

RisiAlbania is a project of the
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CATALYSING ALBANIA'S DIGITAL FUTURE

RisiAlbania's journey in the ICT sector

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1

Why the ICT sector?

In 2013 during the early stages of the first phase of the project RisiAlbania was quick to recognise the potential of the ICT sector. There was already a growing and developing ecosystem of local firms offering digital services to clients in the local and export market. The growth potential of the sector was also significant as the early to mid-2010s were a period when digital technologies were beginning to significantly transform business and society, both locally and globally, driven by wider access to the internet (particularly through mobile devices) and the rise of cloud computing, big data and social media platforms. Also importantly, RisiAlbania recognised the strategic importance of ICT as a driver of productivity, job creation and transformation in other sectors of the Albanian economy.

BOX 1 - RISI'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE ICT SECTOR

Risi views the ICT sector through a systems lens. This includes core IT services such as firms providing services such as software development, cybersecurity and data protection, web and mobile application design, IT consulting, as well as cloud services and data hosting. It also includes ICT or digitally enabled services across sectors – such as eCommerce platforms, digital payments services and other tech-based solutions such as customer relationship management (CRM) for other sectors of the economy. Risi was particularly interested in promoting the digital transformation of the other focus sectors of the project, namely agriculture and tourism. Risi's

understanding the ICT sector also spanned the talent pipeline and enabling environment - including non-formal training providers, certification bodies and standards agencies, career services and job intermediation platforms – which focuses on preparing young people for employment in digital roles.



However, the local ICT ecosystem was fragmented - coordination between government and the private sector was weak. Employers struggled to find, and retain, skilled staff. Although there were some local ICT firms serving export markets, these typically provided lower value-added services such as call centre focused BPO services. Certifications and standards were largely absent, and the government had not yet prioritised ICT in its development strategy. Despite this RisiAlbania understood the significant potential of the ICT sector to tackle youth unemployment and modernize the Albanian economy.



2

What Risi Aimed to Achieve – Vision & Strategy

RisiAlbania's goal was ambitious: to build a dynamic and competitive ICT ecosystem that generates sustainable and high-quality employment opportunities for young people in Albania.

DIAGRAM 1 RISI ICT STRATEGY



Risi identified several key strategic levers critical to achieving this goal (see diagram 1 above) including strengthening the digital skills ecosystem; enhancing firm competitiveness through standards and certification; promoting digitally enabled services (particularly eCommerce and digital payments); influencing digital policy and public-private dialogue; and fostering inclusion: ensuring that women and disadvantaged youth could benefit from the digital transformation.

3

What Risi Did – Making it Happen

RisiAlbania was implemented over three project phases from 2013 to 2025. Diagram 2 below provides an overview of how Risi's ICT strategy evolved and developed over the three project phases.

Phase 1: Oct 2013 - Oct 2017

The early stages of the first phase of Risi were very much about building an understanding of the ICT sector, in particular building networks and trust with local market actors. Extensive engagements were undertaken with leading IT firms, private training providers,





and associations - many of these actors would become important project partners (such as the local BPO association, ABSA) during subsequent phases of the project. There were also some initial discussions with public bodies such as National Authority for Electronic Certification and Cyber security (NAECCS) and the Albanian Accreditation Directorate to explore future local certification systems.

An ICT market diagnostic, guiding by market systems development (MSD) thinking, was undertaken at this stage. This deepened Risi's understanding of the constraints to change and growth in the sector and intervention options available to Risi. Small-scale pilot interventions were launched. For example, early support to explore the potential of building ICT skills through non-formal training providers included partnering with ALMOOC (Albanian Massive Open Online Courses) to offer training in programming languages. About 1,600 young people took advantage of this training opportunity.

Supporting the BPO sector was prioritised during the later stages of phase I, the focus was on increasing Albania's visibility as an outsourcing location particularly for higher valued-added services.

Risi established partnerships with the national investment promotion, AIDA and ABSA, the recently established local BPO association. The early results of these partnerships were promising: a tri-partite cooperation agreement was agreed and signed between ABSA, the Ministry of Economy and AIDA formalising their intention to work together to promote the BPO sector and a business case was produced highlighting the potential of Albania as an outsourcing location.

Phase I very much laid the groundwork for a significant expansion in the scope and scale of project activities in second phase.

