POLICY BRIEF

MEANINGFUL INVOLVMENT OF CSOs IN SDGs

ARE WESTERN BALKANS FALLING BEHIND?

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Authors:

Simona Ognenovska, MCIC

Aleka Papa, IDM Albania

Introduction

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have come into effect since January 2016. Focusing on both developing and developed countries and tackling the issues of development, environment, human rights, security and social justice as inter-connected and indivisible, they have brought about a growing momentum towards upholding development and integrating it within good governance efforts.

In this context, it is worthwhile to look at the SDGs from the more regional perspective of the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia), given that the region shares similar political and structural socio-economic challenges. However, this extremely ambitious programme, with 17 goals and 169 targets cannot be attained and implemented by national governments alone; it requires growing partnerships between governments, civil society organizations (CSOs), the private sector and academia. For that reason, the discussion of the roles and responsibilities that different stakeholders should take remains critical.

CSOs in the region through their role and work in articulating the needs of their constituents, providing service-delivery, being agents of accountability and promoting good governance practices, have a fundamental role to play in advancing the SDGs. Moreover, these goals provide a reversal of emphasis in the direction of localization – with implementation and accountability happening at the local, national and regional level.

A review of MDG-related (Millennium Development Goals) implementation practices across the region[i] reveals that international CSOs focused more on the MDGs as compared to CSOs working on a local level. The question then arises as to if these new set of goals – that provide ample opportunities for dialogue and multi-stakeholder participation[ii] – will propel a shift from this *business as usual* path towards a more meaningful involvement of CSOs in the region in localizing the SDGs; since in order to begin a bottom-up process of transforming the goals into local realities, the SDGs need to be owned by individuals, communities and the civil sector.

The aim of this policy brief is to expose the current situation of CSOs involvement in localizing SDGs across the region in order to advocate for a meaningful involvement of civil society in the process.[iii]

Relevance of SDGs for the Western Balkans

European Integration is the main driver of political reform in the region.[iv] All countries, with the exception of Kosovo, have reached upper-middle income status but overcoming the "middle-income trap" is a long-term strategic policy challenge.[v] As the 2007-2008 financial crisis revealed, growth in the Western Balkans – in contrast to progress in economic reform – is predominantly driven by unsustainable capital inflows and liquidity. As a result, income convergence to European economies is lagging behind; GDP per capita in the region (adjusted for PPP) is roughly one-third that of Southern EU members and only a quarter of richest members in Western Europe.[vi]

Economic growth has not converted to increased well-being across all income groups (as measured using the Gini coefficient). Furthermore, although the financial crisis impacted the region to a lesser degree, it still brought an increase in poverty, with Albania and Montenegro seeing the sharpest rise

in poverty.[vii] Inequalities continue to adversely hinder the enjoyment of basic healthcare, education, and social protection. Severe disparities affect especially access of minority populations such as Roma and Egyptians, persons with disabilities and other minorities or socially vulnerable groups.[viii] Progress towards gender equality has been slow; in almost all countries of the region women have not reached at least 30% participation in decision-making levels, gender pay gap remains at around 20%, female entrepreneurs represent below 10% of the total, and domestic violence is high. [ix] Moreover, discrimination towards vulnerable groups, in general, remains a serious issue.

Box 1. Sustainable Development Goals

Goal 1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere
Goal 2. End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture
Goal 3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages
Goal 4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all
Goal 5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls
Goal 6. Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all
Goal 7. Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all
Goal 8. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all
Goal 9. Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation
Goal 10. Reduce inequality within and among countries
Goal 11. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable
Goal 12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns
Goal 13. Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts
Goal 14. Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development
Goal 15. Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss
Goal 16. Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels
Goal 17. Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development

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Due to declining birth rates and high emigration, almost the entire region is faced with aging and shrinking population.[x] Low employment rates and high long-term unemployment are a salient feature of the labor markets of the region, reflecting underlying structural job challenges. [xi] In 2016, unemployment rates averaged from 17.1% in Serbia to 25.4% in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Youth unemployment and the quality of employment are a particular challenge. Besides, informal sector activities are a prominent feature of the economies of the region.[xii]

Democratic governance and rule of law continues to be an area where the Western Balkans region lags behind – with new worrying trends of political polarization, populist authoritarianism, and declining media freedom emerging in recent times. The average "Democracy Score" (as measured by Freedom House) has been steadily declining in the region since 2010,[xiii] and corruption remains widespread and is deeply rooted in society.[xiv] Likewise, the global trend of shrinking civic space has manifested itself across the region, too.[xv]

In this regional context, Agenda 2030 represents a powerful lever with a common vision on the way to supporting and advancing sustainable development, reconciliation and human security across the Western Balkans. In contrast to MDGs, SDGs are more inclusive and rooted in human rights standards, presenting ample opportunities for local action and local partnerships.

