

**Sustainable Cities: Green cities transformation -  
smart, sustainable and low-carbon urban  
solutions in triangular metropolitan area**

**Serbia**

**GEF Assembly Learning Station Session**

**From Concepts to Implementation- Operationalizing Integrated Programs - Sustainable Cities**



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SAMARKAND 2026  
UZBEKISTAN**

# The Belgrade – Novi Sad – Zrenjanin Triangle

2.12 million people · 32% of Serbia · Shared environmental pressures

## BELGRADE | 1.65M population

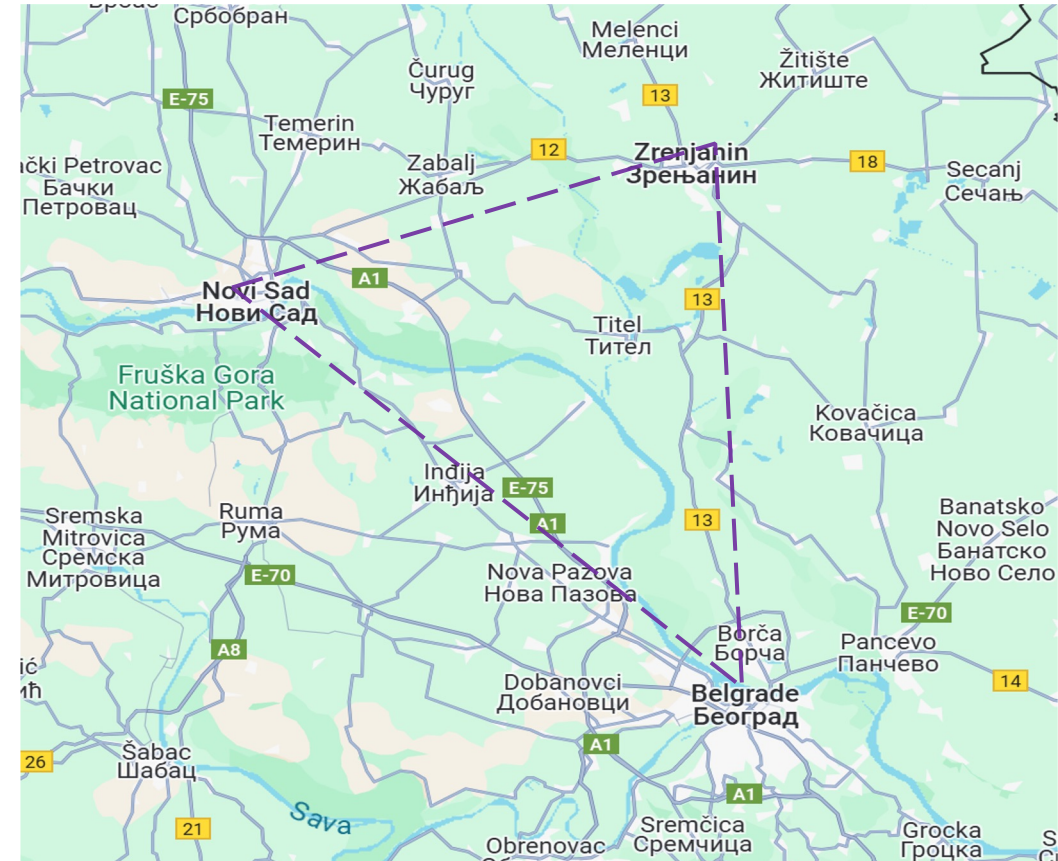
Capital and economic centre · 26% of national GDP  
Danube–Sava confluence · Ada Ciganlija nature island  
Belgrade Fortress forest park · 4,000 ha green areas

## NOVI SAD | 369K population

Ramsar Wetland City (first in Balkans)  
Fruška Gora National Park  
Koviljsko-Petrovaradinski Rit and Begečka jama wetlands reserve

## ZRENJANIN | 106K population

Largest municipality in Vojvodina Province · 1,326 km<sup>2</sup>  
Carska Bara Ramsar wetland adjacent  
Begej river corridor  
Agriculture heartland — biodiversity under pressure



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# Our Path to Green Transformation: Priorities and Progress Across the Metropolitan Triangle

## Waste & Wastewater Modernization

All 3 cities are actively advancing WWTP development to meet EU water quality standards and protect river health. Sanitary landfill upgrades underway across all cities.

