



Food and Agriculture  
Organization of the  
United Nations



# TOWARDS GENDER-RESPONSIVE AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION SERVICES IN ALBANIA

## ASSESSMENT REPORT





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## Abbreviations and acronyms

ALL	Albanian Lek
ARDA	Agriculture and Rural Development Agency
ATTC	Agricultural Technology Transfer Centre
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
DCM	Decision of the Council of Ministers
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
GDP	gross domestic product
GRAST	Gender and Rural Advisory Services Assessment Tool
GREAT	Gender, Rural Equality and Tourism
IPARD	Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance for Rural Development
ISARD	Intersectoral Strategy for the Rural and Agricultural Development
MAPs	medicinal and aromatic plants
MARD	Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development
NES	National Extension Service
NGO	non-governmental organization
RAEA	Regional Agricultural Extension Agency
RAS	rural advisory services
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
UNCT	United Nations Country Team
USD	United States Dollar



## Executive summary

This document presents the findings of a qualitative study that assessed the extent, progress and challenges of providing gender-responsive agricultural extension services in Albania. The study was conducted under the framework of the “Gender Rural Equality and Tourism” (GREAT) project carried out by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and UN Women, with funding from the Ministry of International Affairs and International Cooperation of the Republic of Italy. The study followed the FAO Gender and Rural Advisory Services Assessment Tool (GRAST) methodology and collected data from policymakers, local government officials, members of local action groups, extensionists, private providers, civil society organizations, and clients of agricultural extension services in the municipalities of Elbasan, Kolonja and Puka.

The assessment found that while the Government of Albania recognizes the role of rural women in the sustainable development of rural areas, the current framework in Albania has not adequately mainstreamed the gender dimension in national agriculture and rural development policies. This shortcoming hinders the achievement of the relevant Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the country’s progress towards inclusive and sustainable agrifood systems. Agricultural competitiveness and modernization policies overlook rural women’s entrepreneurship potential, sometimes merely recognizing their role in niche products, agri-processing or other non-farm-related activities.

As a result, support measures further deprioritize the needs of women farmers, in particular their access to advisory services, information and availability of grants and other measures. A concrete action plan to integrate gender-focused objectives is lacking, partly due to the absence of evidence-based and sex-disaggregated data that can inform the development of gender-responsive services driven by a sound understanding of the gender-specific barriers that prevent farmers from accessing and benefiting from such services. Consequently, rural women in Albania have limited opportunities for improving their skills, knowledge and experiences.

At the organizational level, the study found that the National Extension Service (NES) and Regional Agricultural Extension Agencies (RAEAs) do not have internal procedures such as women extensionist recruitment quotas and gender equality training, which hampers outreach and limits trust building among women clients. The absence of well-articulated and mainstreamed gender and social inclusion policies for targeting and reaching diverse women and men clients by the NES and RAEAs also reduces progress towards national goals and commitments.

Field advisors, who are predominately men, usually use male-dominated communication and information sharing channels to reach farmers and collect their feedback, confirming the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development’s (MARD’s) data that only about 11 percent of rural women receive agricultural information. Rural women interviewees

reported that they had not met or communicated with field advisors, and instead relied on private providers and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) who were more accommodating towards their learning needs and time constraints.

This report concludes that the Government of Albania should strengthen its efforts to mainstream gender equality and inclusion in agriculture and rural development policies.

The systematic collection of sex-disaggregated data is necessary to inform evidence-based inclusion and women's empowerment. Capacity-building and enforceable institutional mechanisms are needed to ensure effective gender-responsive agricultural extension services. These recommendations, if implemented, would help to achieve the SDGs and enhance the inclusiveness and sustainability of agrifood systems in Albania.

# 1. Introduction

Agriculture is an important sector in Albania's socioeconomic development, representing 18.93 percent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP; INSTAT, 2021c). In 2019, the export of agricultural products accounted for 11.8 percent of total exports, an increase of 8.7 percent compared with 2015 (Albania Investment Council, 2020). As the predominant economic activity of the rural population, employment in the agricultural sector in 2020 accounted for 36.1 percent of overall employment in the country (INSTAT, 2021a). Agricultural production is dominated by small family farmers and is their main form of livelihood and primary source of food, security and income (FAO, 2020a). Yet, informality in the agricultural sector is high and the unpaid engagement of family farm members is not reflected in official state statistics. The majority of these unpaid "informal" or "inactive" family farm members are women (INSTAT, 2018; World Bank 2020b). In general, the sector is labour intensive (NIRAS, 2019) and mostly employs poor and low-skilled workers who lack training or have low levels of education (OECD, 2021). This study responds to the request by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development to FAO for technical support to increase the incomes of the rural population, to enhance the support provided to rural smallholders and family farmers, particularly rural women and young people, and to improve rural development policy.

Albania has affirmed its commitment to the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda where rural women are the focus in several of the sustainable development goals. The country's achievement of the SDGs largely depends on women's inclusion in sustainable agrifood systems and the enhancement of women's capacity to access relevant knowledge, adopt it in the context of their family farms, and apply it to sustainably improve farm productivity, enhance household income, and innovate and strengthen their resilience to overcome various challenges, including climate change. As a European Union country candidate, Albania is undertaking multiple efforts to adjust its institutions and agricultural policy in line with the European Union Common Agriculture Policy that considers gender equality to be an essential means of achieving sustainable rural development and economic growth. Albania has signed the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and more recently the Istanbul Convention.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the National Strategy on Gender Equality (NSGE, 2021–2030) in Albania envisages an increase in the capacities of agricultural extension services at the local and national levels to deliver gender-responsive services in rural tourism, agribusiness and value chain development (Council of Ministers, 2021). The new National Strategy on Employment and Skills (2019–2022) aims to increase job opportunities, enhance skills, and promote social inclusion by reducing the education gap between rural and urban areas to reach out more effectively to rural women and girls (Ministry of Finance and Economy, 2019). One of the priorities of the Intersectoral Strategy for the Rural and Agricultural Development (ISARD, 2014–2020) was related to knowledge transfer and technical assistance to support the implementation of

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<sup>1</sup> Albania is an active member of the Council of Europe and a party to its key human rights documents including the European Social Charter and the European Convention on Human Rights.

rural development (Official Gazette, 2014). At the same time, an important consideration within the 2021–2025 Albanian Government Program in the field of agriculture and rural development relates to the development of rural tourism in villages through incentivizing policies that will increase the inclusion of rural women in the sector (Council of Ministers, 2021, p. 20).

Despite the existing policies, in practice, rural women are not always recognized as farmers in their own right. They have limited opportunities for ensuring the sustainability and profitability of their family farms due to structural disadvantages and discrimination. Official data show that in 2020, rural women employed in the agricultural sector in Albania outnumbered rural men (41.4 percent of women compared with 31.8 percent of men; INSTAT, 2021a). However, their high contribution in various aspects of agricultural value chains is not adequately and sufficiently analysed: both policy indicators and analyses lack a gender focus.

Rural women's limited access to knowledge, training, services and time-saving technologies compared with men (FAO, 2020a) leads to "low productivity and a lack of opportunities to break the cycle of poverty" (Davis and Franzel, 2018, p. 5) and further reinforces their invisibility in the policies. Overcoming gender gaps in agriculture is therefore a crucial prerequisite for creating "sustainable and inclusive food systems and resilient and peaceful societies" (FAO, 2020b, p. 1). Moreover, investing in the economic empowerment of rural women is essential for ensuring sustainable agriculture, income generation and employment opportunities in rural areas (Meçe and Ribaj, 2019). Women are 18 times more likely to be involved in unpaid family farm activities compared with men (INSTAT, 2019 in FAO, 2022a, p. 1); and in addition to this, in the context of high youth and male outmigration, adult and older women who are left behind are often forced to develop significant involvement in agriculture (Zhllima, Xhoxhi and Imami, 2021).

While studies in various countries show an increased share of women's employment in the agriculture, fisheries and forestry sector due to men's outmigration, the literature remains inconclusive about the impact of male-dominated migration on the economic empowerment of women in rural areas. Some studies have not found evidence of women's increased participation in high value-added activities (see for example, Slavchevska *et al.*, 2020), while other studies have affirmed women's deeper exploitation in low-paid agricultural activities and limited participation in agricultural groups (Wu and Ye, 2014; Zuccotti *et al.*, 2018). Thus, this transition to "farm manager" or de-facto owner role might be a new experience for rural women, and they might face various farm and business management-related challenges. Access to rural advisory services (RAS), resources and assets are critical for narrowing gender gaps and improving women's time poverty and intense work burdens (Quisumbing, Meinzen-Dick and Malapit, 2019).

Nevertheless, the limited studies conducted in Albania on farm management have found a positive association between women's access to agricultural extension services and their on-farm decision-making power (Zhllima, Xhoxhi and Imami, 2021). As engines for change, RAS can contribute to achieving "long-term success in family farming" (Petrics *et al.*, 2015, p. 1) and growth (Faure *et al.*, 2016), and have the potential for gender transformative change (FAO, forthcoming). One of the pillars of the United Nations Decade of Family

Farming (2019–2028) aims to promote “gender equality in food and agriculture production” by reinforcing women’s agency and autonomy, and increasing their access to information, gender-friendly technology and appropriate extension services (FAO and IFAD, 2019, p. 17). In line with the evidence, the FAO Regional Gender Equality Strategy and Action Plan for Europe and Central Asia 2019–2022 emphasizes the need to continue supporting the economic empowerment of rural women by creating entrepreneurship and employment opportunities to diversify their incomes (FAO, 2019). Taking into consideration the fact that gender inequalities persist and that “gender is [the] subject of exclusion” (FARA and AFAAS, 2015, p. 40), FAO’s GRAS (Petrics *et al.*, 2018) contributes to providing an evidence-based demand for gender-responsive RAS to design relevant services for diverse women and men, while also challenging and addressing the underlying causes of gender inequalities.

The main purpose of this qualitative study, conducted between September 2021 and December 2021, was to assess the existing bottlenecks in gender-responsive agricultural extension services using the FAO GRAS and identify possible nudges for behavioural change in three targeted municipalities: Elbasan, Puka and Kolonja. The study was commissioned by FAO within the framework of the “Gender Rural Equality and Tourism” project, implemented in partnership with UN Women. Funded by the Ministry of International Affairs and International Cooperation of the Republic of Italy, the main goal of this three-year initiative (2021–2023) was to contribute to the empowerment of rural women in Albania and to facilitate, as well as strengthen, women’s role in and contribution to rural development in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its core principle of “leaving no-one behind”.

The findings in this assessment report will support the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development and other national institutions and agencies in Albania to design policies and take measures to improve agricultural extension services’ performance, accountability and efficiency. The findings are also relevant for other international institutions and organizations, including FAO, because they provide recommendations on how to increase farmers’ access to agricultural extension services in general, and women farmers in particular, as well as on how to improve agricultural productivity and competitiveness.

This report is organized into five sections. Following the introduction and structure of the study, the second part briefly explains the theoretical framework of the agricultural extension service concept, the importance of a gender-responsive agricultural extension service, and the gender context and gender gaps in agriculture and rural development in Albania, including a general overview of the agricultural extension service. The third part describes the methodology used in the study, including data collection, the GRAS methodology, a brief profile of the study areas, and the study’s limitations. Findings are divided into specific rubrics that target various levels of the analysis based on GRAS and these are presented in the fourth section. Finally, the conclusions, and recommendations are presented in the fifth part.

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## 2. The role of agricultural extension services in closing the gender gap and promoting women's economic empowerment

### 2.1 A brief theoretical framework for moving towards extension and advisory services that promote women's economic empowerment

There are various definitions of extension and advisory services: for example, “advisory services” are also known as “rural extension” (Oakley and Garforth, 1985), “agricultural advisory services” (Labarthe and Laurent, 2013) or “extension” (Christoplos, 2010). Extension and advisory services have also evolved over time, reflecting different ways of achieving progress in agriculture and improving the knowledge and income of farmers and members of rural communities (Faure *et al.*, 2016).<sup>2</sup> FAO refers to rural advisory services (RAS) as a core component for enhancing agricultural innovation systems (FAO, 2022b). It defines RAS as:

All different activities that provide information and advisory services needed and requested by farmers and other actors in agrifood systems and rural development. These include technical, organizational, business and management skills and practices, which improve rural livelihoods and wellbeing (Blum, Cofini and Sulaiman, 2020, p. 2).

The focus of RAS has evolved over time. The linear provider-client model that dominated during the 1970s and 1980s consisted of persuading farmers to adopt new technologies to improve yields and increase production. In this fast-changing environment, it was replaced by systems that apply more participatory and partnership-based approaches, where farmers and members of rural communities not only receive information, but also articulate their needs, participate in coaching, and are involved in research, education and extension (Davis and Sulaiman, 2018, p. 3; FAO, forthcoming). Today, RAS offers a broader range of services targeting not only farmers, but also other actors in rural settings. Thus, RAS are dynamic, diverse, and complex services, in which the co-production of knowledge tries to combine experience-based and evidence-based knowledge with scientific evidence and the knowledge of farmers (Labarthe and Laurent, 2013).

