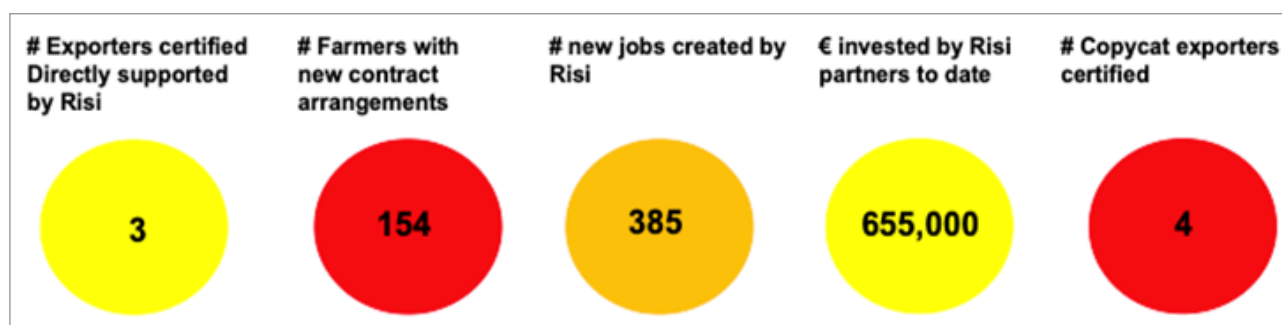
3. Results

3.1 Systemic Change and Job Creation

RisiAlbania's interventions in the Albanian fruit and vegetable sector have driven measurable, sustainable improvements by enabling access to high-value markets through the promotion of GlobalG.A.P. certification. An independent impact assessment confirmed the creation of over 1,200 new jobs, with a significant portion directly linked to RisiAlbania's partners and the rest generated through replication by other market actors. These findings, supported by a comparative analysis of certified and non-certified groups, demonstrate that certified exporters increased employment by an average of **14 workers**, while non-certified firms experienced stagnation or decline. Similarly, certified farmers reported significantly higher increases in income (54%), investment, and access to stable markets, indicating that these improvements were not coincidental but **directly linked** to the project's interventions.



Figure 4: Young Quality Manager employed by an exporter



In 2018, only 40 hectares of land in Albania were GlobalG.A.P. certified. By 2020, this figure had grown to 500 hectares. This rapid expansion was the result of both RisiAlbania’s targeted efforts and a broader behavioural shift across the sector. The **introduction and scale-up of the Group Certification** model significantly reduced the cost and complexity of compliance, particularly for small and medium-sized farms. Today, **78%** of certified exporters and **70%** of certified farms in Albania operate under this model.

To achieve this, RisiAlbania initially worked directly with pioneering exporters, later transitioning to a facilitative role by engaging farm consultants, BDS providers, and certification bodies. These actors played a critical role in sustaining and expanding the model beyond the project’s direct involvement. Farm business consultants trained during the pilot phase supported over 300 farmers linked to 10 exporters, helping them improve production practices and establish quality management systems. Most of the serious exporters adopted and maintained these systems with increasing independence. Some, like Doni Fruits, even internalized the function, creating their own quality control units to manage and scale certification.

Doni Fruits is a notable example of systemic change in action. In its first year of certification in 2019, the company sourced from 60 hectares across five crops. By 2020, it had expanded to 120 certified hectares and broadened its supplier base to 58 farmers producing 10 products. The company also built five new relationships with EU retailers and 20 with importers. This growth led to the creation of 13 full-time field jobs, 253 part-time seasonal field jobs, 30 full-time operational roles, and one transport position. Importantly, Doni Fruits assumed responsibility for

the ongoing certification process without external assistance after the pilot phase.

The impact extended beyond the private sector. As a result of increased awareness and lobbying by exporters, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development integrated financial support for GlobalG.A.P. certification into its national subsidy scheme and restricted use of the national stand at FruitLogistica to certified exporters. This policy shift further reinforced the sector’s transition from a volume-driven to a value-driven export model, improving Albania’s competitiveness in EU markets.

Not all innovations had the desired uptake. For example, the Agroquality platform raised visibility around certification and quality management, but most service engagements still occurred informally, outside the platform. While this illustrates the complexity of shifting entrenched market behaviours, it also reinforces the importance of aligning tools with existing practices.

Ultimately, RisiAlbania’s strategic and adaptive approach enabled a transformation of the fruit and vegetable sector, supporting both increased employment—especially for young women and men in rural areas—and a shift toward higher-quality production. Without these targeted, systemic interventions, the sector would likely have remained fragmented, informal, and less competitive in international markets.

3.2 Overall system change

Looking back from the end of the intervention to the start, it is clear that the fruits and vegetables market system has changed. There are now a small group of leading exporters with experience selling to the EU

suppliers respond with investments, and informal behaviours give way to contracts and record-keeping. This marks the maturation of fruits and vegetables as a competitive, export-facing sector.

The exporter to buyer relationships are well-established and are moving to a longer-term arrangement. EU buyers are showing far greater confidence and interest in Albania as a sourcing location and are investing into the country to support the change, either with co-investment in a contracted exporter or by placing a representative in Albania to manage relationships and support growth.

Indirectly from the project's activities there has been a considerable improvement in the input supply market, shown by new investments to stock and supply better quality agrochemicals (inorganic and organic). Smaller input shops in farming areas are also better trained by their suppliers and there is generally a greater understanding of the proper selection and application of crop chemicals.

This change in the business arrangements is fully supported by the government which is keen to move the economy to a closer alignment with the EU as part of its ambitions to achieve EU accession by 2030. In association with the EU, it is directing IPARD grants to support exporters committed to expansion to the EU market. That said, systems remain dynamic and vulnerable. Maintaining the momentum will require

reinforcing positive feedback loops, continuing to align incentives across the value chain, and embedding institutional champions who can monitor and adapt to new challenges.