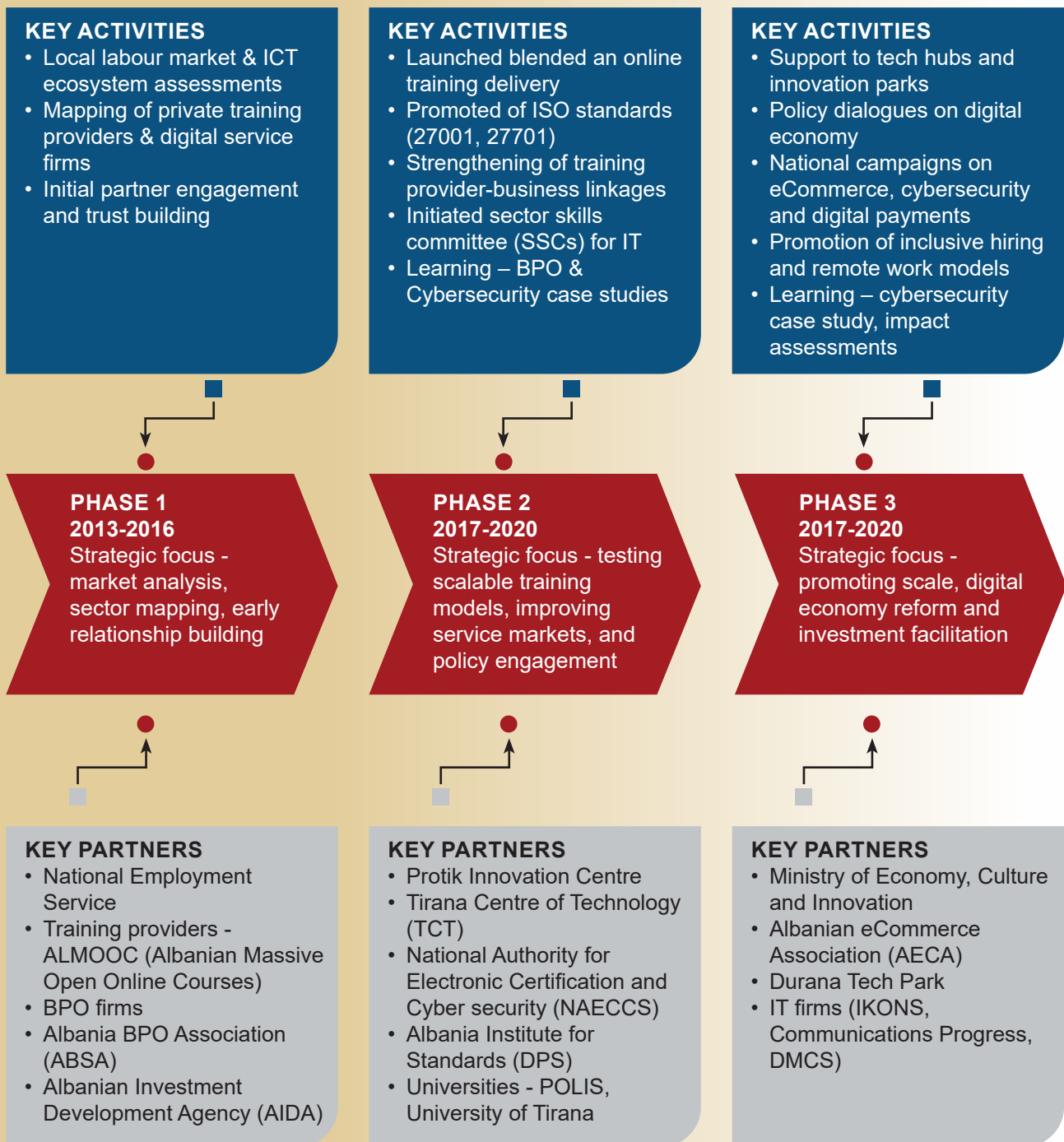
Phase II: Oct 2017 - Oct 2021

Several skills building initiatives were quickly initiated during the early stages of the second phase. Partnerships were established with non-formal training providers - Tirana Centre of Technology, Albanian ICT Academy and Protik - to introduce market-relevant ICT courses. Risi's support focused on improving curricula, training delivery and linkages with employers. Following adaptive management principles, Risi's support to its partners evolved in response to changes in the local operating context. For example, Risi quickly pivoted to support the development blended and online ICT training models during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. During phase II Risi also played an instrumental role in establishing the Sector Skills Committee (SSC) to align training curricula with industry needs. The SSC in ICT was the first one to be piloted by the Albanian government.

