



Република Србија
МИНИСТАРСТВО ЗАШТИТЕ ЖИВОТНЕ
СРЕДИНЕ



Green cities transformation – smart, sustainable and low-carbon urban solutions in triangular metropolitan area

CHALLENGE CALL GUIDELINE

September 2026

1. About the Project

The Ministry of Environmental Protection, with support of United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) implements the project “Green Cities Transformation — Smart, Sustainable and Low-Carbon Urban Solutions in the Triangular Metropolitan Area”, with financial support of the Global Environmental Facility (the GEF). The project supports an integrated model of sustainable urban development in Belgrade, Novi Sad and Zrenjanin, a metropolitan corridor home to approximately 2.16 million people, or roughly 32% of Serbia’s population, connecting urban planning, green infrastructure, biodiversity, mobility, waste management, water systems and climate resilience into a single, coherent green transformation agenda.

Rapid urbanization, climate risks and increasing infrastructure demands are placing growing pressure on Belgrade, Novi Sad and Zrenjanin to deliver more resilient, inclusive and resource-efficient urban systems. Green infrastructure (GI) and nature-based solutions (NbS) are critical components of this transformation, offering integrated approaches that enhance resilience, maintain and restore ecosystem services, and contribute to local economic development, such as through nature-based tourism. However, in all three cities, GI interventions remain fragmented and insufficiently embedded within urban planning, infrastructure investment, and service delivery systems such as isolated parks, river corridors, wetlands and green spaces are too often planned and managed as separate projects rather than as a connected, multi-functional network.

The project is designed to unlock and scale up investment into citizen-centered sustainable infrastructure, natural capital, ecosystem services and nature-based solutions through Challenge Calls. This Call is targeting innovative solutions that maintain and enhance natural capital, restore and maintain ecosystem services and promote nature-based solutions across the urban and peri-urban landscape of the triangular metropolitan area.

Green Infrastructure (GI)	A strategically planned network of natural and semi-natural areas with other environmental features designed and managed to deliver a wide range of ecosystem services. It moves beyond isolated parks or green spaces to create an interconnected system that includes everything from urban forests and river corridors to green roofs and walls, creating new parks and urban pockets, enhancing urban resilience and livability.
Nature-Based Solutions (NbS)	Actions inspired and supported by nature that address societal challenges while providing benefits for both human well-being and biodiversity. Examples include restoring wetlands to manage flood risk, planting trees to cool urban areas, or creating green corridors to support wildlife.
Ecosystem Services	The many benefits that humans receive from healthy ecosystems. These can include tangible benefits like clean air and water, and intangible ones such as climate regulation, pollination, and opportunities for recreation and tourism, all of which contribute to economic and social well-being.

The GEF8 Programme Approach

Though the Challenge-based competitive calls, the project will identify and accelerate innovative project proposals. The most progressive ideas will be turned into bankable investments and implemented the UNDP performance-based payment mechanism.

The Innovation Challenge Call has several subsequent steps:

- Publishing of the Call
- Selection of the innovative projects/ideas proposals
- Independent evaluation of received innovative projects/ideas
- Acceleration of the most promising projects/ideas through guided mentorship and technical assistance.
- Co-financing of the bankable and most progressive projects/ideas through the Performance-Based Payment Agreements or Innovation Awards.

This Call is one of two complementary Challenge Calls under the project, the other targets innovative digital and low-carbon solutions for communal infrastructure. Applicants are encouraged to design proposals that generate co-benefits across both calls. For example, urban greening that reduces building energy demand such as green roofs, green walls and shading that improve thermal performance or expanding tree canopy that lowers the urban heat island effect across three cities. As the Call for digital and low-carbon Call has not yet been published co-benefits across calls will not be scored against that Call's specific criteria. Therefore, proposals will instead receive a higher evaluation score where they clearly articulate possible cross-sectoral synergies, to be further assessed and operationalize jointly during the Acceleration phase once both Calls are active.

2. Challenge Call for Advancing Urban Green Infrastructure (restoring and maintaining Natural Capital, Ecosystem Services and Nature-Based Solutions)

The Ministry of Environmental Protection and UNDP Serbia are launching the Challenge Call for Advancing the Urban Green Infrastructure. The call will solicit innovative project proposals that restore, maintain or enhance natural capital, ecosystem services, and nature-based solutions in Belgrade, Novi Sad and Zrenjanin urban and peri-urban areas.