There are five factors that might undermine the system change that has been achieved:

- Business failure: this is a feature of any economy and even more so in an emerging one like Albania.
- Climate crisis: this is already affecting production systems as explained in this report.
- Labour supply: this is already a problem to which businesses are responding by hiring more part-time labour, using labour agencies and importing labour from South Asia.
- Weakening of adherence to standards: Businesses in the supply chain have adopted the GlobalG.A.P standard because of the financial rewards, rather than because they value the principle of market standards. They may start to take shortcuts to 'tick the box' which will eventually lead to a loss of market credibility.
- Environmental governance of markets: This is now an established feature of mature, international markets. It affects investments and trade. However, it is only just arriving in Albania. The intensive production methods supported during this project are not environmentally sound. In the future, the market may put pressure on producers to grow in a more environmentally sensitive manner which will require changes and new investments, or Albania will lose market share. In this context, GlobalG.A.P certification plays a critical role, as it integrates environmental and social compliance criteria—helping to reduce negative environmental impacts while also improving working conditions across the value chain.

Overall, the system change looks sustainable and resilient to future shocks and trends, because of the strong institutional support by government, the compelling political and cultural narrative of EU alignment, the commercial incentives of the EU market for the Albanian value chain and the commercial incentives of the Albanian suppliers for the EU buyers, the commercial strengths of the inspection and certification business, and the planned developments in agricultural financial services.

3.3 Sector level change and impact

RisiAlbania's intervention was aiming to achieve an impact in terms of jobs, particularly for youths and women.

According to the impact study and RisiAlbania's MRM system, the intervention directly contributed to the job creation as it is given/described about of approximately 1'200 jobs(72% women) among producers and exporters who accessed higher-value markets, improved product quality, invested in their businesses, and enhanced working conditions for their employees.

Roles created within exporters' packing and quality teams offer higher safety and mobility for rural women compared to field labour. Similarly, the emergence of young agronomists and farm managers suggests subtle but meaningful shifts in intergenerational farm dynamics. The engagement of export managers highlights a strategic export-oriented focus and signals the private sector's strong commitment to further penetrate high-value international markets.

Beyond headline numbers, a key outcome is the emergence of a **commercially viable export segment** within the fruits and vegetable sector. These firms are now acting as role models, demonstrating that EU compliance and value chain upgrades can pay off — influencing peers, competitors, and aspiring agripreneurs alike.

- At the fruits and vegetable sectoral level, the following changes have been achieved: Since 2018, production has increased by around 20% with area increasing by 10%.The reporting period of only six years (2018-2023) and the reliability of the data is insufficient to draw strong conclusions.
- The percentage share of exports has increased for EU (15%) and decreased for non-EU markets. This change is happening gradually and appears to be a sustainable change that will continue.
- There has not been a significant change in the percentage of production by method (open-field or covered). Greenhouse production remains unchanged since 2018 at around 22% of total production with a slight increase from 8 to 9% for area cultivated. However, exporters are reporting an intention to gradually increase the proportion of their purchases from suppliers that are producing in larger, modern farm systems due to several advantages: economies of scale (production, transport, administration), higher control and greater reliability of production

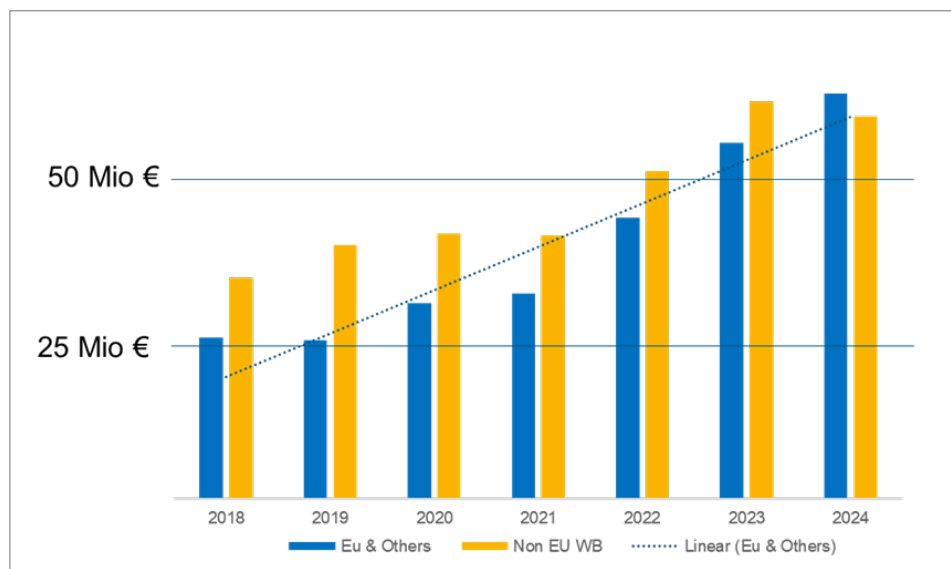


Figure 6: The trend of Vegetables Export in EU/other countries vs 5 non-Eu Balkan Countries (source Eurostat)

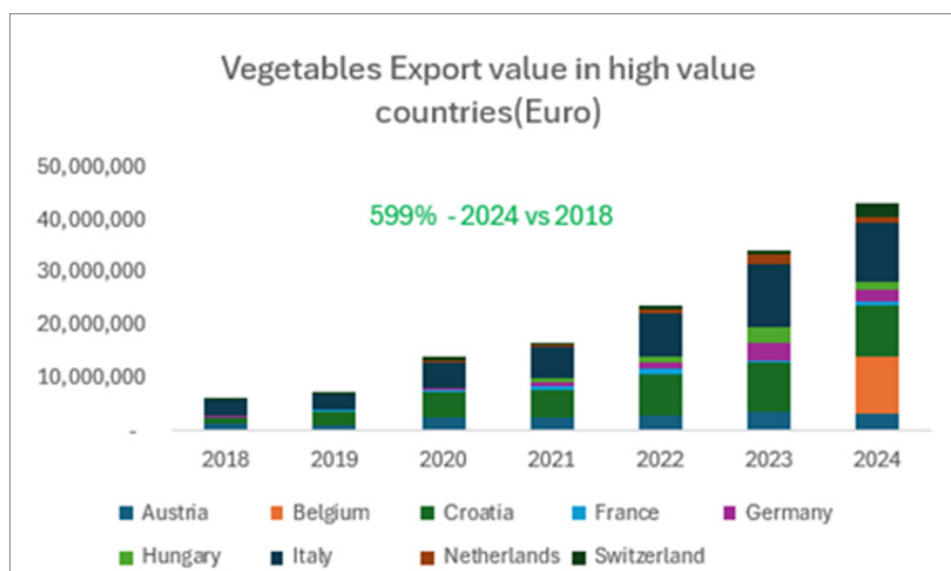


Figure 7: The trend of Vegetables Export in some of the High value countries (source Eurostat)