Framework for the Implementation of Agenda 2030

Following the adoption of "2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development" [xvi] at the UN Sustainable Development Summit in September 2015, UN member states started the process of implementing SDGs from 1 January 2016.

Implementation represents a political commitment by UN member states that is not legally binding. However, Agenda 2030 outlines SDGs accompanying targets along with important elements on the Means of Implementation and Follow-up Review. There are several parts to this process.

First, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to implementation. Even though Agenda 2030 gives a universally accepted policy relevant framework, national governments ought to take ownership and lead its implementation in different ways, hinging on their national contexts and establishing their frameworks for the achievement of the 17 Goals.

Second, whatever approach chosen, multi-stakeholder partnerships are recognized as a critical component of this process and likewise all stakeholders, *civil society included*, should contribute to the realization of the Agenda 2030. Additionally, in support to national efforts, implementation is based on the concept of a global partnership characterized by shared responsibility, mutual accountability and engagement.

Third, sustainable development strategies for implementing the Agenda 2030 expect adequate and resource mobilization and novel financing strategies. To this end, Agenda 2030 is complemented by the Addis Ababa Action Agenda [xvii] out of the Third International Conference on Financing for Development, which provides concrete policies and actions to support the implementation of the Agenda.

Fourth, follow-up and monitoring/review mechanisms are included to ensure progress given that the agreed time frame to accomplish the SDGs is 15 years. At the national level, individual member states have the principal obligation to follow-up and monitor the progress in implementing the goals; they have to develop their own indicators to assist in monitoring progress made on the goals and targets. At the global level, the Agenda will be monitored and reviewed using a set of global indicators, developed by the Inter Agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators (IAEIS-SDGs). [xviii] To inform the follow-up and review process, the Secretary General and UN System prepares an annual SDG Progress Report based on the global indicator framework, data from national statistical systems and information collected at the regional level.

Additionally, a High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) on Sustainable Development was established in June 2013 to serve as the main forum for development issues. HLPF oversees the monitoring and review progress at regular intervals. [xix] As part of the review process, governments have already started conducting Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) on their progress in implementing the SDGs, which are "state-led…and should provide a platform for partnerships, including *through participation of major groups and other stakeholders*". [xx] From the Western Balkan countries, only Montenegro has presented its VNRs in 2016; and as of June 2017, there are no other countries in the region signed on to deliver VNRs at the 2017 or 2018 HLPF [xxi].

With regard to EU's approach in achieving the 2030 Agenda, the European Commission (EC) has released a series of communications that outline its approach in achieving SDGs in Europe.[xxii] The Communication "Next steps for a sustainable European future: European action for sustainability" describes how the EC's ten political priorities contribute to implementing the 2030 Agenda through two work streams: mainstreaming the SDGs in European policy frameworks and current Commission priorities, assessing current progress and identifying relevant sustainability concerns; and reflecting on further developing the EU's longer term vision and sectoral policies after 2020.

Localization of SDGs in the Western Balkans

As Agenda 2030 is tracing the path to sustainable development, it appears that the Western Balkans are not falling too far behind – at least, as regards initial steps undertaken to implement SDGs.

Preparatory steps to integrate and align the SDGs in existing national strategies have taken place in almost all Western Balkan countries. All countries, except for Serbia[xxiii], have noted progress towards mainstreaming the SDGs in their national strategies on development. Namely, in Albania, Kosovo and Montenegro, the process has started, while in Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, a gap analysis on the alignment of the national legislation has been prepared.