## Air, Energy, Transportation

Committed to improving air quality toward EU PM10 standards. District heating decarbonization in progress. Household emissions reduction targeted through green energy programs. Public transport modernization and low-carbon mobility planned.

## Green Infrastructure

Building connected GI networks to link urban areas, rivers, and protected zones. High cycling rates in Novi Sad and Zrenjanin are a strong foundation for integrated GI network planning.

## Climate Change Vulnerability

Actively building resilience against climate impacts — extreme heat, flooding, and urban heat islands — through nature-based and green infrastructure solutions.

**Why it matters for local and national priorities:** These challenges hinder the cities' productivity and attractiveness for sustainable business and employment. Addressing them is crucial for meeting national strategies and aligning with the EU's environmental standards and Green Agenda for the Western Balkans.

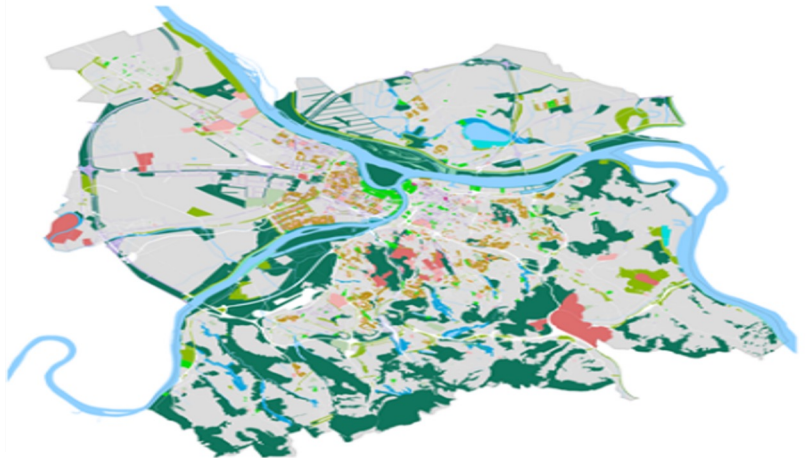
**Key sustainability priorities:** The project focuses on:

- Reducing pollution and greening urban infrastructure.
- Promoting decarbonization and a circular economy.
- Enhancing climate resilience through nature-positive development.

**Why an integrated approach is needed:** To overcome the fragmented and uncoordinated planning that has previously obstructed a fundamental green transformation. It will ensure that investments are holistic, inclusive, and address the interconnected nature of urban challenges.

# Natural Assets and Green Infrastructure Network

Metropolitan scale: GEF-8 will design a connected GI network plan linking parks, rivers, wetlands and cycling corridors across all three cities as a single ecological system



Belgrade



Novi Sad



Zrenjanin

# Project Design and Integrated Solutions

*Piloting green, digital and nature-positive urban transformation in Belgrade, Novi Sad and Zrenjanin*

🎯 **Main Objective: Pilot integrated green, digital, and nature-positive transformations across the triangular metropolitan area — creating a replicable model for other Serbian cities and the Western Balkans region**

## Key components and thematic areas

### Enabling framework

**Creating a supportive policy and planning environment for integrated green urban development.**

- Urban development plans revised
- Green city roadmaps per city
- Digital data management systems set or enhanced
- Livelihood Action Plans
- Sustainable Cities Platform (SSCP)

### Integrated Investments

Unlocking and scaling investments in citizen-centred sustainable infrastructure, natural capital, and nature-based solutions through the Innovation Challenge Call mechanism.

- Challenge Calls for urban infrastructure
- Challenge Calls for NbS and ecosystems
- Acceleration
- Financial Mechanisms (performance – based payments agreements, innovation awards)
- Smart City Information System

### Knowledge Management

Sharing lessons learned and replicating successful pilot projects nationally and internationally through the GPSC and the Serbian Sustainable Cities Platform.