Therefore, RAS should be inclusive, flexible, demand-driven and adjusted to specific contexts to understand the diverse needs of women farmers and different gender roles and apply participatory methods to deliver gender-responsive services (Petrics *et al.*, 2015). This

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<sup>2</sup> According to Oakley and Garforth (1985), rural advisory services (RAS) imply a continuous educational process that communicates knowledge to rural people in a variety of ways. As such, it is not a one-off activity, but an ongoing process that takes place over time to support and prepares individuals to overcome their problems successfully. Birner *et al.* (2009, p. 342) focus on the advice of those involved in agricultural production and define RAS as “the entire set of organizations that support and facilitate people engaged in agricultural production to solve problems and obtain information, skills, and technologies to improve their livelihood and wellbeing”.

is essential in the context of family farming, a model that predominates worldwide, including in Albania. Diverse farms require tailored RAS approaches that enable them to: a) increase their professionalism so that they can compete in markets with their products through efficient use of their resources, to protect their interests and improve their incomes; b) support women to adopt sustainable agricultural practices that will help them to optimize their economic outlook, diversify crops, increase value-added activities, and build resilience in the context of climate change, scarcity of natural resources and environmental degradation; and c) contribute to the creation of bridges, networks and links between women farmers and various actors to facilitate technology transfer, cooperation and innovation (Sulaiman and Blum, 2016).

In this context, it is necessary for RAS to be: a) accountable to clients because, on the one hand, RAS should be accountable to the governmental institutions that prepare and monitor the implementation of rural development policies, but at the same time, they should be able to fulfil the needs of rural people (Oakley and Garforth, 1985); b) use a two-way link between farmers and advisors not only to transfer knowledge to farmers, but also to receive farmers' suggestions or advice and build upon their knowledge (Oakley and Garforth, 1985); and c) be inclusive and integrated to support family farming through systematic and holistic gender-responsive services that take into consideration gender roles and practices in their design and delivery (FAO, forthcoming; Sulaiman and Blum, 2016).

## 2.2 The importance of gender-responsive agricultural extension services

Women are an important asset in agricultural production (FAO, 2011) and they contribute to maximizing the sector's impact on food security and the national economy. However, women's potential is hindered by socially constructed gender-based inequalities and norms that continuously undermine their sustainable inclusion in the sector's development (FAO, 2022a).

As in many other countries, the shift in labour productivity and gender roles in Albania is occurring in parallel with other socio-demographic changes, increasing the unequal division of labour, the feminization of agriculture and the ageing of the rural labour force in many countries (Brooks and Meçe, 2022; Petrics *et al.*, 2015; World Bank, FAO and IFAD, 2009). When referring to farming households, women are often perceived merely as "farm workers" or "helpers" who are mainly interested in "feeding their household rather than as active participants in the commercial value chain" (Colverson, 2015, p. 1). Women's contribution remains invisible and is often situated within the informal sector (Ministry of Health and Social Protection, 2020). In Albania, men's migration to urban areas has not reduced rural women's multiple roles within the household as housekeepers, mothers and caregivers, as well as responsibilities outside home that have been silently shouldered to the rural women who are left behind (Brooks and Meçe, 2022). The improvement of the socioeconomic status of rural women remains a national priority, which requires addressing their limited control over assets, restricted land ownership and low access to markets.

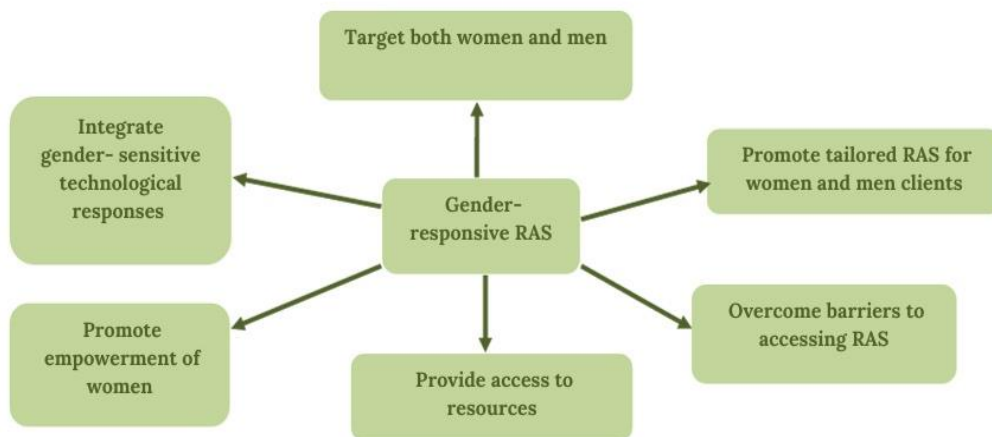
Strengthening of human capital by improving their knowledge and skills is essential. Thus rural women's participation in training and skills development activities is also important. This should be done by taking into consideration the high interdependence of rural women and agriculture, therefore the investment in RAS should explicitly target rural women's interests and needs (FAO, 2011; Petrics *et al.*, 2015). The success of family farming largely depends on women's prominent role and has a gender dimension (Petricis *et al.*, 2015). Rural advisory services are a vibrant source of knowledge that have the potential to address gender inequalities in accessing agricultural information and opportunities (Colverson, 2015; Sulaiman *et al.*, 2022). Despite this potential, RAS often reinforce the same existing discriminatory and unequal relations (GIZ, 2013). For example, across the region, RAS often implicitly target men as the key decision-makers on the farm, without or rarely considering the methods in which new knowledge or information is passed on, transferred to or used by women. Additionally, RAS often work with one family member – a farm owner, who is a man in the majority of cases – bypassing the needs of “unrecognized”, unpaid, yet essential contributors such as women (GIZ, 2013; Sulaiman *et al.*, 2022; FAO, 2022b).

To overcome these inequalities and gender biases, it is first necessary to understand the types of approaches that RAS should utilize in order to achieve equitable service provision (Christoplos, 2010; FAO, forthcoming). Based on the literature, RAS is a learning-based intervention guided by the following principles (see Figure 1):

- Recognition of women as legitimate clients of RAS and targeting both women and men. Reaching out to both women and men as RAS clients will avoid gender-unaware services and place a stronger emphasis on recognizing women farmers as clients. Targeting also entails overcoming barriers to clients' access to RAS by designing interventions that take into consideration women's mobility, time constraints and limited resources, by using methods that are adapted to their educational level and by addressing social norms that restrict women's participation. This also involves identifying the age-specific and other overlapping constraints that may limit access to RAS and the benefits that could be gained from this.
- Promotion of tailored and accessible services. RAS should be available to respond to the diverse needs and demands of women and men smallholders.
- Provision of access to resources. RAS should mainstream gender equality by conducting gender analysis to understand the gender-based constraints that hinder rural women's access to RAS and promote the development of gender-sensitive value chains.
- Delivery of gender-sensitive technological responses. RAS should update their clients on appropriate time-saving technologies that can diversify women's incomes and provide benefits from various profitable opportunities (Blum, Cofini and Sulaiman, 2020; Petrics *et al.*, 2018).
- Contribution to the empowerment of women by promoting participation. RAS should support women and women-led farmer groups to voice their demands in accessing and receiving services and ensure their representation and participation. This may also include RAS' engagement with both women and men in addressing harmful gender practices.



**Figure 1. Gender-responsive rural advisory services design considerations**



**Source:** Adapted from Blum, Cofini & Sulaiman. 2020. Agricultural extension in transition worldwide: Policies and strategies for reform, Rome, FAO, pp. 161–164. <https://doi.org/10.4060/ca8199en>

### 2.3 Background context and the gender gap in agriculture and rural areas in Albania

In 2020, Albania reached an overall Gender Equality Index value of 60.4 that shows a gender gap which is 7.4 points lower than the European Union average of 67.4. The largest gaps compared with the European Union average were recorded in the domains of time, money and knowledge (European Commission, 2021, p. 32). The disadvantaged position of rural women in Albania in general, and the gender gap in the agricultural sector in particular, mirror the societal shift in access to resources in an unstable post-socialist transition and the detrimental impact of structural transformations conducted during the years of fragile state institutions in rural areas. The total collapse of about 550 agricultural cooperatives and state farms (Bregasi, 2013, p. 83) by the beginning of 1991 and the implementation of the new land privatisation law (based on “free and equal distribution per capita”) of state agricultural land for member families and rural inhabitants (Cungu and Swinnen, 1999, p. 607) led to high land fragmentation and the creation of small-size farms. The revival of the customary law (the Kanun) strengthened the role of men in the domestic and public spheres, weakening women’s position to influence and actively participate in socioeconomic decision-making (Meçe, 2017). The implementation of structural reforms during Albania’s transition years from a state-led to an open-market economy reduced the employment rates of rural women and their participation in social and community life (Zhllima *et al.*, 2016; Brooks and Meçe, 2022). Yet, against the backdrop of these challenges, the European Union integration process encourages and requires a stronger policy orientation towards gender equality.

Today, the agricultural sector consists of 352 000 agricultural holdings (FAO, 2022a, p. 1), which is quite high compared with the country’s total size. The farm structures are complex

and fragmented. The average size is approximately 1.2 hectares distributed into 3 to 5 plots of different land quality, size and proximity from the farmers' residence (Albania Investment Council, 2020, p. 6), which hampers the growth of their overall productivity and the competitiveness of the sector as a whole. Smallholder agriculture dominates the sector representing up to 95 percent of the total number of agricultural farms (FAO, 2022c). Farms' production is primarily oriented to meet household consumption needs. Fragmented value chains generate low earnings making "the lowest value added per agricultural worker in the Western Balkans" (World Bank, 2020b, p. 43). The level of informal employment in the agricultural sector in Albania is 61 percent, which is quite high compared with that observed in other Western Balkan countries, including Serbia (18.7 percent) and Bosnia and Herzegovina (30.5 percent; ILO, 2018). Significantly affected by male-dominated migration flows, depopulated rural areas in Albania are exposed to high wealth inequality, poor infrastructure and a lack of services. The outmigration of young rural women and men further reinforces the ageing of the agricultural labour force (Brooks and Meçe, 2022; Meçe, 2015). There are no sex-disaggregated data about the agricultural labour force, but available statistics show that one-third of workers in this sector is above 65 years of age (World Bank, 2020c, p. 43). The GINI coefficient is 0.05 in rural areas compared with 0.15 in urban areas (INSTAT, Institute of Public Health and IFC, 2018, p. 10), indicating a better concentration of resources and opportunities in urban areas. Significant shrinking of the mean family size in rural areas from 4.1 (2008–2009) to 3.5 (2017–2018) compared with 3.8 (2008–2009) to 3.3 (2017–2018) nationwide (INSTAT, Institute of Public Health and IFC, 2018, p. 10) has reshaped the distribution of gender roles and responsibilities in smallholder agriculture. Zhllima, Xhoxhi and Imami (2021) conclude that rural women face triple oppression from: a) top-down, authoritative-oriented government actions; b) male dominance within the family and community; and c) poverty caused by subsistence farming dependency. Limited intra-household capacities and resources to share caregiving tasks for children, older household members and those with disabilities have increased both the burden of unpaid domestic work for rural women and their time poverty (Brooks and Meçe, 2022). Studies show that rural women in Albania perform 86 percent of unpaid work and are responsible for about 86 percent of domestic duties, spending five times more in unpaid work activities than men (Zhllima *et al.*, 2016).

