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## TRENDS IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION IN SERBIA AND THE WESTERN BALKANS

### Abstract

*Sustainable development is a process in which constant changes take place between social, economic, and environmental dimensions. This long-run process requires a carefully managed development policy taking into account the complex global challenges facing humanity. Some of the contemporary challenges of sustainable development are for example: raising the level of people's environmental conscience and responsibility, application of economic instruments and innovative solutions to environmental protection problems, etc. Therefore, a sustainable development and environmental protection strategy is necessary. Statistical estimation of achievement of sustainable development goals of the Western Balkan countries in the period from 2012 to 2023 based on the analysis of time series is used in this paper and it is presented using the average annual growth rates. The results showed that the analysed countries recorded collective positive trends in sustainable development and environmental protection, but Serbia achieved the most significant progress and demonstrated significant engagement in this field.*

**Keywords:** sustainable development, environmental protection, Agenda 2030, Serbia, Western Balkans.

**JEL classification:** Q58, C10

## ТРЕНДОВИ У ОДРЖИВОМ РАЗВОЈУ И ЗАШТИТИ ЖИВОТНЕ СРЕДИНЕ У СРБИЈИ И ЗАПАДНОМ БАЛКАНУ

### Апстракт

*Одрживи развој је процес у коме се дешавају сталне промене између друштвених, економских и еколошких димензија. Ово је дугорочни процес који захтева пажљиво вођену развојну политику узимајући у обзир сложене глобалне промене са којима се суочава човечанство. Неки од савремених изазова одрживог развоја су на пример: подизање нивоа еколошке свести и одговорности код људи, примена економских инструмената и иновативних решења за заштиту животне средине, итд. Стога је стратегија одрживог развоја и заштите животне средине неопходна. У овом раду коришћена је статистичка процена степена постигнутих циљева одрживог развоја*

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*земаља западног Балкана у периоду од 2012. до 2023. године на основу анализе временских серија и приказана је коришћењем просечних годишњих стопа раста. Резултати су показали да су анализиране земље оствариле колективне позитивне трендове у остваривању циљева одрживог развоја и да је Србија постигла најзначајнији напредак и показала значајни ангажман у овој области.*

**Кључне речи:** *одрживи развој, заштита животне средине, Агенда 2030, Србија, Западни Балкан*

## 1. Introduction

The adoption of Agenda 2030 marked a historic consensus within the UN. This ambitious development agenda represents a vision crucial for creating prerequisites for a better, more prosperous, safer, and more stable world. International cooperation between countries, especially regionally and sub-regionally, is a necessary condition for the comprehensive implementation of the Sustainable Development (SD) Agenda across all its dimensions - economic, social, and environmental (Krstić et al., 2018). This primarily pertains to our responsibility towards the poorest and most vulnerable groups, the environment, and a fuller conception of human life in which the human rights of all are respected.

The challenge lies in maintaining this vision firmly connected with reality, where every specific activity is linked to the creation of sustainable and resilient societies. By adopting Agenda 2030, Serbia together with all UN member states has altered the traditional understanding of sustainable development. Agenda enriched the balance of social inclusion, economic growth, and environmental protection - the three key elements of the sustainable development concept. First, by adding peace as a necessary precondition to their full and inseparable integration, and second, partnership as a defining type of relationship.

In the first part of the paper, the focus will be on presenting strategic documents containing these goals and future strategic directions for achieving sustainable development in Serbia (Jovanović et al., 2023). Based on this analysis, in the second part of the paper, the focus will be on the sustainable development goals and the extent of their realization in both Serbia and other Western Balkan countries (Radivojević et al., 2018).

For Serbia as a candidate country, this issue is important not only for environmental protection in a narrow sense, but also for other interconnected issues demanding regional cooperation. Drawing upon the analysis of experiences in developed countries, an overview of laws and strategies adopted by our country to address how strategic goals will be achieved, along with explanations of measures introduced for sustainability, will be provided.

## 2. Sustainable Development Roots

In the previous period, environmental issues were side-lined and neglected because they were considered unimportant. But now, awareness about climate change is growing and, in that light, the impact of human activities started to be viewed globally, at state, corporate, and individual levels.

Despite the growing awareness and increased interest in studying these issues, it remains challenging to assess the negative environmental effects or to comprehend the overall natural resources vulnerability to human activities.

Climate issues pose a social and economic challenge, primarily on a global but also on a local level. Rapid development and continual population growth leads to depletion of natural resources. The quest for long-run solutions has led to the sustainable development concept.