The cities of Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Zrenjanin are facing critical environmental pressures that demand urgent intervention. This Challenge Call is launched as a direct response to several escalating challenges in these urban areas, such as climate change impacts (an increasing frequency and severity of heatwaves, droughts, and floods), disaster resilience, environmental quality (persistent air pollution, ongoing deterioration of natural ecosystems), urbanization pressures (rapid urban development leading to the significant loss of vital green spaces and biodiversity). By addressing these pressing problems, the proposed green infrastructure projects will play a crucial role in restoring ecological balance, protecting public health, and building long-term urban resilience against future climate challenges.

Why Is This Challenge Initiated?

- Green infrastructure and natural assets in the three cities such as parks, river corridors, wetlands and green spaces, are too often planned and managed in isolation rather than as a connected, multi-functional network, limiting their ecological, social and economic value;
- Urban development pressure, including substantial capital works, risk further fragmenting ecological corridors between urban areas and surrounding natural landscapes unless green infrastructure is deliberately integrated into these works from the outset;
- Significant public infrastructure investment is already planned or underway in all three cities, representing a time-bound opportunity to add green and nature-based elements at a fraction of the cost of standalone projects;
- Carefully designed nature-based solutions can simultaneously deliver climate adaptation, biodiversity, water management, urban cooling and citizen well-being benefits;
- Protected areas and natural sites near or within the metropolitan triangle currently offer a limited and underdeveloped range of services and experiences for citizens and visitors, despite their potential to support education, recreation, sustainable tourism and local economic development;
- Strengthening the link between the cities, natural capital and ecosystem services requires a dedicated instrument that can source, accelerate and fund the most promising ideas proposed by local self-governments, communities, private sector, academia and civil society.

Why to Participate?

- **To help solve a pressing urban environmental challenge** in your city by improving the green infrastructure with direct relevance to the livability, climate resilience and biodiversity of the area where you live, work or operate;
- **To align your project idea with planned or ongoing infrastructure investment**, including capital works, maximizing the impact and visibility of your proposal;
- **To access co-financing and technical support** through performance-based payments or innovation awards, once your idea has been refined through the project Accelerator;
- **To gain free coaching and mentoring** from technical experts in green infrastructure, nature-based solutions, urban ecology and project financing;
- **To benefit from networking opportunities** with other cities, innovators, technical experts and potential financing partners across the triangular metropolitan area and beyond;
- **To increase the visibility of your project and your organization**, including through public showcase events, city fairs and Global Sustainable Cities Platform.

Project Accelerator and Technical Assistance

Following the selection process, the most promising project proposals will be invited to join a structured Project Accelerator, providing technical assistance and tailor-made mentorship support to further develop and strengthen the proposed solution towards bankable and ready-for-implementation investment. This support includes, but is not limited to, further technical assistance to confirm the technical characteristics and expected impacts of the proposed solution, development of technical documentation (e.g. feasibility studies) as needed, adjustment of the project budget, and confirmation of the financing structure using blended finance approach¹. During the Acceleration phase, the project team will also facilitate partnerships with local governments, businesses, protected area management institutions, or NGOs.

What Kind of Projects We Will Support?

Green Infrastructure and Urban Nature Solutions	Additional Aspects to Be Considered in Project Design
• Greening and naturalization of cycling and pedestrian corridors, including new or planned routes, tree planting, shading, planting strips, rain gardens etc; • Creation or reinforcement of urban and peri-urban green corridors connecting parks,	• Clear demonstration of how the proposal links to, complements, or is coordinated with planned or ongoing projects, infrastructure or urban development works; • Solving social challenges (gender equality, marginalized groups, youth and elderly

¹ Blended finance approach implies that the proposed project will only be partially funded through the project grant, while the rest of needed financing the applicant needs to secure from own funds (public or private resources), loans, other donations etc.

