

Improving Sanitation Services in Greater Tirana, Albania

Albania strives to meet EU standards for wastewater management. Sandec is contributing to an integrated sanitation and stormwater strategy for Greater Tirana, focussing on decentralised wastewater treatment and septage management in the peri-urban and rural areas. *Philippe Reymond¹, Christoph Lüthi¹*

Google Earth, 13.03.2025



Photo: Aerial view of part of Tirana East Gate peri-urban area, featuring a mix of settlement types.

Context

As a prospective candidate for EU accession, Albania is working to align its wastewater management practices with the European Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive (UWWTD). The National Agency of Water Supply and Sewerage Infrastructure (AKUK) is spearheading these efforts together with the water and sewerage utilities. Funded by the Swiss State Secretariat for Economic Affairs (SECO), this project focuses on non-sewered areas in the municipalities of Tirana, Vora, and Kamza, which include large rural areas in a mountainous landscape. These areas can be characterised as fast-growing peri-urban areas with a wide variety of rural settlements (Photo). This project, following a Citywide Inclusive Sanitation (CWIS) approach, is complementary to another assignment led by project partners that focusses on understanding and modelling the sewer and stormwater networks in the urban core of Tirana.

Beyond Albania, in the countries of the Balkan region, even those that are already members of the European Union, wastewater management for small settlements with populations under 2,000 inhabitants also remains a challenge.

Different settlements, different solutions

Based on field visits, interviews with key informants, and a literature review, a typology has been established that unbundles the diversity of settlements to be served. These range from high-end real estate developments to small rural villages and individual housing. This typology will be used as the basis for the development of a catalogue of sanitation options for these contexts. There is no one-size-fits-all solution, and each context presents opportunities and constraints. The project will draw on past experience from other European countries, and the latest developments at Eawag and Switzerland.

Septage management

In non-sewered areas, individual buildings are mandated to have a septic tank. However, our analysis shows that septage management is not a big market in Tirana, at least formally. Three main reasons can be identified: **1)** most buildings discharge their wastewater in nearby drains or streams, with or without a holding/septic tank on the way, **2)** the obligation to have a properly designed septic tank is currently not enforced in most cases, and **3)** formal septic tank emptying service providers are very expensive. The lack of a formal septage disposal site in Tirana is seen as the main bottleneck, as the only permitted disposal point is around 40 km away. The project will formulate recommendations on how service costs could be reduced, how the future Wastewater Treatment Plant (WWTP) of Tirana could best receive the septage from the municipality, and how to enable the formalisation of a wider segment of the market.

A participatory strategy development process

The new strategy to be developed under this mandate is a unique opportunity to adjust to the latest urban developments, fill in the missing gaps from past projects and master plans, and create a common vision among the key stakeholders. Stakeholder involvement is an important component of the next project phase. Topics range from the discussion of options for selected urban areas, decentralised treatment for real estate development projects, septage management, and solutions for small rural villages.

The strategy developed will be the basis for master planning and investments under the lead of the World Bank. It may also lead to regulatory adjustments and capacity-strengthening initiatives. From an academic perspective, this initial engagement of Sandec in the Balkan region will help to deepen the understanding of how to operationalise CWIS, and the barriers and opportunities for decentralised wastewater management schemes. •

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