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United Nations Development Programme

Kukes Region Cross Border Cooperation Programme

Description of the Action

Title of the action:	Aiding the Development of the Valbona Valley as an International Hiking Destination
Location(s) of the action:	The Valbona Valley of Tropoja
Name of the applicant	The Valbona Chapter of Outdoor Albania Association
Nationality of the applicant ¹	Albanian

PART A. CONCEPT NOTE

1. Relevance of the Action

Provide a general presentation and analysis of the problems and their interrelation at all levels.

The beautiful Valbona Valley of Northern Albania's Tropoja District has been preserved in a pristine, unspoiled condition unique in Europe, due in part to its historic isolation and, ironically, its lack of previous economic development (see photographs 1 & 2 in Annex 5 : Photographs). The Valley is 27 km of natural environment, unmarred by MacDonalds, gas stations, or indeed any sign of 20th or 21st century life. The stunning mountains, which rise from 750 m in the valley bottom to over 2500m on the surrounding peaks, are furthermore crossed by more than 200 km of mountain trails, the same trails used for 100s of years by local people and shepherds. It is thus, in its present state, a precious and prime candidate for development as an International Hiking Destination.

This region has also been one of the poorest parts of what was recently the poorest country in Europe. An estimated 60% of the 238 residents of the valley currently still live off public assistance equal to \$25 per month. The development of lucrative international eco-tourism represents a crucial

¹ The statutes must make it possible to ascertain that the organisation was set up by an act governed by the national law of the country concerned. In this respect, any legal entity whose statutes have been established in another country cannot be considered an eligible local organisation.

opportunity for the people of Valbona to better their economic situation in a very real sense, without radically altering or compromising their unique environment. A recent study of the Aspe Valley in the Pyrennees of southwestern France (an area culturally and environmentally analagous to the Valbona Valley) calculates that each km of hiking trail currently generates 5000 euro per year of income for the local people. Development of these trails was begun 30 years ago, largely as the initiative of the locals there. It is also worth noting that the local government of Valbona, represented by the Margegaj Komun, estimates that 50% of the population of Valbona is under the age of 18, which is the highest percentage of young people in any village in the area. Thus there is a very real future for the people of Valbona which should and must be provided for.

The traditional trails also represent a very real physical aspect of the culture of the Malesi, or "highlands." Less than 1% of the valley's land is useful farmland (Margegaj Komun estimate), and so the people of these mountains traditionally relied heavily on livestock hearing. The mountains are dotted with ancient shepherds' huts used during summer pasturing on the alpine slopes and meadows, and the whole culture of the area was shaped by these practices. Developing this environment for hiking provides an opportunity to study and preserve evidence of the ancient cultural practices of the area.

The development of hiking trails is a critical step in achieving these goals of improving economic conditions, while preserving the environment, celebrating the culture and providing for the future. It is furthermore eminently achievable within a realistically rapid timeframe, by beginning with basic requirements and progressing over time to a fully developed system. The traditional trails exist, and can be brought up to usability by visitors with the addition of 1) signposts (so that the trails can be found) and 2) standard international trail markings (so that the trails can be followed). The next two interrelated steps are to 3) map the trails and produce low-cost but high-quality paper hiking maps, while 4) developing GPS generated trail maps which can be made available over the internet. And finally, the whole trail system could be brought up to the highest level with the addition of posted and maintained camping sites, ranging from basic tent-pitches to (potentially) staffed "refuges" or mountain cabins.

Three parallel processes are required to complement the draw of the thus-developed trail system. The first is to carry out some basic maintenance of the valley, with its growing community of locally-run guesthouses: Firstly, to clean up the valley which is just beginning to experience a trash disposal problem. At present the villagers have no solution but to dump the trash (still mercifully mainly organic, but with a growing amount of plastic and metal) in the valley. A basic cleanup and removal of existing trash to the Bajram Curri dump, as well as the installation of waste recepticles would address the current situation while the villagers attempt to pursue the attention of the local government to their responsibilities in this area. We are very excited to have discovered a local purchaser for recyclable aluminum cans, thus making the beginning of a recycling program in Valbona a very real possibility with only the purchase of some extra receptacles specifically for aluminum. This will provide a modest source of income for the village, encourage more careful waste disposal practices, *and* please foreign tourists (who frequently express shock and dismay at currently common Albanian tolerance of littering). Additionally, information about the hiking trail system as it develops must be made available in the valley, through the production of informational resources, beginning with promotional documents, guides and maps and progressing to well-developed information centers. (For a map of current guesthouses in Valbona, please see image 3 in Annex 5 : Photographs – and note: Besides the school, there are no other public buildings in Valbona, no shops or civic centers. The guesthouses are the public places of Valbona).