riverfronts, wetlands and protected areas into a coherent, multi-functional network; • Restoration of degraded urban green spaces, riverbanks, wetlands or other natural assets, including nature-based stormwater and flood management solutions; • Urban cooling and climate adaptation measures using nature-based approaches such as green roofs, green walls, urban forests, pocket parks and shaded public spaces; • Improving the role, accessibility and visitor offer of protected areas near the three cities, including new or upgraded trails, visitor infrastructure, interpretation and educational facilities, and nature-based tourism products; • Citizen science, biodiversity monitoring and community stewardship initiatives that strengthen the long-term management of green infrastructure and natural assets; • Creating new green urban pockets as green urban oases as small-scale, strategically placed nature-based interventions, such as pocket parks, shaded seating areas with native vegetation, biodiverse planting islands, or greened pedestrian corners.	access to green space) should be presented and effects explained; • Contribution to climate change adaptation and mitigation (e.g. carbon sequestration and avoided emissions through reduced energy demand) and alignment with the Serbia's National Adaptation Plan, Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) and Low Carbon Development Strategy, local adaptation plan and local strategic documents and action plans; • Multi-dimensional impact, covering co-benefits across several subsectors such as energy systems, communal infrastructure, transport, and waste management; • Use of nature-based solutions for carbon sequestration where applicable (e.g. wetland or floodplain restoration as a carbon sink), and circular economy principles such as reuse of waste biomass from green areas for composting or energy generation; • Potential for replication and scaling up across the three participating cities and beyond.
---	--

Application Process

Applicants shall submit a project proposal online, using the simplified application form set out in Section 3 of this Guideline. The proposal must clearly describe the project idea, its location, its relationship to natural capital and ecosystem services in the relevant city, and, where applicable, its alignment with planned or ongoing local and national projects.

Evaluation

The Ministry and UNDP will assess all submitted project proposals for completeness and eligibility. Eligible proposals will then be evaluated by an evaluation committee comprising of independent experts in climate change, sustainable urban planning, green infrastructure, ecosystem services and nature-based solutions. The evaluation committee will select two groups of projects: proposals that are technically mature and ready for immediate implementation and proposals that are the most promising but require further support through the Project Accelerator prior to a final co-financing decision. The Project Board will make the final decision, and applicants will be informed of the outcome.

Who Can Apply?

This Call is open to the following categories of applicants:

- Cities of Belgrade, Novi Sad and Zrenjanin, city municipalities, including their relevant departments, agencies and city institutes;
- Public utility companies operating in the three cities;
- Protected area management institutions located in or near the triangular metropolitan area;
- Private sector;
- Civil society organizations, academic and research institutions.

All applicants must be legally registered and operating in Serbia in accordance with national legislation. Applicants may apply independently or in consortia. If applying in a consortium, the Lead Applicant must be clearly identified to represent the consortium throughout the application process and to serve as the main recipient of any future co-financing.

Applicants may submit two project proposals as lead applicant and may participate as a consortium member in an unlimited number of additional submissions under this Challenge Call.

Indicative Timeline

Call Opens	1 September 2026
Information Sessions for Potential Applicants	Three sessions to be scheduled within the application window, including in Belgrade, Novi Sad and Zrenjanin First Info day in Belgrade – 09 September 2026
Submission Deadline	18 September 2026, until 5.00 p.m.
Evaluation Completed	25 September 2026
Implementation of Mature Projects (first group)	01 October 2026 – June 2027
Acceleration Phase	01 October 2026 – 31 December 2026
Selection of Second group of Most Mature Projects and Co-Financing Agreements	29 January 2027
Implementation (second group)	01 February 2027 – 01 December 2027
Monitoring, Reporting and Evaluation	Minimum 12 months following project completion

Categories of Projects Sought

Based on indicative investment value, project proposals will be considered under three categories:

Category	Indicative Investment Value	Project co-financing (innovation awards/PBPs)
Micro projects	Up to USD 100,000	Maximum USD 40,000
Small projects	USD 100,000 – USD 300,000	Up to 40% of project value (maximum USD 120,000)
Medium projects	USD 300,000 – USD 1,000,000	Up to 25% of project value (maximum USD 250,000)
Large projects	Above USD 1,000,000	Up to 30% of project value (maximum USD 300,000)

Note on co-financing:

Co-financing provided through Performance-Based Payment Agreements or Innovation Awards represents a contribution toward total project investment and is not intended to cover the full cost of project implementation. The applicant is required to secure and demonstrate confirmed financing for the remainder of project costs through binding financing arrangements (own resources, commercial borrowing, grants from other sources, or other confirmed contributions) by the end of the Acceleration phase. At the proposal stage, applicants are encouraged to indicate any preliminary discussions with co-financing partners, including letters of intent, memoranda of understanding or loan agreements where available.

