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***Working Document***

**Conclusions from the TAIEX / EPPA Regional Workshop on Green Infrastructure and Ecological Connectivity (24-25 June 2020)**

**INTRODUCTION**

The study on Green Infrastructure (GI) deployment and ecological connectivity status in Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia is the central outcome of the EPPA Activity 5.1.1 - Support for the implementation of the EUSAIR and EUSDR activities in the area of nature protection and biodiversity.

The study was developed in the period August 2019 – July 2020 and its results were presented during the TAIEX / EPPA Regional Workshop on Green Infrastructure and Ecological Connectivity (held online on 24-25 June 2020).

The present document presents in summary the main findings and recommendations from the study as well as the conclusions from the regional workshop, including a set of proposed follow up actions.

**CONCLUSIONS**

1. **Importance of the Green infrastructure and Ecological connectivity for safeguarding the natural capital of the Western Balkans**

The Western Balkans are exceptionally rich in biodiversity and natural ecosystems, which provide valuable benefits to the local communities. In the same time, the region is facing challenges in terms of pressures and impacts on the nature, related to urban development, construction of new roads, dams, illegal hunting and unsustainable forestry practices.

The deployment of Green Infrastructure and ensuring connectivity between the ecosystems and habitats are identified as priority areas, in the context of the EU Green Deal and the new EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030.

The EPPA Study on GI and ecological connectivity status supports the implementation of EUSAIR and establishes a baseline for defining future joint actions and funding priorities, related to the programming of the EU financial support for the period 2021-2027.

1. **Key findings and conclusions from the Study of GI and ecological connectivity**
   * The Western Balkans region is rich in landscapes with high and medium potential to deliver ecosystem services, especially the forests in the mountain areas, the natural ecosystems around the large lakes and extensive natural river systems.
   * The application of Habitat Suitability Model for the large carnivores as umbrella species provides good picture of the ecological connectivity at regional scale. However it does not calculate all critical environmental factors and needs to be supplemented by a further research of the species distribution and population viability.
   * The model for Brown bear and Wolf shows good coverage of potential core areas and dispersal corridors at regional scale. Migration barriers of human origin are also present and they are not always visible on the maps. In the same time the study confirms the fragmentation of the Lynx habitats. This species has high habitat demands and its distribution is limited to isolated core areas.
   * Protection and coordinated sustainable management of the transboundary clusters of protected areas and green corridors is crucial for the long-term sustaining of the ecological connectivity in the region.
   * The mapping of Green Infrastructure in line with EU Strategy and relevant guidance documents requires uniform and coherent geo-referenced data, which is only partially available.
2. **Identification of the common challenges and needs of the EPPA beneficiary countries**

The common challenges and needs, identified based on the presentations of the EPPA beneficiary countries and the discussions held during the workshop, are summarized in the following points:

* + Regional cooperation in the areas of ecological connectivity and coordinated management of the shared natural assets;
  + Need to close the gaps in scientific information and knowledge: identification of the GI elements, habitats mapping, research on the distribution and population status of the key protected species and monitoring;
  + Obligation to develop the Natura 2000 network as a part of the EU accession process: define the boundaries of the proposed sites, ensure coherent network, finalize the legal harmonization, introduction of Appropriate Assessment of strategic plans and investment projects, and harmonization with EIA and SEA procedures;
  + Capacity building: strengthening institutional capacity at all administrative levels, responsible for the nature conservation; Training in GIS and spatial planning; Establishment of a network of experts;
  + Awareness raising, related to the social and economic benefits from the healthy and functionally connected ecosystems; engaging stakeholders and general public in planning and management of the ecological networks;
  + Ensuring financial sustainability of the identified actions by mainstream the GI and ecological connectivity in IPA III national programming and mobilizing of funding from national and EU sources;

**PROPOSED ACTIONS**

* Action 1: Strengthen the regional cooperation for development of GI and ecosystem connectivity: establishment of a regional working group and adoption of a regional action plan
* Action 2: Support to the development of joint population level management plans for the large carnivores
* Action 3: Support to the development of Natura 2000 network in the framework of EU approximation
* Action 4: Mapping and assessment of ecosystem services for identification of the main elements of the Green Infrastructure at national and regional level
* Action 5: Integrate GI and ecological corridors into the spatial planning and sector policies
* Action 6: Strengthen the capacity of the national authorities in the areas of i) enforcement of the existing nature conservation legislation and ii) compliance with environmental standards and assessment requirements to ensure that infrastructure and other development projects are not permitted that will impact protected areas and corridors.



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