

LET'S GIVE A CHANCE TO A NEW ERA OF YOUTH CHANGE MAKERS

An op-ed by Co-ordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities Igli Hasani and Head of the OSCE Presence in Albania Vincenzo Del Monaco published on Albanian Daily News newspaper, 28 February 2022

Crises feature regularly on our days. They often translate into widespread social injustices, resource constraints, cultural and economic instability, in grief. But in many instances, people's indignation have canalised into positive and peaceful actions that are initiating new, global democratic and social movements, as well as creative and resilient business ventures.

Alternative visions can shape novel solutions in every field. A new generation of change-makers can re-image the world, where "eco" substitutes "ego", "well-being" corroborates "profit" and "interconnection" edges "individualism". New entrepreneurial opportunities for social innovation may represent the lifeblood for a new socio-economic order. This region, too, ought to engage and enjoy this cultural turn that is filled with hope and is brought about by a vibrant and entrepreneurial young generation.

In this spirit, the OSCE Office of the Co-ordinator of Economic and Environmental Activities (OCEEA) has launched the regional flagship initiative "YDEAS - Young Developers and Entrepreneurs to Advance Start-ups". This initiative is currently supported by Italy and Poland. Through its leadership in this area, OCEEA stands, hand-in-hand with the OSCE Presence in Albania, to support youth social entrepreneurs to advance solutions in the digital and social economy.

Today and tomorrow, thanks to the excellent partnership with the Mayor of Tirana and his team, more than 100 young entrepreneurs – start-uppers – from all over the region will gather in Tirana with high municipal officials from the main cities of their homes. The gathering will offer the chance to discuss lessons from the COVID-19 crisis and ways to overcome technological barriers towards a fast-evolving digital transformation of the education sector and the business climate in the Western Balkans.

What our young generation is witnessing right now is an intense cultural shift that recognizes the importance of relations both between societies across the world, and between humans and their ecosystems. A tangible sign of this turn is the proliferation of various forms of economics based on mutuality that provide businesses with a different purpose, one that benefits communities, institutions, the planet, individuals, and still...it's highly profitable.

The data is irrefutable. The social economy -- those businesses, associations, foundations, cooperatives etc. with social and fair purposes -- contribute about 7% to the world's GDP, according to the United Nations Secretary General report on Cooperatives in Social Development (2017). This is a far cry from a time when such businesses were considered the "poor cousin of the market and state".

Today, being part of the global social economy is an admired philosophy of life based on shared values, which puts people over profits, prefers democratic governance, and reinvests most dividends for the sake of a higher good. Throughout Europe, the social economy is seen as a major economic player with 2.8 million enterprises, ranging from small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to large EU groups. It is present across all sectors, employs 13.6 million

people and accounts for 8% of the EU's GDP. (Data from <https://www.socialeconomy.eu.org/about/>)

However, in the Western Balkan region, most countries continue to struggle to transition to the social economy while underestimating its potential for socio-economic recovery, growth and stability. In Albania, for example, a 2019 mapping of social enterprises estimated fewer than 400 social enterprises with less than 2,500 employees¹.

This region's overall economic recovery from the COVID-19-induced recession remains flimsy, notwithstanding some positive signs of improvement, according to the World Bank. "The unemployment rate increased in the first half of 2021 in most countries. Job losses from the recession and its aftermath have disproportionately affected women and youth, which may set back efforts to raise the region's perennially low rates of labor force participation" (World Bank, 2021). (Data from "World Bank. 2021. *Western Balkans Regional Economic Report, No. 20, Fall 2021 : Greening the Recovery*. World Bank, Washington, DC. © World Bank. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/36402> License: CC BY 3.0 IGO).

Tirana serves as a most fitting host for the event as the "European Youth Capital" for 2022, a title awarded to the municipality by the European Youth Forum to empower young people, boost their participation, and strengthen a shared European identity. Under the slogan "Activate Youth", the municipality of Tirana has launched a packed program for the year to promote volunteerism, empower youth organizations, and create networks among young people from all over Europe to focus on the needs of young people today and tomorrow. Mayor of Tirana Erion Veliaj addressed the youth at Tirana's youth capital launch, and he was right when he stated, "Each of you has the opportunity to change the community."

2022, coincidentally, is also the European Year of Youth, as declared by the European Union, to recognize the sacrifices of youth during the pandemic, acknowledge youth expectations, rights, and needs; and push for sustainable and positive policy changes.

The efforts of youth social entrepreneurs are just one critical example of this, as the assembled participants at this week's event are working to address pressing social, economic, and environmental challenges, while fostering inclusive growth, shared prosperity, and social inclusion.

And in a region suffering from rapid population decline and youth emigration – especially of educated youth – social entrepreneurship offers an answer to the lack of opportunities that drive those to leave.

As young start-uppers consider how to support local authorities in addressing post-pandemic recovery challenges by catalysing innovative, environmentally sustainable, social businesses, initiatives arising from this platform may have implications for the region and beyond. Given the economic prospects social enterprises offer, the youth of the Western Balkans and their home countries stand only to gain.

Clearly this is not a futuristic talk, youth are not the future – youth are here, now, in this moment. And they are leading the way to a brighter future for all of us.

¹ [Social enterprises and their ecosystems in Europe. Country fiche Albania.pdf](#)