



The Role of Civil Society in Implementing the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans and Decarbonizing the Economy

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Introduction

Just as the Green Deal is a challenge for EU member states, the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (GAWB) is a massive challenge for the region and its economies that requires taking urgent and bold steps toward implementation. During times when decarbonization and energy transition are a priority, it falls upon governments of the region to provide the necessary regulatory environment for companies and to drive forward the process which they declaratively support to a great extent. However, implementation is lagging behind. Moreover, the transformation of the energy sector is not the only challenge we are facing, it may not even be the biggest one. Decarbonizing the transport and food production sectors and creating a circular economy, while at the same time ensuring that the transition is socially just, may prove to be an even bigger challenge of which our societies may not even be aware.

To this end, the ultimate goal for the civil society sector is to generate political will to move WB societies from where they are currently towards a decarbonized economy and an implemented GAWB. This paper discusses the roles and challenges of the civil society sector in fulfilling their role in driving forward the implementation of GAWB.

The Roles of Civil Society Organizations and Think Tanks in Promoting the Green Transition

Civil society organizations, think tanks, and researchers in the WB region have worked on issues related to promoting a green transition for a very long time, generating knowledge, gaining experience, and positively impacting the

democratic process in relation to these issues. The GAWB now prioritizes the issues these actors have been advocating for over a long period of time. In supporting a successful implementation of the GAWB they play an important role by providing independent research and data, formulating policy recommendations, advocating for change, and monitoring the implementation of legislation.

Their roles in implementing the GAWB can be multiple, but relate mainly to the following:

- Creating space for public dialogue;
- Acting as “agents of change”;
- Being watchdogs of the authorities and financing institutions.

At this point in time in relation to the GAWB, the role of creating space for public dialogue is one of the most important, as all stakeholders have different views on the priorities and challenges related to implementing the GAWB. Under those circumstances, CSOs and think tanks often act as the “voice of reason” that tries to promote and facilitate dialogue between all relevant stakeholders. Although this is not a role that belongs exclusively to CSOs, when the discussion comes to a standstill, they often advocate for finding solutions by providing data and research and offering innovative solutions. While their role in this discussion is often at the level of providing recommendations because they have no direct power in executing and implementing, their experience and knowledge can be of great help for institutions and businesses when planning and communicating difficult subjects, such as the transition towards a decarbonized economy. As this transition will inevitably lead to a change in society, CSOs can contribute to facilitating dialogue between stakeholders, on the one hand, and to explaining the change for citizens on the other hand.

This role is directly related to being “agents of change.” While facilitating dialogue can be part of bringing about change, making true progress includes many other roles, such as empowering



citizens to act by providing them with relevant information, creating public pressure and increasing the capacity of all relevant stakeholders, including media, to understand and deal with issues related to the GAWB. Further roles of CSOs related to making true progress include pushing for implementation and adoption of new policies that are aligned with GAWB, promoting innovation and innovative practices, and speaking publicly and openly about challenges and opportunities. The GAWB requires that we change our lives completely, and in all sectors – from how we eat, to how we move, to how we transport goods, to how we use energy and resources. All these are reflected in the five pillars of the Green Agenda, but unfortunately, in spite of the Sofia Declaration, the policies of today do not yet reflect this change. CSOs, think tanks, and researchers have the very important role of pushing for reforms of the unsuitable policies, which for certain pillars may turn out to be very demanding and time-consuming.

The role of being the watchdog of the authorities and financing institutions includes monitoring the alignment of policies with the requirements of the GAWB by the authorities and the extent of official commitments being carried out. This also includes holding decision-makers accountable for non-implementation and publicly criticizing the lack of reforms.

Challenges and Barriers to the Role of the Civil Society Sector

When it comes to challenges and barriers, the general difficulties which CSOs, think tanks, and researchers in the Western Balkans region face in their everyday work apply to working on implementing the GAWB as well. Shrinking space for civil society, reduced freedom of speech, political blockades, and low political will to address the challenges are barriers CSOs and think tanks face in their daily work and they try to work around these as well as they can.