This concept represents an integral development with environmental protection enabling the improvement of the quality of life for future generations. “UN defines it as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It also requires coordinated efforts towards building an inclusive, sustainable, and resilient future for both people and the planet” (Jovanović & Stojković-Zlatanović, 2020).

The key sustainable development elements (economic, social, and environmental) have to be coordinated. These elements are vital for the welfare of individuals and society. It is crucial to emphasize that eradicating poverty is the ultimate sustainable goal. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (United Nations, 2015) focused on urgent issues and represented the global strategic action for reducing poverty, while continuity in this strategic approach is the definition of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Grainger-Brown & Malekpour, 2019). The key difference between MDGs and SDGs is that MDGs focused on government-led actions, while SDGs work on including new agents, such as businesses, local governments, and civil society (Hajer et al., 2015).

The economic aspects of sustainable development encompass: 1) economic development based on increased employment, productivity, and better-paid jobs, leading to poverty reduction; 2) sustainable economic development founded on encouraging innovation, socially responsible entrepreneurship, and sustainable macroeconomic indicators (investments, indebtedness, balance of trade, etc.); and 3) establishing responsible, efficient, and inclusive institutions, strengthening the rule of law, and combating corruption as prerequisites for sustainable economic development. Consequently, in economic science, a consensus has been established on the position that institutions promoting the rule of law are of fundamental importance for successful long-term economic performance and dynamic economic growth and development.

Because of the dynamic natural and social processes in contemporary conditions, a right reaction of humanity is necessary. This means that sustainable development should not be managed spontaneously but strategically by international organisations, national governments, local authorities, companies, and individuals (Jelisavac-Trošić et al., 2023; Berber et al., 2021; Moon, 2007; Liczmańska-Kopcewicz et al., 2019).

### 3. SDGs in Serbia according to Agenda 2030 – strategic framework

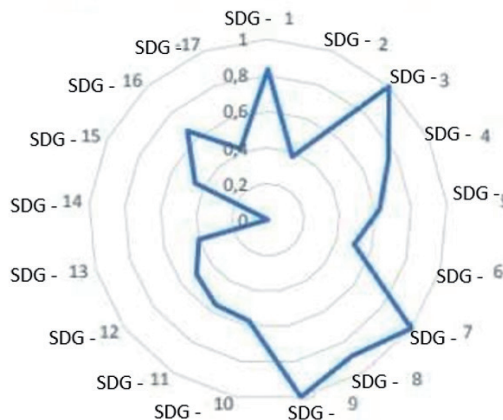
SDGs are globally represented in Agenda 2030, and each country has adopted 17 goals, adapted them to its specificities, and monitors their achievement annually. These goals are primarily aimed at the reduction of poverty, inequality, and injustice, as well as minimizing the consequences of climate change.

Before Agenda 2030, MDGs were set for a period of 15 years, that is, in 2015 it was finally determined that, despite certain progress, MDGs globally faced shortcomings. After the deadline for MDGs expired, there was a need for swift and thoughtful action to continue achieving the sustainable goals more efficiently - reducing poverty, environmental problems, inequality, and various other global issues. The Government of the Republic of Serbia participated in the drafting of Agenda by including the citizens in the consultations on the development agenda after 2015, through the national campaign ‘Serbia We Want,’ and by participating of state representatives in global forums, within the global campaign ‘The World We Want.’ Establishing an institutional framework for monitoring the achievement of SDGs in the country is very important.

The Public Policy Secretariat, supported by the German Development Cooperation (GIZ), prepared the ‘Serbia and 2030 Agenda’ report in 2018. This report was an immediate response to the need for mapping the strategic issues in Serbia and contributing to the dialogue and decision-making regarding the prioritized Agenda 2030 in Serbia. The mapping concerning the SDGs in Serbia was conducted in relation to all active strategies and other documents.

The database of the Public Policy Secretariat is a basis for the strategic approach. Additionally, the implementation status of the strategy was indicated. Finally, strategic documents planned for adoption according to the National Program for the Adoption of the European Union Acquis (the second revision from 2016) – NPAA were also designated. For each SDG, a brief overview of the situation in that area in Serbia was provided, using indicators from the UN, along with domestic and international statistical analyses.

Figure 1. Presentation of the coverage of SDGs by strategies in Serbia (2022)



Source: Government of the Republic of Serbia, Public Policy Secretariat, Serbia and Agenda 2030, p. 57.

Figure 1 shows that the weakest coverage of SDGs is observed in the area of environmental protection, while goals 1, 3, 4, 7, 8, and 9 are best covered. These goals relate to the areas of environment and climate (*SDG 7*), economic growth (*SDG 8*; *SDG 9*), and human resource development (*SDG 1*; *SDG 3*; *SDG 4*). The overall coverage of SDGs and sub-goals by Serbia's strategic framework is 62% (Serbia and Agenda 2030, p. 58).