Rural women in Albania have limited opportunities for improving their skills, knowledge and experiences. The median years completed in education among rural women are 7.5 versus 14.4 among urban women (INSTAT, Institute of Public Health and IFC, 2018, p. 13). Women are highly involved in labour-intensive activities and have low access to time-saving equipment and machinery. Only 27 percent of rural women perceive themselves as owners of assets compared with 73 percent of rural men (Zhllima *et al.*, 2016). Mechanization among male-headed households is 15 percent higher compared with female-headed ones, while the gender gap in fertilizer use is 16 percent in favour of men (FAO, 2014).<sup>3</sup> There is a strong relationship between women's access in farm activities, decision-making and level of education, and access to skill-building and information services. Rural women need knowledge, skills and experience to improve their productivity, secure nutrition for their family members and communities, and improve their ability to make cost-effective choices

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<sup>3</sup> More recently, during the training activity organized in December 2022 with representatives from the agricultural extension service and municipal extensionists, women's lower level of use and access to various types of agricultural machinery was observed compared with men.

and time-saving decisions around available resources and services, including education, technology, credit and advisory services, and enjoy equal rights to land and other assets. It is mainly men who are registered as owners of agricultural land (FAO and GIZ, 2020). The 2017–2018 Demographic and Health Survey data show that only 14 percent of rural women self-reported owning land (INSTAT, Institute of Public Health and IFC, 2018). Moreover, in 2020, 11.4 percent of enterprises in agriculture, forestry and fishing were owned by women, compared with 88.6 percent owned by men, while the gender pay gap in agriculture was 6.1 (INSTAT, 2021a). Women’s low level of landownership is deeply shaped by the fact that patriarchal tradition disfavors women’s landownership rights. Moreover, women’s acceptance of their limitations in terms of ownership further makes them devalue their agricultural labour and subordinate to men’s decision-making on access to land (Zhillima *et al.*, 2016). In addition, the concept of landlessness is more common in the northern part of Albania due to the customary Kanun practice.<sup>4</sup> Despite ongoing policy reforms and interventions, social pressure combined with complex legal procedures discourage rural women from claiming their agricultural landownership rights, effectively excluding them from the formalization of contracts with traders or from access to financial support services (FAO and GIZ, 2020; UN Women, 2020).

Rural women in Albania have limited non-agricultural job opportunities (FAO, 2020a; Brooks and Meçe, 2022); farming is often the only option for sustaining themselves and their household members. A recent study found that in 96.7 percent of the cases, men decided how to manage small family farms, while joint decisions were reported only by 3.3 percent of the respondents (Biçoku and Subashi, 2020). Several studies on the gender division of roles in smallholder agriculture show that rural women undertake the bulk of a range of agricultural activities, including land preparation, planting, harvesting and post-harvesting, while men are mostly responsible for decision-making about what crops to grow, land leasing agreements, the purchase of agricultural inputs, the use of pesticides, transportation and the sale of the products to markets (FAO, 2020a; Zhillima *et al.*, 2016). Gender inequalities in rural areas in Albania are mirrored in the digital gender gap because rural women have low access to information and communications technologies compared with both rural men and urban women (INSTAT, Institute of Public Health and IFC, 2018). Research shows that 13 percent of rural women self-reported using a computer, while men’s access to the internet was higher than that of rural women’s (Zhillima *et al.*, 2016). Since the majority of agricultural farms in Albania are headed by men, rural women are less involved in market relations and coordination because they have low access to networks and rural organizations. Previous research has found that 0.7 percent of rural women are involved in these organizations compared with 3 percent of rural men (Zhillima *et al.*, 2016).

Gendered differences in access to resources and productive inputs limit women’s agricultural productivity. Studies show that rural women have low access to vocational training and advisory services because they lack information, in general, and because of the dominance of male-oriented communication channels, in particular (FAO, 2020a, 2022a; Zhillima *et al.*, 2016). Although the total number of female beneficiaries from national

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<sup>4</sup> In the southern part of Albania, land has been distributed per capita based on the land privatization law, while in the northern part of the country, it has been distributed based on customary law (the Kanun). Thus, poor families who did not own land prior to the process of land collectivization that took place in 1946 did not benefit based on customary law.

schemes and agricultural advisory services has increased, from 514 in 2014 to 627 in 2018, and from 7 300 in 2016 to 8 100 in 2021 respectively, structural barriers and social norms still impact upon women's empowerment and limit their flexibility to make sustainable choices that generate cash resources to improve their agricultural productivity, household nutrition status and well-being. Since rural women do not represent a homogeneous group, they face intersecting constraints to fulfilling their tasks depending on age, ethnicity, and locality. Therefore, to promote and enhance rural growth it is necessary to close the gender gap in the agriculture and rural sector (OECD, 2021).

## 2.4 General overview of agricultural extension services in Albania

The Agricultural Extension Service in Albania is relatively new compared with those found in other Western Balkan countries (OECD, 2021, p. 537). Throughout the years of the socialist system, during which Albania's rural sector was dominated by agricultural cooperatives and state farms, agronomists and livestock experts were responsible for increasing agricultural workers' capacities in day-to-day technical work and in the use of new technologies (Biçoku and Subashi, 2020). When the centralized system failed and the state farms and agricultural cooperatives collapsed, the Agricultural Extension Service was one of the first services offered to Albanian farmers when private farms were established. It started in 1992 as typical technical advice for the new farm owners who used to be former state farm workers and cooperative members operating under a centralized system and a top-down chain of communication.

Faced with a new system of farming, operation and management, and mixed activities (fruit trees, olive trees, vineyards, vegetables, cereals, and livestock, etc.), farmers at the time needed multiple kinds of technical assistance and information. This need was the main reason for the initiation of a pilot project in the six most agricultural areas of Albania (Shkodra, Lushnja, Durrës, Fier, Elbasan and Korça). The information and knowledge topics provided in these areas were strongly focused on technical problems and aimed at creating a totally new concept, that of "contact farmers",<sup>5</sup> due to the very large number of farms and limited number of specialists to provide assistance. Nine years after the establishment of this advisory service, during which time the training of staff and structural consolidation was based on the support of different donor projects, the former Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Consumer Protection<sup>6</sup> took over the public advisory system that was present in all regions of Albania. Further developments from 2000 onwards included the establishment of Agricultural Information Centres, the implementation of joint activities of extension, and the Agricultural Technology Transfer Centres (ATTCs), including training courses and on-farm research. However, while the content of technical advice remained broadly the same, some new topics including record keeping, farm analysis and marketing were also emphasized. At the same time, some attention was given to gender issues. Along with the public advisory service, input traders and some civil society organizations gained key roles in advising farmers. In line with these developments, the mass media became an important advisory

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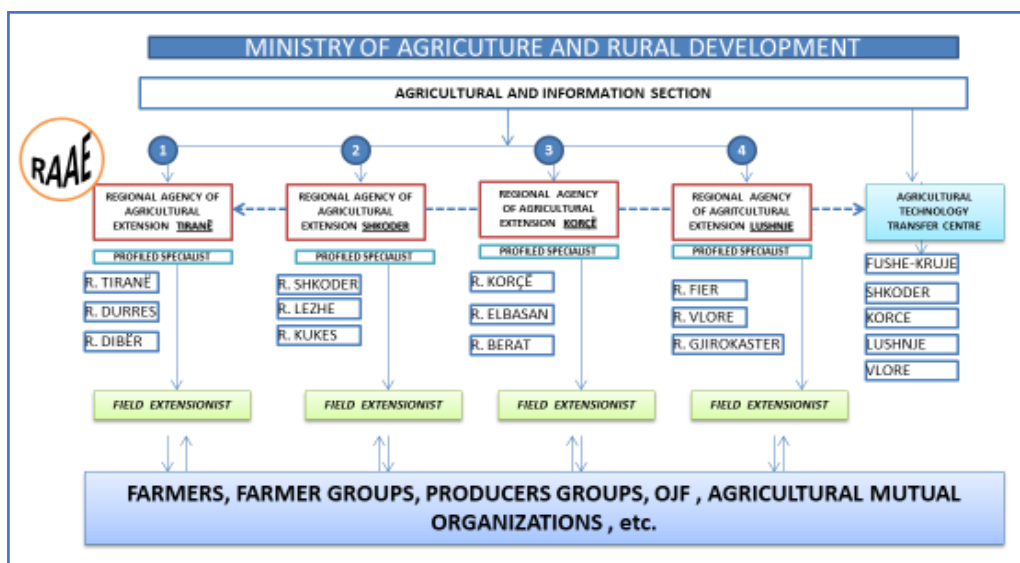
<sup>5</sup> Authors' note: "Contact farmers" were the most progressive farmers who agreed to implement the new technologies and were willing to share the results with other farmers.

<sup>6</sup> The Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Consumer Protection is now the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD).

tool through specific programmes. The Agricultural Knowledge and Information System (AKIS) was also established to bring together advisory services, research and farmers. Thus, farmers’ problems were addressed by research findings and solutions offered to them by the advisory service.

Today there are several public and private providers in Albania that deliver agricultural advisory services to farmers. However, their level of importance varies and some of them are more significant than others in this process (NIRAS, 2019). The public agricultural extension service is represented by the National Extension Service (NES; NIRAS, 2019) that delivers free of charge or low-cost services particularly focused on production technologies, and partly on farm management, marketing and markets, the promotion of producers’ organizations and rural development (OECD, 2021). After 2001, this service underwent several reforms (Biçoku and Subashi, 2020). Formerly comprised of 13 directorates, the National Extension Service was restructured in 2018 following a Decision of the Council of Ministers (DCM)<sup>7</sup> into four locations – Tirana, Shkodra, Lushnja and Korça. Each of these is responsible for advisory services in three counties, while each county covers between three and seven municipalities. Figure 2 illustrates the more recent structure of this service in Albania.

**Figure 2. The structure of the National Extension Service in Albania**



**Source:** NIRAS. 2019. Strategic Action Plan 2021–2022: Albanian National Extension Services, p. 21.

The main mission of each RAAEA is “to be the main factor of development for [a] competitive and stable agricultural sector in the country” (NIRAS, 2019, p. 14). By the time this study was conducted, RAEAs had 224 staff in total, including experts and specialists directly involved in

<sup>7</sup> Decision of the Council of Ministers. On the establishment, organization, and functioning of the Regional Agricultural Extension Agencies, No. 147, 13 March 2018.

field activities. Among them, 178 experts were field extensionists (121 men and 57 women). There were also 18 vacancies. The highest number of vacant positions (11 persons) was for extensionists,<sup>8</sup> which points to an issue of understaffing. Three out of four RAEA staff are located in sub-offices based in local government units or municipal administrative units, while the remaining staff are based at the regional level (Biçoku and Subashi, 2020; NIRAS, 2019). In terms of background, the majority of extensionists are agronomists (79 percent), followed by zootechnicians (14 percent) and economists (7 percent). Their average age is 52.5 years old.<sup>9</sup>

Pursuant to Article 4 of DCM No. 147, dated 13 March 2018, advisors have several responsibilities, including: a) knowledge transfer to farmers; b) informing farmers and assisting them to access national support schemes and grants from the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance for Rural Development (IPARD) scheme; c) facilitating farmers' cooperation; d) delivering professional training in agriculture and rural development; e) providing information about food-related quality standards, organic agriculture, environment and marketing, etc.; f) advising farmers on the selection of agricultural equipment; and g) providing general information to farmers and the general public through mass media. Moreover, Article 5 of the same DCM specifies the main responsibilities of RAEAs, including: a) contributing to drafting the subsidy support schemes and implementing agricultural development programmes; b) observing farm accountability in the database system; c) ensuring the regular training of advisers; and d) offering services for farmers, institutions and the local government units.

Despite improvements over the years, the public agricultural extension service in Albania has limited coverage, and in some areas, it does not exist at all, for instance, in Përmet Municipality (FAO, 2022a). The credibility of the agricultural extension service has been affected by the lack of tailored information given to farmers and weak outreach. Nearly half (47.2 percent) of the respondents in a larger study demonstrated a lack of trust towards the agricultural extension service (FAO, 2022a); and agricultural extensionists are not seen to meet farmers' demands for new technology and modern advice (NIRAS, 2019). Similarly, in a smaller study sample, limited interactions and exchange of information with agricultural extensionists were reported by farmers (Biçoku and Subashi, 2020). Many of the farmers (about 65 percent) reported limited contact with them, quoting that the service offered does not meet their requirements. The agricultural extension service has also been criticized for not considering farmers' specific needs (NIRAS, 2019); and was further criticized for scheduling training activities and demonstrations without consulting farmers and causing time conflict with the peak season. Some of the root causes for the ineffective functioning of the agricultural extension service are understaffing and poor logistical support (FAO, 2022a); the service lacks the human capacities and financial resources to improve its daily performance (OECD, 2021). Based on the number of smallholders and agricultural extensionists, each extensionist has to work with approximately 70 000<sup>10</sup> potential beneficiaries. Taking into consideration that field extensionists mainly base their work in face-to-face contact with farmers, this ratio is very low. For example, Roseboom (2004)

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<sup>8</sup> These data come from the statistics of the National Extension Service (2022).

<sup>9</sup> These data come from the statistics of the National Extension Service (2022).

<sup>10</sup> This number represents farmers who have a Taxpayer Identification Number: farmers who are not registered with the tax office are not included here.

suggested an average investment target of one extensionist per 1 000 farmers, while Blum and Szonyi (2014) suggested a range of between 500 and 2 000 active rural population members for every one field extensionist.

