Inclusive waste governance in practice

Report from a fact-finding mission in Berat, Albania

CEE Bankwatch Network

EDEN Environmental Center for Development Education and Networking

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National context

Albania operates within a political and economic environment that is both ambitious and challenging. While the Albanian government and EU institutions have jointly committed to advancing the country's accession process, with a potential timeline from 2027 until 2030, EU governance principles and standards remain distant from the everyday realities of residents, particularly in relation to essential public services. Waste management is a clear example of this gap: a long-standing structural problem that has dragged on for years, much like an unhealed wound.

Although Albania's legal and policy framework on waste management has been progressively aligned with EU directives and strengthened by several amendments, implementation on the ground remains weak. Municipalities face a similarly 'powerless' situation: budgetary shortfalls, a lack of institutional authority, and insufficient technical capacity to meet their obligations and effectively apply the waste management hierarchy. As a result, local leadership is unable to translate policy ambition into quality service delivery until waste management operations become an immediate national priority.

Beyond its technical dimension, waste management in Albania is closely linked to social and governance issues. It intersects with multiple vulnerabilities and human rights concerns, particularly those affecting marginalised groups like informal waste pickers – predominantly from Roma and Egyptian communities – and women, who often shoulder a disproportionate domestic burden. In this context, waste management is not only an environmental challenge, but also a critical test of inclusive governance, social protection and the credibility of Albania's green transition.

While pilot projects in the waste sector have been sporadically implemented over the years with donor support, clear examples of municipalities taking the initiative to independently improve and elevate their waste management systems are notably scarce. On the one hand, this situation can be attributed to a combination of limited human capacity, capital availability and technical assistance. On the other, the country's ambitious objective of achieving EU membership by 2030 places significant demands on local governance structures, which urgently need to build and strengthen public service delivery to meet mandatory EU waste management targets.

However, improving public services – particularly those that are environmentally sustainable – has not been consistently prioritised at the municipal level. While the Ministry of Local Governance is promoting an agenda of capacity-building and EU integration to support local administrations, implementation of the Mountain Package,[1] a new legislative framework launched in March 2025

[1] Agency for the Support of Local Self-Government, Mountain Package, accessed 26 February 2026.

intended to incentivise large-scale investment in mountainous territories – has currently taken precedence, overlooking the urgent need to improve public services.

In April 2021, a pilot waste separation scheme was launched in Berat – a historic city in south-central Albania – supported by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency. The initiative, which concluded in 2025, represents Albania's first comprehensive urban waste separation project and serves as a critical test of EU-aligned waste governance, providing practical insights that can inform future replication.

In October 2025, the Environmental Centre for Development Education and Networking (EDEN) and CEE Bankwatch Network conducted a fact-finding mission to turn the Berat pilot scheme into a validated learning case study. Since the project had already received substantial technical assistance – resulting in public opinion surveys, a social impact assessment, and multiple rounds of structured consultations – the aim of the mission was not to reassess attitudes or replicate previous studies.

Instead, the mission focused on direct engagement with institutions, residents, businesses and vulnerable groups to maximise the learning value of the Berat experience for municipalities, national institutions, and donors financing Albania's green transition. In doing so, our overarching aim was to credibly present the pilot not only as a successful initiative, but also as a transferable case study capable of informing policy, donor programming, and future replication in other Albanian municipalities and beyond.

Door-to-door collection in the Uznova district (photo: CEE Bankwatch Network)

The case study also presents valuable lessons for improving waste separation not only in Berat but also in other municipalities. For example, introducing effective source separation of biowaste – including park waste and food waste from households and businesses – is necessary to boost recycling rates. Separating wet organic waste from dry recyclable materials prevents contamination, which in turn improves the quality and quantity of recovered materials like paper and plastic.

Implementing these practices is also important for Albania's EU accession prospects. To meet more ambitious recycling and environmental targets, the EU mandates that all Member States implement separate collection of biowaste, while reducing methane emissions and toxic leachate from waste management facilities. To fulfil these requirements, the Albanian government must advance its policy and regulatory frameworks for biowaste management, and Albanian municipalities must gain practical experience with composting or using organic waste for biogas and electricity production.

During our fact-finding mission, it became clear that the need for further investments is at odds with the consensus among stakeholders that waste fees should not be increased for political and social reasons. We also learned that the existing landfill in Berat is expected to reach capacity within the next two years, yet the municipality lacks the resources to start composting and methane collection.

In this context, it is vital that Albania's national extended producer responsibility (EPR) schemes,[2] launched in January 2026, include full-cost coverage for the entire life cycle of target products, as stipulated in the EU's Single-Use Plastics Directive[3] and the recent revisions of the Packaging and Packaging Waste Directive[4] and Waste Framework Directive.[5] Ensuring that producers cover these costs will relieve municipal budgets and local taxpayers of the significant financial burden of managing these waste streams.