Phase I BPO activities also began to bear fruit during the early stages of phase II. In June 2018 ABSA was approached by Fusion BPO Services, an Indian BPO operator interested in setting up an operation in Albania which ultimately resulted in Fusion establishing a new business support centre in Tirana in early 2019 initial employing 29 people which would increase to 300 people by the 2019. A BPO case study was produced documenting the evolution of Risi's intervention and key learnings.



DIAGRAM 1 RISI ICT STRATEGY



Midway through the second phase Risi’s certification and standards work began to advance. Partnerships were established with the Albanian Directorate of Accreditation and NAECCS to build local capacity for certification delivery, particularly in the areas of cybersecurity and data protection, with the objective of making standards like ISO

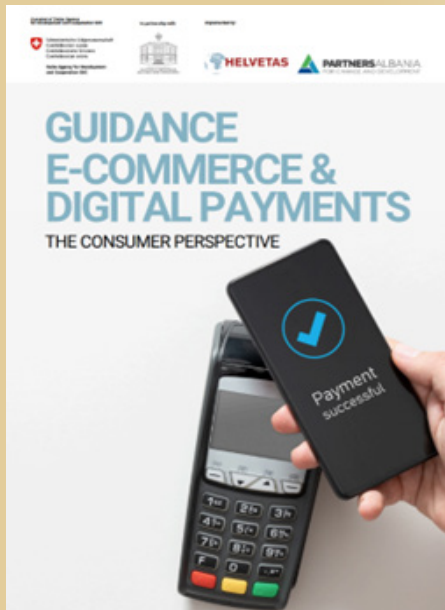
27001 and ISO 27701 more accessible to Albanian ICT firms. To stimulate demand Risi also worked with certification service providers - LegalCert and InfoSecurity – to pilot certification implementation. In the later stages of phase II, a case study was produced documenting the results and learning from this intervention.

Another key initiative in phase II was Risi support to the the Ministry of Economy to support Albania's first eCommerce strategy and action plan.

Phase III: Oct 2021-Oct 2025

Scaling and further innovating the ICT skills offering of local training providers was a key focus of the early stages of phase III. Working in partnership with Risi, the Tirana Centre of Technology pioneered the delivery of online ICT courses, making training more accessible to students outside Tirana. Risi also supported the online training platform Unipro Balkan Academy to improve and increase the outreach its training offer, particularly recorded video courses, focused on building and improving the soft skills of students.

Building on the data privacy and security activities initiated in phase II, Risi continued to strengthen the uptake the standards 27001 and 27701 by supporting local certification and consulting providers. For example, Risi supported local service provider such as Ikons and DM Consulting to deliver data security internal audits and compliance training and guidance on implementing quality and information security to local ICT firms.





Promoting digital innovation and ICT enabled services across other sectors of the Albania economy was another key feature of phase III. Risi supported the establishment of the local E-Commerce Association (AECA) to promote and regulate the e-commerce market. Risi also supported the establishment of the Durana Tech Park, an entrepreneurship and innovation hub which creates employment opportunities in areas such as software design, robotics research and data analysis. Risi also supported the uptake of digital solutions in the wider economy, particularly by firms in Risi's other focus sectors - this included the adoption of digital traceability systems by agribusinesses and online platforms for tour operators in the tourism sector.

Risi also supported promotion and awareness raising campaigns during phase III – such as the Ecommerce & Digital Payments guidance note highlighted above – to stimulate the wider adoption of the ideas and innovations promoted by Risi. During phase III Risi also completed a couple of impact assessments to better understand the achievements of Risi's ICT interventions across the three project phases (more details on the findings of these impact assessments are provided in the final section below).

4

What Risi Achieved – Impact

Over its three phases, Risi's ICT interventions have played a transformative role in shaping Albania's digital economy. Beginning with foundational market research and pilot training initiatives, the project evolved to scale inclusive, market-driven solutions that improved skills, boosted employment, and enhanced firm competitiveness. Risi helped create over 2,900 ICT jobs—nearly half for women—and supported the introduction of over 100 new training courses, while creating enable conditions for companies to adopt international standards like ISO 27001.

Overview of Risi Impact ¹

Employment & Job Creation

- **2,936 jobs created** (1,590 were for women and 111 for disadvantaged youth) in the ICT sector attributed to Risi interventions
- **Risi partner firms saw 2.5x faster workforce growth** than non-partners
- **17 new ICT training courses introduced;** 739 young people (338 women and 110 from marginalized groups) secured employment within six months of completing these training courses

¹ Sources: RisiAlbania – Job Creation - <https://beamexchange.org/practice/programme-index/222/>; Risi Impact Assessments and Outcome Harvest.