By May 2025, about twenty companies are exporting GlobalG.A.P certified products to the EU representing a turnover of €45-50 million, equivalent to 45% of the total fruit and vegetable exports from Albania. Over the past 5-6 years, exports to the EU-27 have nearly doubled, climbing from €32 million in 2018 to €85 million in 2024 making up 47% of Albania's total fresh fruits and vegetables exports. Regarding the export of vegetable from 2018 to 2024, exports to these markets increased by **€34.86 million**, representing a **141% growth**, compared to an **81% increase** (€27.63 million) in exports to five non-EU Western Balkan countries. **This trend is clearly illustrated in the two charts above regarding the export of**

vegetables: while both regions experienced growth, the **EU & others** category nearly closed the gap with **non-EU Western Balkans**, reaching €59.6 million in 2024 compared to €61.6 million—demonstrating Albania's successful shift toward premium markets driven by improved quality standards, certifications, and export readiness.

Going forward, robust impact evaluation will be essential to understand attribution more clearly — especially in relation to behaviour change, inclusion outcomes, and environmental impacts. Without this, the sector may lack the data needed to secure future donor or public sector investment.

4. Chronology of interventions

An important feature of the project's approach was that it made changes to its strategy and plans as it progressed. Whilst the project established an intervention strategy based on a good market system analysis, it continued to reflect on experience and listened to the market. The graphic illustrates the entire story and impact of the Intervention from 2018 to 2025, highlighting key changes and respond at multiple levels of the market system. As the project progressed, it catalysed broader systemic change enabling exporters to improve quality management, access finance and inputs, and adopt innovations such as traceability and GAP-related services while prompting responsive shifts across the wider market system, with public and private actors increasingly embracing certification as a gateway to high-value export markets.

4.1 Pilot Period (2018-2020)

During the pilot period, the project focused on the following activities aimed to move the market system towards the vision.

4.1.1 Activities

Producer-Exporter⁸ Relations: The project partnered with two large exporters (TomatoAI, Doni Fruits/Top Fruits) to test and demonstrate the benefits of group certification. This allows for a lower certification cost for each farm whilst being able to aggregate sufficient volumes to meet international demand. The exporters selected farms to form groups and then provided them with production advice so that they complied with the standard. Finally, the exporters bought the farmers' produce. An essential foundation of this activity was the increased formalisation in the relationship between farmers and exporters. These relationships became the backbone for knowledge transfer, improved planning, and trust-building. Farmers, who previously operated in isolation or relied on spot buyers, were now integrated into structured supply chains with clearer quality expectations, pre-harvest advice, and more predictable incomes. This shift also increased female participation in sorting, grading, and quality control functions.

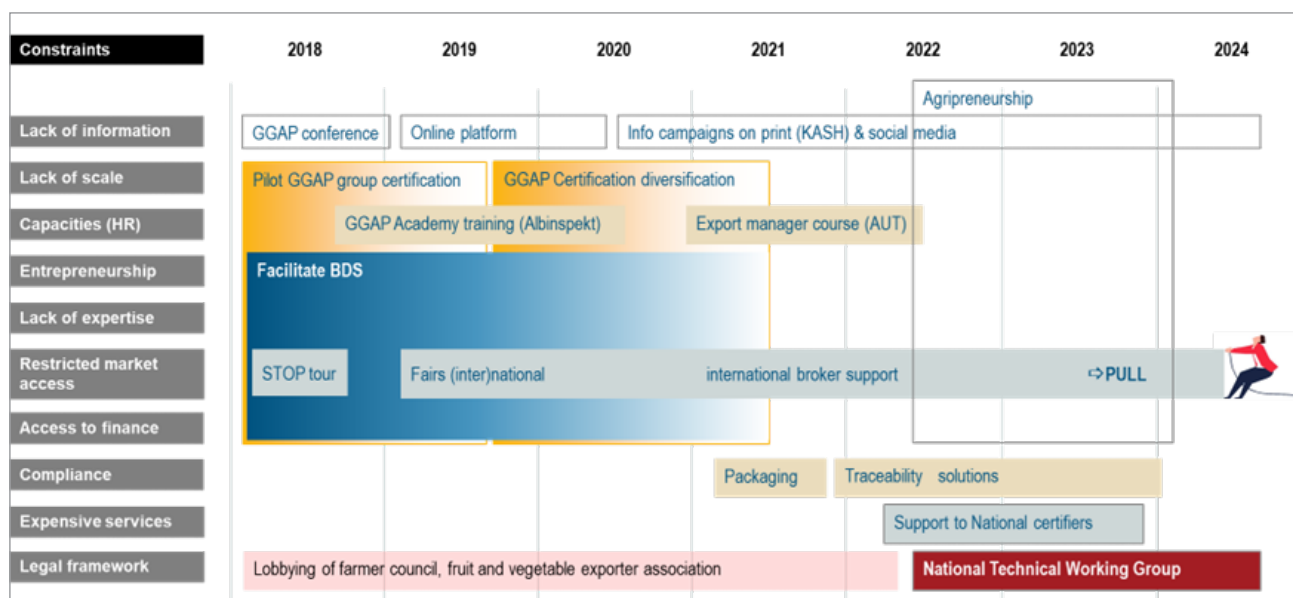


Figure 8: Adaptive management approach adopted by RisiAlbania

8 Exporters refer to companies that collect fresh fruits and vegetables from 100 to 3,000 farmers. They are responsible for sorting, cleaning, and packaging the produce, and ultimately exporting it to international markets

Standards: The development of the supply chain to meet export markets with high quality fruits and vegetables critically depends on standards. The project partnered with Albinspekt/ bio.inspecta to build **Agroquality** which is an online platform to promote the food safety standards of Global G.A.P., organic, H.A.C.C.P. and provide information on sources of advisory service.