In addition, the new EPR schemes must facilitate the transition to a circular economy by incentivising better product design through the 'eco-modulation' of product fees – where the costs paid by producers are tied to the recyclability and environmental performance of products. Effective and efficient EPR schemes are crucial for providing the stable, long-term funding needed to invest in the infrastructure for separate collection and recycling – both of which are required to meet waste management targets.

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[2] Aneta Kankaras, Uarda Llazi, Aida Vidimlić et al., Strengthening Waste Management and EPR in the Western Balkans, Chamber Partnership Western Balkans, 10, November 2025.

[3] European Parliament, Council of the European Union, Directive (EU) 2019/904 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 June 2019 on the reduction of the impact of certain plastic products on the environment (Text with EEA relevance, 5, 5 June 2019.

[4] European Parliament, Council of the European Union, Regulation (EU) 2025/40 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 December 2024 on packaging and packaging waste, amending Regulation (EU) 2019/1020 and Directive (EU) 2019/904, and repealing Directive 94/62/EC (Text with EEA relevance), 20, 19 December 2024.

[5] European Parliament, Council of the European Union, Directive 2008/98/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 November 2008 on waste and repealing certain Directives (Text with EEA relevance), 16, 19 November 2008.

Berat and the waste separation project

Berat at a glance

Berat is one of the oldest cultural, economic and political centres in Albania. Known as the 'city of a thousand windows' for its distinctive architectural layout, Berat was proclaimed a Museum City by government decree in 1961. Today, it remains a source of national pride, having been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2008.[6] The city serves as the administrative seat of both Berat Municipality and Berat County, hosting key local, regional and national public institutions.

With a population of approximately 140,956 inhabitants[7] and an administrative area of 379.98 square kilometres, Berat Municipality is located in south-central Albania and is widely recognised as a tourism destination. Its hilly landscape is surrounded by mountain ranges, including Tomorr Mountain National Park, while the Osum River flows through the city, shaping both its natural and cultural landscape. The region enjoys a Mediterranean climate, characterised by hot, dry summers and mild, wet winters.[8]

The region's main economic activities are tourism and agro-tourism, which depend on a healthy environment, quality public services, and sustainable waste management. Planned investments in road infrastructure are expected to improve connectivity, leading to a further rise in tourism and mobility. As visitor numbers grow, however, pressure on municipal services – particularly waste management – is set to intensify. To meet this increased demand, delivering effective and inclusive services will be critical for the future development of the region.

Waste management in Berat (until 2021)

Until 2021, waste management services in Berat were delivered through a public–private service contract between Berat Municipality, acting as the contracting authority, and various private operators selected through an open procurement procedure. While service provision was outsourced, accountability, oversight and strategic responsibility remained with the municipality. The contract established a performance-based system in which service quality depended not only on the contractor's capacity, but also on the municipality's ability to plan, supervise and enforce contractual obligations. Payments to the contractor were made on a monthly basis.[9]

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[6] Bashkia Berat, Bashkia Berat, accessed 25 February 2026.

[7] Albanian Institute of Statistics, Albania Population and Housing Census 2023, 28 June 2024.

[8] Bashkia Berat, Bashkia Berat, accessed 25 February 2026.

[9] Bashkia Berat, Kontrate sipërmarrje për shërbimin e pastrimit urban të qytetit Berat, 27 April 2016.

Table 1. Division of waste management roles between Berat Municipality and the private operator.

Berat Municipality	Private operator
Supervision and regulation	**Daily provision of urban cleaning services**
Appointing a supervisor responsible for daily field inspections Verification of completed work Preparation of monthly service reports Imposing penalties in cases of non-performance or substandard service	Collection and transport of municipal waste Street and pavement cleaning (manual and mechanical) Washing and disinfection of containers Maintenance of waste collection points Waste disposal at designated landfill

In 2021, Berat's municipal cleaning and waste management service handled an average of approximately 28 tonnes of municipal waste per day, all of which was deposited at the landfill. The waste collection infrastructure included a total of 478 containers distributed across 170 waste collection points; of these, 300 containers served the urban area of Berat, with the remaining 178 reserved for administrative units.

The cleaning service covered an extensive urban surface area on a daily basis, including the washing of approximately 117,321 square metres of streets at night (scheduled for 10 months per year) and the same area during daytime operations (scheduled for 8 months, or approximately 240 days, per year). In addition, around 180,050 square metres of streets and pavements were cleaned manually each day, while 87,982 square metres of main roads received routine maintenance. Mechanical sweeping covered approximately 11,453 linear metres of road per day.

The service also involved the washing and disinfection of an average of 16 waste containers per day. All waste collection and cleaning activities were carried out by a single private operator under a public–private arrangement, supported by 9 service vehicles with an average age of 10 to 15 years, indicating an ageing fleet. Container emptying was performed daily in the city of Berat, and between two and four times per week in the largely rural administrative units.