According to the experiences of other European Union countries, for the current number of beneficiaries in Albania there is a need for at least 200 agricultural advisors, excluding support staff and managerial staff (NIRAS, 2019). There is also no sufficient evidence to show that agricultural extensionists deliver the “necessary support to [the] agri-food sector, especially in the field of knowledge and innovation” (NIRAS, 2019, p. 30). Having low operational costs and a limited budget for transport, the agricultural extension service is barely able to reach farmers in terms of providing advice on the most updated and relevant information. Limited studies conducted so far in Albania about the access of rural women to agricultural extension services indicate high levels of dissatisfaction (FAO 2022a). In some rural areas, women are not aware of the responsible advisor for their area, while in other cases, women reported that they did not communicate with them (Zhlilima *et al.*, 2016). The total budget of this service increased from 2.1 percent of the total MARD budget in 2018 to 5.6 percent of the total budget in 2020. However, the agricultural extension service still underperforms as is demonstrated from this review. Other public providers of agricultural extension services in Albania include:

- Agricultural Technology Transfer Centres (ATTCs): these are subordinated structures of MARD. In total, there are five centres located in Vlora, Lushnja, Shkodra, Korça and Fushë-Kruja. Among other tasks, they are also responsible for: a) training agricultural experts, farmers and other interested subjects; and b) ensuring the delivery of technical expertise to advisory services and farmers.
- Agriculture and Rural Development Agency (ARDA): is a subordinated structure to MARD. Its primary responsibility is to manage and control the implementation of the IPARD scheme (75 percent funded by the European Union and 25 percent by the state budget) and other schemes including the National Support Scheme for the Agricultural Sector (NSSAS; fully funded by the state budget). Through AGROPIKAs (AGROPOINTS), it offers a new single window for farmers to obtain information about applications, access to finance, support with advice, and other extension services. In total, there are 20 branches of AGROPIKA in Albania (ARDA, 2020).
- Agricultural University of Tirana: a public university oriented in teaching, training, scientific research and extension in the fields of agriculture, agrifood technology, veterinary medicine, animal husbandry, agrarian policy and economy, as well as other subjects. It is not directly involved in delivering advisory services, but some of its staff are involved in advisory services as private consultants.

In addition to public providers, there are also private ones, mainly input providers, private consultants and companies, as well as some project-based rural development-oriented civil society organizations that provide various types of information and advice to farmers, including information on how to use the inputs they sell, for instance, machinery, seedlings, seeds, fertilizers and plant protection. Some of the private consultants conduct regular site visits to the farms to provide advisory services (NIRAS, 2019).

### 3. Methodology

This assessment was based on FAO's Gender and Rural Advisory Services Tool (Petrics *et al.*, 2018) that aims to gain a better understanding of how to improve agricultural extension services in order to increase their access and relevance to rural women. The main objectives of GRAST include:

- a deeper understanding of what works in gender-responsive rural advisory service design and delivery, and how to use information collected to disseminate and promote innovative good practices; and
- an evidence-based contribution to identify areas where rural advisory service programmes and policies can be improved to deliver gender-responsive services (Petrics *et al.*, 2018, p. 5).

The GRAST provides a comprehensive analysis at three levels: the national policy environment level, organizational level and individual level (that includes both extension service staff and clients). At the national policy level, the GRAST aims to assess the national policy environment and its commitment to understanding how enabling it is and to what extent it contributes to the improvement of the situation for rural women in general, and the delivery of a gender-responsive extension service in particular. Taking into consideration that the effectiveness of the extension service is highly dependent on the socio-political environment that shapes the behaviour of the institutions and organizations, gender-blind policies in the agriculture sector or extension service “create a disabling environment” that negatively impacts upon gender-responsive extension programmes (Petrics *et al.*, 2018, p. 7).

At the organizational level, the GRAST assesses the stated commitment of the organizations, including their policies and implementation plans to deliver a gender-responsive extension service (Petrics *et al.*, 2018, p. 8). The literature suggests that the organizational dimension to delivering gender-responsive services impacts upon the way that staff of the organization develop competences and use them within it. This is why having in place gender-responsive policies, processes and practices are important in shaping the culture of the organization, which, in turn, influences the perceptions of the staff on gender roles and gender equality. It is argued that gender-blind organizations are more likely to deliver “gender-biased services” (Buchy and Basaznew, 2005).

At the individual level, the GRAST assessment targets both the agricultural extension staff and the clients. From the perspective of the agricultural extensionists, the GRAST tries to explore their skills, attitudes, behaviours and competences to assess to what extent they are aware of the gender-specific demands of their clients and whether they respond to them appropriately and adequately. It also develops an understanding of the extent to which gender-responsive human resource policies are implemented and contributes to obtaining a better picture of the challenges faced by field advisors during their daily work with rural women and men (Petrics *et al.*, 2018, p. 9). From the clients' point of view, the GRAST analysis helps to validate whether the work of agricultural extensionists meets the needs of rural women and identifies areas for improvement. It also contributes to understanding whether advisory service policies and programmes implemented on the ground yield



positive outcomes and what can be improved to facilitate a better impact on user livelihoods.

### 3.1 Research methods

This qualitative assessment was based on a desk analysis of policies, a review of secondary data, and semi-structured and in-depth interviews. Desk analysis was conducted to:

- a) review whether political commitment expressed in written policy frameworks, programmes and strategies at the national level takes into consideration women in general, and rural women in particular, in designing and planning relevant gender-responsive agricultural extension services;
- b) examine whether the existing legal framework in the field of agriculture and rural development and other legal documents recognize the key role of rural women in this sector and include specific objectives to ensure that women and men can have equal access to resources, income-generating activities and agricultural extension services; and
- c) establish whether MARD in Albania has a gender equality policy in place and, if it does, how it addresses the needs and interests of rural women in advisory services (Petrics *et al.*, 2018).

Desk research was based on several sources of information, including national strategic documents and the country's reports on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the National Strategy for Development and Integration (NSDI, 2015–2020), ISARD (2014–2020), United Nations Country Team (UNCT) alternative CEDAW reports, CEDAW shadow reports prepared by civil society organizations, and other available reports.

Primary data were collected between September and December 2021 to assess the perceptions of staff from MARD and agricultural extension services (public and private), and their users, on the gender-responsiveness of the agricultural extension service. Semi-structured and in-depth interviews were held face-to-face with women and men farmers in three communities in the project areas. In addition, one single-sex focus group was held with women in one project area. The data collection instrument was adjusted to each target group based on instructions provided in the GRAST (Petrics *et al.*, 2018). On average, interviews lasted between 15 and 60 minutes. The timings of the interviews did not conflict with respondents' commitments or scheduled tasks.

Ethical principles were considered during the interviews and each interviewee was treated fairly without prejudice and discrimination. Their views were respected, and they were encouraged to freely express their opinions. Interviewees were free to participate, answer questions and stop the interview whenever it was reasonable for them. The interviews were conducted in a safe, friendly and relaxing environment. In the case of officials, interviews were mainly conducted in the premises they preferred. Participants were selected through purposive sampling. In total, there were 35 participants: 4 from MARD, 6 from the targeted

municipalities and local administrative units (LAUs) of the project areas (Elbasan, Puka and Kolonja), 5 from the public agricultural extension service in municipalities and municipal administrative units, and 5 from private extension services/civil society organizations. To generate an understanding of the clients' perspectives, 15 in-depth interviews were conducted with rural men and women (3 men and 12 women). Fifty-two percent of all participants were women. Table 1 presents the overall distribution of respondents by gender, municipality and role.

**Table 1. Distribution of study participants by gender, municipality and relation to the agricultural extension service**

Description	Tirana		Elbasan		Puka		Kolonja		Total
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	
<b>MARD</b>	1	3							4
<b>Municipality/ Municipal units</b>			1		3		1	1	6
<b>NES</b>			1	1		1	2		5
<b>Private providers/ NGOs</b>			2		2		1		5
<b>Clients/ farmers</b>			3	3		4		5	15
<b>Total</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>35</b>

Secondary data were used to gain a better picture of the socioeconomic and demographic profiles of the study areas, including the development of agriculture sectors and the situation of rural women. Data were mostly collected from INSTAT, local social and development plans/strategies of the targeted municipalities, as well as various bulletins and studies prepared by different organizations and institutions in Albania, including Urban Research Institute, Helvetas, local NGO AGROPUKA and others.

### 3.1.1 Study limitations

This cross-sectional qualitative study has some limitations that are worth noting. First, it was conducted within a short timeframe during which participants were contacted only once. Therefore, there was no opportunity to interview them again in a different time interval to see whether there was any change in their views. Second, this study was based on purposive sampling, which means that it approached participants who were relevant to its purpose. For this reason, its findings should be interpreted with caution because they are not generalizable. Third, it was based on face-to-face semi-structured and in-depth interviews, which rely on self-reporting. Therefore, subjective biases in their answers cannot be avoided. Finally, this study mainly assessed the existing bottlenecks in the gender-responsiveness of the public agricultural extension service, taking into consideration its large nationwide coverage. Thus, private advisors were not targeted.

## 3.2 A brief profile of the study areas

### 3.2.1 Kolonja Municipality



**Source:** United Nations Geospatial. 2024. Albania. Cited 22 April 2024.  
<https://www.un.org/geospatial/content/albania-1>

Located at 1 100 m above sea level, Kolonja Municipality is characterized by harsh mountainous terrain and is surrounded by 16 tall mountains, the highest of which is Gramozi Mountain at 2 523 m. Winter is cold with temperatures varying from 0 °C to -5 °C, while summer is cool with temperatures varying from 19 °C to 24 °C (Kolonja Municipality, 2020). It is rich in natural resources, including forests, grazing land, pastures and thermal waters with good curative values (Urban Research Institute, 2016).

Administratively, Kolonja Municipality is under Korça County and is comprised of 8 administrative units that include 2 cities (Erseka and Leskovik) and 76 villages. Its official administrative seat is in Erseka. Its population is decreasing significantly because of the high internal and international migration flows that began after 1991. Inter-census data show that its population declined from 28 815 in 1989 (the last census under the socialist system) to 17 150 inhabitants in the 2001 census and 11 070 inhabitants in the 2011 census (Central Directory of Statistics, 1991; INSTAT, 2001, 2012). As a result of the high village abandonment rate, 72 villages are currently populated out of 76 that were populated before 1991.

In general, Kolonja Municipality has a low population density (13 inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup>). Forty percent of its population lives in rural areas, while women represent 49.6 percent of the total population (Kolonja Municipality, 2020). Data on age group composition shows that its population is ageing. This is quite problematic in rural areas, where left behind and

living alone older people predominate and shape the structure of production and productivity of small family farms.

In Kolonja Municipality almost half of the population (49.6 percent) is employed in the service sector, representing the largest contribution to its local GDP, followed by the agriculture sector that employs 39.7 percent and industry (10.7 percent). The population lacks income and 7.6 percent of its inhabitants benefit from social safety nets, which is relatively high compared with the national average (6.2 percent; Kolonja Municipality, 2020). The total number of children and older people who suffer from various types of disability is higher in its rural areas compared with urban ones. They lack services in general, and specialized services in particular (ibid.). The unemployment level is high among women (50.3 percent). Female-headed households with more than 5 members, older people, those with a low level of education and people with disabilities are more exposed to poverty (ibid.).

Agriculture is underdeveloped and does not meet the needs of rural inhabitants. Excessive fragmentation followed by the lack of appropriate technologies, including versatile equipment, small-scale mechanization and mobile milking systems (necessary for use in hill and mountain farming) have placed them at a disadvantage. Fifteen percent or 12 000 hectares are agricultural land, while 66 percent or 55 310 hectares are forests and pastureland. The agriculture sector is very fragmented, with short value chains lacking value-added and income diversification opportunities. In total, there are 2 303 small farms in Kolonja Municipality that mainly grow wheat, maize, barley, apples and grapes, as shown in Table 2 (Urban Research Institute, 2016).

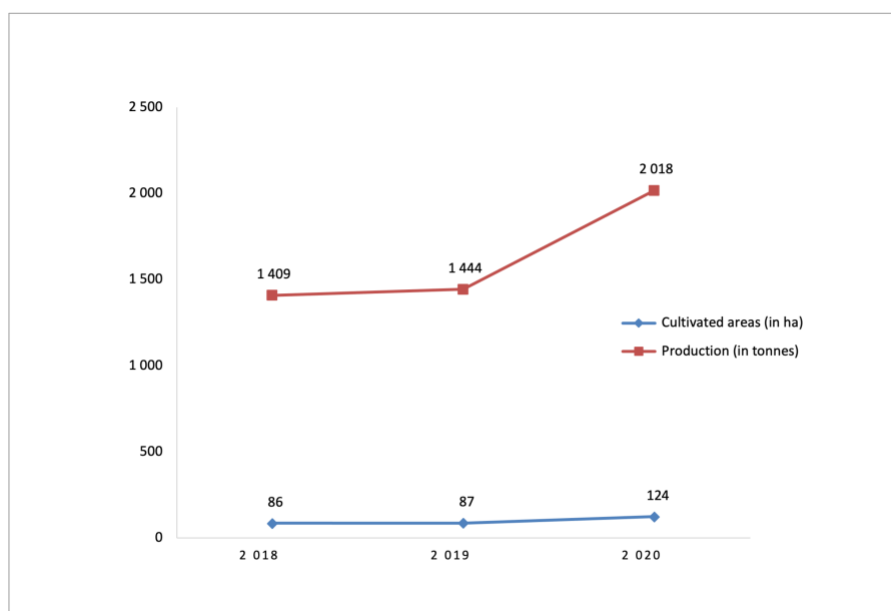
**Table 2. Production of field crops and permanent crops in Kolonja Municipality, 2020**

Description	Cereals	Wheat	Maize	White beans	Barley	Fruits	Grapes
<b>Production (in tonnes)</b>	5 121	2 240	1 426	164	454	4 517	1 260

*Source:* INSTAT. 2021b. *Agricultural statistical yearbook, 2020*. Tirana.