Export market linkages: The project facilitated, in cooperation with MARD and GlobalG.A.P, a 'GlobalG.A.P stop tour'. Buyers such as LIDL-OGL were introduced to Albania and exporters were able to meet visitors on the tour and learn about other countries. Also, to increase business links, understanding and confidence of the partner exporters, the project supported their participation and promotion at **Fruit Logistica**, the main European trade exhibition.

Media: To support the development of a movement for change, to create greater excitement in the sector at this early stage, and to help pioneer exporters to be recognised and appreciated, the project collaborated with media channels to share content on television and **social media**. A famous Albanian TV presenter was supported by the project to travel to Austria to showcase the presence of Albanian tomatoes in supermarkets and to explain the importance of quality management. A video programme was broadcast in Albania on a TV channel used in rural areas and was seen by 15,000 viewers.

Farm advisory consultancy: 15 farm business consultants were trained with support from the project, in partnership with GlobalG.A.P Academy, MARD and Albinspekt/ bio.inspecta. The consultants developed the capacity to advise farmers and exporters on GlobalG.A.P standards, with a particular focus on preparing for certification by supporting the establishment of Quality Management Systems and the implementation of group certification schemes. During the pilot period, the consultants started to advise farmers that were connected with exporters. They also advised exporters on IPARD grant applications for greenhouses and other farm assets, loan applications and trade intermediary services. The services to farmers were paid by exporters. An impactful innovation was the linkage of these farm consultants with the exporters' business models — embedding advisory services in commercial transactions, rather than offering them as stand-alone training. This model-built trust and relevance while also contributing to the sustainability of advisory services beyond the project lifecycle.

Consultancy on export markets: Consultants were encouraged to provide advice to exporters on all the aspects of getting ready to meet export market needs. This was done as a way of helping consultants increase their income so that they would stay in business. But exporters showed little interest in paying for this service.

4.2 Consolidation period (2021-24) – expansion and diversification

In this period, RisiAlbania adapted its strategy to take account of the experience it had gained and the changes taking place in the market. The project's strategy focussed on export facilitation, institutionalisation of GlobalG.A.P skills at a national level and upgrading product packaging.

4.2.1 Export Facilitation

The improved preparation of Albanian exporters led to direct meetings with supermarket chains and buyers from eight countries — Sweden, Poland, Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and Germany including Coop Switzerland, which announced plans (see photo) to start sourcing GlobalG.A.P certified fruits and vegetables from Albania. RisiAlbania, through its neutral role, effectively supported both exporters and buyers to build mutual understanding and trust, which resulted in several new sales contracts. Buyers acknowledged that Albania lacks large-scale exporters and would need to collaborate with medium-scale suppliers. While a few exporters subsequently engaged Koestinger & Partners and Gateway Partners for additional services, most are still adapting to the export-oriented mindset. This shift requires investing



Figure 10: Albanian Fruits and Vegetables Stand at Fruit Logistica (2023).



Figure 11 Students awarded Export Manager certification by the Agricultural University of Tirana (AUT) and Koestinger & Partners

more in marketing, establishing new trust-based relationships in the EU, moving beyond existing networks in the Balkans, and gaining confidence in the reliability and value of EU market opportunities.

Each year, around 70 meetings were held at Fruit Logistica, involving approximately 10 exporters annually, with each exporter typically securing 2–3 meaningful buyer contacts. Since these efforts began, an estimated **60 exporter-buyer linkages** have been established. Exporters widely recognised that RisiAlbania’s support — both for the national stand and export facilitation — was instrumental. They have improved their attitudes, professionalism, and organisational capacity to meet EU buyer expectations.

Export facilitation is not a new concept in Albania. For years, donor-funded projects have implemented such initiatives, often covering all costs, but with limited local engagement or lasting commitment. In the fruits and vegetables sector specifically, only a handful of farmers had previously attended **Fruit Logistica** in Berlin — the leading fruits and vegetables industry trade platform in the EU.

In 2018, the project initiated a structured export facilitation activity in partnership with GIZ and MARD, enabling the first participation of a group of GlobalG.A.P.-certified fruits and vegetables farmers. This engagement led MARD to adopt a new requirement: only certified exporters would be allowed to participate in future national stands.

Building on this momentum, from 2021, the project intensified its efforts to help the fruits and vegetables

sector position itself in the EU market, strengthen connections between GlobalG.A.P.-certified exporters and EU buyers, and turn these connections into concrete sales. Most exporters lacked dedicated export managers, clear export strategies, and structured plans for entering the EU market.

In response, the project worked closely with MARD to significantly enhance the Albanian stand at Fruit Logistica and human resources capacities. It also partnered with **Koestinger & Partners and Gateway Partners** who in cooperation with Agriculture University of Tirana introduced the course Export Stars-Sustainable Export Manager. The “Export Stars” program was a 9-week experiential learning initiative aimed at equipping Albanian university students and recent graduates with practical export knowledge by working on real projects from local SMEs targeting EU markets. Guided by expert mentorship, student teams developed GoToMarket strategies supported by trade data, market research, and customer discovery, delivering actionable export plans to participating companies lacking dedicated export departments. Furthermore, Koestinger expanded their services to Albanian fruits and vegetables exporters, addressing the gap where some certified exporters were still unable to access EU markets. Exporters received tailored support on how to effectively manage their stands, prepare for and schedule buyer meetings, and develop relevant marketing materials. Experts facilitated direct meetings with key EU buyers. Additionally, the project supported the Albanian consultancy **CBS** to provide export readiness services to exporters.

To ensure sustainability, the project intentionally

reduced its financial footprint over time and required increasing exporter cost-sharing for participation in trade fairs and matchmaking. This tapering approach strengthened ownership, enhanced exporter competence in export marketing, and signalled to public partners such as MARD the value of long-term engagement.

4.2.2 Packaging

By late 2024, out of approximately 100 fruits and vegetables exporters, around **70% had improved the quality of their packaging**, and **30% had invested in modern packing line technology** to meet EU standards. Exporters progressively recognised the value of upgrading their packaging to recyclable materials, adopting EU-standard designs, and improving product presentation for the EU market. The packaging upgrade was a turning point for many exporters. Once seen as a secondary issue, packaging became a symbol of market readiness and professionalism. It allowed exporters to reposition their brands, reduce product loss, and meet sustainability preferences of EU buyers.