Blue bin for recyclables from a restaurant in the Castle quarter (photo: CEE Bankwatch Network)

The results of a baseline public opinion survey conducted by EDEN in July 2021[10] revealed that informal waste pickers were key players in existing recycling chains. Yet they remained economically vulnerable and at a higher risk of exclusion as waste systems become more formalised. The findings also revealed that women carried a disproportionate share of household waste management responsibilities, making them more affected by waste reforms despite being central to the success of separating waste at source.

Berat waste separation at source project

The Berat Household Waste Separation at Source project was launched in 2021 and concluded in 2025. Supported by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency and implemented by Brooks Hannas & Partners and the Urban Research Institute, the initiative was delivered in partnership with Albania's Ministry of Tourism and Environment and Berat Municipality. The total budget for the project was EUR 1.5 million, including a capital investment of EUR 700 000 from Sida for essential infrastructure and equipment.[11]

As Albania's first comprehensive urban pilot for household waste separation, the project was designed to align local practices with EU standards. Commencing full implementation in January 2025, the project combined technical assistance, capacity-building, public communication, and infrastructure support to improve municipal waste management while addressing governance and social inclusion challenges. Designed as a learning model, the pilot aimed to generate practical

[10] Ermelinda Mahmutaj, Eliana Ibrahimi, Baseline report, Survey of Public Opinions on Source Separation of Household Waste in the Municipality of Berat, EDEN, 15 October 2021.

[11] Development Aid, Source separation of household waste in Berat Municipality, 15 December 2020.

evidence to inform national policy, support Albania's EU accession under chapter 27 of the EU *acquis* on environment and climate change,[12] and guide future replication in other municipalities.

Project outcomes and impacts

The project was implemented within an urban area of 6.3 square kilometres, comprising approximately 63,262 residents, 23,939 households and 1,825 businesses.[13]

Table 2. Interventions, results and implications of the project.[14]

Intervention	Outputs and results	Implications
Technical assistance	• **Establishment of a comprehensive urban waste separation scheme covering the entire urban area** • **Introduction of waste separation at source into two streams**: 1. Recyclables (paper, plastic, metal) – blue containers 2. Residual waste (non-recyclables, glass, organic waste) – green containers • **Design and rollout of four differentiated collection schemes**: 1. **Apartment blocks** – blue containers placed next to existing green containers 2. **Hilly neighbourhoods without vehicle access** – blue bags distributed at household level 3. **Private houses** – blue household bins provided 4. **Businesses** – dedicated blue bins or containers where feasible; otherwise integrated into the apartment-block scheme	• **Full transfer of waste management and urban cleaning services to Berat City Green**, a joint-stock company publicly owned in full by Berat Municipality (since 2024), strengthening municipal control and accountability over waste services • **Creation of 14 new employment opportunities within the recycling scheme**, adaptable to the skills and educational background of informal waste pickers • **Waste separation at source operationalised thanks to new infrastructure**, providing the physical foundation for long-term recycling services • **Albanian government provided with practical implementation experience to inform negotiations on EU waste directive legislation**, including
Capacity-building	• **Development of a standardised model for introducing waste separation at source**, including cost	

[12] European Commission, Chapters of the acquis, accessed 26 February 2026.

[13] Data obtained from Berat Municipality's urban and statistics departments.

[14] Data obtained from interviews with Berat Municipality's environmental department and with the project implementation team.

	calculations for rollout of the model across Albania and its contribution to aligning with EU standards. • **Application of the model in the Berat context using a locally tailored methodology** adapted to housing and road types and the institutional environment. • **Support for the development of operational tools**, including an operations manual, a communications toolbox, and procedures for large-scale auctions of secondary raw materials.	cost, scheduling, legislative, and institutional requirements. • **Regional waste companies provided with practical guidance for waste separation** • **Participatory design and implementation of waste management**: 3,700–4,000 residents and stakeholders directly engaged through door-to-door outreach, consultations and volunteer activities • **Approximately 10% of municipal waste diverted from landfill**, extending its lifespan • **Generation of financial revenues for progressive waste collection** • **Recognition of improved waste collection standards as important for local tourism** • **Collection of reliable waste data via newly installed weighbridge**, offering quality data for regional facility planning
Public communication and participation	• **2 public opinion surveys** (baseline and final) • **Social impact assessment** focusing on informal waste pickers and women • **5 focus-group discussions** • **7 public consultation rounds** with different target groups • **Education and information campaign** • **Dedicated website**[15]	
Infrastructure support	• **Installation of 410 new 1,100-litre containers (250 green and 160 blue) and 1,200 blue 240-litre household bins to enable waste separation** • **Distribution of 100,000 blue bags to households in hilly areas without vehicle access** • **Provision of three modern compactor collection vehicles for recyclable waste**: one truck with an 8 m^3 capacity and two 4 m^3 trucks • **Design, construction, training and support for a sorting and material recovery centre**	

[15] Berat City Green, Mirësevini në Berat City Green, accessed 25 February 2026.