#### 4. Assessment of the Achieved SDGs in the Western Balkan

Achieving SDGs based on the SDG Index is necessary to review the position of Serbia compared to the Western Balkan (WB).

Table 1. Position of WB according to the SDG Index in the period 2012-2023.

Year	Serbia	North Macedonia	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Albania	Montenegro
2012	72.0	69.2	69.1	70.7	67.2
2013	72.9	70.6	70.3	70.6	68.6
2014	73.8	71.0	70.5	69.6	68.6
2015	73.6	70.9	70.7	70.9	68.2
2016	74.8	71.1	71.0	71.1	68.2
2017	75.7	71.6	70.9	73.5	69.6
2018	76.7	73.0	72.4	73.5	69.8
2019	77.5	73.0	73.0	73.7	70.8
2020	77.5	72.5	73.4	73.7	70.7
2021	78.4	73.1	74.1	73.7	71.2
2022	75.9	72.3	74.0	71.6	68.8
2023	77.3	74.0	73.5	72.5	71.4

Source: Sachs, J., Lafortune, G., Kroll, C., Fuller, G., Woelm, F. (2023) *Sustainable Development Report 2023*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Sachs, J.D., Lafortune, G., Fuller, G., Drumm, E. (2023). *Implementing the SDG Stimulus*. *Sustainable Development Report 2023*.

Table 1 shows the readiness to fulfil the SDGs for the WB, shown during 12 years in the period from 2012-2023. Based on the degree of achievement of individual goals, specific problems that each country faces on the way to sustainable development can be determined.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for WB

	Serbia	North Macedonia	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Albania	Montenegro
The average value (arithmetic mean)	75.51	71.86	71.91	72.09	69.43

Standard error	0.60	0.39	0.49	0,43	0.39
Median	75.80	71.95	71.70	72.05	69.20
Mode	77.50	73.00	-	73.70	68.60
Standard deviation	2.07	1.36	1.68	1.50	1.36
Variance	4.30	1.84	2.83	2.26	1.86
Kurtosis coefficient	-1.19	-0.27	-1.44	-1.63	-1.23
Skewness coefficient	-0.31	-0.33	-0.10	-0.20	0.08
Range of value change	6.40	4.80	5.00	4.10	4.20
Minimum	72.00	69.20	69.10	69.60	67.20
Maximum	78.40	74.00	74.10	73.70	71.40
Sum	906.10	862.30	862.90	865.10	833.10
Number of data in series	12	12	12	12	12

Source: Author

Table 2 presents SDG Index descriptive statistics for WB. It includes statistical measures for each listed country: Serbia, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, and Montenegro. By analysing the data presented in the table, collective progress in the overall SDG Indexes of the WB has been noted. However, none of the states managed to position themselves better than the 36th place on the international level in 2023.

Figure 2. Results of the SDG index for WB (2012-2022)



Source: Author

Figure 2 shows that at the beginning of the analysed period (2012), Montenegro had the lowest SDG Index (67.2) among WB, while Serbia was the country with the highest index (72.0). Consequently, Montenegro and Serbia occupied the 73rd and 44th place, respectively. When comparing the data from 2012 with the results from 2023, it can be concluded that all WB achieved an increase in their index, with Serbia experiencing the largest increase of 5.3 percentage points, from 72.0 to 77.3, thereby also improving its international position, climbing to 36th place.

North Macedonia also made significant progress of 4.8 percentage points (2012), raising its SDG Index from 69.2 to 74.0 (2023). Thus, North Macedonia improved its international position from the 61st to 47th place.

The third country in terms of the percentage point index growth is Bosnia and Herzegovina, which recorded an increase of 4.4 percentage points, from 69.1 (2012) to 73.5 (2023), improving its rank from 63rd to 54th place.

Albania showed very moderate and the smallest growth among all observed countries. With an increase of 1.8 percentage points (2012), it raised its index from 70.7 to 72.5 (2023). With such low growth, Albania unfortunately distinguished itself as the only country to decline in terms of international position among the observed countries, dropping from 53rd to 60th place.

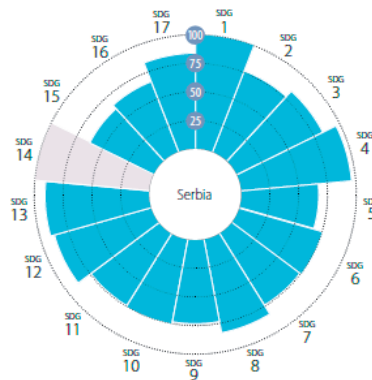
Although Montenegro showed improvement in the same period, increasing its index by 4.2 percentage points, from 67.2 (2012) to 71.4 (2023), it still lags behind in terms of index score and rank in relation to other WB.

