

Innovative Solutions in Response to the COVID-19 Crisis in Albania and North Macedonia

Serbia's Official Development Assistance Call for Proposals – Innovative solutions to counter COVID-19 crisis in Albania and North Macedonia.

Metadata

Countries/territories: Albania, North Macedonia, Serbia

Regions involved: Western Balkans Region

Nominated by: United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Serbia.

a) Primary SDG: 17 **Specify SDG Targets:** 17.6; 17.7;17.8;17.9

b) Secondary SDG(s): 3, 8 **Specify SDG Targets:** 3.8; 3b; 3d; 8.2; 8.3

Supported by: Government of Serbia

Implementing entities: UNDP Serbia

Project status: Completed

Project period: 05/2021 – 05/2022

URL of the practice: <https://www.rs.undp.org/content/serbia/en/home/presscenter/articles/2021/oda-serbia-north-macedonia-albania.html>

The Challenge

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused huge socio-economic setbacks in the Western Balkans region, having a wide and far-reaching impact on health and economic well-being. Some of these challenges include disruption in supply chains affecting access to essential goods, including food and medical supplies; and reduced demand for key services, which has impacted operations of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), especially in transport, tourism and manufacturing, resulting in a general economic meltdown. A joint response across the countries from multiple stakeholders was needed to sustain socio-economic activities and resilience in the region.

Towards a Solution

In response to the above challenges UNDP Serbia launched Serbia's Official Development Assistance (ODA) Challenge Call for innovative solutions to address the emerging development issues resulting from the global COVID-19 crisis in North Macedonia and Albania, as partnering countries under the Open Balkans regional cooperation initiative. The initiative aimed to support the transfer of Serbian knowledge, expertise and implementation of innovative solutions in those two countries and to create a compendium of home-grown solutions consistent with partner countries' local context and practices, which they could learn from and replicate to reduce the socio-economic impact of the pandemic. The goal is to support the public and private companies and the academic and research institutions from Serbia to transfer those innovative solutions.

The Challenge Call focused on the following areas:

- **New digital services** – to address the inequalities and needs in different sectors, innovative inclusive and sustainable digital solutions in the services sector are sought.
- **Low touch economies** (contactless economic activities) – to stimulate economic growth, solutions are sought that introduce new ways of production/consumption and promote contactless economic activities, remote delivery services and teleworking opportunities.
- **Health and well-being** – to support individuals and communities' health and well-being, innovative solutions are sought that promote the connection of individuals and health, physical and psychosocial welfare and other holistic

ways to improve the well-being of the population, to protect service providers and caregivers from COVID-19 and to minimize the risk of transmission.

The call was launched in May 2021 which generated 21 submissions – 15 from North Macedonia, 4 from Albania, 1 application relevant for both North Macedonia and Albania and 1 application without reference to the countries.

The amount of funding available for this Challenge Call was US\$200,000. Agreements have been signed with the six awardees – 4 in North Macedonia, 2 in Albania, with the requested funding in the amount of US\$194,039.17. The total value of the awarded initiatives (requested funding + co-funding from the applicants) amounted to US\$328,474.17. The list of the awarded companies is given below:

- 1) [Neomedica d.o.o.](#)
- 2) [Svezdrav Rešenja d.o.o.](#)
- 3) [Institute for the Application of Nuclear Energy – INEP, Belgrade.](#)
- 4) [Just Smart d.o.o. Belgrade](#)
- 5) [Digital Worx d.o.o., Belgrade.](#)
- 6) [EON PLUS d.o.o., Belgrade.](#)

Decision on award

The overall ranking was done based on the evaluation of all received applications according to the number of points received, and the threshold was defined by considering the available funds and the amount of applications received. The final decision for making the awards was made according to the ranking list. Only applicants with an evaluation score above the defined threshold could be nominated for an award. The decision for an award was guided by the principles of impartiality, transparency and the rational use of funds. Following the award decision, the selected applicants signed the Innovation Challenge Agreement (hereafter Agreement).

The Agreement contained the final Project Plan and Project Budget that was not necessarily the same as the one the applicant submitted, resulting from negotiations with the applicant. Before signing the Agreement, UNDP and successful applicants agreed on specific activities, outputs, project milestone schedules and indicators. Before signing the Agreement, the applicant had to send all the required documentation. Awarding is done under the Agreement's general provisions, and the payments for funding are to be completed based on UNDP regulations and rules.