During our interview with the Brooks Hannas & Partners and Urban Research Institute project implementation team, the following key challenges were identified:

- **Unreliable data:** Previous international technical assistance underestimated waste generation in Berat, with actual collected volumes one-third higher than originally predicted.
- **Business conditions:** While cooperation with small supermarkets proved effective, the size and frequency of the collection system should be refined to meet the specific needs of restaurants and cafes.
- **Apartment blocks:** On-street containers remain the dominant mode of collection for multi-apartment buildings. As this system yields the lowest quality recyclables, these buildings require dedicated, locked containers to improve results.
- **Operational pressure during peak periods:** The summer tourism season creates sharp increases in waste volumes, straining collection capacity and affecting the consistency of separate collection services. This underlines the need for seasonal planning and flexible resourcing.

The main lesson the implementation team learned was that introducing waste separation at source requires more than just the provision of infrastructure, and that long-term success depends on developing public understanding, cooperation, and sustained behaviour change among residents, small and medium-sized enterprises and public institutions. They also acknowledged that achieving this shift is a complex process that requires continuous engagement beyond the rollout phase.

Door-to-door collection in the Uznova district (photo: CEE Bankwatch Network)

Observations and findings

This chapter presents the key observations and findings from the fact-finding mission conducted by the Environmental Centre for Development Education and Networking and CEE Bankwatch Network in Berat in October 2025. The mission examined how waste separation at source functions in practice through meetings with municipal authorities, site visits to waste collection and sorting facilities, and direct engagement with residents, businesses, civil society and waste pickers.

The findings focus on what implementation reveals beyond the formal plans and policies, highlighting concrete governance strengths, persistent gaps, and lessons that are critical for improving social inclusion, accountability and the credibility of waste reforms in Albania and beyond.

Separate collection in Berat was implemented between January and December 2025. Quantitative data on the recovery of recyclable materials were disclosed by Berat Municipality during the months of January and February 2026.

Berat recycling scheme

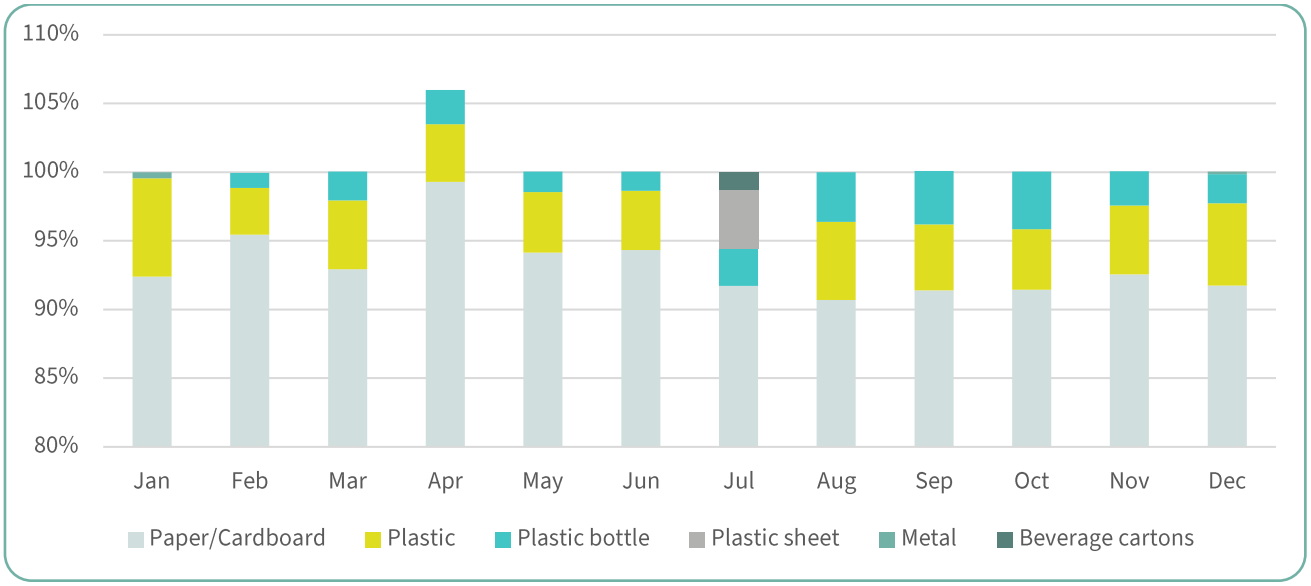
Overview

Between January and December 2025, the total amount of waste collected in Berat was 16,920.67 tonnes. Of this total, 16,747.80 tonnes were collected as residual waste and disposed of in landfill. The remaining 172.87 tonnes were collected as source-separated recyclable materials and processed at the sorting centre. Of the total separately collected amount, 18.47 tonnes (approximately 10%) were sorted as unrecyclable materials. In total, 146.14 tonnes of paper and cardboard were sold through a public auction process, including 65.55 tonnes in June 2025 (generating EUR 8 967.80) and 80.59 tonnes in December 2025 (generating EUR 11 035). Additionally, 8.26 tonnes of plastic were sold through the same public auction process in December 2025 (generating EUR 2 773.73).[16]

In total, EUR 22 776.53 was generated as local income from the sale of recyclable paper, cardboard and plastic streams in the first year of operation. These revenues were reinvested in the sorting centre.