With the highest index and rank, Serbia continues to lead as country with the most significant progress and commitment in achieving SDGs.

## 5. Evaluation of SDGs in Serbia

According to the latest SD Report (2023), Serbia is the best ranked in the WB region, holding the 36th position out of a total of 166 countries. In the observed region, Montenegro and North Macedonia show the least competence to fulfil the SDGs.

Figure 3. Average performance of SDGs in Serbia according to the SDG index in 2023



Source: Sachs, J., Lafortune, G., Kroll, C., Fuller, G., Woelm, F. (2023) Sustainable Development Report 2023. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Figure 3 shows that in Serbia SDG 14 is not covered at all, and furthermore, SDG 15 is the least achieved. The highest fulfilment is observed for SDG 1, followed by SDG 4. Therefore, the measures taken to reduce poverty and ensure inclusive and quality education have been the most successful, while measures related to degradation of forest, land, and biodiversity conservation have been the least successful.

Figure 4. Level of achievement of individual SDGs in Serbia



Source: Sachs, J., Lafortune, G., Kroll, C., Fuller, G., Woelm, F. (2023) *Sustainable Development Report 2023*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

According to the latest report from 2023, Serbia has made a significant step towards achieving SDG 6 and SDG 10, while stagnation has been observed in SDG 4, 13, and 16 (Figure 4). Moderate progress is observed in other goals. This means progress has been made in: a) providing sanitation facilities and access to drinking water and b) reducing inequalities between and within countries. On the other hand, stagnation has been noted in the areas of: poverty reduction, education, and reducing mortality rates.

Through the existing strategic framework, the Republic of Serbia has been directed towards achieving sustainable development goals. However, due to the lack of strategies in every sector and the inability to monitor the strategies, it is difficult to assess the degree of realization of these goals in Serbia. For this reason, the goals can be classified into four groups:

- Economic growth (SDGs 8, and 9)
- Human resource improvement (SDGs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 10)
- Environment (SDGs 6, 7, 11, 12, 13, and 15)
- Institutions, finance, and partnership (SDGs 16, and 17).

The first group of goals encompasses sustainable economic progress, employment, better working conditions, sustainable industrialization, development of infrastructure and innovations. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are very important for Serbian economy because of the number of companies and employees. To remove barriers to their further development, access to financing resources should be increased. Although there is a positive trend in the labour market in Serbia regarding employment, there is a problem of unemployment in the long run and a high number of unemployed youth and socially vulnerable groups (Kostic, Z. & Radukic, S., 2019).

The second group of SDGs is relevant for human resource development and pertains to poverty reduction, health, and education. In order to reduce poverty, support for the most vulnerable strata of the population, rights to economic resources, access to basic services, management and ownership of the land, support in cases of conflicts and climate disasters, use of new technologies and financial services are promoted, with special consideration given to nonbank financial institutions and microfinance. Vulnerable groups face challenges in achieving this goal.



The third group of SDGs encompasses environmental protection and combating climate change. Climate change refers to changes of the average annual temperature and amount of precipitation in our region. Due to negative impacts, an increase in annual temperature of air and a rainfall decrease are expected, which will adversely affect the development of agriculture. Additionally, extreme climate and weather conditions in Serbia have led to significant material damage caused by droughts and floods, leading to undertaking efforts to implement proper preventive measures.

The fourth group of SDGs is based on strengthening institutions, rules, and partnerships. Responsible institutions are necessary to influence the reduction of all forms of violence, combat organised crime, reduce corruption, provide access to information, and protect fundamental freedoms. Progress in the European integration process, where substantive reforms of the public sector are being implemented towards greater transparency and inclusivity. Achieving SDGs of the Agenda 2030 requires partnerships among regional, national, and local levels of governments, the research organisations, society, and the private sector to leverage all available resources (Kostić, Z. & Radukić, S., 2019).

## **6. Adapting to European Environmental Protection Standards**

In accordance with the Sofia Declaration on the Green Agenda for WB (Balkan Green Energy News, 2020), Serbia is committed to developing and implementing strategies and action plans aimed at ecological sustainability and transitioning to a green economy. This entails formulating strategies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, developing integrated climate and energy plans, and action plans for climate change adaptation. Additionally, Serbia will work on strategies for transitioning to a circular economy, including waste management and recycling, as well as plans for the depollution of air, water, and soil. In the agricultural sector, the focus will be on strategies for sustainable food production and organic farming. For the protection of biodiversity, Serbia will develop strategies and plans for the protection and restoration of the ecosystem. These strategies and plans will be aimed at fulfilling the obligations of the Green Agenda and contributing to the goals of the EU in the areas of climate change and SDGs. The Sofia Declaration was also signed by WB. This declaration is part of the Berlin Process that aims to strengthen the partnership and European integration in the region of WB.

