

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN WESTERN BALKAN COUNTRIES: AN ANALYSIS OF DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

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The Western Balkan countries, including Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, participate in the framework of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set by the United Nations. In total, there are 193 countries committed to fulfilling the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which was implemented in 2015. One of the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals is to promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth and decent work for all. This goal is expressed in the following indicators: employment and unemployment rates, people killed in accidents at work, real GDP per capita, resource productivity, and domestic material consumption. The aim of this paper is to analyze SDG 8 in the Western Balkan economies. Since the Western Balkan countries are EU candidates or potential candidates, comparing their performance with the EU average is vital. The results show that although Western Balkan countries have improved their performance, they still fall behind the EU average. They should focus more on increasing their economic growth rates and providing more sustainable workplaces. Therefore, future actions to be enhanced by the economic policy in the Western Balkans should include the implementation of legal facilitations for start-ups and other firms in order to boost the stimulus for entrepreneurship, develop sustainable migration policy, and promote stable forms of employment.

Key words: decent work, economic growth, sustainable development, the Western Balkans (WB).

INTRODUCTION

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted in 2015. The leaders of 193 United Nations member states signed the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development document. This document includes 17 SDGs, which indicate areas of great importance for humanity and the environment: people, planet, prosperity, peace, and partnership (abbreviated as 5xP). The UN's SDGs are an action plan for changes and transformations in the world, in which economic development should be enhanced with social development and careful consideration of environmental concerns (Hess, 2016; Lee *et al.*, 2016). Economic development is one of the three pillars of sustainable development. It is a process by which the current level of prosperity should at least be maintained. The next pillar is sustainable social development, which is the ability of an economy to provide its society with well-

being. The last pillar is environmental protection, with its primary assumption to preserve the natural environment. In sustainable development, environmental issues are of great importance. During the development of nations, social and economic progress have very often happened at the expense of the natural system (Pearce *et al.*, 2019).

There are several challenges associated with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including climate change, education, gender equality, health, hunger, peace, poverty, and social justice. Since there are numerous indicators applied in different SDGs, it might be problematic to distinguish which goals should be prioritized (Lomborg, 2018). Some opinions even question the concept of SDGs, since it might be impossible to achieve a sustainable economic system in times of ongoing globalization processes (Barry *et al.*, 2004). Although some words of criticism are directed towards the idea of SDGs, they remain a widely useful and standardized tool to measure and compare performance in the economic, social, and environmental spheres of a number of countries worldwide.

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The Western Balkan (WB) countries refer to six countries in Southern and Eastern Europe: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Kosovo², Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. These countries are part of the EU Enlargement Policy since they are either candidate countries, except Kosovo, which is a potential candidate. It is vital to track their performance in Sustainable Development Goals and compare it with the EU's.

The first part of this paper is devoted to SDG no. 8: decent work and economic growth. Then, the paper provides an analysis of SDG 8 indicators in the Western Balkan countries, except Kosovo due to the substantial lack of data, and compares them to the EU's average. It also presents a discussion of the results, followed by a conclusion and description of some further research ideas on this topic.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOAL NUMBER 8: DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

The main aim of SDG 8 is to promote stable, sustainable, and inclusive economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all people. Table 1 presents the detailed objectives of SDG 8.

Sustainable economic development has been a matter discussed by many scientific papers (Barbier, 1987; Higgins, 2014; Phillips and Besser, 2016). Sustainability, in this sense, links economic growth with social development and takes into consideration environmental measures. Focusing on achieving only a high level of economic growth may bring negative consequences, such as the lack of not only water, but also forest and land. However, trying to take care only of the environment without the need to achieve economic

growth is seen as a utopia. As more and more people are on the planet, there is also a growing demand for good living conditions, so more resources are needed. Therefore, growth should be associated with environmental issues (Munier, 2006).

A similar logic applies to social development. For an average citizen, numbers like the GDP per capita or GDP growth do not provide any valuable information. However, factors like access to good healthcare services, kindergartens, and good infrastructure projects (roads, broadband, etc.) are of great importance. Therefore, economic growth is only sustainable when it comes with its social and environmental components (Cuthill, 2010; Frischmann, 2012).