[16] Data provided by Berat City Green sorting centre.

Graph 1. Composition of recyclable waste collected in Berat during 2025.



Based on the composition of recyclable waste collected in Berat during 2025, the following observations can be made:

- **Paper and cardboard dominate the recycling system:** Paper and cardboard were the largest and most stable recycling stream, with monthly quantities ranging from approximately 11,200 to 16,119 kg. The consistently high volumes reflect strong cooperation with large businesses benefitting from door-to-door collection. Peaks in July and December suggest seasonal effects, likely linked to higher tourism activity and increased consumption during summer and end-of-year celebrations. The cleanest and largest quantities of paper and cardboard were generated by businesses. Due to the high quality of source-separated material, paper waste collected in Berat was sold at an average price of between EUR 0.11 and 0.14/kg. This is significantly higher than the EUR 0.05/kg achieved by Roskovec Municipality,[17] where source separation is not practised and material quality is lower. Plastic waste collected in Berat was sold at a price ranging between EUR 0.27 and 0.34/kg.

- **Plastics are present but more fragmented:** Plastics were collected across different substreams – mixed plastic, plastic bottles and plastic film – rather than as a single category. Quantities were significantly lower than for paper and cardboard, indicating either lower generation or lower separation rates. The collection of plastic bottles gradually increased from spring to autumn, peaking around October.

- **Metal is marginal but present:** Metal was collected only in January and December, and in very small quantities. This trend suggests limited recovery through formal collection channels, likely

[17] Data provided by Berat Municipality.

because metal has a higher market value and is diverted into existing informal collection channels or sold directly to scrap dealers.

- **Composite packaging characterised by sporadic collection:** Composite packaging (beverage cartons) was collected almost exclusively in July, possibly pointing to seasonal consumption. The absence of this stream in other months indicates that it was not yet systematically integrated into year-round collection.

Successful outcomes

- **Door-to-door collection as the backbone of source separation**: Door-to-door collection proved the most effective aspect of source separation throughout 2025. At the household level, residents responded positively when provided with blue bins and blue plastic bags, and when accompanied by clear guidance. Households generally managed to separate waste correctly, respect collection schedules and take responsibility for maintaining their bins. As a result, the materials collected from households on a door-to-door basis were clean and well sorted.

- **Businesses as key system partners.** Businesses emerged as the system's most important and reliable partners, providing high-quality material in significant quantities. Supermarkets, food markets, and electronics stores in particular generated large volumes of clean paper and cardboard, representing their main waste stream. Their contributions significantly enhanced the overall performance and economic viability of the recycling scheme.

- **Differentiated collection schemes aligned with existing habits.** The differentiated collection scheme, tailored to different neighbourhood typologies, functioned well. Aligning recyclable waste collection methods (collection trucks, 'tezga' collectors,[18] and small vehicles) with existing residual waste collection practices ensured a smooth transition without disrupting established habits. For example, residents accustomed to disposing of waste in 1.1 m^3 neighbourhood containers continued to use them but separated waste into two streams: residual waste in green containers and recyclables in blue ones. In areas with door-to-door residual waste collection, recyclables were collected in the same way on designated days and times.

- **Municipal ownership.** Berat City Green, a public joint-stock company fully owned by Berat Municipality, proved an effective vehicle for strengthening municipal supervision and oversight of waste management. This arrangement provided the Municipality with the flexibility to adjust policies based on user feedback without being constrained by rigid contractual obligations. It also

[18] A tool made of several wooden boards fastened to two poles, carried by two people to transport soil, manure, stones, lime or other materials over short distances.

enabled the Municipality to generate revenues and reinvest them directly into service improvements.

- **Inclusion of informal waste pickers in the scheme:** The Municipality represents a rare example of how the integration of informal waste pickers into a newly operational recycling system can generate tangible results. Management expressed strong satisfaction with the skills, efficiency and practical knowledge these informal waste pickers brought to the system, particularly at the sorting centre. Their expertise was widely recognised as an invaluable contribution to the overall professionalism of the scheme.

- **Successful piloting of public auctions for recyclable materials:** Despite procedural challenges, the Municipality successfully implemented public auctions for the sale of recyclable materials. This is one of the first cases in Albania where a municipality has sold recyclable waste through a formal public auction process. The Berat pilot demonstrates that, when properly separated at source and conveniently collected using individual bins and bags or door-to-door collection, waste materials can generate local income and deliver benefits earlier than expected, offering a replicable model for other Albanian municipalities.