Monitoring, Visibility and Showcasing

All selected projects will be assigned a specific ID code and monitoring card, with key performance indicators tailored to green infrastructure and ecosystem outcomes (e.g. hectares of green space created or restored, length of green corridor established, estimated carbon sequestration, biodiversity indicators, citizen usage and satisfaction). Selected projects will be showcased at public events, project's website, GSCP website and events.

Intellectual Property Rights Disclosure

The applicant shall provide written confirmation accompanying the proposal, confirming to UNDP that it holds all intellectual property rights reasonably foreseeable as necessary for achieving the project's goals, or describing the manner in which such rights will be resolved in conformity with the project's objectives. The applicant is further required to confirm the absence of any intellectual property disputes arising from the proposed idea.

How to Apply

1	Review eligibility criteria and evaluation criteria set out in this Guideline
2	Complete the application form online

Please attach the following documents in support of your application:

- A site location map or description showing the project site and, where relevant, its relationship to planned or ongoing local and national projects or to nearby protected areas, wetlands or ecological corridors; consistency with spatial and urban planning documents, confirming that the area is not designated for other land uses;
- Partnership agreement, where applying as a consortium;
- Any available documents confirming potential co-financing commitments (letters of intent, MoUs, loan agreements etc.).

All supported documents should be sent to: djordje.todorovic@undp.org

Important: Please ensure that you upload the final and complete version of your application by the deadline. The application form contains specific fields, and it is important that each field is completed. Incomplete applications may be rejected. When completing the application form, please consult the relevant evaluation criteria in Section 4 of this Guideline.

3. Application Form

The application must be completed in the Serbian language. A summary of the proposed project idea must be provided in both Serbian and English language. Please address each question clearly and concisely. Where indicated, responses are subject to word limits.

APPLICATION DETAILS	
Title	Enter the full title of the proposed project idea
City	Indicate whether the project is located in Belgrade, Novi Sad or Zrenjanin (or spans more than one city)
Main sectors	Indicate the primary sector(s) of the proposal (e.g. green infrastructure, urban cooling, wetland/river restoration, protected area visitor infrastructure, biodiversity monitoring, other)
Project location and relationship to planned/ongoing projects	Provide the project location and describe, where applicable, its relationship to planned or ongoing local and national projects, if applicable, or to nearby protected areas, wetlands or ecological corridors
Project duration	Expressed in months

LEAD APPLICANT	
Name of the Lead Applicant	Enter the full registered name of the lead applicant
Type of organization	E.g. local self-government, public utility company, protected area management institution, private company, civil society organization, academic/research institution
Contact details of the Lead Applicant	Enter the full name, address, postal code, e-mail address and telephone number of the main point of contact

OTHER PROJECT APPLICANTS (IF APPLICABLE)	
Name of project applicant	Enter the full name and type of organization
Contact person	Enter the full name, address, postal code, e-mail address and telephone number

SUMMARY OF THE PROPOSED PROJECT IDEA	
Summary (max. 300 words, in Serbian and English)	Provide a short summary, including the scope, objectives, location and relationship to nearby natural capital, ecosystem services or green infrastructure. The summary should give a clear understanding of the challenge, the proposed solution, and the expected outcome.

