

HOW IMPORTANT IS THE GREEN ECONOMY FOR THE WESTERN BALKAN COUNTRIES?

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INTRODUCTION

The green economy is an emerging concept that is being examined generally in the high level dialog and is often not fully grasped by the wider public. Green economy encompasses diverse approaches and numerous segments at the same time. This complexity creates a need to educate people from all stakeholder groups

“A green economy is defined as low carbon, resource efficient and socially inclusive. In a green economy, growth in employment and income are driven by public and private investment into such economic activities, infrastructure and assets that allow reduced carbon emissions and pollution, enhanced energy and resource efficiency, and prevention of the loss of biodiversity and ecosystem services” (UNEP, 2011).

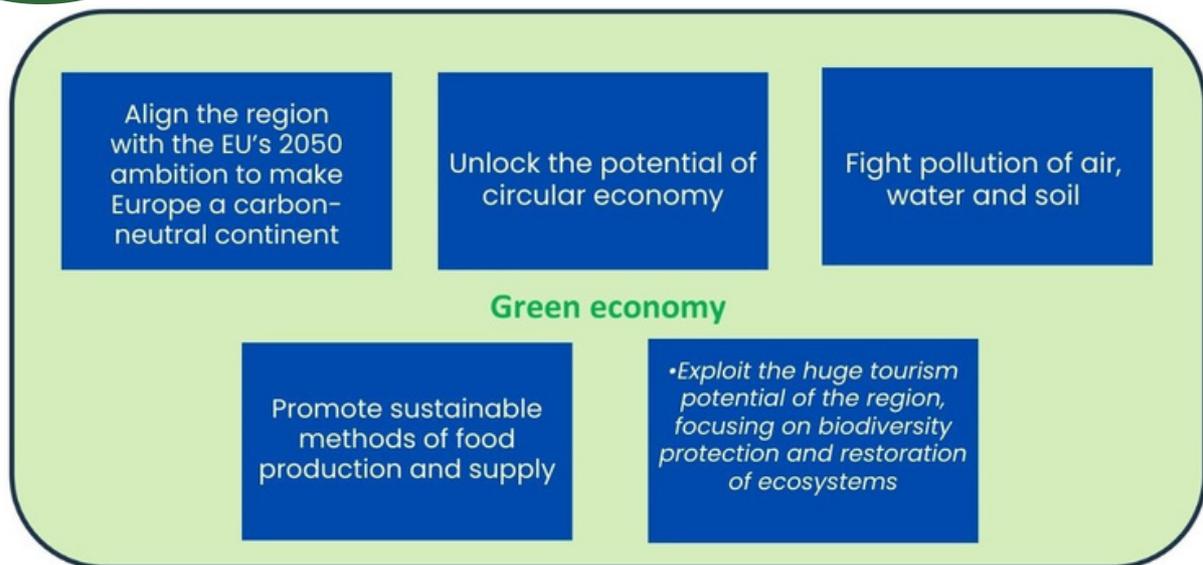
WB countries have policies and legislation in place, but they are not defined or adjusted entirely to the green economy concept. The green economy is tackled, however limited financial resources are dedicated to implementation of its inclusion in developed strategies and programs. The countries' development goals are primarily focused on instant benefits, neglecting the sustainability to which the green economy contributes. Furthermore, there is no civil activism that will improve the situation due to the low level of awareness of the topic.

Raising the public awareness about the green economy concept can have meaningful results in the endeavors for improvement of the socio-economic situation in the WB rural areas. One of the current major problems faced by the whole world are the negative effects of the climate change, where the implementation of the green economy can have a significant role by reducing greenhouse gas emissions, conserving natural resources, promoting sustainability, and building resilience to climate impacts. Moreover, the transition to a green economy can create new job opportunities in renewable energy, energy efficiency, conservation, and other sustainable sectors. This can stimulate economic growth while reducing dependence on carbon-intensive industries.