UNDP, as well as all other UN agencies, are also leading the process. All the countries, except for Kosovo, have signed different strategic documents with the UN regarding the partnership and cooperation for the SDGs[xxiv]. For Kosovo, UN has designed a similar modality[xxv]. The strategic documents bear different names and cover different periods, and each country has signed between 3 to 5 key areas: good governance, social cohesion, environment and climate change, economic growth and employment. Some specific areas include: gender equality and the empowerment of women for Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and culture and development for Serbia.

Table 1. Strategic documents signed with UN

Country	Albania	Kosovo	Macedonia	Serbia	BiH	Montenegro
Areas	1. Governance and Rule of Law	1.Rule of Law	1.Employment	1.Governance and Rule of Law	1.Rule of law and human security	1.Democratic governance
	2.Social Cohesion	2.Social Inclusion	2.Good governance	2.Social and Human Resources Development	2.Sustainable and equitable development and employment	2.Social Inclusion
	3.Economic Growth, Labor and Agriculture	3.Environment and health	3.Social inclusion	3.Economic Development, Growth, and Employment	3.Social inclusion	3.Environmental Sustainability
	4.Environment and Climate Change		4.Environmental sustainability	4.Environment, Climate Change and Resilient Communities	4.The empowerment of women	4.Economic governance
			5.Gender equality	5.Culture and Development		
Total funds	108,9 mil USD	33 mil USD	120,9 mil USD	169,7 mil USD	264,5 mil USD	55,6 mil USD
Funds to be mobilized	70,9 mil USD	15,5 mil USD	81,2 mil USD	93,1 mil USD	131, 1 mil USD	35,9 mil USD
Period	2017-2021	2016-2020	2016-2020	2016-2020	2015-2019	2017-2021

Sources: Respective agreements with UN

Different institutions are leading the localization process of the SDGs, ranging from government offices to key ministries. For instance, the Government Office in Serbia, the Office of the Prime Minister in Albania[xxvi] and Kosovo[xxvii], and the Office of the Vice President of the Government for Economic Issues in Macedonia are the primary institutions responsible for SDGs implementation; whilst in Montenegro it is the Ministry of Sustainable Development and Tourism through its Department for Sustainable Development and Integrated Coastal Zone management (ICZM), and in Bosnia-Herzegovina the Ministry of Finance and Treasury through its Sector Coordination of International Aid.

Moreover, inter-sectoral bodies have been established in Albania (Inter-Ministerial Committee for the achievement of SDGs), Macedonia (National Council for Sustainable Development) and Serbia (Inter-Sectoral Working Group of the Government for Agenda 2030).

Western Balkan CSOs role in the process so far

Mechanisms for the cooperation and meaningful involvement of civil society in SDGs processes do not exist across the region, with the exception of Montenegro.

Concerning the involvement of CSOs in the phase of aligning national documents with SDGs, there appears to be a lack of engagement in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia and Macedonia, followed by a more positive approach in Albania and Kosovo. On the other hand, Montenegro sets out to be the best example of participatory approach that includes non-state actors. CSOs in Montenegro were consulted during the phase of translation of the SDGs in the national strategy, as well as on a regular basis with two representatives of CSOs in the National Council for Sustainable Development, Climate Changes and ICZM.

Besides this, in several countries, civil society was consulted through different events. In Albania and Macedonia, consultative events related to the alignment of SDGs with the national strategic framework were held by the leading institutions in which CSOs could take part. In both countries, a sectoral approach to policy coordination was adopted (Integrated Policy Management Groups in Albania coordinated by the Department of Development, Financing and Foreign Aid of the Prime Minister Office and the National Council for Sustainable development in Macedonia), involving line ministries, main donors, and others such as civil society and local government. In Kosovo, Civikos, the largest civil society platform with a membership of 205 CSOs, has initiated the promotion of SDGs to CSOs and the facilitation of their localization in consultation with civil society. Furthermore, the United Nations Kosovo Team (UNKT) is supporting the process of building of civil society capacities to integrate SDG targets and measure progress of results in the next few years. A micro capital grant agreement financed by UNDP, UNFPA, UNWOMEN and UNDOC was signed with the CIVIKOS platform.