These changes positioned Albanian exporters to better meet EU buyer expectations, while also improving traceability, branding, and sustainability. Exporters who had initially been sceptical gradually shifted their approach, realising that improved packaging and modernised packing lines were essential for accessing and competing in higher-value markets.

During the pilot, it became clear to the project that significant improvements in packaging were needed to align with EU market preferences. Fortunately, Albania already had a major and innovative packaging manufacturer — **Pik Industry** — which supplied approximately 70% of the fruits and vegetables sector's packaging. Pik Industry shared the project's vision and saw an opportunity to lead the transition towards EU-standard packaging, including recyclable materials, reduced plastic use, QR codes, traceability features, and branded designs.

RisiAlbania worked closely with Pik Industry to help communicate this improved offer to exporters. To further support this effort, the project facilitated visits from packaging experts from Italy, who introduced exporters to modern packing line technologies and EU-standard packaging solutions.

Initially, exporters were sceptical about the value of these changes, particularly regarding the higher costs

of recyclable and branded packaging, given their familiarity with Balkan market requirements. However, over time, some exporters — early adopters — began investing in improved packing line technologies for cleaning, sorting, and packaging products to EU standards, with Pik Industry playing a key partnership role in this transition.

4.2.3 Skills Development

The national technical working group successfully developed and secured approval from GlobalG.A.P. for the **GRASP module for Albania**, covering labour standards — an increasingly important requirement for European buyers. The group also produced **National Interpretation Guidelines** for GlobalG.A.P. and localg.a.p., enabling the international standard to be appropriately adapted for application in Albania.

These outputs are critical as they facilitate exporter compliance with internationally recognised quality and social standards, improving access to EU markets and reducing uncertainty among certification bodies and exporters. The working group became



The GlobalG.A.P. Risk Assessment on Social Practice (GRASP) is an add-on that aims to support the evaluation of workers' health, safety, and welfare at farm level. It covers four major social responsibility topics: workers' voice, human and labor rights information, human and labor rights indicators, and child and young workers' protection



is a social audit standard aimed at assessing working conditions in areas such as labour, health and safety, environment, and business ethics

an important platform where technical issues could be discussed and resolved in a coordinated manner. Additionally, the group, with project support, carried out a **communication campaign** among farmers, raising awareness about GlobalG.A.P. certification and social standards such as SMETA and GRASP, further encouraging formal compliance in the fruits and vegetables sector. To strengthen the sustainability and effectiveness of export facilitation, the project decided to further encourage the formalisation and recognition of the national technical working group. The objective was to establish it as a platform for addressing technical issues and resolving certification-related challenges systematically. The group comprised nine members, including representatives from the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD), sector associations (KASH and ADAD Malore), exporters, certification bodies (bio.inspecta and EQSC), input suppliers, and GlobalG.A.P.-registered consultants.

With project support, the group also designed and implemented an outreach campaign to raise awareness among farmers about the importance of GlobalG.A.P., GRASP, and SMETA standards, encouraging broader adoption and formal compliance in the fruits and vegetables sector.

4.2.4 Agripreneurship advice

Agripreneurship is called an approach in which a buyer (often the international partner) engages to improve knowledge and skills of its suppliers, while arranging input and service suppliers to provide several trainings. Agripreneurship are in principle embedded services with the difference that the training does not only cover aspects linked to the input or service provided, but imparts a broader range of knowledge, while linking various aspects of production and emphasising market orientation, including economical and managerial aspects.



Figure 12: Franc Janko a young entrepreneur who run his own open field farm and was part of Agripreneurship program

The objective of the intervention therefore was to enable farmers to meet export market standards; quality assurance and enhancing farmers' business profitability and attracting young "agripreneurs" to create better job opportunities in the agricultural sector.

In 2023, under Risi facilitation, a national buyer arranged three exporters, three input suppliers, one finance institute, Vodafone Albania (smart farming program), a representative of Spar Switzerland and the Municipality of Lushnja to deliver the Agripreneurship training program for hundreds of farmers.

The success of the program was moderate, since intensity was high and farmers more interested in the inputs or services, they needed than basic topics like sustained soil fertility, regenerative agriculture or financial education. Once the arranging buyer pulled out, it came to a provisional halt.

In the course of action, several challenges emerged. The lack of clear demand from importers for improved

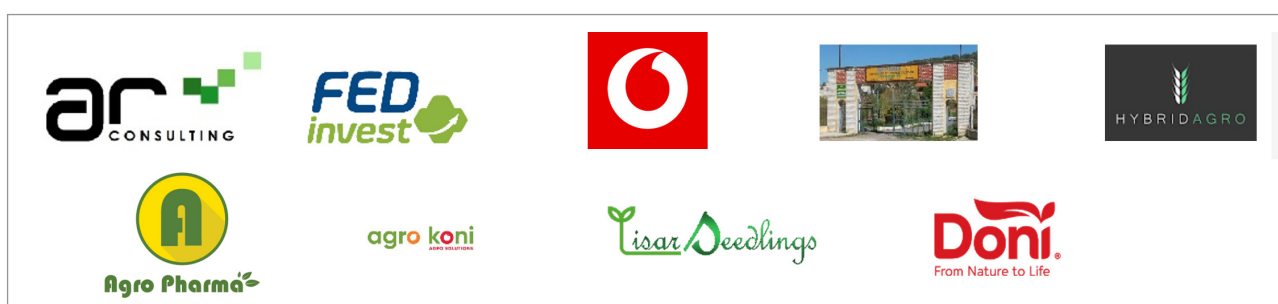


Figure 13: Logos of some involved companies/partners in the Agripreneurship program.

business practices and the difficulty in steering discussions towards sectoral-level issues limited the effectiveness of the initiative. Instead, input- and service providers tended to focus discussions on their own businesses or used the meetings to promote their products and services. This experience underscores a key MSD lesson: supply-driven efforts to build service ecosystems often fail unless there is strong, visible demand. In this case, exporters and farmers did not yet see business planning or structured consultancy as a competitive advantage — indicating the need for deeper demand-side work, possibly by building success stories, peer learning, or buyer-led pressure. Nonetheless, a positive outcome of the endeavour is an increased demand for certain services which is seen for instance with the increased turnover of the involved consulting company. In other words, if farmers were not excited about training, they know now where to get in- depth knowledge and skills and apparently, they make use of it.