Farmlands are also planted with vegetables and mainly produce cucumbers, tomatoes, peppers, melons and watermelons. Statistics show that cultivated areas with vegetables increased during the period 2018 to 2020 (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3. Cultivated areas with vegetables (in hectares) and production (in tonnes) in Kolonja Municipality, 2018–2020**



*Source:* INSTAT. 2021b. *Agricultural statistical yearbook*, 2020. Tirana.

The sector of medicinal and aromatic plants (MAPs) is underdeveloped in Kolonja Municipality and does not seem to be an attractive employment opportunity for young people. Outdated collection, harvesting and post-harvesting techniques have increased the overexploitation of MAPs and farmers lack access to new technological information about innovative and sustainable practices. However, it is an important income source for poor families who are involved in their collection and trading, but in turn, their overexploitation might result in economic hardship for them.

Livestock is a crucial nourishment asset for rural families who mainly manage cows, sheep, goats and poultry. However, the income generated from various livestock-related activities is relatively low because livestock farmers face various challenges in adopting new technological advances. Moreover, the mass migration of young rural men has negatively affected the size of the herds and their current production. Recent data show that the total number of livestock heads (see Table 3) and their production (see Table 4) decreased during the period 2018 to 2020.

**Table 3. Trends in livestock in Kolonja Municipality, 2018–2020**

Heads	2018	2019	2020
<b>Cows</b>	8 317	6 174	6 200
<b>Sheep</b>	32 791	23 896	24 000
<b>Milked sheep</b>	28 899	21 229	21 300
<b>Goats</b>	29 070	21 963	21 960
<b>Poultry</b>	23 955	24 259	24 000
<b>Beehives</b>	10 595	9 772	9 770

*Source:* INSTAT. 2021b. *Agricultural statistical yearbook*, 2020. Tirana.

**Table 4. Trends in livestock production in Kolonja Municipality, 2018–2020**

Production	2018	2019	2020
<b>Milk (in tonnes)</b>	14 104.4	10 481.7	10 481.0
<b>Meat (in tonnes)</b>	2 515.1	1 678.3	1 677.8
<b>Eggs (pieces)</b>	2 400.0	2 615.0	2 604.0
<b>Honey (in tonnes)</b>	127.1	117.3	117.2

*Source:* INSTAT 2021b. Agricultural statistical yearbook, 2020, Tirana.

Poor infrastructure in rural areas isolates the population during long winters. Available data show that only 7 percent of its infrastructure meets the required standards. Thus, the majority of rural roads are mostly unpaved and have deteriorated (Kolonja Municipality, 2020). Agritourism is underdeveloped in light of the area’s great potential, providing fewer revenues for local residents. Recently, two villages in this municipality, Borova (6 km from Erseka city) and Rehova (2 km from Erseka city), became part of the “100 villages” government programme that aims to promote integrated and sustainable rural development in Albania, and will improve infrastructure, develop human and social capital, diversify economic activities, and improve economic well-being (Council of Ministers, 2018c).

### 3.2.2 Elbasan Municipality



Elbasan Municipality has a total area of 872.03 km<sup>2</sup> and is situated in the central part of Albania, bordering Tirana Municipality in the north, Librazhd Municipality in the east, Prenjas Municipality in the southeast, Gramsh Municipality in the southwest, and Cerrik and Peqin Municipalities in the west.

*Source:* United Nations Geospatial. 2024. Albania. Cited 22 April 2024. <https://www.un.org/geospatial/content/albania-1>

Distributed over a wide area, Elbasan Municipality has a wide geographical diversity that combines a narrow band of hills and flat lands in the central and western parts, with partly hilly and mountainous landscape in the northeastern and southeastern parts. Therefore,

some areas have an altitude that ranges between 70 m and 128 m above sea level, while some rural areas are very hilly and surrounded by high mountains, with the highest one being Bukanik Mountain at 1 831 m (Elbasan Municipality, 2016).

Elbasan Municipality has a continental Mediterranean climate. On average, temperatures vary from 6.7 °C to 11 °C in January (winter) to 23.4 °C to 31.2 °C in July (summer). It is rich in natural resources, including rivers, lakes, forests, hills covered with olive trees, Mediterranean bushes and thermal waters with curative power (Elbasan Municipality, 2016). Administratively, it falls under Elbasan County. Elbasan Municipality is composed of 13 administrative units that include Elbasan city and 117 villages.

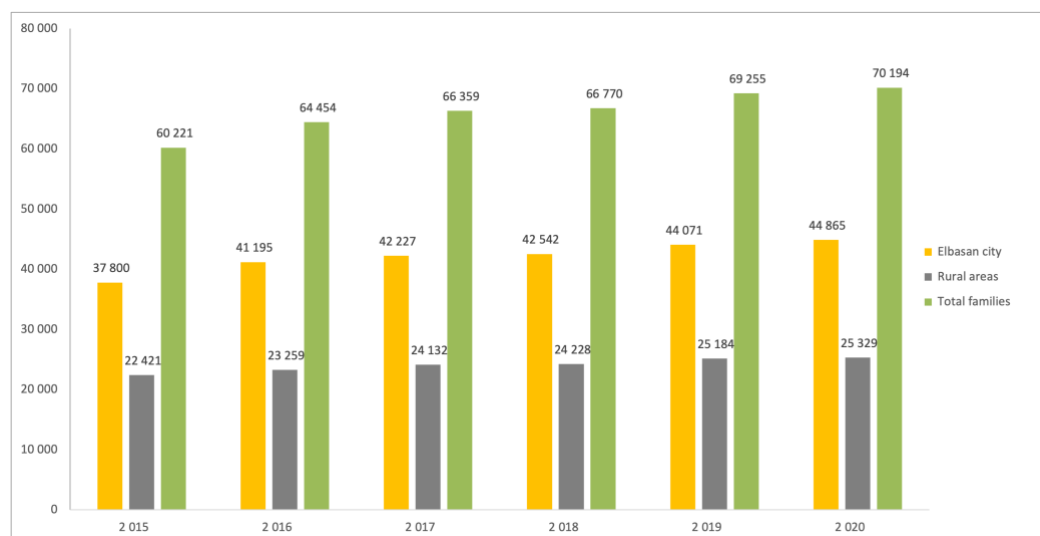
Its official administrative seat is in Elbasan city. Data from the population registry show that the total population of Elbasan Municipality (in both rural areas and Elbasan city) has increased because of rural-to-urban migration from other parts of the country, from 208 480 inhabitants in 2015 to 214 316 inhabitants in 2020, as shown in Figure 4 (Elbasan Municipality, 2022). No sex-disaggregated data were found. This increase is also reflected in the total number of families (see Figure 5).

**Figure 4. Trends in the total population in Elbasan Municipality, by place of residence, 2015–2020**



**Source:** Elbasan Municipality. 2022. Evidence of population change, years 2015–2020 in Elbasan Municipality. In: *Elbasan Municipality*. [Cited 20 February 2022]. <https://elbasani.gov.al/levizja-demografike>

**Figure 5. Total number of families in Elbasan Municipality, by place of residence, 2015–2020**



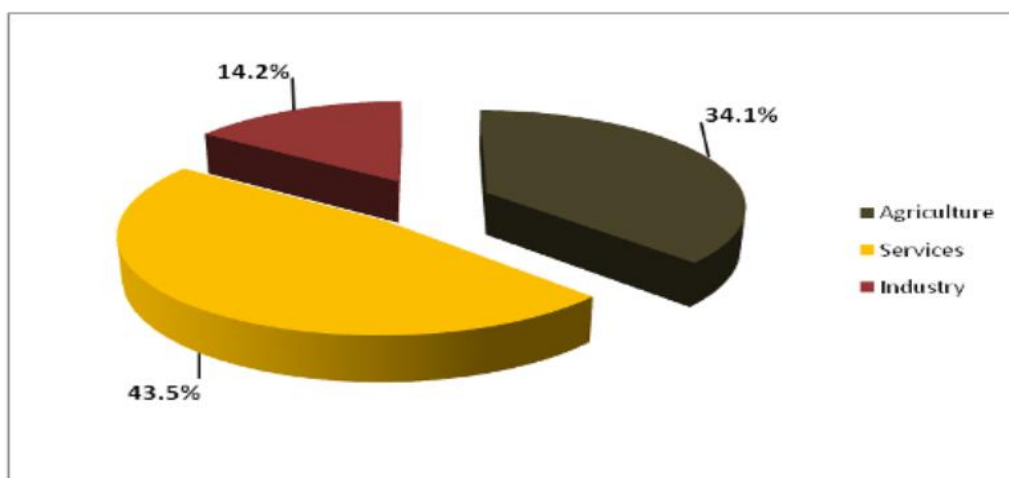
**Source:** Author's calculations for this report, based on Elbasan Municipality. 2022. *Evidence of population change, years 2015–2020 in Elbasan Municipality*. In: Elbasan Municipality. [Cited 20 February 2022]. <https://elbasani.gov.al/levizja-demografike>

About 39 percent of the total population lives in rural areas, and the population density is 236 inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup> (Elbasan Municipality, 2016). Elbasan Municipality has a relatively young population. Its age group composition shows that almost 70 percent of residents are 15 to 64 years old, 20 percent are under 14 years old, and 10 percent are 65 years old and over. Updated sex-disaggregated data were not found. However, there are significant rural-urban differences in age-structure composition due to frequent migration flows, which continuously affect rural areas. As a result, the old-age dependency ratio in rural areas is increasing along with the ageing of its labour force. In general, the rural labour force has a relatively low level of education. The percentage of those who have completed secondary and tertiary education is lower than at the national level, negatively affecting their competitiveness and productivity in the labour market (GADC, 2018).

The structure of the economy in Elbasan Municipality diverged significantly after 1991 when Albania changed its political system. Formerly, it was an area oriented to heavy industry, including the metallurgical plant, and industrial mining support enterprises such as a timber processing plant, a cement factory and an explosive materials plant. This led to contamination of the air and agricultural land in the surrounding areas. Their collapse and restructuring replaced some of these with small- and medium-sized private enterprises. Data show that 51.4 percent of the population is employed in the service sector, followed by 27.7 percent in agriculture and 20.9 percent in the industrial sector (Elbasan Municipality, 2016). With this shift in the structure of the economy of Elbasan Municipality, agriculture now plays an important role contributing to 34.1 percent of its GDP (see Figure 6).



**Figure 6. Contribution to gross domestic product by sector, Elbasan Municipality**



**Source:** Elbasan Municipality. 2016. *General local plan*. Municipal Council Decision No. 1, 29 December 2016. Elbasan, p. 18. [in Albanian]

Elbasan Municipality has 17 600 hectares of agricultural land, 7 075 hectares of pastureland, 5 768.9 hectares of forestland, 5 094.48 hectares of unproductive land and 139.46 hectares of abandoned land. Even though it does not have abundant agricultural land, it produces cereals (mainly wheat and maize), tobacco and potatoes (see Table 5).