Additionally, a very important document that Serbia has committed to produce and follow is the National Energy and Climate Plan (NECP). The NECP is a document that EU member states, including candidates such as Serbia, must develop and implement as part of their obligations towards the energy and climate goals of the European Union. For Serbia, creating the NECP is not only a requirement stemming from its aspirations to join the EU, but also a crucial step towards aligning with the EU's Energy Union framework, which focuses on energy efficiency and security, decarbonisation, creation of internal energy market, increasing of innovation, and improvement of competitiveness. Implementing the NECP in Serbia promises significant benefits, including a more sustainable and efficient energy sector, reduced environmental impact, and increased energy security. It also paves the way for Serbia's integration into the European energy

market and harnessing potential economic and technological advancements. As Serbia is on the verge of achieving its NECP, this marks a turning point in the country's energy and climate policies, laying the groundwork for a greener and more sustainable future.

Regarding developing countries, particularly the poorest and most endangered, assistance from developed countries is necessary, especially financial aid. However, it is precisely these countries, including Serbia to some extent, that need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to adapt to other countries in Europe.

## 7. Conclusion

Every sector of the economy, as well as the economy as a whole, is to some extent responsible for pollution in its surroundings and beyond. Therefore, every country should pursue an active environmental protection policy and finance projects in this area.

Serbia has enacted numerous laws, strategies, action plans, regulations, and guidelines, all aimed at protecting the environment and sustainable development. This is evidenced by cooperation with the UN and partner agencies in achieving SDGs, which is carried out on all levels of government.

Mapping of the strategic issues in Serbia regarding sustainable development goals has been conducted, taking into account all active strategic documents in Serbia. SDGs in the area of environmental protection are the least covered by strategies, while the best covered SDGs are in the area of poverty reduction, improvement of health and education levels, followed by access to affordable and renewable energy, as well as goals contributing to economic growth. The overall coverage of goals and subgoals by strategies in Serbia is 62% (Serbia and Agenda 2030, 2018).

By analysing the WB based on the period from 2012 to 2023, progress has been determined, as well as the greatest engagement in the area of sustainable development by our country. Serbia has achieved the best results in the SDG index compared to Montenegro, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Albania.

To evaluate the progress in Serbia in achieving SDGs based on the value of the SDG index in relation to the WB group, according to the latest SD Report (2023), our country is the highest ranked country in WB region and ranks 36th out of a total of 163 countries. Montenegro and Albania have the lowest positions in the region. In addition, Serbia recorded significant results in: a) poverty reduction, b) promoting inclusive and quality education and lifelong learning, c) ensuring sanitary conditions and access to drinking water, d) reducing inequalities between and within states.

On the other hand, regression has been noted in the area of climate change, with stagnation in the area of accessible and renewable energy. One of the main problems is the level of awareness among the people in Serbia. Environmental preservation should be a priority concern for educational organizations, and without raising awareness about the importance of environmental preservation, all other efforts and laws would be pointless.

Environmental protection and sustainable development are part of the development strategy of every economy, so in Serbia, more and more attention being paid to this issue in a responsible and dedicated manner. Environmental protection from the perspective of industrial development has made significant progress in many countries, placing humanity's responsibility for future generations at the forefront. Sustainable development

and environmental management entail the need for a high level of adaptability of the economy to emerging situations and strategies, as well as assistance to numerous organizations involved in environmental protection, as well as ecological research to properly define future goals and strategies. All efforts to achieve good results in this field are linked to the opportunities for investment in activities related to environmental protection on all levels. Countries that achieve remarkable levels of GNP and national income are in a better position because they have the ability to allocate more resources for investing in environmental protection compared to those countries that are struggling with insufficient revenue from their own economy. In those countries, problems of ensuring normal living and working conditions are also more pronounced, because the importance and priority of investing in environmental protection are not adequately recognized and placed in the right perspective. Bearing this in mind, it is impossible to achieve optimal level of SDGs without the implementation of appropriate strategies based on scientifically known and verified knowledge in the sustainable development context.

Sustainable development is the only right path leading to the preservation of the economy, on the one side, and the improvement of society and awareness of environmental protection, on the other side. Increasing awareness of sustainable development from experts to individuals would contribute to increasing social welfare.

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