

Roads to success: the EU improves access in rural Albania

The EU Delegation to Tirana has refurbished 250 kilometres of secondary road connections across Albania. The €51 million-project was financed by EU pre-accession funds to help rural regions, and to allow access to essential public services for Albanians across the country.

NO MOUNTAIN TOO HIGH

Over the past two decades, Albania has risen from a troubled history of state-ownership to a burgeoning market-economy. It has held credible elections, life expectancy is on the rise and GDP has grown strongly. But the country's mountainous landscape still means that half the population lives in remote areas, where agriculture remains the prime source of employment and over a third of residents live in poverty. By improving the local road network, the EU has opened up new employment and public service opportunities to some of the poorest regions in the country.

It is no small task, since there are 12,000 kilometres of mainly small routes, often unpaved, and sometimes impassable for months at a time due to weather conditions. This EU project has been connecting remote places to national traffic arteries, rehabilitating roads where entire sections were in such disrepair that they were useful only for short trips and for real necessities. Longer journeys, even for job interviews or hospital treatments, remained rare.

Careful study of travel patterns has allowed selective work on four crucial sections. One section links isolated communities in the northern mountain-village Vermosh to the SH20 interstate highway. Others make transport easier around historic cities – notably Lezhe, Shkoder and the UNESCO World Heritage site of Gjirokaster –, where ad hoc road-signs are being set-up to attract foreign

travellers. Indeed, promoting tourism could provide new and relevant sources of revenue for the country beyond the urban economic life.

BRINGING MORE CHOICE TO CHILDREN

Better roads will have far-reaching benefits. They are already making it easier – and cheaper – for farmers to reach urban markets, so that their goods are more competitive. Patients can get to regional hospitals faster and emergency services can reach outlying villages. Traffic accidents are also down, in turn alleviating healthcare budgets. And improved access to schools is bringing the developing regions of Albania within the knowledge economy. The roads built today may eventually offer children the choice between working in the fields or in the country's emerging banking or telecommunications industry.



Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA)

Albania

IPA – AN INVESTMENT IN EUROPE. AN INVESTMENT IN AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT.

The project will continue until 2015, but it is already delivering results. Erik Qirjaqi, who heads road infrastructure activities at the Albanian Development Fund, says journeys in free flowing traffic are 60% faster. Recent road upgrades, including those funded by the EU, have provided 600,000 Albanians with access to all-season roads. Traffic volumes are up by 21% and public transport costs are down by 8.5%. These are all encouraging signs of the improvements that road infrastructure is bringing to living conditions in rural Albania.

Gjelosh Vuçaj of Vermosh recounts that it was only via one of the new roads that he was able to get his mother to hospital when she became critically ill during the storm of February 2012. The access routes to the regional hospital of Shkodra were impassable, but along the new road she was able to reach another emergency care centre.

PROJECT DETAILS –

Reconstruction of the secondary and local roads

Partners:

The Albanian Development Fund

Total cost in €:

51.5 million in IPA grants
in conjunction with EUR 200 million in loans
from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD),
the Council of Europe Development Bank (CEB)
and the German Development Bank (KfW)

EU Contribution in €:

51 million (99%)

Start date:

April 2008

End date:

March 2011

Results:

Improved transport links;
boosting local economies in more remote regions
and improving quality of life through easier access to services

Techniques:

Assistance with design, contracting,
funding of civil engineering works