Against this backdrop, even though in Montenegro and Kosovo, as well as in Albania and Macedonia there is a positive trend regarding the political willingness to include CSOs, the main challenge for CSOs to be involved in the accomplishment of Agenda 2030 in Western Balkans remains the lack of political willingness by the national authorities to predict certain roles for CSOs and to consider them as partners in these processes. What is more worrying is that across the regions, CSOs face trends of shrinking space, political instability [xxviii] and frequent elections that hamper the possibility for their development, therefore their dedication to Agenda 2030. Another important challenge is the financial viability and sustainability of CSOs. Western Balkan countries note continuous deterioration of the dialogue between CSOs and public authorities.[xxix] Additionally, another key challenge remains the fact

that CSOs are uninformed about the SDGs, and their prospective role in all the phases or even recognizing how their existing activities are related to global issues.

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Box 2. Benefits from CSOs involvement in the SDGs

The Second High Level Meeting in Nairobi agreed on and reassured the importance of civil society in sustainable development and in leaving no-one behind; in engaging with governments to uphold their commitments; and in being development actors in their own right[1]. Furthermore, according to the EU a vibrant civil society contributes to fulfilling the conditions for EU membership[2]. CSOs in the Western Balkans have proven their capacities to contribute to the democratic consolidations of their respective countries, to promote diversity and respect for human rights, and act as a voice that brings change to the most marginalized and poor citizens.

The collaboration of civil society with other stakeholders (national governments, international organizations, private sector, and academics) can provide numerous benefits in achieving Agenda2030:
- Watchdog activities pointing out to the existing gaps in policies, and addressing the most vulnerable ones;
- Raising awareness activities of burning issues and challenges and advocating for change;
- Bringing expert knowledge and experience and building solutions;
- Providing education, training and other capacity building activities;
- Delivering services to the ones in need for education, health and food;
- Disaster and humanitarian management;
- Experience in understanding the needs of the under-represented communities and the capability to effectively articulate the needs of their constituents;
- Encouraging citizen engagement;
- Promoting fundamental and universal values;
- Innovatively implementing their experience in fundraising for the implementation of the SDGs.

[1] The Nairobi Outcome Document was endorsed in plenary at the Second High-Level Meeting (HLM2) of the Global Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation in the presence of 4,600 delegates from 157 countries and twelve stakeholder groups – governments, civil society, business, foundations, members of parliament, trade unions, academia, regional organisations, youth, local governments and multi-lateral development banks and other international organisations. More here: http://effectivecooperation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/OutcomeDocumentEnglish.pdf
[2] https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/policy/policy-highlights/civil-society_en

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Recommendations and way forward

What can CSOs do?
- Get more informed on the local and global SDG processes;
- Collaborate through wide coalitions on national, regional and global level;
- Mainstream the SDGs in their organizations strategic plan by connecting existing activities, provision of services and collected evidence from the ground;
- Monitor the ongoing process of localization of the SDGs at the national level (the detail level of the baseline, availability of data for the indicators, setting of priorities, involvement of citizens);
- Establish cooperation with the key stakeholders on national level;
- Raise public awareness and facilitate public debates on SDGs, in order to build the support and mobilize the public;
- Engage in innovation and collaboration with different stakeholders on fundraising for implementation of the SDGs;
- Hold governments accountable for what they have agreed by producing shadow reports, particularly thematic reviews on issue where national statistics are lacking;
- Develop a road map to facilitate cooperation in Western Balkans region on the possibilities of working together and finding means for implementation of the SDGs;
- Get involved in consultations in regional, EU, and global processes regarding the global agenda 2030.

What can national governments do?

- Ensure an enabling environment for civil society to be able to freely associate, assemble, and express. Also, provide favourable financial framework for CSOs to develop, as well as enable the dialogue and cooperation with civil society.
- Enable participation of different stakeholders (civil society, private sector, academia, and the wider public) in the design, delivery, monitoring and accountability of the SDGs in order to ensure that the goals are met for everyone;
- Involve CSOs in the implementation of SDGs, through particular institutional structures such as National Councils for Sustainable Development;
- Establish and conduct transparent, participatory, inclusive, and regular reporting mechanisms (review) on the implementation of the SDGs through a national body, which will include broad multi-stakeholder participation.
- Establish parliamentary group for debates concerning the global agenda 2030; Parliaments should hold hearings and engage CSOs, the media, and citizens on the importance of the SDGs and the progress being made.