- Lessons learned and toolkits
- Serbian Sustainable City Partnership Initiative
- GPSC knowledge exchange
- Replication to other Serbian cities

## Implementing Partner & Key Partners

*Implementing Partner*

**Ministry of Environmental Protection (MoEP)**

*Lead Cities*

**Belgrade · Novi Sad · Zrenjanin**

*National Partners*

**Ministry of Construction · Ministry of Energy · Provincial Secretariats, SCTM, Chambers**

*Implementing Agency*

**UNDP**

# Project Design and Integrated Solutions — Benefits and Financing

## Expected Benefits

### Climate & Environment

- Reduced GHG emissions  
Improved air, water and soil quality  
Ecosystem restoration  
Enhanced climate resilience

### Urban Quality of Life

- Improved public health  
Better public spaces  
Reduced urban heat islands  
Clean water & waste services

### Economy & Jobs

- Green job creation  
Circular economy and resource efficiency  
Public utility services improved
- Private investment leveraged

### Governance & Planning

- Integrated urban strategies  
Replicable city model  
Data-driven planning  
Sustainable Cities Platform

## Budget and Co-financing

GEF Trust Fund Grant

**USD 7,065,603**

UNDP TRAC

**USD 100,000**

Total Co-financing

**USD 132,219,632**

Grand Total

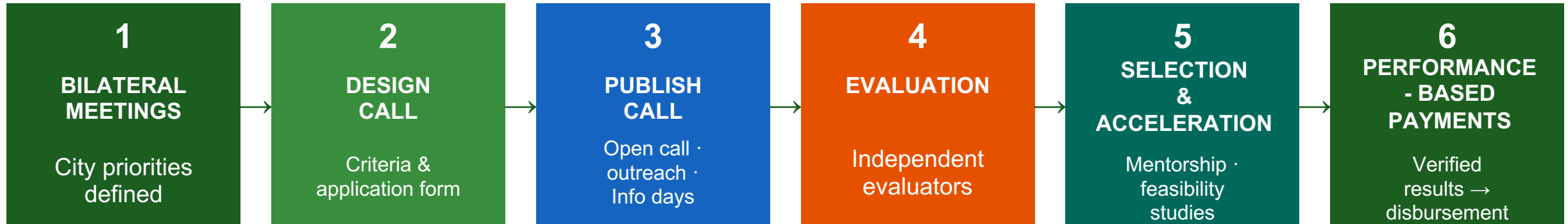
**USD 139,385,235**

Financing approach: (combination of grants, performance-based payments, and co-financing)



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# Innovation Challenge Call: From Ideas to Investment



## CHALLENGE CALLS

**Urban Infrastructure Calls to source and support the implementation of innovative digital and other types of solutions that provide low-carbon, energy-efficient and circular economy based communal infrastructure and services.**

All-city sector call  
Partnership for Innovation (private sector + PUC)  
Women entrepreneurs in green services

**Nature-Based Solutions Calls to source and support solutions that maintain natural capital and ecosystem services and promote nature-based solutions in peri-urban triangular metropolitan areas**

Urban green infrastructure sub-call  
Peri-urban NbS and ecosystem services  
Protected areas management  
Women-led NbS enterprises