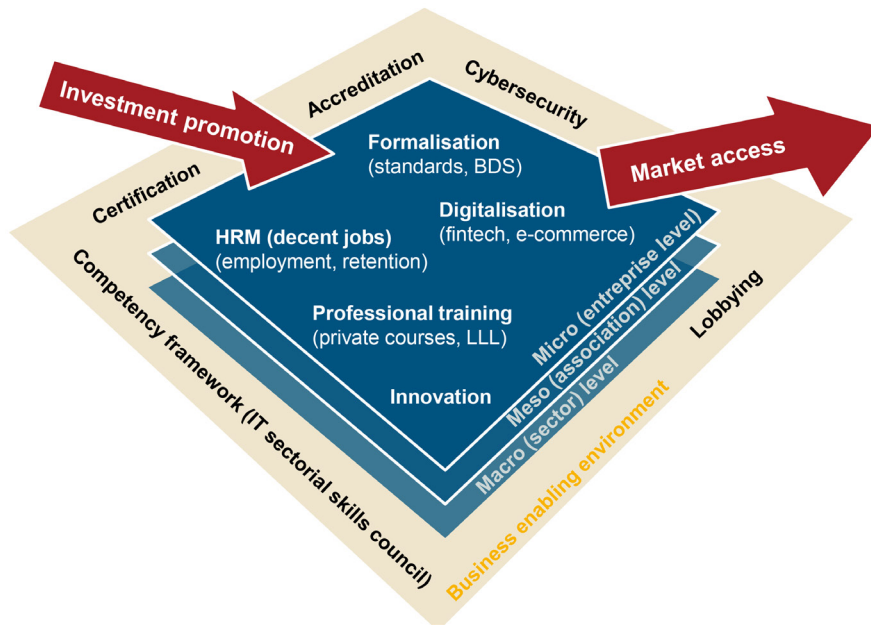
Sector Growth

- **€ 6.26 million in private investment mobilized** across ICT interventions through Risi partnerships
- **€ 898.263 in additional net income** generated by ICT firms through adoption of innovative practices in partnership with Risi.
- **50% of surveyed ICT firms now export**, up from < 20% in the first phase of Risi
- 60% of firms surveyed saw up to **20% sales growth** in the last 5 years
- **Growth in eCommerce and digital payments** adoption among local SMEs
- Improved cybersecurity knowledge and technical capacity: 55% of companies surveyed reported **better understanding of cyber risks**; 40% reported increased **skills from standards-related training**
- Evidence that Albania is transitioning from a low-cost outsourcing destination to a **competitive provider of high-quality digital services**

Moreover, IT and BPO are dynamic, multifaceted sectors and so are the market systems. This asks from a project:

- a diversified, pluralistic approach with a focus on several target groups at the same time;
- Varied entry points at different levels, anticipating a wide range of triggers from different actors (e.g. pushing and/ or pulling markets)
- Continued market observations, trend tracking allowing the project team to scout opportunities purposefully and to make informed decisions;
- React with high level of responsiveness and a sense for urgencies, without compromising on quality;
- React with a spirit of innovation, scrutinising thoroughly the potentials of replication and wider spread;
- Adopt an (adaptive) management system and improve it continuously.
- Taking well pondered risks: make sure the monitoring system allows to detect early signs of failure.
- Pursue a holistic learning program with partners and peers, initiate it at an early stage: continuously expand and improve.