The second issue is of course to make Valbona accessible to the international hiking community. People must be able to find information about Valbona as a destination, as well as be able to communicate with Valbona. Given the absence of even telephone signal in Valbona, this is currently a very real problem for businesses dependent on outside contact. Although making Valbona one of the top tourist destinations of Europe is obviously a long-term process, it can be most rapidly begun by using the resources of the internet. It is crucial that visitors can find information about Valbona accomodation and hiking online. It is *also* crucial that the guesthouse owners of Valbona begin to be able to use the internet to communicate with the world, by receiving and responding to email inquiries and bookings.

The third complimentary requirement is to bring the community of Valbona together in a formal and

powerful way to safeguard the sustainability of the development, and insure the representation and achievement of Valbona's interests. We propose to achieve this by forming the Valbona Guesthouse Owner's Association (VGO), a legal non-profit association recognized under Albanian standard law. This will not only provide the villagers with an organized forum for decision making, and unite them as a coherent lobbying unit, but also allow them to execute and support mutually beneficial projects as well as applying for and receiving future aid.

Identify clearly specific problems to be addressed by the action.

Although the vision of this development is at its most long-term rather grand, we feel that it is easily begun, and by moving forward simultaneously through initial, coordinated stages of mutually reinforcing projects, can jumpstart the valley to a functioning hiking destination by the end of the summer. While the villagers themselves currently lack the economic resources to initiate much of this development on their own, we feel the opportunity of the KRCBC grant could allow serious progress to be made along several of these fronts in a mutually advancing and reinforcing manner. Therefore we propose using the maximum grant amount to address the following projects.

This action seeks to address the problem of the villager's ability to develop tourism attractiveness as a hiking destination of international standard in the absence of cash reserves and international experience of their own. It also seeks to initiate a sense of the value of protecting the Environment as a precious and valuable resource, rather than caving into short term gain. It will unify the people of the valley through the formation of a legal association, allowing them to function as a mutually beneficial whole. In achieving these goals it will begin the empowerment of impoverished local people addressing their traditional expectations of failure and thus insuring the sense of ownership and stewardship, as well as making available to them hitherto unavailable access to modern technology and internet methods of attracting and communicating with tourists.

Include a brief description of the target groups and final beneficiaries.

This action seeks to benefit the 238 people of Valbona, by both allowing them to improve their economic prosperity, but also by allowing them to do so in a manner which preserves their environment and the aspects of their traditional lifestyle that they value. By taking the lead in developing this type of responsible, non-destructive tourism development, the valley can serve as a much needed model for the rest of the region, and Albania as a whole. By strengthening the people's sense of position in an international arena and bringing more foreign visitors, it also begins the process of ending Valbona's historical isolation. And, by allowing a means of developing without destruction, it moves towards preserving a truly uniquely unspoiled ecosystem for all the travellers of the world.

Demonstrate the relevance of the proposal to the needs and constraints in general of the target region and to the target groups/final beneficiary groups in particular.

The people of Valbona extremely hard-working, intelligent, curious and industrious. They are also proud of their culture and environment. However, like much of Albania, they have been unable to better their situation due to the twin burdens of poverty and lack of international knowledge due to historic isolation. Furthermore, the highlands of Albania have often functioned as the last bastions of rebellious independence from oppressive regimes, so there is a suspicion of externally imposed systems. This Action addresses these issues by bringing funds and knowledge to the area, but also by involving the local people and enabling their independence at every opportunity, thus fostering a sense of ownership of the project and its products. In moving to preserve what is a uniquely *unspoiled* environment, it preserves both a human community and a natural environment unique in Europe and thus of priceless value to the world community as a whole.