It should be noted that approximately half of the total population worldwide lives on about \$1 - \$2 per day (Rosa, 2017). This implies that having a job does not necessarily secure enough financial remuneration to make a living. On the other hand, these sustainable jobs often require education and qualifications that are not affordable for many people. This phenomenon is often called an endless cycle of poverty, which can have negative lifelong social and health consequences (Ansalone, 2003; Sayed *et al.*, 2013). It is confirmed that people with a low socioeconomic status must deal with a high level of physical and mental obstacles, which may result in failing to meet basic psychological needs and causing emotional exhaustion and an increasing stress level (González *et al.*, 2016).

The proposed solution for offering sustainable jobs is the concept of so-called green jobs (Boromisa *et al.*, 2015; Consoli *et al.*, 2016). According to the International Labour Organization (2016): "green jobs are decent jobs that

Table 1. Objectives of SDG 8
(Source: United Nations website <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal8>)

8.1 Maintain per capita economic growth, taking into account national circumstances. Achieve and maintain at least 7% annual gross domestic product growth in the least developed countries.
8.2 Achieve higher levels of economic efficiency through diversification, technological modernization and innovation, focusing on high value-added and labour-intensive sectors.
8.3 Promote development policies that support productive activity, decent job creation, entrepreneurship, creativity, and innovation. Encourage the formalization and development of micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises, including through access to financial services.
8.4 By 2030, gradually increase the resource efficiency of global consumption and production and strive to break the link between economic growth and environmental degradation, in line with the Ten-Year Framework Programs for Sustainable Consumption and Production, with developed countries leading the way.
8.5 By 2030, ensure full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including young people and people with disabilities; ensure equal pay for work of equal value.
8.6 By 2020, substantially reduce the proportion of young people not in employment, education, and training.
8.7 Take immediate and effective measures to eliminate forced labour, modern forms of slavery, and human trafficking; prohibit and eliminate the worst forms of child labour, including the recruitment and use of child soldiers. By 2025, eliminate child labour in all its forms.
8.8 Protect workers' rights and promote a safe working environment for all, including workers, and including migrant workers, particularly migrant women, and people in precarious employment.
8.9 By 2030, develop and implement policies that promote sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products.
8.10 Increase the capacity of domestic financial institutions to facilitate and expand access to banking, insurance, and financial services for all.
8.a Increase Aid for Trade support to developing countries, in particular the least developed countries, including through the Enhanced Integrated Framework Program for Trade Development for Trade-Related Technical Assistance to Least Developed Countries.
8.b By 2020, develop and implement a global youth employment strategy and the Global Jobs Pact of the International Labour Organization.

²This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999.

contribute to preserve or restore the environment, be they in traditional sectors such as manufacturing and construction, or in new, emerging green sectors such as renewable energy and energy efficiency". Figure 1 presents green jobs in the area marked with lines.

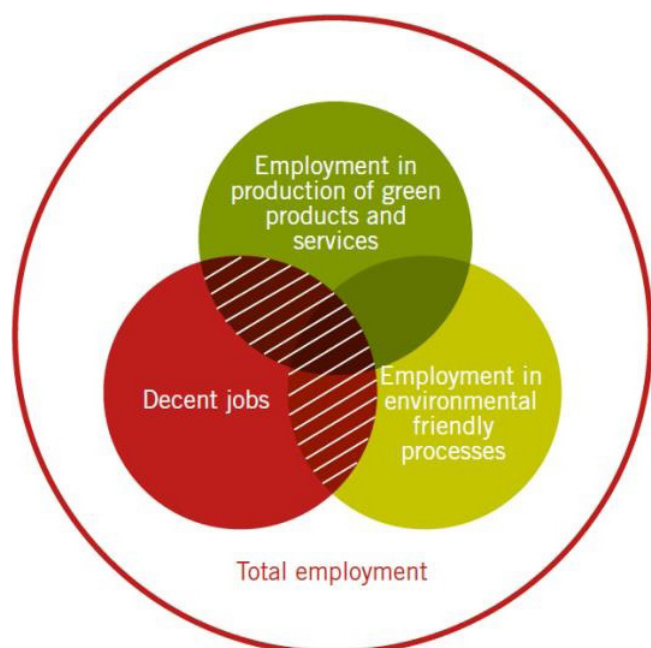


Figure 1. Green jobs

(Source: International Labour Organization, 2016)

However, jobs that provide green goods and services often demand higher qualifications, better work conditions including health and safety issues, and higher remuneration. Thus, these jobs are offered in well-developed economies, including the US, China, Germany, and Spain. Another problematic aspect of green jobs is that it is difficult to implement them in some sectors, such as agriculture, building and construction, recycling, and waste management. These sectors are often exposed to hazardous working conditions, low salaries, problems with job security, and also often issues with social benefits (Poshen, 2015). Another study suggests that SDG 8 should instead be named sustainable work and economic degrowth. SDG 8 undermines social dimensions and biophysical boundaries and as a result, inhibits society's ability to achieve the other SDGs and avoid environmental disasters. SDG 8 causes a discourse of climate delay, since focusing on economic growth and increasing employment might result in unsustainable outcomes (Kreinin and Aigner, 2022).

