

Summary

Final Thematic Working Group (TWG) Public Event: “Advancing Inclusive Regional Mobility and Catalyzing Mobility - Driven Innovation and Knowledge Transfer in Western Balkans”

Implemented by the Center Science and Innovation for Development (SCiDEV) in the framework of
2023 Tirana Civil Society and Think Tank Forum (CSF)

28 September 2023

On September 28, 2023, SCiDEV organized the final TWG public event in hybrid format in Tirana bringing together civil society organizations and stakeholders, emphasizing the urgency of **leveraging mobility driven research and innovation** for **sustained** economic growth and societal resilience.

This event came as the culminating point of four consultation meetings spanning three months over the summer of 2023, which SCiDEV organized gathering 43 stakeholders from various fields, including universities, research centers, intergovernmental organizations, civil society groups, and think tanks in the Western Balkan countries (WB6) and the European Union (EU). The discussions primarily focused on boosting regional mobility, **engaging the diaspora**, and aligning the Western Balkans' higher education and **scientific research systems** with European standards to enhance research collaboration at both regional and EU levels. These conversations offered valuable insights, which were further validated during **advocacy visits** to Berlin, Brussels, facilitated by the Open Society Foundations - Western Balkans (OSFWB) and networking events in Sarajevo and Munich in September 2023.

These consultations and discussions underscored the urgent need and strong demand for investment in research and innovation collaboration within the region and with the EU. The key takeaway is the necessity of substantial and sustainable engagement and investment to fully leverage regional mobility, drive innovation, and facilitate **knowledge transfer** for long-term economic growth and resilient societies.

At the final event, held under the moderation of Mr. Nenad Čelarević, Regional Business Development Coordinator at Helvetas Belgrade, the keynote remarks were addressed by Dr. Blerjana Bino, Executive Director at SCiDEV, and Mr. Klodjan Seferaj, Programme Manager at OSFWB,

During his opening remarks, Klodjan Seferaj, Programme Manager at OSFWB, underlined that Civil Society and Think Tank Forum of Berlin Process comes to the region as a demonstration of **local ownership** for the Berlin Process, but also brings responsibility for creating **networks and partnerships** and determining **priority areas** for further progress and investment.

Blerjana Bino, Executive Director at SCiDEV, in her remarks underscored the key message of this working group for the **financing and support** of research and innovation through a comprehensive **regional mobility framework**

agreement and customized funding schemes to facilitate knowledge transfers and scientific cooperation within the WB6 and with the EU, ultimately aiming for the integration of the region in the **European Research Area**.

The event also reemphasized the key recommendations and political messages drafted by TWG members during the consultation's phase based on the rationale of advancing mobility as a catalyst for **socio-economic development** in the WB6.

Key recommendations presented by Aneta Cekikj, Professor of Political Science at Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in North Macedonia, included that to advance research and innovation collaboration between the WB6 and the EU, there's a need to shift from mere catch-up to **active participation** in EU R&I policies. This commitment should encompass financing the framework agreements, establishing a WB6 Research and Innovation Foundation, and clear **political dedication to R&I**.

The following part of the event was a panel discussion on **“Practices for Mobility Driven Knowledge Transfer in WB6”** which addressed the challenges and opportunities from stakeholders and experts' experience working on the field. Their insights revealed and re-affirmed several challenges identified by the previous TWG consultations as well.

Elona Xhaferi from EU4Innovation Albania discussed the challenges of higher education institutions and researchers in the region accessing Horizon Europe. Those included **limited funding, inadequate institutional capacities**, a lack of clear **research focus**, and a shortage of **training opportunities** as some of the most predominant obstacles that research and academic institutions deal with. Additionally, the **reliance on international funding sources**, such as EU funding, without a dedicated and strategically planned internal budget for research and innovation at the local and national level was also raised as a concern.

Moreover, Katarina Kreceva, Head of Department for Development of Programs, from Policy Answers Horizon Europe project, at the Fund for Innovation and Technology Development, presented the pilot **Regional Mobility Scheme** for researchers that is forthcoming in the Western Balkans in 2024, addressing the need for more mobility programs in the region which are based on long-term results.

Success stories were also shared from stakeholders to raise awareness on the work done with **granting schemes** (such as in the case of Western Balkans Fund - WBF) where focusing on enhancing **capacity and resource development** in the WB6 through the provision of grants has attracted new ideas and project proposals.

Erinda Toska, Coordinator of the Diversified Grants Portfolio at WBF presented the experiences of Western Balkan Fund with mobility in the region through the MOVE granting scheme, underscoring the high **demand for mobility opportunities**. These grants benefit a wide range of stakeholders, including NGOs, media organizations, municipalities, professional associations, sports and arts institutions, and various other groups, and serve also as a

mechanism to dealing with **limited regional connectivity**, navigating **political uncertainty**, and addressing lack of regional mobility and joint initiatives for research and innovation.

The last part of the event featured an open deliberative discussion which focused on the importance of **utilizing research infrastructures**, **addressing local and national disparities**, and promoting innovation and research cooperation. Participants emphasized the positive benefits and the **social impact** of regional cooperation together with the need for tangible, time-bound actions to implement and follow up on the recommendations.

Gentian Elezi, Associate Professor at the University of Tirana, wrapped up the event and concluded that it is important to leverage this momentum for a shared advocacy agenda to push for the commitment of decision-makers. He underlined the need for **tailoring research programs and initiatives** to each WB6 country's capacities and local context, while building advocacy actions and involving non-state actors, such as civil society and academia, in the **EU integration process**.

The final key takeaway of these TWG efforts and discussions lies on the imperative of **substantial and sustainable engagements**, **better informed policy actions**, and **investments to fully harness the potential of regional mobility**, to stimulate innovation, and to enable knowledge transfer for sustained economic growth and resilient societies.

About the Thematic Working Group

Led by SCiDEV, this TWG focused on exploring the potential of inclusive regional mobility, innovation through knowledge exchange, and research and development collaborations in the Western Balkans and with the EU. The members of the working group brought diverse expertise and perspectives, contributing to comprehensive research, meaningful discussions, and the development of impactful policy recommendations. Their insights will form the basis of a civil society shared advocacy agenda for the Leaders' Summit.

CSF 2023 is organized by the Open Society Foundations - Western Balkans (OSFWB), mandated by the Government of Albania as the current holder of the Presidency of the Berlin Process, in collaboration with the Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP) and with the Cooperation and Development Institute (CDI).