Demonstrate the relevance of the proposal to the objectives and priorities and requirements of the call for proposals (point 1.2 of in the Guidelines for grant applicants).

This action to push forward the development of a world class hiking network in Valbona opens a whole new set of tourist activities in the area, and can serve as a model for all of Albania. Although the Outdoor Albania Association has worked previously on trail improvement projects, this is the first venture of the newly formed Valbona Chapter, and represents the first joining together of guesthouses owners in the area to combine their interests and work together for their mutual betterment. The presence and contribution of JourneytoValbona's Catherine Bohne, with her biology background, experience of extensive hiking on three continents (America, Europe and Africa – where she grew up on a nature reserve), her fifteen years of business experience in New York, her computer skills and her

knowledge of trail raftsmanship offers a great opportunity to bring outside knowledge and skills training to the people of Valbona. As sustenance livestock herding decreases as a means of survival, the old trails and skills of the mountains are in danger of fading – the development of the hiking trails provides a means of preserving the physical culture, as well as a focus for collecting historical cultural details of mountaineering skills, as we work with the older generations of Malesori, drawing out their knowledge. Working with the valley guesthouse owners on the internet portion of this action, helping them prepare their information for listing with [shkoder-albanian alps.com](http://shkoder-albanian-alps.com) as well as helping them begin to make useful use of email and communications opportunities offers not only an important skill and education leap for them, but also a great opportunity to focus thought on their role and goals in tourism marketing, while the formation of the VGO Association will organize them formally to be more effective in the future. The long-term improvements to the hiking trails themselves as represented by the overall signage system (built to last for 25 to 30 years) as well as the new information structures in the valley represent concrete and lasting improvements to the developing tourism infrastructure. The success of this action will be a powerful first example of the benefits of joint coordinated action to the business owners of the valley, and encourage them in further future involvement in such efforts. By beginning now to encourage local business owners to perceive the unspoiled nature of the Valley as a valuable asset with real and prompt benefits, this project will encourage and reinforce the importance of managing and preserving the environment for its long-term health and sustainability. The cleanup portion of the project will encourage the people of Valbona to look again at their environment and demand that local government begin to fulfill their responsibilities in this arena. Bringing world class hiking trails to the border with Montenegro and linking up with hiking systems in that country, as well as reaching out to the Balkan Peace Park Project will increase the tourism assets of all countries involved and reinforce the effectiveness of working for mutual benefits. By involving members of the community on as many levels and in as many ways as possible, including school children with the cleanup aspect, business owners with the tourism benefits, local workers in the installation and *labor* required, by adding to the prosperity of the guesthouses which are all very much family-run businesses involving the women of the valley *and* by bringing foreign visitors to reinforce the perception of value which the villagers themselves feel for the environment, but which they are often surprised to find mirrored in visitors, this project will bring a strong and immediate sense of ownership and possibility to the valley.

2. Description of the action and its effectiveness

Provide a description of the proposed action including, where relevant, background information that led to the presentation of this proposal. This should include:

a description of the overall objective of the action, duration, expected results;

The overall objective of the project is to invest concentrated effort in four months across a range of mutually reinforcing projects to jumpstart the ability of valley to appeal to a wider and more lucrative range of tourists while ensuring that the people of the valley feel a strong sense of ownership and increased possibility for the future, as well as an increased sense of the value of the environment in its current unspoiled state.

a description of the proposed activities and their effectiveness;

The action calls for the creation of 30 high-quality Signposts for hiking trails and two large information center signs, as well as marking and mapping 65 km of hiking trails. These projects will take advantage of collaboration with the KRTEP trails project to dramatically improve the quality of the trails and hiking experience offered, while involving local people to the greatest extent in the design, construction and installation. It also includes a project to install and support for 5 months internet access in the valley, which will be a stunning improvement on the currently effectively non-existent representation of the local accommodation to foreign visitors as well as the virtually non-existent communication infrastructure. It also includes the establishment of the VGO Association, a formally recognized legal non-profit association. The final component is a five day cleanup of the village and installation of 10 waste receptacles, including aluminum recycling bins, which will provide a simple, immediate and dramatic improvement to life in the valley, as well as increasing awareness and beginning the process of a long term sustainable system for managing waste.

involvement of any implementing partners, their role and relationship to the applicant, if applicable;

The major associate for this project will be the KRTEP Trails Infrastructure team as we work with them on signs for the whole system as well as coordinating to ensure that all trails are marked in a consistent manner. We also look forward to working extensively with the Outdoor Albania team, drawing on their past expertise in improving trails to ensure a consistent and high standard for hiking in Albania on a national level.

other possible stakeholders (national, local government, private sector, etc.), their anticipated role and/or potential attitudes towards the project.