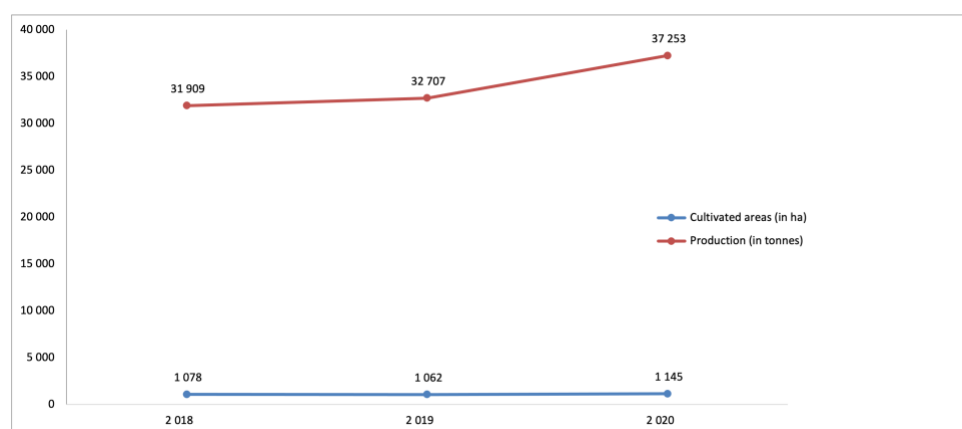
**Table 5. Production of field crops in Elbasan Municipality, 2020**

Description	Cereals	Maize	Wheat	Potatoes	White beans	Tobacco	Medicinal plants
<b>Production (in tonnes)</b>	24 300	15 360	7 973	10 779	800	258	77

**Source:** INSTAT. 2021b. *Agricultural statistical yearbook, 2020*. Tirana.

Farm size is relatively small (about 1.1 hectares/family) in Elbasan Municipality and there are various types of farms, including polyculture farms for market, livestock farms, fruit tree farms, arable crop farms, self-sufficiency farms and leisure farms (Meço, Kapaj and Tomorri, 2018). Fresh vegetables, mainly tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, melons and watermelons, are grown in natural conditions as well as in greenhouses. Recent data show that cultivated areas with vegetables and their production increased in this municipality during the period 2018 to 2020 (see Figure 7).

**Figure 7. Cultivated areas with vegetables (in hectares) and their production (in tonnes) in Elbasan Municipality, 2018–2020**



**Source:** INSTAT. 2021b. Agricultural statistical yearbook, 2020. Tirana.

Fruit trees, olives and vineyards are important in Elbasan Municipality. In 2020, the area counted 475 000 fruit trees, 614 000 olive trees, 18 000 citrus trees, 263 hectares of vineyards and 319 000 pergolas (INSTAT, 2021b). Previous studies conducted on farm performance in Elbasan have found that polyculture farms, as well as livestock and self-sufficient farms, are more viable and productive, and perform well compared with other farms. However, despite their good performance, they face various obstacles including lack of cooperation, high costs and lack of horizontal integration, among others (Meço, Kapaj and Tomorri, 2018). Livestock remains a crucial source of livelihood in Elbasan Municipality (especially in mountainous areas), but smallholder producers feel excluded from significant economies of scale because they do not meet the demanding quality standards of consumers for safe livestock products. Recent data show a decrease in the total number of livestock (see Table 6) and fluctuations in their production (see Table 7) during the period 2018 to 2020.

**Table 6. Trends in livestock in Elbasan Municipality, 2018–2020**

Heads	2018	2019	2020
<b>Cows</b>	11 750	13 750	12 000
<b>Sheep</b>	31 300	25 300	22 300
<b>Milked sheep</b>	20 300	18 800	16 500
<b>Goats</b>	32 000	25 600	22 100
<b>Pigs</b>	1 100	1 350	1 350
<b>Poultry</b>	285 200	258 800	248 000
<b>Beehives</b>	7 000	7 500	11 000

**Source:** INSTAT. 2021b. Agricultural statistical yearbook, 2020. Tirana.

**Table 7. Trends in livestock production in Elbasan Municipality, 2018–2020**

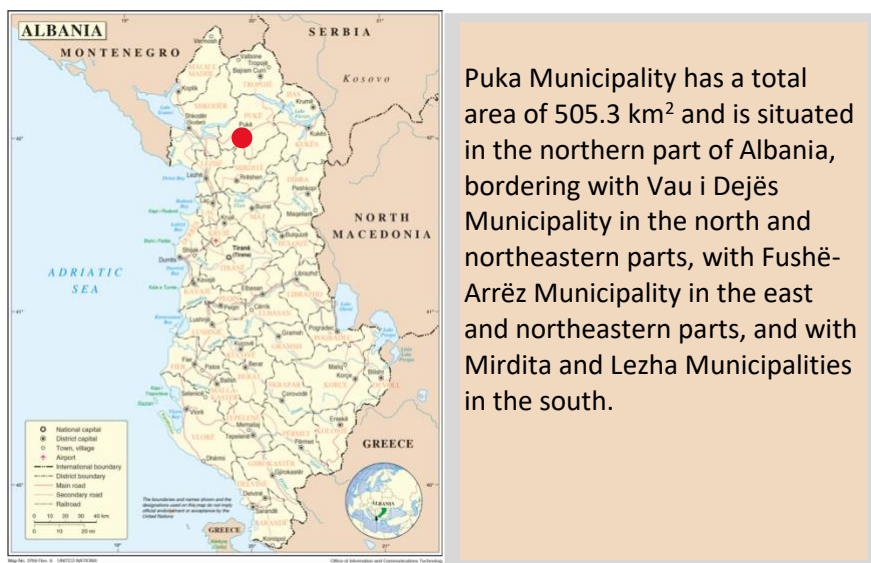
Production	2018	2019	2020
<b>Milk (in tonnes)</b>	39 265.7	42 339.5	41 223.7
<b>Meat (in tonnes)</b>	5 102.4	5 254.4	4 578.6
<b>Eggs (pieces)</b>	20 125.0	24 140.0	22 277.3
<b>Honey (in tonnes)</b>	146.7	119.1	144.2

*Source:* INSTAT. 2021b. *Agricultural statistical yearbook*, 2020. Tirana.

The majority of the rural population is self-employed within their small family farms and women undertake more than 80 percent of the work in agriculture. Very few women are small farm managers. In general, agritourism is underdeveloped, lacking an attractive touristic product that would bridge the city and its rural areas to establish closer ties and supply city residents with agricultural products. There are some exceptions, such as Gjinar village, where the attractiveness of the area has recently improved due to investment. Elbasan Municipality has a high level of poverty compared with the national picture.

The unemployment rate is high among women (36.3 percent) compared with men (29.6 percent). About 13.5 percent of families receive cash benefits from social protection schemes, while 6.3 percent of the population suffers from various forms of disability. Disability is high among rural inhabitants compared with urban inhabitants because they lack specialized and good quality health care services (Elbasan Municipality, 2016). In general, in rural areas, there is a paucity of “farm-to-market roads”. Underinvestment in physical infrastructure has increased both farmers’ transaction costs and the costs of inputs, placing them in a less favourable position in terms of market access and causing a price reduction for their agricultural outputs. Within the Albanian government’s new “100 villages”, two villages of Elbasan Municipality – Shushica (close to Elbasan city) and Gjinar (a remote mountainous area) – have been included to benefit from the development of rural and winter tourism (Council of Ministers, 2018).

### 3.2.3 Puka Municipality



**Source:** United Nations Geospatial. 2024. Albania. Cited 22 April 2024. <https://www.un.org/geospatial/content/albania-1>

Located at an average altitude of 787 m above sea level, Puka Municipality has an attractive, picturesque and mountainous landscape comprised of high mountains, sharp hilly slopes, valleys, caves, watersheds and rivers. Its climate is cold, with an average yearly temperature of 10.2 °C (Ministry of Urban Development, National Agency of Territorial Planning and Puka Municipality, 2018). The municipality is rich in natural resources, including massive forests at Tërbuni Mountain, minerals (copper, chrome, iron and clay), MAPs, forest fruits, pastureland and fruit trees.

Administratively, Puka Municipality falls under Shkodra County. It is divided into 5 administrative units that include Puka city and 41 villages. According to Puka Municipality population register data, in 2016 there were 16 432 inhabitants. However, updated sex-disaggregated data were not found. About 32.5 percent of inhabitants lived in Puka city in 2016 (Ministry of Urban Development, National Agency of Territorial Planning and Puka Municipality, 2018). In general, the municipality (and its rural and remote areas in particular) has been highly affected by mass depopulation during the years of Albania's transition to democracy. Underdevelopment of its economy, poor infrastructure, the closure of state mines, and the collapse of agricultural cooperatives have all fuelled the migration of the rural population. The decrease of the total population, as shown in the 1989 and 2011 censuses, was lower in Puka city (about 23.4 percent) compared with rural areas where it ranged from 72.1 percent to 76.8 percent (ibid.).

The poverty level is high in Puka Municipality, where 400 families or 7 percent of the total number of families receive monthly cash benefits from the social safety net. The majority of these families live in rural areas of the municipality including in Rrapa (12 percent), Qelëz (11 percent) and Gjegjan (9 percent). Seventy-five percent of jobseekers in Puka

Municipality live in urban areas, while 40 percent of female jobseekers belong to the 20 to 40 years age group. More than half of jobseekers (about 56 percent) have completed compulsory education (9 years of schooling), while 34 percent have completed general high school (Puka Municipality, 2021). The area does not have any vocational education and training centres or agricultural high schools, which are necessary for having a qualified labour force in the agricultural sector (Helvetas, 2018). About 2.2 percent of Puka inhabitants live with various disabilities, and of these, 36 percent reside in Puka city, while the remaining proportion reside in rural areas including Qerret (22 percent), Gjegjan (20 percent), Qelëz (13 percent) and Rrapa (9 percent). Rural areas lack specialized and support services for people with disabilities (Puka Municipality, 2021).

Agriculture is the key sector of Puka’s economy and the main income source for its rural population. But low land per capita (450 m<sup>2</sup>), small farm size (about 2–3 decares), poor land quality, and the low use of agricultural technology has negatively impacted on the productivity of family farms. The high price of mechanical equipment has forced farmers to plough their land with animals. As a result, 80 percent of small farm production is used to meet family needs (AGROPUKA, 2012). Traditional crops grown in Puka Municipality include maize, fruit trees (cherry, apple, persimmon, chestnut, walnut), MAPs (thyme, sage), mushrooms and vegetables (tomatoes, pepper, cucumber) as shown in Table 8.

**Table 8. Production of field crops and permanent crops in Puka Municipality, 2020**

Description	Cereals	Maize	Wheat	Potatoes	White beans	Vegetables	Fruits
<b>Production (in tonnes)</b>	3 366	3 317	49	3 003	39	3 178	1 124

*Source:* INSTAT. 2021b. Agricultural statistical yearbook, 2020. Tirana.

Even though it is rich in resources such as forest fruits and MAPs, the agriculture sector faces challenges in increasing added-value and boosting productivity due to the lack of adequate processing infrastructure. In addition, land in this area is not distributed by the new land privatization law, but is based on the customary law known as “the Kanun”, respecting the former boundaries of previous landowners. Due to land conflict and the migration of rural people, the process of land registration at the State Cadastre Office is very slow, prohibiting farmers from investing in their small farms or applying for grants and other support from national schemes. Agribusiness is underdeveloped and very limited, based on a narrow range of low processing activities that are characterized by a lack of advanced technology, limited distribution networks, inappropriate product labelling and low standards. In general, smallholder women and men lack experience and marketing skills. The area’s weak rural infrastructure does not support the commercialization of mass agricultural products, and there is a scarcity of good quality storage and cooling facilities for large amounts of post-harvested fruits and forest fruits. Within the municipality, Qelëz village has been selected as part of the “100 villages” initiative, where the main priority will be economic development and support for women and young people with vocational training (Puka Municipality, 2018).

The business sector is generally weak and very small, mainly comprised of a few active small and medium enterprises (Puka Municipality, 2021); and the livestock sector has low economic productivity regardless of the high capacity of Puka’s pastureland to feed three times more ruminants than it currently does. Small farms with a small number of animals dominate this sector. In total, there are 60 farms with more than 50 ruminants and 11 farms that have more than 100 heads. There are limited dairies to collect raw milk and produce safe and certified milk by-products (GADC, 2016). Data show that during the period 2018 to 2020, this sector shrank both in terms of the total number of heads (see Table 9) and livestock productivity (see Table 10).

**Table 9. Trends in livestock in Puka Municipality, 2018–2020**

Heads	2018	2019	2020
<b>Cows</b>	3 080	2 840	2 642
<b>Sheep</b>	6 300	5 640	3 410
<b>Milked sheep</b>	4 845	4 120	3 020
<b>Goats</b>	12 730	11 740	12 675
<b>Pigs</b>	4 293	4 293	1 582
<b>Poultry</b>	27 000	27 000	24 690
<b>Beehives</b>	4 000	4 000	3 650

*Source:* INSTAT. 2021b. *Agricultural statistical yearbook, 2020*. Tirana.

**Table 10. Trends in livestock production in Puka Municipality, 2018–2020**

Production	2018	2019	2020
<b>Milk (in tonnes)</b>	6 067.7	5 667.0	5 489.0
<b>Meat (in tonnes)</b>	1 081.3	1 037.0	788.0
<b>Eggs (pieces)</b>	2 070.0	2 070.0	2 185.0
<b>Honey (in tonnes)</b>	64.0	64.0	60.0

*Source:* INSTAT. 2021b. *Agricultural statistical yearbook, 2020*. Tirana.