Furthermore, the number of organizations which have expertise on and interest in environmental and climate issues in the WB is limited. As an example, the National Climate

Coalition in North Macedonia has 30 members (as of October 2021), however only ten actively work on climate issues, while for others this is more of an occasional issue.

Research shows that air pollution and poor waste management are the most visible environmental issues of public concern,¹ however awareness about the causes is low, which in turn results in the public not connecting these most burning issues to the GAWB. CSOs, think tanks, and experts produce plenty of research, recommendations, and policy papers which would help the public and decision-makers make the connection between environmental problems and the GAWB; however, the low capacities for working with the media result in their communications not getting enough media attention. As media coverage for environmental issues and topics related to GAWB is low, raising awareness for decarbonization as well as other pillars of the GAWB is also slow. If we add to this the lack of media freedom in WB countries, the challenge becomes even bigger.

Academia is the source of another big challenge as it plays a very important part in educating the experts and decision-makers of tomorrow. It is up to the universities to teach students to be innovative by constantly integrating new developments into curricula. This is particularly relevant to subjects related to environmental policies, considering these policies get more ambitious every day, causing study materials to become outdated very quickly.

Another challenge is the lack of regional approaches by CSOs to the issue of driving the GAWB forward. While the Action Plan for the Implementation of the Sofia Declaration on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans 2021-2030² (Action Plan) foresees a multitude of measures for implementing the GAWB, the deadlines and expectations are rather unspecific, leading to lack of clarity on what can be expected until 2030. Therefore, it falls upon CSOs, think tanks, and researchers to coordinate first on the national level and then on the regional level and to make sure the push to implementing the GAWB actually happens. However, coordinated efforts tend to be scarce.

¹ Source: Representative sample research in North Macedonia carried out in 2018 for Eko-svest by Brima.

² Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), *Action Plan for the Implementation of the Sofia Declaration on the Green Agenda*

for the Western Balkans 2021-2030, (October 4, 2021), <https://www.rcc.int/download/docs/GAWB%20ACTION%20PLAN.pdf/a2e802a86437b9aa0e3501cfc46d437.pdf> (accessed October 28, 2021).



In addition, the incomplete transposition of the EU *acquis* and non-implementation of already transposed legislation make for further challenges for CSOs, think tanks, and researchers. The incomplete transposition of the EU *acquis* often means that while their EU counterparts can rely on certain pieces of legislation in their advocacy efforts, WB organizations often cannot do the same as those legislation pieces are not transposed or aligned with EU legislation. An example are the different emission limit values for air pollution in different WB countries, which in turn means that polluting facilities cannot be held to the same standards. There is a hyper-production of reports on topics related to incomplete transposition and non-implementation of legislation, however their impact is limited for reasons already mentioned above. In view of implementing the GAWB, a potential problem is that policies and strategies are aligned with it, but there are problems with the implementation.

The GAWB would be more of a priority for decision-makers if they had higher awareness on the opportunities it brings. This challenge is partially related to the fact that the problems the business sector identifies in relation to implementing the GAWB are immediate, while the benefits that the CSO sector points to, even though greater, lie in the future and come at a high cost, which is a burden governments have difficulty affording. This results in the business community's voice being heard more strongly as their leverage is more powerful and immediate in comparison to the voice of civil society, which speaks of benefits that lie in the future. Fortunately, the Action Plan coincides with an Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans which foresees as much as 30 billion EUR for the WB in the period 2021-2027. If absorbed appropriately and put to good use for implementation of GAWB-related policies and practices, these funds are able to make a substantial change in the region.

Recommendations for Empowering Civil Society, Think Tanks, and Researchers in Their Roles

In order to empower civil society, think tanks, and researchers in their roles, the fostering of a structured approach to implementing the GAWB is key. The Action Plan for the Implementation of Green Agenda is a positive

step, although it remains to be seen how it will help CSOs, think tanks, and researchers in their efforts to foster public discussion on the topic. Empowering CSOs can be done through opening more fora for discussion with relevant stakeholders in a structured manner and by providing space for discussion on how to introduce the necessary change with the least negative impact. Below are recommendations based on the identified challenges, addressed to different groups of stakeholders.