- **Frequent consultations and adaptive feedback**: Regular meetings with residents and target groups were a key factor in the uptake of the scheme. This adaptive, 'learning-cycle' approach enabled the Municipality to effectively communicate with neighbourhoods and businesses while helping municipal staff better understand their roles within the new system. A critical element of this success was the Municipality's willingness to listen openly and integrate constructive feedback into ongoing service improvements.

Narrow streets in the Uznova district (photo: CEE Bankwatch Network)

- **Low effectiveness of source separation in apartment blocks:** Waste source separation in multi-apartment buildings proved limited. The shared blue containers provided were not perceived as a collective responsibility and instead often used for mixed waste. Even in cases where individual households separated waste correctly, their efforts were undermined by others who did not, making their contributions less visible and discouraging continued participation.
- **Lack of tracking and supervision mechanisms:** There is currently no tracking or supervision mechanism in place. As a result, the Municipality had limited oversight of on-the-ground practices, preventing them from readily identifying instances where separation was functioning well, where it was failing, and which households or buildings required targeted support. This gap was particularly evident among apartment blocks, where collective behaviour determined overall performance.
- **Limited generation and collection of additional recyclable streams:** Apart from paper and certain plastic streams, the generation and collection of other recyclable fractions remained limited. This imbalance indicates the need for further system expansion, including the development of extended producer responsibility schemes beyond packaging, such as for clothes, electronics, car-related waste, cigarette filters, and other items, alongside targeted incentives and market development.
- **Limited municipal capacity during the transition phase:** The Municipality, including its partnership with Berat City Green, faced capacity constraints in managing the transition to source separation without continuous mentoring and external technical support. At the same time, municipal staff demonstrated an openness to learning and proactively requested guidance and support to strengthen implementation.

Stakeholders embrace waste recycling

Strong willingness to participate

Residents across different neighbourhoods in Berat expressed strong support for waste recycling, viewing it as a concrete way to improve cleanliness, quality of life and public health. They responded positively and promptly to the municipality's call for action, even in neighbourhoods where waste services have historically been weak and where some inhabitants have previously engaged in informal waste collection. However, while willingness to participate was high, engagement of residents remained conditional on visible municipal commitment, clear rules, and reliable and convenient service delivery.

For municipality, waste recycling was perceived both as a legal obligation and service improvement. It recognised recycling as a highly visible public service that can demonstrate alignment with EU environmental standards and support tourism-driven development. However, it was not yet considered a means of building trust with residents. At the same time, authorities within the municipality and Berat City Green acknowledged that recycling requires sustained institutional effort, coordination and enforcement

to meet rising public expectations. Berat City Green also recognised that it lacked the institutional capacity to effectively coordinate and mitigate many of the practical issues that arose during the rollout of the new scheme.

Local businesses – especially those focused on tourism, hospitality and the historic areas of the city – supported the concept of utilising waste recycling as a means of improving the city's image and overall visitor experience. Many viewed the prospect of clean streets and organised waste systems as essential for attracting visitors and maintaining competitiveness. However, the level of business engagement was dependent on the clarity of requirements, the availability of infrastructure, and the fairness of enforcement across different sectors.

Informal waste pickers recognised their role and importance within both the previous informal system and the new recycling scheme. In all forms, they expressed a willingness to participate.

Waste as a top environmental concern

Residents and local authorities cited waste management as one of the most pressing environmental issues, considering its impact on public health, cleanliness, and the overall functioning of the city a more immediate concern than other environmental challenges. As a result, waste recycling was widely viewed as a priority for public service reform over other environmental initiatives.

Recycling linked to quality of life, tourism and the city's public image

Recycling was strongly associated with improved quality of life, cleaner streets, reduced visual pollution, and better use of public spaces. It was also closely linked to Berat's identity as a cultural and tourism destination, where environmental quality directly influences visitor experience and the overall reputation of the city. Decision makers viewed recycling as an investment in the city's public image, economic vitality and long-term attractiveness.

Conditional trust in municipal leadership

Support for waste recycling was high but remains conditional on visible municipal leadership and consistent implementation. Residents expressed a desire for clear rules, reliable services and fair enforcement, and that their trust depends on whether commitments translate into action. This dynamic shows that waste recycling is embraced not only as a technical solution, but also as a measure of institutional credibility and local governance performance.