Selection: Panel members reviewed and evaluated the proposed projects, based on the evaluation criteria as follows:

- a. Innovative solution (introducing a new idea, approach, product, or service to a target group) with consideration of risks (10%)
- b. Development impact and project quality, including intervention logic (20%)
- c. Experience of management and development team (10%)
- d. Potential for scale-up and replication (10%)
- e. Long-term sustainability (financial, environmental, social) (10%)
- f. Value for money and cost-effectiveness (30%)
- g. Availability of co-funding (10%)

Only applications that scored above 70% were considered for awarding the Project.

Upon completion of the award procedure, the selected companies started with implementing the **initiatives**. The role of the UNDP Serbia, as implementing partner in the process, was to ensure high-level standards in the implementation of this award, according to the UNDP rules and procedures, and to provide innovative solutions in its broadest sense: 1) a new approach, product, idea, or service not yet tested anywhere; or 2) one new to the beneficiary country; or 3) one not yet applied to the sector in question in the beneficiary country; or 4) a service or business model being introduced to a target group as yet untried.

Furthermore, UNDP CO Serbia oversaw monitoring of the entire implementation process whose purpose was: (i) to assess the progress in the successful project implementation in terms of the envisaged activities and project goal achievements; and (ii) to ensure that financial expenditures conformed to the Project budget for the given period. Monitoring ensured that key information was regularly collected and tracked to allow progress measurement against set objectives. The awardee had to deliver a short, mid-term, narrative report, and a detailed final narrative report, including all key requisite information for tracking progress against the targets.

Three out of six awarded initiatives were related to the new digital services:

1. **Development of a digital learning tool** that would be free and accessible to all students in North Macedonia, irrespective of their location or social status (through gadgets or laptops), by offering a digitized version of education.
2. **Development of a new industrial workflow management system (named TAKT)** which would help industrial **small and medium enterprises** in North Macedonia to control and manage their activities more efficiently, to align them with the company's capacities and ensure proper availability of resources, thus increasing the company's competitive advantage and gross margin.
3. **Creating digital solutions for conducting Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA) – ENVIGO** that will ensure benefits and contribute to local people, communities and societies.

The remaining three initiatives dealt with health and well-being:

- 1) **Rapid antigen test for the detection of SARS-CoV-2 virus** to provide a test for the qualitative detection of SARS-CoV-2 antigen in saliva/sputum specimens in patients in the acute (early) phase of SARS-CoV-2 infection, and also in asymptomatic patients. This would reduce the incidence of COVID-19 among preschool and schoolchildren in Albania
2. **Innovative palette of ELISA COVID-19 serology assays**, with the newly introduced algorithm that should contribute to a more accurate interpretation of results of antibody testing in COVID-19 and to a better understanding of humoral immune response, with the accent on medical professionals and patients
3. **Newly developed device** for providing remote monitoring of ECG and other biomedical signals and telehealth. The idea was to solve the post-pandemic health-care system overload caused by the corona virus in North Macedonia, by doubling the speed of processing patients, reducing the need for physical contact between the patient and doctor, and to prepare the health-care system for dealing with new pandemic situations.

The awardees, in addition to the financial and technical support provided by UNDP, could also benefit from the UNDP's network of contacts in the region and from institutional support from partnering countries. This was aimed at reaching planned results and objectives to the maximum possible extent.

All awarded solutions have proven to be sustainable in practice, innovative and replicable/scalable, which has generated additional attention from the national authorities and private sector in partnering countries and created the foundation for further enhancement of cooperation among private companies from Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia. For example, Serbian companies have used this opportunity to agree on extending business cooperation with North Macedonian and Albanian partner companies, both on the call for proposals and on other business endeavours. Thus, new and long-term partnerships have been established for the benefit of all stakeholders

concerned. Therefore, the Government of Serbia supports the continuation of this initiative in the form of a new call that would cover the relevant thematic areas and involve the relevant partner countries necessary to achieve the SDGs, both in the region and globally.

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Photos of the Initiative



Ambassador of Serbia H.E. Nevena Jovanovic at the ODA event in Skopje, North Macedonia, April 2022