For Decision-Makers

- Build a partner relationship with CSOs, think tanks, and researchers, which can bring multiple benefits to decision-makers at all levels. The civil society sector has expertise on many topics and can help to improve strategic documents, policies, and legislative drafts. It is in the best interest of decision-makers to use this expertise.
- Put to good use the multitude of reports that CSOs, think tanks, and expert researchers produce, where the priorities are highlighted, and creative and innovative solutions are offered. The multitude of reports and analyses produced can be used to push for innovative solutions and help to drive society forward. This is an opportunity for decision-makers which should be used to the benefit of all citizens.
- Speed up the transposition of the EU *acquis*, which will help the general situation of the environment. While the chapter on environment is one of the most costly and difficult chapters to align with, it has the potential to generate savings in other sectors, including health, while at the same time providing jobs, including green jobs.
- Ensure that the energy transition that results from the decarbonization of the economy is just for all members of society. While this is a costly process, support is available from various donors.
- Prioritize the implementation of strategies and policies and the enforcement of legislation, as a key factor for implementing the GAWB. If not implemented properly and by all sectors of society, the GAWB will remain “just another strategy.”



For Businesses

- Seek ways to use the opportunities the GAWB offers and to adapt to its requirements very quickly. It will not be possible to move society forward at all if the business sector wants to continue the “business as usual” scenario.
- Work in partnership with the civil society sector on promoting new scenarios and helping to create new policies.

For Civil Society, Think Tanks, and Experts

- Work in partnership with each other on the national and regional level. The mainstreaming of GAWB into national policies and strategic documents is a very important advocacy point for CSOs and think tanks. This advocacy would be much easier and more successful if the sector had a joint approach. Coalition building on the topic, both on the national and regional level, can contribute to finding a joint approach, making sure the sector speaks with one voice which will be more easily heard.
- Increase capacities for working with the media. This would help make communications and reports more attractive to media, thus making sure the public sees and reads them. This would, in turn, contribute to raising awareness on the need for the implementation of the GAWB and its acceptance by citizens.
- Make the GAWB part of advocacy efforts, even if only indirectly through supporting coalitions which work on the issue. While it is clear that governments are the ones who need to make the change happen, it is upon civil society to request this change from them and to make sure that the public calls for a society with a decarbonized, circular economy which offers green jobs.

For the International Donor Community

- Program funds should help empower CSOs, think tanks, and researchers by supporting joint actions and coalition building related to GAWB on the national and regional level.

- Program funds that would support the building of partner relationships between decision-makers, businesses, CSOs, think tanks, and researchers, including opening discussion fora where these stakeholders would work together on the thematic challenges related to the five pillars of the green agenda. This would help to create public pressure and political will for implementation.
- Support the transition to a decarbonized economy through funding awareness raising activities and investing in pilot projects related to renewables (solar, wind, energy storage).
- Further support, both politically and financially, the just transition processes related to the energy transition ensuing from decarbonizing the economy.
- Support, both politically and financially, the opening of the space for discussion on all pillars of the GAWB. Considering the GAWB does not entirely consist of energy issues, but includes also other topics, such as transport, food production, and the introduction of a circular economy, it is of utmost importance to widen the discussion to include these further topics, while also supporting advocacy efforts from the civil society sector.

Conclusion

The GAWB brings many opportunities for developing society in a new, innovative direction, where people and the environment thrive together through green jobs, a circular economy, and a decarbonized society. However, for this to happen bold steps must be taken by decision-makers who will have to give direction not only to businesses, but to all parts of society. A business-as-usual scenario will not bring different results to what we have today. Therefore, if we want change to happen, all sectors of society must put their efforts together to the benefit of all citizens.