Social inclusion in waste management

Inclusion of waste pickers – a rare model

During public consultations for the project, 36 informal waste pickers were identified as operating in Berat, of whom 14 were permanently collecting at the Berat landfill. According to a social impact assessment conducted by EDEN in October 2021, 14 individuals were considered eligible for employment based on their age, health and education status.[19]

The recycling scheme designed an employment structure consisting of 10 vacancies potentially available to informal waste pickers, assuming they possess the skills required.[20] During the fact-finding mission, our team met four former informal pickers – three men and one woman – who were still employed at the Berat recycling facility, situated next to the landfill. They wore protective working garments and demonstrated the new skills they had acquired, such as operating a forklift and a packaging machine.

Three additional informal pickers still working at the landfill came to meet the team and expressed hope that the recycling scheme and related facilities would expand, enabling them to obtain formal employment, new qualifications and better working conditions. Our team also witnessed door-to-door collection in the Castle and Uznove areas, as well as in other neighbourhoods with narrow streets, where some of the workers were former waste pickers. In 2025, the recycling workforce consisted of seven staff members: two truck drivers, three waste-sorting workers, and two door-to-door recycling collectors. This unit is expected to remain in place in 2026 based on the workload and operational needs of the scheme. With the exception of the drivers, all employees were former informal waste pickers from the minority Egyptian community.

Inclusion of women

Women were identified as 'key agents of change' [21] due to their central role in household waste management in Berat and, most importantly, their strong expressed interest in supporting family and community education on waste separation.

Women's involvement in scheme design

Women represented the largest focus group consulted prior to the design of the recycling scheme. Structured discussions were held with women working outside the home (both employed and self-employed), home-based women, and older women. These consultations documented their experiences with waste sorting, practical challenges, expectations, and clear 'non-negotiables' related to implementing

[19] Ani Bajrami, Ermelinda Mahmutaj, Social Impact Assessment Development on women and waste pickers in the Municipality of Berat, EDEN, 15 November 2021.

[20] Information provided by the Berat project implementation team.

[21] Ermelinda Mahmutaj, Eliana Ibrahimi, Baseline report, Survey of Public Opinions on Source Separation of Household Waste in the Municipality of Berat.

household waste separation. Their input was used to inform service design choices, helping to ensure that the scheme reflected everyday household realities.

Women's involvement during implementation

Following the launch of the recycling scheme, between 15 and 20 women proactively engaged on a volunteer basis to promote the education and awareness-raising campaign around the scheme. They supported outreach efforts publicising the distribution of containers, bins and plastic bags to residents in Berat. Additionally, at the household level, their initiative served as a critical lever for the success of source separation in private homes. They also played an important role in addressing limitations and unsuccessful practices in multi-apartment buildings, where collective waste separation proved more challenging.

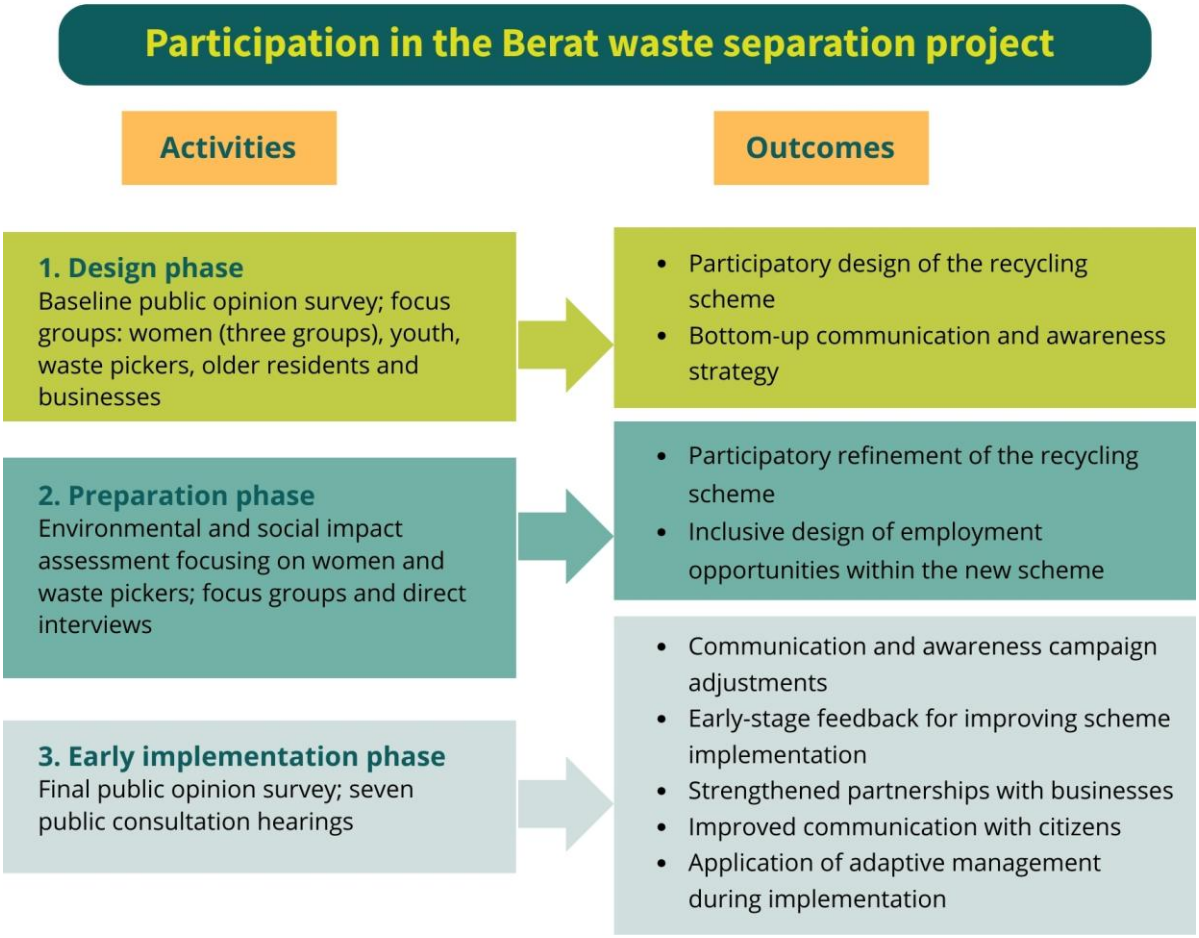
Participatory local governance in waste management