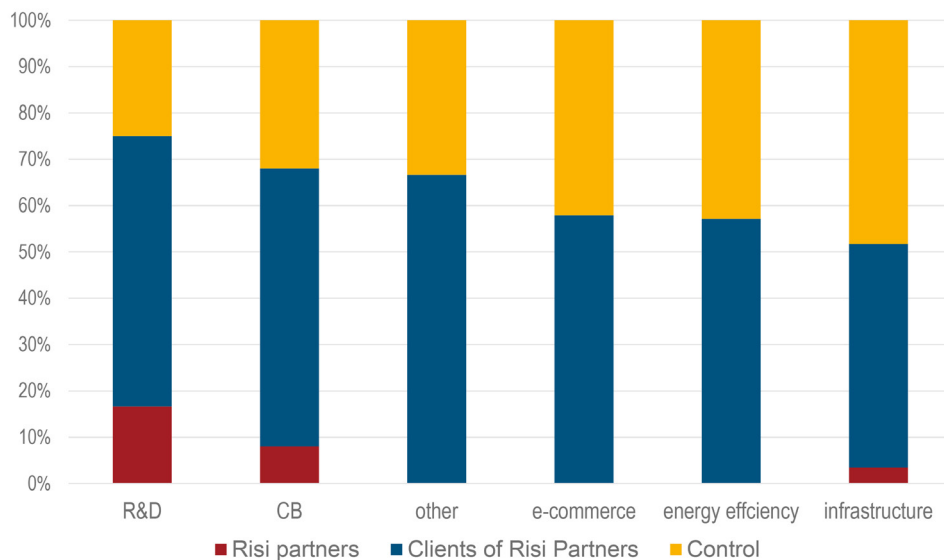
Simplified, Risi addressed in IT the enabling environment, while emphasising formalisation and thus EU alignment of markets for instance through certification and cybersecurity. Supporting the development of a competency framework and a private, non- formal training providers in developing and delivering courses that are in line with the national and thus the EU qualification framework, young women and men increasingly get employed since having obtained the necessary qualification.



Risi IT intervention- areas at a glance

Overall, Risi gave a boost to and through innovative enterprises in the sector and indirectly companies who followed them while pushing on one side for market access, on the other pulling investment promotion. The multilayered focus of the project was the right choice since generating win-win constellations between enterprise- and association level, respectively fostered systems at national level.

The sector experienced during the last decade an unseen development from a lack of jobs at the start of the project to a lack of qualified labourforce today. Given this deficit, qualitative aspects of employment gained importance over time. Joining flagship

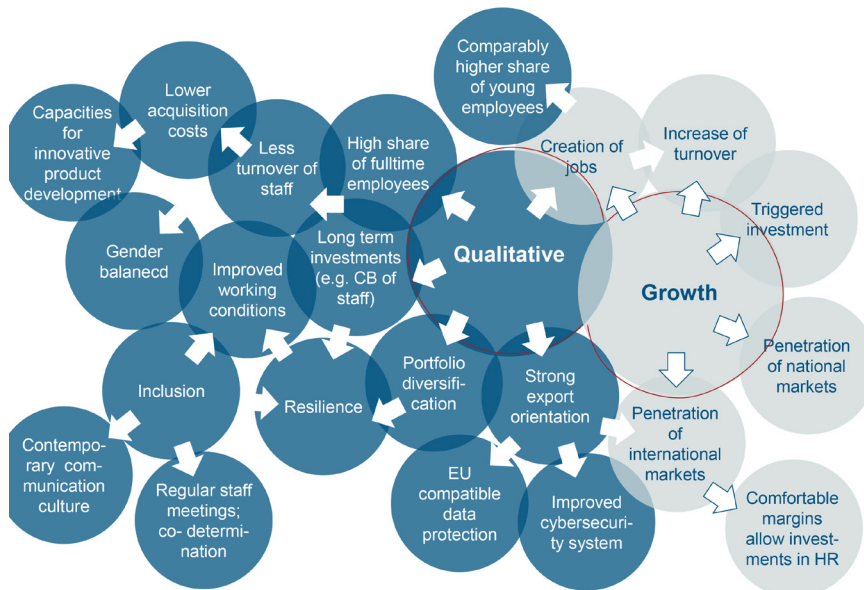


Investment priorities of Risi partners, their clients and a control group



companies in innovative, employment- conducive endeavours, the project managed to engage for better working conditions like and/ or flexible employment modalities, which add to a series of non- financial benefits at work. Valuing the person, an impact study revealed that Risi partner companies and their clients invested increasingly in human resources respectively R&D; both areas which produce the rate of return on longer terms, but more sustainably. The induced qualitative growth also led companies to diversify their portfolio and to adopt sound risk management which makes them more resilient.

Figure 1 Qualitative growth – the overarching principle inducing a wide array of changes and achievements



Risi’s ICT interventions thereby have played a transformative role in shaping Albania’s digital economy. Risi helped create over 2,690 ICT jobs—nearly half for women—and supported the introduction of over 100 new training courses, while creating enable conditions for companies to adopt international standards like ISO 27001.

Beyond technical gains, Risi catalysed wider systemic change: influencing national e-commerce policy, strengthening sector associations, and embedding inclusive, quality-driven practices across the ICT workforce. Today, Albania is building a reputation as a competitive digital services hub—an outcome significantly shaped by Risi’s interventions.

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