We hope to be able to work with other guesthouse owners in Montenegro like Kujtim Dedushi to begin discussing the possibility of cross border tourism promotions based on the hiking systems being developed. If possible, we'd like to involve the BunkerTrails people to assist in GPS and computer mapping of trails. But most importantly, we look forward to involving the people of Valbona to the greatest possible extent, thus making this truly a project of and for the people. We believe strongly that any project which does not directly and immediately involve the people or which increases their sense of disenfranchisement will ultimately have failed in its most important mission – to *help*.

why the applicant is the best placed for the implementation of the action etc

The Valbona Chapter of Outdoor Albania combines an unimprovable knowledge of both the local mountain environment as well as the Valbona community with an unusual resource of foreign experience and expertise. Being locally based and knowledgeable we are able to act quickly and effectively, and having international experience ensures that our products will be of the highest standards.

3. Sustainability of the action

Provide an initial risk analysis and possible contingency plans. This should include at least a list of risks associated with each main activity proposed accompanied by relevant corrective measures to mitigate such risks. A good risk analysis would include a range of risk types including physical, environmental, political, economic and social risks.

There are risks to the potential effectiveness of this action and its components. Given the collaborative nature of the trail improvement with the KRTEP project, any delays on their end could negatively impact the four month window of this action – four months have been chosen to end the project in November, when the weather will effectively shut down most activities in the valley, and certainly make the mountains inaccessible. There is also a slight danger of design disagreements between the two projects, but since the sign aspect is unique to this action, we feel this danger is not significant. The key to avoiding both these risks of collaboration will of course be communication, which is of course one of the very problems addressed by the action. Moving promptly to improve communication infrastructure is key to all aspects of the project. There is a risk of resistance on the part of the key players in the valley, although their willingness to be involved in the simultaneous KRTEP project which, with KRCBC, are the first aid projects to come to the valley argues well for the ability of the project to mobilize enthusiasm. The people of the valley have a long experience of suffering at the hands of authority and local government, and are quite suspicious when not downright fatalistic, which makes the successful progress of this project a potentially extremely significant turning point. The risk of failure of the project to gain the sympathy of the villagers is most easily overcome by involving and employing them as much as possible. The formation of the VGO Association will provide a powerful forum for uniting and empowering the people of Valbona, as well as establishing an institution capable of assuming responsibility for the maintenance of these projects in the future. There is some risk from the weather interfering with installation of signs, but with a total of 14 days assumed for installation, it seems like somewhere in the second, third and fourth months of the project there will be at least 14 days of decent weather. In any case, the signs can be stockpiled for later installation if absolutely necessary. The continued sustainability of the internet service will be dependent on the 8 existing guesthouse owners splitting the ongoing cost of the service, but at less than 40 Euro each per month we find this unlikely. Finally, as we find no mention of the intended date of funding, a start date after the first of August would make the four month window of this project unrealistic, driving us into December when the weather in the valley becomes totally unnegotiable.

Give the main preconditions and assumptions during and after the implementation phase.

Preconditions and assumptions include receiving funding, and the cooperation of the local people, as well as the successfulness of the project leading to a sense of ownership to carry the project forward into the future.

Explain how sustainability will be secured after completion of the action. This can include aspects of necessary measures and strategies built into the action, follow-up activities, ownership by target groups etc.

Responsibility for maintaining the trails will initially be taken over by the Guesthouse Owners's Association, although we look forward to working with the Ministry of the Environment in the future. Maintaining trash will have to be pursued with the local government, and the guesthouse owners will take ownership of the internet service.