PROJECT DETAILS	
Project description (max. 2,000 words)	• What specific challenge related to natural capital, ecosystem services or green infrastructure is the project addressing? Where possible, quantify the scale of the problem (e.g. hectares of degraded green space, length of fragmented ecological corridor, extent of urban heat exposure). • How does the project address this challenge? Provide an overview of the technical approach and describe how nature-based principles are applied. • Where applicable, describe how the project links to planned or ongoing infrastructure or urban development projects, and the implementation timeline of those works. • What is the expected ecosystem service, biodiversity or climate adaptation benefit of the project, and what approach or methodology was used to estimate it? • Consistency with spatial and urban planning documents, confirming that the area is not designated for other land uses; cadastral parcel number, parcel description.
Innovation (max. 1,000 words)	What are the innovative elements of the proposed project? Does it represent a new application of an existing approach in the context of the three cities? Why is the proposed approach expected to be more effective than conventional alternatives?
Risks and risk management	Identify the key technical, financial, regulatory and environmental risks and uncertainties of the project, and describe how the project would mitigate these risks.
Intellectual property rights disclosure	Identify any intellectual property rights involved, or describe the model by which they will be resolved, and confirm the absence of any legal disputes arising from such rights.
Team skills and experience	Explain the experience and role of team members, including any environmental, ecological or landscape design expertise within the team or consortium. Describe previously implemented projects or activities relevant to the objectives of this Call.
Activities and timetable	Which activities would be required to implement the proposed project? Where the project is linked to planned infrastructure works, how is the proposed timetable coordinated with the construction schedule of those works? How will local communities and relevant institutions be engaged?
Expected impact and outcomes	Describe the main expected impacts, including: ecosystem service and biodiversity benefits; contribution to green corridor connectivity; climate adaptation and urban cooling benefits; sustainability of results after project completion; and impact on vulnerable groups (youth, elderly, persons with disabilities, marginalized groups) and local employment, number of direct beneficiaries.

Gender approach	Describe the approach for mainstreaming gender considerations, recognizing the complementary roles of women and men, with a view to advancing gender equality through the project.
Expected project budget	Indicate project costs against planned activities. The total budget and cost structure must be realistic and consistent with the proposed activities. Clearly present any contribution from project partners and indicate how the funds necessary for implementation will be secured, including sources, structure and any available supporting documentation.

4. Evaluation Criteria and Scoring

Project proposals will be evaluated against the following criteria. The maximum total score is 100 points.

Criteria	Maximum Score	Description
Presentation of the proposal	10	Does the proposal contribute to the aim of this Challenge Call? Is the information clearly presented, including the project's innovative aspects in terms of concept and approach?
Innovativeness of the project idea	10	Can the project be considered innovative in the context of the three cities, particularly in its approach to natural capital and ecosystem services?
Impact potential in terms of global environmental benefits	20	What is the expected impact in terms of global environmental benefits such as biodiversity, ecosystem services, climate resilience?
Cost-effectiveness and cost-sharing ratio	15	What is the cost-effectiveness of the proposal (e.g. environmental benefit achieved per amount of project support requested), and what is the proposed cost-sharing ratio?
Operational and management capacity	10	Do the applicants demonstrate the relevant skills, expertise, experience and resources to implement the project successfully within the proposed timeframe?
Sustainability and potential for replication and scaling up	10	Does the project have potential to be scaled up or replicated across the three participating cities?
Multi-dimensional impact	15	Does the project demonstrate co-benefits across multiple subsectors (energy, communal infrastructure, transport, waste management), reinforcing synergy with the other GEF8 project activities? Does the proposal clearly demonstrate how it links to, complements, or is coordinated with planned or ongoing local and national projects, infrastructure works or investment programmes, maximizing the combined value of existing public commitments?
Alignment with the Sustainable Urban Development Strategy, National Programme for Adaptation, local strategic documents and action plans	10	Is the project aligned with national and local strategies on green infrastructure, climate resilience and adaptation, sustainable development and other relevant documents?
TOTAL	100	

Exclusivity Criteria

In addition to the scoring criteria above, the following exclusivity criteria apply. Proposals that do not meet these criteria will not be eligible for funding:

- No physical displacement of vulnerable groups;
- Use of biomass only from sustainable sources;
- No activities in natural protected areas that are inconsistent with the management plan or protection regime of the relevant protected area;
- No use or transport of hazardous waste.

5. Contact and Additional Information

The **online application form** for this Public Call is available [HERE](#).

To provide detailed information on the eligibility requirements and selection criteria of the Call, a series of Information Days will be organized. The first Information Day will be held on **9 September 2026 at 10:00 a.m.**, both in person at the United Nations Building in Belgrade (64 Bulevar Zorana Đinđića) and online.

All interested participants may register via this [LINK](#).

Questions?

Email: ana.seke@undp.org