In addition, any alignment with EU policies will put the WB countries a step forward in the approximation process to the EU. The practicing of green economy is one of the priorities of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, which represents an essential document for addressing pressing environmental challenges, promoting sustainable economic development,

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and aligning with EU standards and the EU Green Deal (EC, 2020). It is an opportunity for the region to improve the well-being of its citizens, protect its natural resources, and contribute to global efforts to combat climate change and protect the environment. The main goals of this Green Agenda for the Western Balkans are fully compatible with the green economy concept:



MAIN FINDINGS

Within the framework of the project “Networking and Advocacy for Green Economy - NAGE”, aimed to support and enhance the policy and decision-making impact of the Balkan Rural Development Network (BRDN) and its constituents, many drivers and hindrances linked to the green economy transition were recognized in the Western Balkan countries (Martinovska Stojcheska et al., 2021). Some of the main findings include:

Drivers:

- Raise awareness and knowledge about the green economy concept and mainstreaming green economy principles, initiatives, and actions into the development of rural areas;
- coordinate the policy agenda between institutions / harmonized policy agenda (ex. harmonization of national policies with the CAP and their alignment with the EU Green Deal and Farm-to-Fork strategy)
- Increase the support for green economy in rural development programs.
- strengthen institutions with continuous capacity building, which will in turn create conditions for more successful and prompter use of rural development and similar programs.
- encourage and enable private sector investments and green business models.

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Hindrances:

- Depopulation from rural areas, as a major persisting problem;
 - Small scale farming system which creates difficulties in having a wide access to the market and sustainable operation;
 - Lack of infrastructure and services in rural areas (road infrastructure, social and health infrastructure);
 - Lack and low skilled labor forces;
 - Lack of information and knowledge on green economy;
 - Lack of funds for support of the rural development process, especially for support of the green economy implementation;
- Low prioritization and political will dedicated to the shift to a green economy;
 - Weak capacities of local communities in the context of natural resources management and solving environmental problems.

Rural development programmes can be crucial in fostering the shift to a green economy by supporting investments that are low-carbon, resource-efficient, and socially defensible, as well as by encouraging the sustainable management of natural resources in both agriculture and other economic sectors. There are many measures within the Western Balkan rural development policies, but hardly any of them openly and directly address or even less actually target the green economy. Greater effort should be put into using the IPARD programs, which are financed by the EU, to plan, program, manage, and put into effect green economy-related actions.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to enhance the social and economic well-being of the rural areas of the Western Balkans and to bring rural development policies in line with EU standards and the European Union Green Deal, the present position paper provides recommendations on what all stakeholders should do:

- **Raise awareness** about the importance of the green economy including institutional strengthening of human capacities.
- Educate and **build capacity of key stakeholders** such as farmers, processors, distributors, suppliers, other entrepreneurs, employees in the related institutions, civil society sector, and public (organize workshops, seminars and other forms of education and knowledge transfer).
- **Strengthen inter- sectorial cooperation** between the relevant ministries for agriculture, rural development, environmental protection, education, and economy, as well as the cooperation between the key stakeholders in the green economy ecosystem.
- **Adopt a legislation on green economy** (Preparatory regulatory impact assessment for laws on green economy)
- Simplify procedures for access to financial support (Advocate the idea for simplified procedures. Increase the budgetary allocations!)
- Encourage faster accreditation and implementation of Agri-environment-climate and organic farming, IPARD measure in WB countries.

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- **Promote green economy** models to the business sector.

All major players (producers, processors, suppliers, advisory services, the research community,

CSOs, and consumers) must be included in order to strengthen the process by raising and developing fluid knowledge about the green economy across the sector. All the players in the countries and the area must work together to overcome major obstacles if we are to create a sustainable environmental future.

Additionally, it is crucial to have proper measuring tools and indicators in place so that policymakers can assess the effectiveness of the regulations and gauge the pace at which society is moving toward a greener path.

SOURCES

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Balkan Rural Development Network
Address: “Kosta Veselinov” 3A Skopje, N. Macedonia
Phone:+389 2 3075 506
Website: www.brdnetwork.org ; <http://brd-network.org/>
E-mail: info@brdnetwork.org