Apart from the potential drawbacks of the SDG concept and SDG 8 in particular, they are undoubtedly widely applicable, since they cover 193 UN countries. This study provides clear evidence of the performance of the Western Balkan countries in indicators associated with decent work and economic growth.

DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH IN WESTERN BALKAN COUNTRIES

The Western Balkan countries are in the process of European integration, and so they are well-monitored regarding the socio-economic development measures named as chapters of the *acquis*. Although progress is noted, they are still lagging behind the EU average in economic development (Dabrowski and Myachenkova, 2018; Endrődi-Kovács and Tankovsky, 2022; Uvalić, 2019). Considering decent work exclusively, the Western Balkans have some significant constraints that need to be addressed: income inequality, the shadow economy, and inefficient institutions (Tevdovski, 2015). Problems with income inequalities, unemployment, and demographic crisis have even worsened since the COVID-19 pandemic (Stefanova, 2022). Hence, the analysis in this section covers selected indicators of decent growth and economic development for Western Balkan countries and compares their performance with the EU average (EU27).

In times of global financial crises and recovery, the highest economic growth was noted in Albania, ranging from 4.05% in 2009 to 1.58% in 2012 (Figure 2). It was the only country with a positive growth rate throughout the whole period 2009-2019. The remaining countries and the EU27 had a negative growth rate in 2009. In 2019, however, the best-performing countries in terms of GDP growth were Serbia, with a growth rate of almost 5%, Montenegro (which managed to grow from the last position of -6% in 2009) with more than 4%, and North Macedonia with nearly 4% economic growth. Table 2 shows the GDP growth beyond 2019, which in all cases was negative as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. The worst performer was Montenegro, with a decline of GDP per capita of more than 15% in 2020 while Serbia suffered the least from economic downturn (only a 0.3% drop in GDP) out of all of the Western Balkan countries. In the following year, the Montenegrin economy experienced the fastest recovery of more than a 12% increase in GDP per capita, while only North Macedonia, with a score of 4.34%, was below the EU average growth rate of 5.51%.

Table 2. Annual growth rate of real GDP per capita (in %) in Western Balkan countries
(Source: Own elaboration by the Author based on World Bank data)

Country	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Albania	4.05	4.22	2.82	1.58	1.19	1.99	2.52	3.48	3.90	4.28	2.52	-2.93	9.55
BiH	-2.53	1.70	2.18	0.72	4.15	2.91	4.67	4.46	4.24	4.60	3.55	-2.52	7.67
EU27	-4.57	2.11	2.04	-0.85	-0.27	1.32	2.09	1.79	2.66	1.90	1.76	-6.01	5.51
North Macedonia	-0.54	3.14	2.16	-0.58	2.78	3.46	3.72	2.74	0.98	2.80	3.89	-5.92	4.34
Montenegro	-6.00	2.55	3.12	-2.81	3.45	1.68	3.33	2.93	4.70	5.10	4.10	-15.21	12.64
Serbia	-2.34	1.14	2.85	-0.20	3.39	-1.13	2.31	3.88	2.65	5.07	4.89	-0.28	8.25

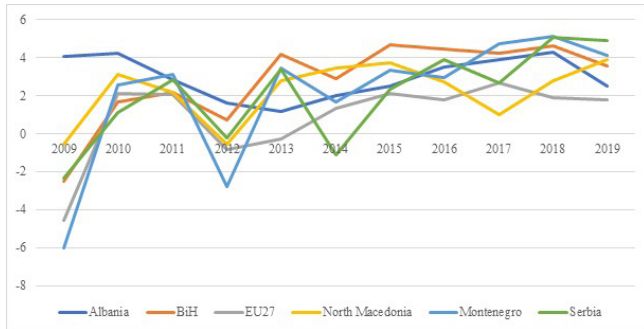


Figure 2. Annual growth rate of real GDP per capita (in %) in Western Balkan countries
(Source: Own elaboration based on the World Bank data)

The unemployment level is below expectations for the Western Balkan economies (Figure 3). In all the years of the analysis, these countries have not managed to have a lower unemployment rate than that of EU27. The worst performing countries in 2011-2018 were North Macedonia (the unemployment rate ranged from 20 to 31%) and BiH (here it was 18-28%). Albania was the best-performing country, with a score of 13.5% in 2011 and 12.3% in 2018, while the EU average was 9.8% in 2011 and 6.7% in 2018. The situation in recent years slightly changed, and Serbia has been the leader from the Western Balkan countries, with Montenegro, North Macedonia, and BiH having the highest values of unemployment rates.