4.2.5 Albanian certification services

The Albanian fruits and vegetables sector now benefits from a **functioning, locally embedded certification ecosystem** for GlobalG.A.P., significantly reducing costs and increasing accessibility for exporters. This evolution—from reliance on international expertise to **domestically available, accredited services**—represents a clear example of systemic transformation aligned with the MSD approach. It reflects the intended outcome of a well-functioning market system: **services that are sustainable, market-driven, and independent of project support**.

Historically, exporters in Albania depended on foreign consultants and auditors to achieve GlobalG.A.P. compliance. These services were expensive, logistically complex, and poorly adapted to local realities. Certification was largely out of reach for smaller producers, and there was limited incentive to invest due to weak demand from regional markets. RisiAlbania identified this lack of local certification, auditing, and advisory services as a key constraint in the sector.

To address this, the project applied a facilitative approach, combining **exposure through events such as GlobalG.A.P. Stop Tours**, with **targeted technical assistance and co-investment**. This strategy successfully catalyzed the development of a domestic service market capable of responding to demand both during and beyond the project's intervention.

A major breakthrough came when **bio.inspecta**, a local inspection company, obtained accreditation through **CERES**, an international certification body. This enabled them to offer internationally recognized GlobalG.A.P. inspection and audit services from within Albania. Since then, bio.inspecta has remained active in the ecosystem—engaging with the **National Technical Working Group (NTWG)** to raise awareness, build capacities, and maintain momentum among exporters and consultants.

Similarly, **Hybrid Agro**, a Kosovo-based consultancy originally focused on organic certification, expanded its services after participating in a GlobalG.A.P. Stop Tour event facilitated by RisiAlbania. Recognizing the emerging business case, the company has since contributed to increasing advisory options available to Albanian exporters.

These developments have delivered tangible benefits to the market. Certification is now **more affordable, flexible, and culturally attuned** to the Albanian context. Exporters no longer need to import services from abroad or rely on donor-driven support. Instead, they can access professional certification services through local providers that operate **commercially, independently, and sustainably**.

This outcome exemplifies the MSD principle of fostering a self-sustaining market response. Local service providers are now **embedded in the system**, responding to current demand and ready to scale in response to future growth in export-oriented fruits and vegetables sector. The foundation has been laid for a **durable, market-based solution** to a previously persistent barrier—marking a significant and lasting shift in how the sector operates.

4.2.6 Laying the groundwork for Digital Traceability

As part of its market systems approach, RisiAlbania introduced and supported the development of **digital traceability solutions** to strengthen transparency, food safety, and market compliance in Albanian agricultural value chains. While immediate large-scale uptake did not materialize, these early interventions laid essential foundations for future growth — especially as EU regulatory frameworks evolve and create new market pressures.

Two distinct digital solutions were piloted:



An international platform designed to manage agricultural supply chains with a strong emphasis on traceability and quality control, was introduced and piloted with producers of Medicinal and Aromatic Plants (MAPs).



An Albanian ICT company developed a digital traceability system with RisiAlbania's support to reflect local needs. The platform focuses on food safety and supply chain visibility and was initially piloted in the MAPs sector. It has since begun testing in the fruits and vegetables sector, broadening its relevance.

These tools addressed a clear systemic constraint: the absence of reliable, scalable, and context-appropriate traceability systems in Albania. Traditionally, exporters relied on manual, paper-based tracking methods that were vulnerable to error, lacked transparency, and were difficult to audit. While digital tools promised efficiency, quality assurance, and regulatory readiness, the transition posed challenges.

Despite this promise, the planned scale-up of digital traceability — including a pilot with **Helius Solution** and **Tomato AL** — did not progress as intended. Exporters expressed limited interest, citing the **immediate visibility of costs** and a lack of **perceived short-term value**. The benefits of digitalisation, such as improved compliance, customer trust, and future competitiveness, were not yet sufficiently compelling without direct market pressure.

However, these initial setbacks do not diminish the longer-term potential. Key trends suggest that **market demand for traceability will increase** significantly. The European Union is moving toward tighter traceability regulations, and Albania's Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development has issued **Directive No. 15 (10.04.2025)**, which mandates that food products must carry identifying indicators linking them to specific production lots. This regulation comes into force on **January 1, 2026**, and is expected to **stimulate demand** for digital solutions among exporters.

Moreover, the **introduction of digital tools in the MAPs sector** has already begun to shift attitudes and demonstrate practical value. Although adoption remains modest, the presence of functioning digital systems in adjacent value chains creates **opportunities for horizontal learning** and peer influence.

While the traceability tools are not yet fully embedded across the sector, the groundwork has been laid. Local and international service providers are now present and capable, and initial awareness among exporters has been raised. These are essential preconditions for **systemic change** to occur when external triggers — such as regulation or buyer requirements — accelerate adoption.

The pilot was expected to demonstrate the benefits of digitalisation; however, exporters showed limited interest. The main reason was that the costs of adopting such a system were immediately clear to them, while the **potential value** — especially without immediate market pressure — was uncertain. As a result, the pilot did not progress. While the initial pilot didn't reach scale, the groundwork has been laid. The fact that both local and international digital tools have been introduced and are now in use in adjacent value chains (e.g., MAPs), creates potential for horizontal learning. Future interventions should aim to leverage regulatory changes (e.g., Directive No. 15) as tipping points for adoption.

4.2.7 Regulatory framework

The project played a pivotal role in shaping the policy landscape for certification and quality standards in agri-business in Albania through sustained lobbying, research, and multi-stakeholder coordination. Central to this effort was the establishment and continuous support of the National Technical Working Group (NTWG), a credible platform uniting stakeholder from the private sector, government, and international organizations. Through numerous technical meetings and policy dialogues, the NTWG effectively advocated for institutional backing for GlobalG.A.P and other quality standards.

This advocacy culminated in the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) expanding the national subsidy scheme to include group certification—marking a strategic shift from individual farm support to more systemic quality assurance. These achievements were rooted in strong collaboration, joint research, and the NTWG’s ability to mobilize stakeholders and communicate a compelling value proposition for certification and market-oriented farming practices.