Gender equality remains a serious issue in Puka Municipality, mainly due to the prevalence of gender discriminatory practices. The strong influence of the discriminatory customary law undervalues women’s contribution to the domestic domain and limits their involvement in the public sphere (Brooks and Meçe, 2022). This has negatively impacted upon human capital formation among rural women in Puka: they are unskilled, have limited access to resources, and face various difficulties including low income, lack of opportunities in off-farm activities and travel restrictions without spousal permission (Helvetas, 2018).

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## 4. Findings and discussion

This section presents the findings of this assessment report based on three levels: a) an enabling policy environment level; b) the organizational level; and c) the individual level (focusing on the RAS staff and their clients).

### 4.1 An enabling policy environment

Albania has made substantial progress in achieving gender equality and empowering women in conformity with respective international standards and obligations; however, bold actions are still needed in rural areas. In 2021, Albania submitted its fifth periodic report to the CEDAW Committee noting progress made in addressing the recommendations provided by the Committee on Article 14. The 2016 concluding observations called for the implementation of a comprehensive gender strategy to ensure the equal access of rural women and girls and to take concrete measures to change traditional gender perceptions about women's roles in the public and private spheres as a counter response to growing patriarchal attitudes in rural areas (United Nations, 2016, p. 10).

However, an alternative report on the implementation of CEDAW between 2016 and 2020, prepared by the People's Ombudsman, shows that rural women still have low access to services and are in a less favourable situation compared with their urban counterparts due to limited knowledge about property rights, legislative deficiencies, inaccurate administrative practices, and a lack of monitoring of the gender equality law in practice. The report draws attention to and recommends that central and local institutions take respective measures to guarantee the rights of rural women (People's Ombudsman, 2020). In addition, the shadow report prepared by the UNCT emphasizes the importance of gender mainstreaming in designing and implementing policies in the agriculture sector to ensure inclusive development and the economic empowerment of rural women. It provides several recommendations, including: the preparation of an action plan to address gender disparities in rural areas; the development of evidence-based interventions to address rural women's informality in the agriculture sector; and the application of a gender quota in the agricultural extension service and capacity building for field advisors so that they can deliver gender-responsive services (UNCT, 2022).

At the national level, equality between men and women is foreseen by Article 18 of the Albanian Constitution. The Law on Gender Equality in the Society<sup>11</sup> aims at ensuring a) non-discrimination, gender equality, and effective protection from any form of gender-biased behaviours; b) implementation of measures that guarantee equal opportunities among men and women, eliminating any form of gender-based discrimination; and c) development and reinforcement of laws and policies that encourage gender equality in society by authorities and structures that have clear responsibilities about them. Additionally, the Law on Agriculture and Rural Development<sup>12</sup> defines objectives, sets measures, and highlights

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<sup>11</sup> *On gender equality in the society*, No. 9970, 24 July 2008.

<sup>12</sup> *On agriculture and rural development*, No. 9817, 22 October 2007.

policies in the agriculture sector and rural development, public agricultural services, research and vocational training. One of its main objectives (Article 3) includes the increase of income for the rural population by enhancing its well-being through the improvement of working and living conditions, as well as by creating equal opportunities for men and women.

As a key strategic document, the NSDI (2015–2020) reflected Albania’s vision, goals and aspirations for European integration and successful socioeconomic development. One of its pillars – “Investing in human capital and social cohesion” – aimed to develop the country’s economic growth and prosperity through promoting gender equality, fostering the economic empowerment of women, and encouraging their economic independence through improved access to support schemes in the agriculture sector (Council of Ministers, 2016). However, the strategy mainstreamed 12 SDG indicators, showing a limited capacity to monitor the implementation of the SDGs nationwide. Moreover, with relevance to rural women, the 2018 baseline study on the SDGs (Council of Ministers, 2018a) and the Albania Voluntary National Review of the SDGs show that indicators 5.a.1<sup>13</sup> and 5.a.2<sup>14</sup> are not adopted and monitored in national reporting (Council of Ministers, 2018b).

In addition, the gender dimension has not been adequately mainstreamed in ISARD (2014–2020): it lacks a concrete action plan with clear gender-focused objectives for supporting the various roles of rural women as farmers, processors and entrepreneurs. Considering that the design of the national agricultural support scheme by MARD has not been guided by a thorough analysis of the situation of rural women, the impact of the support scheme on gender equality and women’s empowerment has not been addressed adequately. To add to this, the IPARD II (2014–2020) programme recognized the role of women entrepreneurs in the non-agriculture sector, yet it disregarded their role in agricultural production (World Bank, 2020b). This omission further causes negative effects on women farmers’ income generation and discourages their participation in agricultural cooperatives or associations (FAO, 2022a). Moreover, state programmes often undervalue women’s needs as producers. In ISARD, women’s involvement is recognized only in niche products, agri-processing or other non-farm-related activities.

National policies and programmes prioritize agricultural competitiveness and modernization without an explicit acknowledgement of rural women’s entrepreneurship potential in agrifood systems. As a result, support measures further deprioritize the needs of women farmers, in particular their access to advisory services, information and availability of grants and other measures enabling access to inputs, resources and markets (World Bank, 2020b). A recent study that analysed the agriculture and rural development policy in Albania found that the budget of the national support schemes was insufficient vis-a-vis the contribution of the agriculture sector to the country’s GDP. Support provided to various agricultural sub-sectors was inconsistent, lacking a clear focus based on comparative advantages and the sectors’ overall performance. Many farmers who met the eligibility criteria to benefit from

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<sup>13</sup> a) Proportion of total agricultural population with ownership or secure rights over agricultural land by sex, and b) share of women among owners or rights-bearers of agricultural land, by type of tenure.

<sup>14</sup> Proportion of countries where the legal framework (including customary law) guarantees women’s equal rights to land ownership and/or control.



the national support schemes were not supported, while institutional accountability mechanisms to provide reasons for not benefiting are not in place (FAO, 2022a).

Lacking a comprehensive gender equality strategy and action plan, MARD has a gap in the capacity building of its staff on gender-related issues in general, and of agricultural extensionists in particular. MARD's dedicated gender focal person is responsible for coordinating the institution's activities on gender issues; however, their job description is not primarily focused on gender mainstreaming. The description does not specify their responsibility for capacity building, communication and advocacy, quality assurance, oversight of gender resources and accountability management, nor does it give a clear estimate on expected involvement and performance assessment criteria.

More recently, MARD's new strategy<sup>15</sup> commits to considering gender analysis. However, so far, sex-disaggregated data have been collected for two indicators that are reported at the national level, respectively, a) the total number of women who benefit from the national support scheme, and b) the number of women who benefit from the agricultural extension service. Therefore, gender-responsive budgeting is applied for these two programmes only. During 2021, MARD dedicated a total amount of ALL 1.7 million<sup>16</sup> to train 320 rural women on specific topics. These activities were organized by the RAEAs in close collaboration with ATTCs and monitored by the gender focal person at MARD. In total, ten training days were held nationwide. Moreover, MARD has set some specific criteria to encourage rural women to apply and benefit from the Agriculture and Rural Development Fund (ARDF). Female applicants receive five additional points when they apply for the investment scheme.

To summarize, MARD's policies prioritize the development of the agriculture sector. Although they are gender-sensitive to a certain extent, there is considerable room for improvement and addressing the specific needs and priorities of diverse rural women involved in agrifood systems. Despite these identified gaps, the most recent Strategy makes a commitment to gender mainstreaming.

## 4.2 At the organizational level

As a subordinated structure of MARD, NES does not have a dedicated gender equality mainstreaming policy. The absence of an active policy on gender mainstreaming and social inclusion hampers the steps taken for tracking progress towards national goals and relevant SDGs.

The internal regulations of RAEAs developed by MARD are guided by the principle of non-discrimination on the basis of sex, race, colour, religion, ethnicity, age, marital status, disability and sexual orientation. They highlight the position of RAEAs in respecting equal opportunities and human dignity by involving farmers and employees in the

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<sup>15</sup> Strategy for agriculture, rural development and fisheries 2021–2027, No. 460, 29 June 2022.

<sup>16</sup> In 2021, on average, USD 1 = ALL 103.52 (author's calculations based on data from the Bank of Albania Exchange rate archive: [https://www.bankofalbania.org/Tregjet/Kursi\\_zyrtar\\_i\\_kembimit/Arkiva\\_e\\_kursit\\_te\\_kembimit](https://www.bankofalbania.org/Tregjet/Kursi_zyrtar_i_kembimit/Arkiva_e_kursit_te_kembimit)).

decision-making process. This non-discriminatory statement is considered applicable not only for RAEA staff but also for their approach and other extension-related activities. However, the whole document is dominated by gender-neutral language.

Critically, the job description of agricultural advisors does not require basic knowledge on gender issues and gender sensitivity-related capacity building. It is not essential for them to receive gender-focused training, including information on the use of gender methodologies and gender analysis tools. Besides this, RAEAs do not have policies or mechanisms in place to address the difficulties faced by advisors in fulfilling their tasks and reaching women farmers.

On an organizational level, women are significantly underrepresented at the high managerial level of each RAEA. For instance, none of the units are headed by women. In general, women are also underrepresented in high-level secondary positions including heads of departments and/or sectors. Regional Agricultural Extension Agency staff are recruited based on the Law on the Civil Servants<sup>17</sup> which, in itself, does not mention a gender recruitment quota. As such, RAEAs do not have any recruitment policies with a stated goal to encourage the recruitment of women as agricultural advisors or retain those who are already hired. The 2021–2022 Strategic Action Plan of NES does not recognize women’s role as farmers, processors, and entrepreneurs, nor does it recognize women’s specific needs, barriers or solutions for addressing them. Concrete measures to strengthen the capacity of rural women to access the agricultural extension service and adopt new technologies are lacking. Regional Agricultural Extension Agencies collect sex-disaggregated data on the total number of women clients but do not have specific quotas or targets. Accordingly, only 11 percent of rural women received information in 2019.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, RAEAs do not make any distinction among different categories of rural women, including young women, older women, landless women, female-headed households, or women contributing as unpaid farm workers or managers. As such, their diverse needs remain silent and widely overlooked. In addition, RAEAs are not informed about the analysis of time and mobility constraints of rural women.

The internal regulations of RAEAs foresee that agricultural advisors maintain regular contact with specialized experts and collaborate with them to plan and implement extension activities, training, demonstrations, fairs and other events. However, the training policies in place do not indicate how these activities should be adjusted to women’s needs to accommodate the availability of their schedules and knowledge gaps.

According to RAEAs’ internal regulations, field advisors should conduct regular visits to farms to understand farmers’ problems and process data they collect from them. However, no guidance is provided on how to analyse women’s level of education and skills in order to tailor their training activities. Since data are not analysed to better understand women’s profiles in general, and the educational profiles of rural women in particular, there is a lack of designed gender-based services that match with their education and literacy levels. Besides this, RAEAs do not have specific budgets to respond to the needs of women farmers. Considering the relevance of RAEAs in promoting digital solutions and access to

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<sup>17</sup> *Law On the Civil Servants*, No. 152, 30 May 2013, amended by Law No. 178, 18 December 2014.

<sup>18</sup> Statistics provided by MARD for the purposes of this research.

technologies, tailored needs assessment should be regularly conducted. Yet RAEAs have not conducted any systematic analysis to inform agricultural advisors on the different information and knowledge needs of women and men, or to facilitate an understanding of gender-related constraints in the use of technology, including information and communications technologies.

### 4.3 At the individual level

The following two sections review the perspectives of two distinct sets of actors: field advisors and potential clients (rural women and men).

#### 4.3.1 Field advisors' perspectives

Literature suggests that field advisors are important first-hand information and knowledge dissemination agents in rural areas. As such, they engage with farmers to help them use the new agronomic techniques, mitigate the risks, and catalyse their production growth. Therefore, their opinion about rural women's access in agricultural extension services matters. Face-to-face interviews with field advisors indicate the following issues. Field advisors' work plans mainly take into consideration the opinions of the owners of large farms, giving less room to small-scale farm owners to voice their requests. Since large farms are mostly headed by men, there is no evidence that agricultural advisors consider the needs of rural women when planning their service-related activities.

Field advisors are aware that women and men have different levels of education, workload and mobility overall, but these data are not captured in reporting. Advisors admitted that women are disproportionately busy and are highly involved in agriculture. The advisors are also aware of women's engagement in taking care of livestock and household-related work. Field advisors reported that they are required to collect sector-focused data related to the total number of livestock (disaggregated by category), agricultural land, fruit trees, farm productivity and other indicators. At the same time, data collection on the composition of rural households as clients of rural advisory services has not been included in their terms of reference. Moreover, no sex-disaggregated data are collected on landownership, machinery and other resources. As described by one of the field advisors, "It is not important who does the work ... what matters is that work is done". The interviews demonstrate the lack of systematic data collection on gender-related differences, and as such, further reinforces the de facto invisibility of rural women as clients of advisory services.