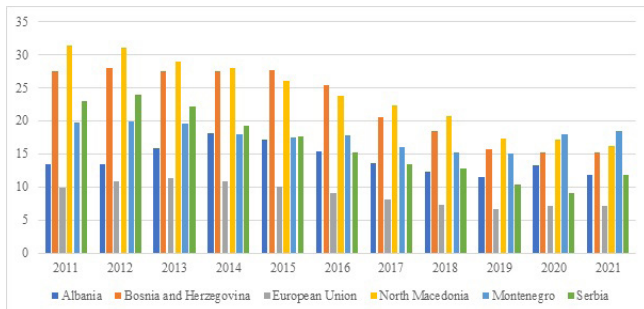


Figure 3. The unemployment rate in Western Balkan countries (% of the total labour force, modelled ILO estimate)
(Source: Own elaboration based on World Bank data)

Possible reasons for high unemployment can be seen in the results of the next indicator, which is: the share of youth not in education, employment or training (Figure 4). This indicator measures the share of people aged 15 to 29 who are not employed and at the same time were not in the process of education or training (formal or non-formal) for the four weeks prior to the Labour Force Survey (LFS). The most severe problem regarding young human capital concerns Albania (where the share of youth not in education or employment exceeded 25% from 2011 to 2019, and it was even above 30% in 2011, 2013, and 2014). However, it is the country with the lowest unemployment rate in the WB region. The situation concerning inactive youth was also difficult in BiH and North Macedonia during 2011-2020, as demonstrated by the high unemployment rate (Figure 3). Montenegro (except for 2020) and Serbia had the lowest level of inactive youth in the range of 15-22% in the 2011-2022 period, which was still higher than the EU average of 10-13%. The problem of youth not in education,

employment or training might also be seen in that there is still a tendency to emigrate in order to find a better-paid job abroad (Gërmenji and Milo, 2011; King and Oruc, 2019). This is known as the brain drain or brain waste concept, which has a high frequency in WB countries (Bartlett *et al.*, 2016; Uvalic, 2008, 2011).

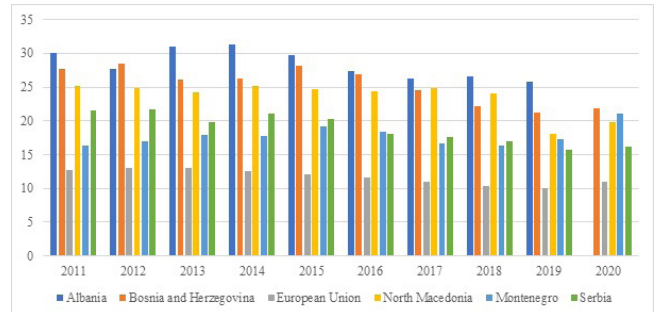


Figure 4. Share of youth not in education, employment or training in Western Balkan countries, total (% of youth population)
Note: Data for Albania in 2020 were missing
(Source: Own elaboration based on World Bank data)

There can be several reasons why people do not work, and thus are outside the labour force, although they would like to work. One of them is obviously due to caring responsibilities, mainly related to other people, e.g. their own children, relatives' children, or adults (ill, elderly, disabled), but also other personal or family responsibilities. The largest inactive population aged 20 to 64 due to caring responsibilities was noted in Montenegro, where in 2013 and 2015, its volume exceeded 42% and 43%, respectively (Figure 5). There were no data available for Albania or BiH. In recent years, other remaining WB countries were still far from the EU average, which did not go beyond 25%.