Beyond the NTWG, the project leveraged partnerships to broaden the policy conversation. Working with UNIDO, GIZ, CBS, and the Food Safety Project led by the Irish Food Safety Authority, the team jointly addressed food safety and quality assurance. These collaborations, informed by targeted research in areas such as fruit and vegetable finance, cold storage, and food safety, ensured alignment across programs and helped embed certification in national strategic frameworks, including subsidy measures and the National Agriculture and Rural Development Strategy.

The project also cooperated with other initiatives through its involvement in the Investment Outreach Campaign for Agribusiness, led by IFC and AIDA. By positioning pioneering exporters and certified companies as reference models, the campaign elevated the business case for investing in

sustainability and certification—reinforcing policy advocacy through real-world examples.

Throughout implementation, the project applied adaptive management not only in its third phase but consistently across interventions, especially during the development of evidence-based recommendations and in response to evolving policy opportunities. This adaptive, issue-driven approach—rather than a rigid phase structure—enabled the team to act on windows of opportunity, refine its methods, and maintain relevance across institutional and market actors.

4.3 Project resources – cost benefit analysis

HELVETAS assigned two types of resources to the intervention in fruit and vegetables: human and financial, whereby human resources consisted of one implementation manager engaging greatly for the endeavour, enjoying the support of the private sector component leader, the entire project team Risi Albania and HELVETAS. Financial resources were on one side used for targeted cooperation agreements with pioneer companies (‘seed money’), on the other service contracts with providers of research and expertise, information, networking or promotion. On the benefit side, the analysis considers jobs that were created either by project partners and their affiliates⁹,

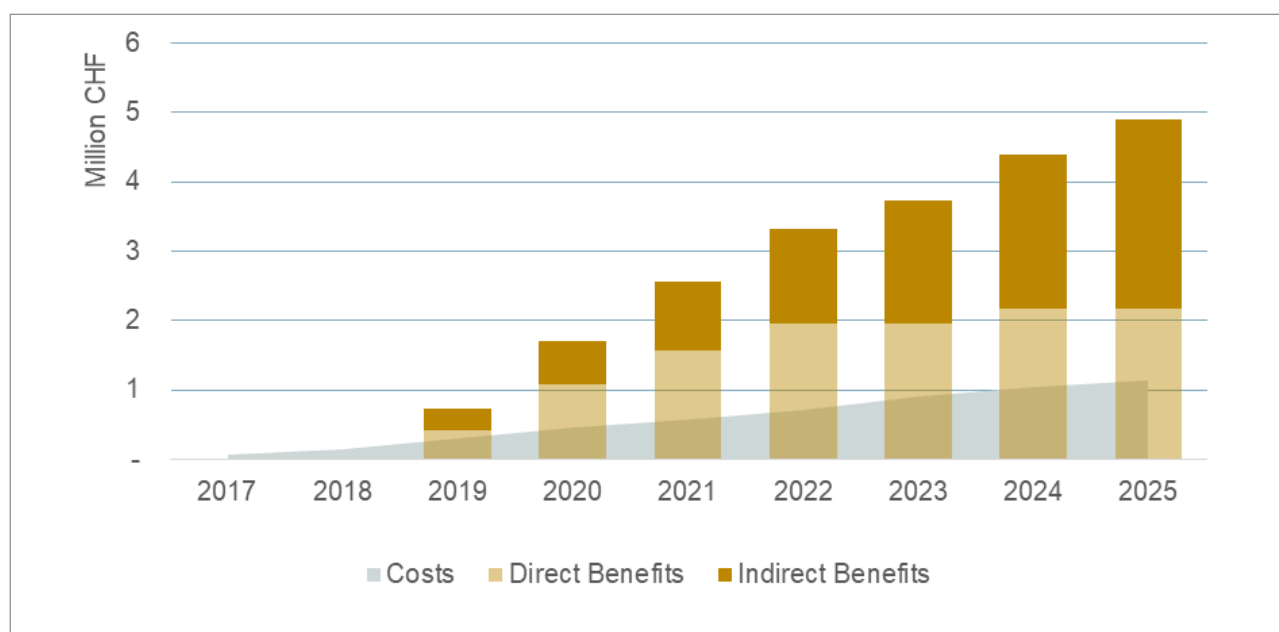


Figure 14: Cost benefit analysis of the certified fruit and vegetable export intervention

9 In the analysis, a project partner is called a company with a cooperation agreement, for instance an exporter. Affiliates are called companies doing business with the partner (e.g. farmers), but neither having obligations towards, respectively enjoying support from the project.

or companies that started group certification on their own. Simplified calculations were made assuming the value of a job created as equal to one year salary (12 months) of an average worker in agriculture, plus a 10% increase as additional benefit for the employing company. The project has done further, detailed analysis which are based on field studies (differentiating the position, type and duration of employment for instance), realising soon that despite an impressive number of information and multiple analyses, general findings are difficult to make. Nonetheless, the coarse comparison of roughly one million Swiss Francs of investment and almost five million of return is impressive.

5. Outlook

As systemic change takes root, the next challenge is guiding the sector through consolidation and deeper integration with European markets. The risks of regression are real, particularly around climate change, informal practices, and low capital investment. However, the foundation laid by RisiAlbania offers a strong pathway for continued public and private co-investment.

A number of potential scenarios can be envisaged for Albania's fruits and vegetables sector: rapid growth, steady growth, or decline. It is considered that the most likely scenario is steady growth due to the commitment of exporters, the sufficient adoption of professional production and supply chain methods aligned to the EU export market, and the comparative advantage that Albania has supplying to the EU market. Rapid growth is unlikely as the Albanian exporters are not easily able to access investment funds to expand their businesses and the social process of change takes time. Decline is unlikely, though cannot be fully ignored due to pressures from climate change.

Steady growth will most probably involve some consolidation amongst exporters with a group of about 5-10 larger exporters providing a major share of the supply with strong, vertical linkages to EU buyers, continued improvement in supporting markets (packing, financial services, grower advice).

Greenhouse expansion has continued steadily, increasing by about 100 hectares each year. If this trend is sustained, Albania's greenhouse area will

reach 4,491 hectares by 2030, which, given an average yield of 82 tons per hectare, would produce an additional 57,400 tons, pushing greenhouse production to an estimated 367,400 tons. Fruit and vegetable exports are expected to exceed 250 million euros by 2030—accounting for 25% of total agricultural exports—provided the current trend continues.

