



SEE WEST ALLIANCE: COLLABORATION AT ITS BEST!



This article was written by Anita Šimundža (CDP "GLOBUS") and Marta Bruschi (Diesis Network)

Although the topic of social economy has become popular in the Western Balkans, a supportive environment for such initiatives in the countries of the region has not yet been created.

In the current socio-economic context of the Western Balkans, characterized by crises of a social, economic and ecological nature, social economy could be a catalyst of change leading to inclusive and sustainable development, with appropriate systemic support. The process of transition, followed by complex needs in society, require new solutions for existing socio-economic challenges, especially at a time when social risks and insecurities are increasing.

The countries of the Western Balkans share the common goals in terms of membership in the European Union and social economy could significantly contribute to their fulfilment. On the other hand, support for social economy, precisely support for social entrepreneurship is more of a declarative character, the legal framework is still underdeveloped, and institutional programs targeting social enterprises are limited.

Social entrepreneurship is mainly viewed through the prism of employment of marginalised categories of the population, while it can open up a wide range of development possibilities.

Many social entrepreneurship initiatives in Western Balkans have been recognised and launched in civil society organisations, which are among the most important actors for strengthening the ecosystem for social entrepreneurship. However, CSOs face limited resources and capacities for implementing social entrepreneurship, which is why improving the environment for the development of social entrepreneurship is of inestimable importance. One of the most significant initiatives in this direction is the "Western Balkans Civil Society Declaration on the Social Economy", initiated by the Coalition for the Development of the Solidarity Economy (CoSED) from Serbia in 2022. More than 120 CSO actors supported the themes and goals of the Western Balkans Civil Society Declaration on the Social Economy, which called on decision-makers to take concrete steps that will contribute to the further development of the social economy as a relevant economic model that is centered on the protection of society and the planet.



There is a great need for cooperation in creating a favourable policy environment for the development of the social economy, adequate financial support that recognises its specificity, association and cross-sectoral partnerships, as well as the dissemination of knowledge on the social economy.

Given the scale and complexity of today's challenges, undoubtedly, the role of social economy in further socio-economic development in the region is essential. The key element is regional cooperation. In 2020, the European Commission adopted the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans (EIP) (European Commission, 2020). It aims to boost economic growth and development, support a green and digital transition, promote regional integration among the six Western Balkan countries. This document is accompanied by a Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, a new growth strategy for the region, leaping from a traditional economic model to a sustainable economy, in line with the European Green Deal.

Being aware of significance of collaboration, WB6 SE actors, members of Diesis Network formed a working group on social economy ecosystem in Western Balkans. SEE WEST Alliance has been growing organically throughout the years, sharpening its common vision and purpose, based on willingness to address common challenges and barriers collectively, to develop strong Social Economy Ecosystem. SEE WEST sets the path to systemic collaboration that will in long term have the positive effects.

According to Arthur Himmelman (2002); "Collaborating is defined in relationship to three other strategies for working together: networking, coordinating, and cooperating that build upon each other along a developmental continuum". These strategies are most effective when there is a common vision and purpose, mutual learning, and mutual accountability for results.

The emphasis on collaboration and partnering represents the fundamental shift of thinking. SEE WEST recognises the need of interconnectedness, which requires the unprecedented level of collaboration between all of the actors in the sector and beyond. This new collaborative way of working sets up the NEW NORMAL: systemic collaboration across borders and sectors.

It is by now evident that collaboration allows for the sharing of knowledge and resources, as well as facilitate the transfer of good practices and successful models of social economy development. Working together can lead to economies of scale, enabling organisations to achieve more significant impact and increase the bargaining power with stakeholders and investors. In the long run it will provide access to new markets and customers, helping to expand the reach of social enterprises beyond the single country's domestic borders.



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Further, it will help to align policies and regulations across different countries, creating a more favourable environment for social enterprises to operate and grow. This includes the adoption of common standards for measuring social impact and the development of policies that support the growth of the social economy. It will contribute to greater regional integration, leading to economic growth, creating more attractive environment for investment and support the development of a thriving social economy, as the Western Balkans remain one of the areas of Europe with the best growth prospects for the future.

All of the partners are strongly motivated by new approaches, and especially by transfer of good practices cross-border and learning from each other's strengths and failures, believe that the SEE WEST Alliance has a great perspective in terms of future development of ecosystem for social entrepreneurship in the region.

In the course of last 2 years, we have been working to set the course of our work, designing a Roadmap including short and long goals and based on the 3 main pillars:

- Visibility & Recognition of the Social Economy Ecosystems in WB 6 countries, and the work of the key SE actors on the European and international level,
- Nurturing and forming cross-regional partnerships & collaborations,
- Facilitate cross-regional knowledge transfer.

Today, we are consolidating our work to form the continuum and grow together in the years to come under the SEE WEST Alliance.

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