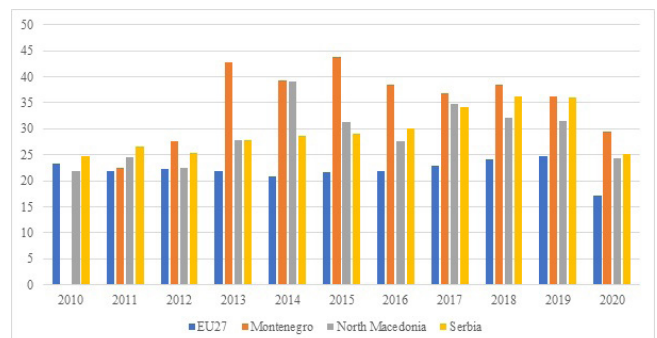


Figure 5. Inactive population due to caring responsibilities in Western Balkan countries, as a % of inactive population aged 20 to 64
Note: Data for Albania, BiH were not available and were missing for some countries in 2011-2016
(Source: Own elaboration based on Eurostat data)

The last but not the least indicator selected for this study refers to the concept of a vicious cycle of poverty. It measures the share of people who have worked at least for the past six months but who earn below the risk-of-poverty threshold, which amounts to 60% of the national median income (more specifically it is an equivalised disposable income, calculated after the deduction of social transfers). The share of the in work at-risk-of-poverty rate in recent years was highest in Albania, with a volume of nearly 18% in 2017, while in the years 2013-2016, it was highest in

Serbia, however, data for Albania during these years were not available (Figure 6). Other WB countries (except for BiH where the data were unavailable) have been oscillating close to the EU average in recent years. Montenegro was the best-performing country on average in this indicator, noting a level below that of EU27 for most years.

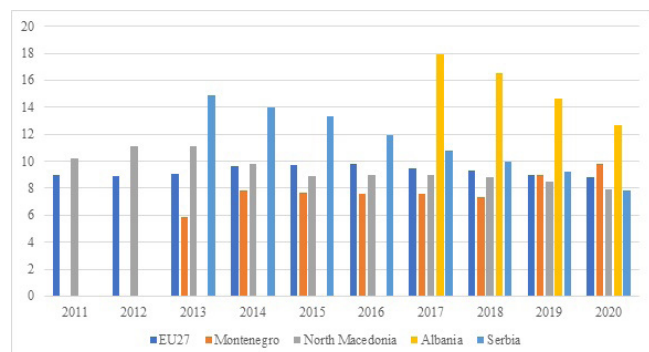


Figure 6. In work at-risk-of-poverty rate in Western Balkan countries, % of employed persons aged 18 or over

Note: Data for BiH were not available and were missing for some countries in 2011-2016

(Source: Own elaboration by the Author based on Eurostat data)

CONCLUSION

Western Balkan countries are on the way towards joining the EU, so it is vital to monitor their performance relative to the EU in different economic aspects. One of them is obviously SDGs connected with the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In this framework, many indicators related to different goals refer to a country's economic situation. However, one strict goal is designed to assess economic growth and decent work, namely SDG 8.

The analysis of selected SDG 8 indicators showed that there is indeed economic potential in the WB region, as indicated in the economic growth dynamics. Regarding unemployment, most WB countries noted progress over time, however, it still remains one of the most significant challenges; in 2021, its level ranged between 11.8% to 18.5% across the WB area, while in the EU it was 6.7%. In addition, the inactive youth population is also an issue in WB economies – the lowest unemployment level was noted in Serbia reaching almost 16.2% while in the EU, it was nearly 11% in 2020. There is also a similar trend concerning the inactive population due to caring responsibilities. Although WB countries have improved in this measure, its 2020 level (exceeding 24% where data were available) for example, was much higher than for the EU (17.2%). The last indicator is the share of employed people at-risk-of-poverty. The results show that most of the WB countries noted an improvement in this measure: North Macedonia from 10.2% in 2011 to 9.8% in 2020, Albania from 17.9% in 2017 to 12.7% in 2020, and Serbia from 14.95 to 7.8% in 2020; however, Montenegro experienced the opposite trend starting from a very low level of 5.9% and ending up with 9.8% in 2020, while the average score for the EU in 2020 was 8.8%.

Western Balkan countries still need to address some burning issues like relatively high unemployment, a high inactive share of young people, an inactive population

due to caring responsibilities, and the in work at-risk-of-poverty rate. These are all tasks of economic policymakers who should shape policies directed to the citizens which will foster employment, competitiveness, innovation and support young people, especially in the early stages of their careers. On top of that, policymakers are not alone in this task since they also have different programs offered through the EU Enlargement Policy, helping to reduce the gap in socioeconomic measures for EU candidate and potential candidate countries.

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