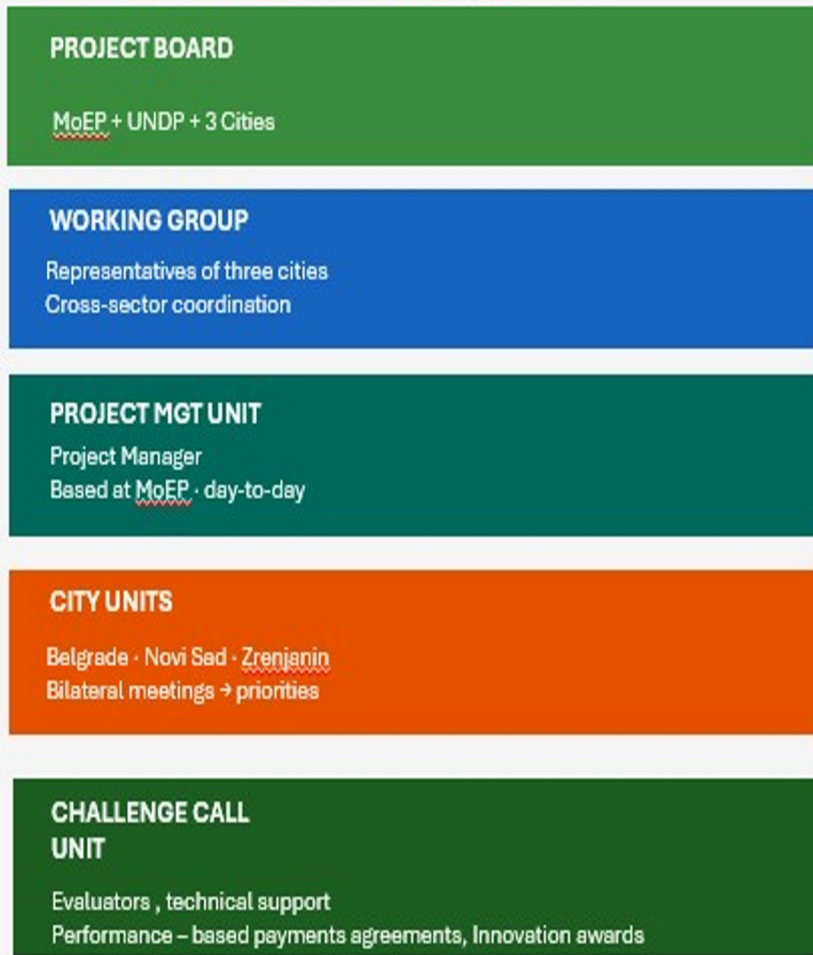
When formulating the Challenge Calls, the project will ensure synergy, by setting complementary problem statements and evaluation criteria that promote synergy between Challenge Calls. The set of criteria will require the potential applicants/ beneficiaries to identify specific actions with co-benefits addressing both challenges

# Operationalizing the Project: Governance and Key Milestones

## How the project moved from concept/design to implementation:

- The project builds upon the lessons learned from previous GEF-supported projects in Serbia (Climate Smart Urban Development and Circular Economy).
- Project concept and document has been developed in close consultation with key stakeholders, including the government and participating cities, ensuring strong ownership and a design that is responsive to local needs and priorities.

## Institutional Coordination Arrangements



## Key Implementation Milestones



# Main challenges and opportunities

**Challenge:** Embedding national green policies into strong local action plans.

**Solution:** The project will provide technical assistance and capacity building to local self-governments to strengthen their planning and implementation capabilities

**Opportunity:** Limited financing for integrated and innovative green city investments.

**Solution:** The project will introduce innovative financing mechanisms, such as challenge calls and performance-based payments, to de-risk and unlock private sector investment.

## Cross-Sectoral Data Mapping

Shared database of all planned investments across waste, water, energy, transport, green space & biodiversity – replacing three separate spreadsheets.

## Structured City Consultations

Gap identification and pilot project priorities per city, with a focus on public utility companies, as delivery actors.

## Digital Twin Infrastructure

Urban planners simulate investment scenarios before committing capital; includes EMIS integration for all three cities.

## Challenge Call Pipeline

≥15 pilot projects with min. \$5M co-financing and \$15M total investment value, advanced through GEF8 mechanism.

# Results, Lessons Learned and Insights for GEF-9

## Key Targets

**1,100  
ktCO<sub>2</sub>eq**

Direct GHG emission  
reduction

**4,000 ha**

Improved land  
management

**≥15**

Pilot investments  
funded

**≥5**

Women-led  
enterprises

**150,000**

Direct beneficiaries

## Key Lessons Learned

- Private sector engagement is essential, performance-based payments de-risk investment and unlock 10–15x leverage
- Challenge calls must be designed WITH cities, not FOR cities
- GI network planning requires embedding in statutory urban plans, not just project outputs
- Serbia's green bond (€1B, 2021) shows national appetite for climate finance at scale

## Insights for GEF-9

- Combine policy reform + innovative financing to unlock public and private investment at scale
- Integrate at least green-blue corridors from the start, metropolitan GI networks need statutory status
- Livelihood Action Plans for vulnerable groups make just transition operational, not theoretical
- National replication platform for sustainable cities (SSCP) is built into project design, not added after

## Scaling Up

- Serbian Sustainable Cities Platform will extend lessons to all 145 Serbian municipalities
- Belgrade–Novi Sad - Zrenjanin triangle as replication model for Western Balkans region
- Linking urban GI networks to national biodiversity strategies