When asked about rural women's barriers in accessing advisory services, field advisors mentioned an array of reasons, but they did not always acknowledge gender differences. Some of the stated reasons were, for instance, related to difficult geographical terrain, but they also mentioned social norms that prohibit women who live in remote and isolated villages from travelling alone to a nearby city. In addition, rural advisors mentioned the barriers that women in female-headed households face and recognized the limited time availability of women who manage all household tasks because their husbands have migrated abroad. Other reasons that were discussed include poor infrastructure and lack of

regular modes of transportation to access services. In relation to smallholders, the advisors emphasized the low interest in the services that are provided, mainly because the small and fragmented plots produce only for subsistence, not for the market. Women's limited access to landownership was also acknowledged. One field advisor from a southern municipality said:

*Women do not own land because land has no [low market] value. A widow or divorced rural woman does not have any interest to register land [in] her name because land registration is costly. Since they can't find markets to sell their products, they are not interested in farming.*

Because of the Kanun practices described above, some rural families in the north are landless, including women, as explained by a rural advisor based in the north:

*Rural women are not interested in their land rights and do not request them because of the patriarchal norms that do not allow girls to ask [for] any property or land from their father. Family land is divided among brothers and other male family members, but not among women and girls.*

Another issue is low land per capita in the north of the country, due to the smaller amount of agricultural land in general compared with that in the south. As such, daughters avoid applying in the courts for a small portion of land, often needing investment for cultivation. Therefore, they frequently "donate" their share to their brothers. Field advisors do not conduct awareness raising activities about landownership rights. Rural women are rarely the direct recipients of information or primary channels of communication with the agricultural extension service. Field advisors usually use male-dominated communication and information sharing channels to reach farmers and collect their feedback. As one field advisor explained:

*I can't visit all farms and meet all farmers because farms are highly scattered in this mountainous terrain. One farmer, for instance, has two to four plots located in different parts of the village and sometimes one hour [apart] from each other. Therefore, I work with "contact farmers" [farmers who volunteer to spread the word on extension services among peers] and "village inspectors" [mainly men who are hired part-time by the local government to link the local community with the institutions]. I have 100 contact farmers in agriculture, 60 in beekeeping and 60 in livestock. All information I obtain from them about the farmers' problems and their needs is shared with RAEA within the week. Moreover, I have two office days per week where farmers can come in my office and present their problems or ask for support/advice.*

Regional Agricultural Extension Agencies do not apply any gender analysis to enable the uptake of new technologies. The approach is gender-neutral: field advisors stated that their clients were equally treated regardless of gender differences in needs, resources and capacities. Both rural women and men have low information and communications technology skills, and this, combined with poor broadband connectivity in rural areas in

general, and remote areas in particular, means that they are infrequently updated about advanced agricultural technological practices. Agricultural advisors conducted demonstrations mainly on large farms that were located not far from the city or in areas with good access to the main roads. They invited other smallholders to participate. But those located in remote villages, and women in particular, were highly underrepresented. According to field advisors, smallholders barely met their own basic needs, and this is why they were not interested in new technology. Additionally, patriarchal norms prohibit rural women from diversifying family income. In general, agricultural advisors were not very positive about rural women's engagement in associations. One male advisor referred to women as "very passive by choice, not by pressure", sharing a similar sentiment to another male respondent who said, "nobody has excluded them to actively interact and go forward in their community". Some field advisors claimed that women were "victims of patriarchal mentality" and did not want to change it, but none of them discussed this disadvantaged position from a gendered perspective or mentioned other options/alternatives available to women to enable them to make different choices in their lives.

Eligibility requirements also restrict smallholder women and men's interest in and the potential benefits of support from the agricultural extension service. Field advisors reported that the numerous requirements of existing national support schemes limit the inclusion of small-scale farmers, including women. In addition to criteria on farm size, the number of animals or the number of beehives, farmers need to submit several documents, including a) a land certificate; b) a taxpayer individual number; c) a document from RAEA that verifies the individual as an active farmer; d) a bank account; and e) a document to verify the farmer's social insurance payment (in total ALL 30 000). Since both Kolonja and Puka Municipalities do not have tax offices and farmers have to be physically present, they must travel to Korça (87 km from Leskovik) and to Shkodra (61 km from Puka). Finally, there are no bank branches in rural areas, while in towns like Puka and Leskovik, there is only one branch of one bank. This causes long queues and increases the waiting time to open a bank account. All of these expenses and procedures are relatively prohibitive and tiring for the majority of smallholders.

While being aware of the various challenges faced by rural women, field advisers also face technical and logistical difficulties in addressing smallholders' needs, including: a) a lack of working conditions (such as laptops and photocopiers); b) a lack of reimbursement for their travel costs or under-reimbursement of their real travel costs [they explained that their transportation costs to farms were higher than those reimbursed by the institutions]; c) a lack of regular and scheduled transportation to the villages making service provision less efficient, as advisers spent considerable time visiting one or two villages and waiting for public buses; and d) low per diems. They receive ALL 500<sup>19</sup> if they travel more than 60 km. One advisor described these challenges in practice:

*Some rural farmers wanted to apply for the IPARD scheme and asked me to support them to prepare their applications. But I do not have any computer in my office, so I brought my personal laptop from home. I tried*

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<sup>19</sup> Equivalent to USD 4.68 in December 2021.

*to complete their application forms online, but connection was very poor and documents could not be attached. I told the farmers to find other ways to complete and submit their applications.*

To summarize, field advisors have a low level of awareness about gender imbalances in access to agricultural information, knowledge and technology. As such, gender-based data are not collected and gender analysis is not conducted. This, in turn, does not generate evidence-based gender-sensitive interventions. Their low level of interaction with rural women is also hampered by inadequate working conditions and limited gender-based human capital development.

### 4.3.2 Clients' perspectives

To understand the clients' perspectives, interviews were conducted with women and men smallholders. There were no women's organizations/associations in Kolonja Municipality, while in Puka, a local NGO (AGROPUKA) and an Italian NGO (Volontari nel mondo – RTM) had established some informal women's groups in the area under the frameworks of their past projects. In both Puka and Kolonja Municipalities, Local Action Groups (LAGs) had been formed within the framework of a project formerly implemented by the World Bank. However, in both groups, rural women were not represented.

Face-to-face individual interviews with women and men emphasized that they have limited contact with field advisors. All twelve rural women interviewees stated that they had neither met nor were in contact with them. These women relied more on support and advice provided by private providers/companies and NGOs. In Elbasan Municipality, for instance, interviewees mentioned Agricultural Federation (a private company with an olive processing focus located in the village of Kuqan in the Shirgjan Municipal Unit, which also markets agricultural supplies) as being very active in informing them about new technological innovations. The federation had about 400 members who participated in various capacity building activities and knowledge sharing sessions. The interviewed rural women also reported being members of the federation. Overall, both women and men valued its services and applied the knowledge they had gained, considering it useful for improving farming operations and the productivity of their crops and vegetables that in turn generated profit for their households.

On the other hand, the interviewees in Puka mentioned the role of AGROPUKA, a local NGO, and RTM NGO in regularly providing support to mobilize rural women in informal groups and strengthen their needs-based capacities in food processing, beekeeping or milk by-product processing. Training topics were tailored to their requests, and women were exposed to new technology through site visits to advanced farms/laboratories in other parts of the country and face-to-face training with qualified experts. Women farmers in Elbasan reported playing an active role in farm decision-making. Both rural men and women were aware of joint farm responsibilities, indicating more flexibility in negotiating roles in on-farm activities. Conversely, women interviewees in rural areas of Puka emphasized the barriers imposed by cultural norms that prohibited joint farm decision-making. In both areas, respondents mentioned participation in both specialized training and gender-based training activities organized by the respective organizations.

## 5. Conclusions and recommendations

The emergence of family farms as the dominant type of smallholder family farming in agriculture in post-socialist Albania brought about a significant change in the role of women. Once former employees of agricultural cooperatives and state farms, women have since transitioned into family farmers, but they are merely considered to be unpaid “farm helpers”. As their contribution in agrifood systems has extended over time and their involvement in various processes of the value chains has increased, they have gradually assumed more responsibilities, moving from growing traditional products for household consumption to producing for the market and small businesses. Addressing rural women’s access to information, knowledge and services is essential for ensuring gender equality, reaching farm efficiency, sustainability and productivity, and contributing to the enhancement of livelihoods.

Following the GRAST methodology, this assessment has found critical gender gaps in the national policy agenda on agriculture and rural development, where rural women in general, and their diverse needs in particular, are not clearly articulated and mainstreamed. Policies in this sector are not informed by evidence-based sex-disaggregated data and lack systematic gender analysis to deliver inclusive services. Regional Agricultural Extension Agencies do not prioritize the education, knowledge and technology gaps of rural women in their programmes. Furthermore, women’s time and mobility constraints are not accommodated or proactively addressed in their capacity building activities. In general, field advisors are aware of women’s needs but they “take for granted” their gender-based differences. They do not deliver tailored services for rural women because they do not have sufficient resources and lack training on gender-related issues.

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are provided for key actors.

### **For the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development:**

- MARD should strengthen its commitment to mainstreaming gender equality in its national strategy on agriculture and rural development, setting clear gender-focused indicators to keep track of their progress.
- MARD should design gender-sensitive internal policies and regulations establishing a clear gender recruitment quota at managerial and executive levels across all departments, including NES, combined with mandatory gender equality training to foster women’s leadership and institutionalize a gender-responsive approach.
- MARD should collect sex-disaggregated data and conduct systematic gender analysis to inform its policy actions and design tailored services for rural women based on their diversity of needs and different roles as farmers, producers, processors and entrepreneurs.
- MARD should develop a comprehensive capacity building plan on gender issues and update it regularly to reflect the needs of staff, including formal and on-the-job training necessary to deliver gender-responsive services.

- MARD should review the job description of the gender focal point to ensure that gender-related activities at the institutional level are clearly articulated, while the time dedicated for each of them is well defined.
- MARD should design an evidence-based monitoring and evaluation system using a sound gender-sensitive methodology to contribute to accountable decision-making processes and enhance the effectiveness of its measures and interventions.
- MARD should review the budget it allocates to NES to ensure that it reflects its needs for effective service delivery and operational activities to respond to the diverse needs of women and men farmers.

#### **For the National Extension Service and Regional Agricultural Extension Agencies:**

- NES should review its internal regulations and instructions to make sure that the agricultural extension service is tailored to diverse rural women's needs.
- NES should review its recruitment policy, encouraging women applicants and requiring gender sensitivity-related capacity building abilities as a requirement for taking the job.
- RAEAs should create a gender-sensitive working environment that supports a demand-driven and gender-sensitive organizational culture to successfully reach diverse rural women, recognizing their role as clients.
- RAEAs should collect sex-disaggregated data and conduct gender analysis to understand rural women's constraints in access to knowledge, skills, information and technology. This, in turn, also helps ways of taking concrete measures to strengthen rural women's access to advisory services and their adoption of time-saving technologies.
- RAEAs should design participatory training activities; they should be flexible and innovative taking into consideration rural women's needs and accommodating their availability and mobility constraints.
- RAEAs should develop internal instructions explaining the consideration of participatory approaches in gender analysis (such as the division of labour and responsibilities in agriculture) as part of the introduction of new gender-sensitive technology.
- RAEAs should develop guidance on how to analyse sex-disaggregated data relating to education and skills, in order to prepare gender-sensitive communication materials that match with clients' educational and literacy levels.
- RAEAs should prepare internal instructions to explain how field advisors can support rural women to organize or participate in rural organizations and associations.

#### **For extensionists:**

- Extensionists should find effective communication channels to ensure that rural women are also direct recipients of information or primary channels of communication with advisory services. They should develop tools to collect women's feedback and self-assess their service.
- Extensionists should regularly collect sex-disaggregated data and update targeting strategies to gain a better understanding of rural women's needs and tailor demand-driven, gender-based services to them.



- Extensionists should raise the awareness of rural women about their landownership rights and control over resources by facilitating their communication with respective local representatives and institutions.
- Extensionists should contribute to removing the potential barriers to rural women's productivity by developing their entrepreneurship and farm management skills.
- Extensionists should promote sustainable practices, including valuing the traditional knowledge of rural women.
- Extensionists' work should be informed by good practices in gender-responsive advisory services, including those delivered by private providers and NGOs. This will contribute to the more effective harmonization and development of services for promoting rural women's economic empowerment and supporting their entrepreneurial skills

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