What can the UN do?

- UN should facilitate cooperation and partnership between civil society and national and local governments, and encourage wide participation of different stakeholders;
- Local UN organizations should find innovative financial and nonfinancial ways to engage with CSOs on raising awareness activities among civil society on SDGs;
- UN should introduce to national CSOs relevant web-tools and internet possibilities to learn and contribute more to the Agenda2030.

What can the EU do?

- EU should further address through policies, advocacy and funding mechanisms the trend of shrinking space in Western Balkan countries, and the need for enabling environment for development of CSOs;
- EU should support the raising awareness and advocacy activities on development education and SDGs of CSOs (consider the possibility for WB CSOs to be involved as partners at DEAR calls for proposals);
- The EU delegations should ensure strong political ownership and avoid that implementation of the SDGs takes place in a political vacuum on national level in Western Balkans.
- EU should ensure that civil society is included in the implementation, as well as measuring the progress of the implementation and the actual impact of policies.

[i] Visit http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/ for The Millennium Development Goals Report and individual country reports.

[ii] "Encourage and promote effective public, public-private and civil society partnerships, building on the experience and resourcing strategies of partnerships" (SDG 17.17) "We encourage member states to conduct regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and sub-national levels. Such reviews should draw on contributions from indigenous peoples, civil society, the private sector and other stakeholders, in line with national circumstances, policies a.nd priorities" (Paragraph 79) -- Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

[iii] The methodological tools employed comprised a review of relevant literature and official documents, and interviews with key informants.

[iv] Albania, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia have EU candidate country status. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo are potential candidates.

[v] www.worldbank.org

[vi] World Economic Outlook. IMF. (October 2015).

[vii] Koczan, Z. (2016). Being Poor, Feeling Poorer: Inequality, Poverty and Poverty Perceptions in the Western Balkans. IMF. Retrieved from: https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/wp/2016/wp1631.pdf

[viii] EC Reports. Retrieved at: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries/package_en

[ix] Structural gender inequality and cultural factors generate multiple forms of discrimination that continue to deprive women of their rights. Read more at: http://www.eurasia.undp.org

[x] At present, demographically only Albania and Kosovo have a high share of young population, but United Nations (UN) population projections indicate that aging of populations will be a feature of all Western Balkan countries in the medium and long-term.

[xi] World Bank. (April 2017). Western Balkans: Labour Market Trends 2017. Retrieved at: http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/336041491297229505/170403-Regional-Report-Western-Balkan-Labor-Market-Trends-2017-FINAL.pdf

[xii] Albeit the data scarcity on the issue.

[xiii] Freedom House (2017). Nations in Transit.

[xiv] World Bank governance indicators. Transparency International's Corruption perceptions index.

[xv] Check the Policy Brief "Fostering and Enabling Environment for Civil Society Contribution to Global Development". (2017). Balkan Civil Society Development Network.

[xvi] Accessible here: http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1&Lang=E

[xvii] Accessible here: http://www.un.org/esa/ffd/ffd3/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2015/07/Addis-Ababa-Action-Agenda-Draft-Outcome-Document-7-July-2015.pdf

[xviii] Read more here: http://sdg.iisd.org/commentary/policy-briefs/the-2030-agendas-missing-piece-update-on-sdg-indicators/

[xix] The first HLPF meeting convened in New York from 11 to 20 July 2016; and the second is scheduled for 10 to 19 July 2017.

[xx] http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/67/290

[xxi] https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf

[xxii] http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-16-3883_en.htm

[xxiii] A new National Sustainable Development Strategy in line with SDGs is considered to be developed, since the previous strategy is not operational.

[xxiv] Kosovo is a non-UN member state recognized by at least one UN member state. It is recognized by 111 UN members and Taiwan, the Sovereign Military Order of Malta, the Cook Islands, and Niue.

[xxv] UN Common Development Plan 2016-2020 http://unkt.org/en/cdp/

[xxvi] The Strategic Planning and Development Unit, within the Department for Development, Financing and Foreign Aid.

[xxvii] As for Kosovo, focal points are appointed in three key institutions (Office of the Prime Minister, Ministry of European Integration and Ministry of Finance), in order to collaborate on mainstreaming and aligning national strategies and plans with SDG targets and indicators.