Participation was essential in building acceptance, reducing resistance and creating a shared understanding of responsibilities related to wase separation at source in Berat. It provided a critical space to anticipate social risks, particularly those affecting informal waste pickers whose livelihoods depend on access to recyclable materials. Without meaningful participation, the recycling scheme would ultimately have been technically sound but socially fragile.

Public participation in the Berat waste separation scheme took place at three important points in the project cycle:

1. **Design phase**: A baseline public opinion survey was conducted, alongside focus groups involving women (three groups), youth, informal waste pickers, older residents and businesses.
2. **Preparation phase**: An environmental and social impact assessment was carried out, paying particular attention to women and informal waste pickers. This phase also included additional focus groups and direct interviews.
3. **Early implementation phase**: A final public opinion survey was conducted, accompanied by seven public consultation hearings to gather feedback during the rollout of the scheme.

Figure 1. Participation activities and outcomes across different stages of the Berat recycling scheme.



Key takeaways

- Waste recycling schemes can become governance success stories when residents are treated as partners rather than passive service users. Waste separation should be considered not only a public service endeavour, but also a key component of governance reform.
- High public willingness can exist even in contexts characterised by historically poor baseline services. However, sustained engagement depends on visible municipal leadership and trust-building, leading to behaviour change among residents.
- Social inclusion is neither automatic nor symbolic; it must be intentional. Informal waste pickers can and should be integrated into formal systems through fair labour conditions and appropriate safeguards. To strengthen institutional trust, inclusive waste governance must go beyond visibility and deliver substantive opportunities.

- Participation improves service design and public acceptance, but it must be accompanied by accountability, monitoring and feedback.
- Local environmental reforms succeed when they connect improvements in quality of life, social justice and long-term urban development.
- The Berat experience offers concrete and transferable lessons for municipalities, national institutions and donors committed to investing in modern waste services as part of an inclusive green transition.

Postscript: The evolving national waste governance framework

Since 2025, Albania has entered a period of significant transition in waste governance, marked by amendments to the Integrated Waste Management Law[22] indicating a policy shift towards stronger national and regional coordination of waste treatment and disposal infrastructure, including regional landfills. While the primary legal framework is in place, implementing regulations and detailed governance arrangements remain under development, leaving uncertainties regarding management roles, coordination mechanisms, and financial flows.

In this evolving context, legitimate questions arise regarding the positioning of advanced municipal models such as the Berat pilot scheme, particularly concerning incentives linked to public auctions of recyclables and the future allocation of financial benefits. These questions are especially relevant given the absence thus far of approved governmental schemes clarifying how high-performing local systems will be integrated into the emerging national framework.

What can be stated with confidence is that the Berat model was developed not as a temporary project, but as the establishment of a permanent public service. Regardless of future governance arrangements, the model remains strong and competitive across potential economic and institutional scenarios. Two key factors place Berat ahead of most Albanian municipalities: first, it is currently among the very few municipalities that systematically collect operational waste data; second, the source separation scheme and associated infrastructure results in the collection of higher-quality recyclable materials.

While this analysis was not part of the original fact-finding mission, the team considers it relevant to dedicate a space to reflect on ongoing national policy developments. These changes will continue to be closely monitored and assessed as secondary legislation and implementation mechanisms are clarified.

[22] Amendments to the Integrated Waste Management Law of Albania: https://qeverisjavendore.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/PROJEKTLIGJI-I-MENAXHIMIT-TE-INTEGRUAR-TE-MBETJEVE-11.07.2025-2.pdf

CEE Bankwatch Network

EDEN Environmental Center for Development Education and Networking