To increase the likelihood of this scenario, several areas of systemic change will need to be supported. Each of these areas should be viewed not as isolated gaps, but as leverage points for a more resilient, competitive fruits and vegetables sector. Investments in certification, traceability, seedling quality, or youth engagement should align with a broader vision: positioning Albania as a trusted, high-quality supplier for EU retail chains.

Certification facilities: The GlobalG.A.P inspection and certification process is well-established. However, it would be helped if there was some investment in laboratories in Albania to help with quick analysis.

Digital technical advice for smallholder farmers: As the farmers have developed over the last 8-10 years, the way that they obtain advice has changed. It would be useful to do a market analysis of farm advisory services to better understand how it currently works and ways that it could be improved. Maintaining a quality product in the market starts first in the field. How do farmers learn about modern fruits and vegetables cultivation, crop handling, field packing, storage and transport to exporter sheds? Traditionally, farmers mainly learn from each other and from agricultural input shops. What media or internet sources do they use? Would they be open to a digi-extension service that is either linked to exporters or independent? Could such a service be integrated to Global GAP standards? Can cost efficiencies be introduced so that the service is more affordable? How to identify and work with shops selling safe and quality products and counteract fake inputs in the market?

A youth mindset shift is needed to ensure the future of the fruits and vegetables sector. Social norms currently lead youths to favour emigration, online work, urban business or employment. The agriculture sector's workforce is aging, and new investment is not being led by the next generation. Activities can be taken by NGOs or social impact ventures to help promote business opportunities in high-value fruits and vegetables. As farms grow and new technology

is adopted, the fruits and vegetables sector may become more attractive to youths.

The **climate change threats** are real: increasing peak temperatures in the growing season, destructive winds and rain, droughts, new pests and diseases. There is a role for publicly-funded agricultural research to identify solutions and put them in the market for farmers to adopt.

Standards can continue to be established as the market develops. Some exporters have obtained experience with new labour standards, GRASP and SMETA. It is expected that this will increasingly be required by EU importers.

What can be done to improve the **seedling supply market** so that farmers can more quickly access high quality and appropriate planting materials? Could exporters invest in more professional seedling production and distribution methods as an embedded service? Would this help coordinate production crop and timing to suit market orders?

Traceability solutions may become a requirement of EU buyers keen to have more data on quality assurance. The limited uptake of traceability reflects a broader MSD insight: early-stage innovations often face inertia without external pressure or clear buyer mandates. For traceability to scale, future efforts could focus on buyer-driven compliance incentives, public-private traceability pilots, and bundling traceability with broader digital farm management tools to increase value perception. Can Albania continue developing and piloting such solutions ahead of any market demand?

Financial services are critical for the growth of the fruits and vegetables sector. The market is currently distorted by grants from donors (particularly EU). A range of potential services would assist the growth and reduce the risk of the fruits and vegetables sector: cooperative finance, weather index insurance, export credit insurance, lease finance, capital investors, export factoring. Entry points exist for partnering with FedInvest, Rabobank, JICA, SwissRe and Coface.

Finally, a roadmap for post-project market facilitation could be developed jointly by public agencies (e.g. MARD), donors, and sector associations. This would help ensure continuity of reforms and targeted support mechanisms without risking market distortion or dependency.

6. Lessons or Guidance for MSD Projects

While technical compliance and market access tools were central, real impact stemmed from working with the right people, creating enabling environments, and adapting to local realities. Success depended not just on ticking boxes for certification, but on fostering entrepreneurial mindsets, building trust-based relationships, and embedding standards within broader business and policy ecosystems. The following insights highlight what worked—and why—offering guidance for future programs aiming to unlock inclusive, sustainable growth through certification and market systems development.

- Focus on Market-Ready Entrepreneurs and Enterprises**
 Certification and standards yield impact only when exporters are genuinely committed to entering high-value markets. Working with motivated and capable entrepreneurs proved essential, as they were more willing to invest in quality, treat farmers as partners, and adopt standards meaningfully. Certification added little value when this entrepreneurial mindset was absent.
- Leverage Exporters as Catalysts for Systemic Change**
 Cooperation with forward-looking exporters created a ripple effect—positively impacting hundreds of farmers. Exporters were effective points for introducing quality management systems and building trust within the value chain. Group certification emerged as a game changer, reducing costs and enabling scale, especially for smallholders.
- Invest in Relationships, Trust, and Transparency**
 Building trust across stakeholders—especially between project staff and private sector actors—was critical. Relationships shaped the effectiveness of interventions as much as technical solutions did. Transparency and sustained engagement-built credibility and allowed long-term partnerships.

- **Certification is a Tool, not a Standalone Solution**
 Certification alone does not guarantee success. Its impact is limited if not coupled with business incentives, support services, and farmer engagement. For example, localg.a.p proved unattractive to domestic supermarkets, and some exporters lacked the readiness to use certification as a pathway to EU markets. Standards must be embedded in a broader strategy that includes farmer inclusion, advisory support, and market linkage.
- **Policy Engagement Multiplies Impact**
 Close cooperation and continuous lobbying with government institutions especially the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development led to concrete policy outcomes. The expansion of subsidies to support group certification, integration of standards into the national strategy, and institutional recognition of the National Technical Working Group (NTWG) are strong examples. The NTWG also became a valuable platform for resolving technical issues and improving coordination between public and private actors.
- **Early Involvement of Support Services Increases Sustainability**
 Business Development Services (BDS) played a vital role in strengthening the service market around certification. Early engagement of consultants, certifiers, and input suppliers ensured that services were available, market-driven, and able to continue beyond the project's direct involvement.
- **Adaptive Management Enables Relevance**
 The project benefited from a flexible, adaptive approach. Learning was integrated throughout implementation, with regular reflection on what worked, what didn't, and what needed to change. While not all results were measured systematically, particularly in areas like media—feedback loops and real-time learning helped identify shifts in market dynamics and guide interventions accordingly.

FRUITS AND VEGETABLES AGRIBUSINESS IN ALBANIA: A SOURCE OF BETTER AND INCLUSIVE JOBS FOR YOUNG WOMEN AND MEN

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