

**Special Session: Localizing Sustainable Development Goals: Actions, Assessments,
and Interlinkages at the Regional Level**

**Towards Achievement of SDG 5: Empowering Women in the Western Balkans-
Advancing Gender Equality in Agricultural Land Ownership**

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Extended Abstract

The paper analyses the progress and highlights important achievements towards reporting on SDG 5 in the Western Balkans, but it also provides baseline for remaining gaps and challenges.

Western Balkans towards achievement of SDG 5

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for the Western Balkans are particularly significant, offering a roadmap for sustainable economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental protection. The adoption of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs by these countries between 2015 and 2016, reflects their commitment to the global SDG framework established by the United Nations in 2015.

This underscores the region's ongoing dedication to the SDGs, demonstrated through progress reports and increasing focus on localizing and integrating these goals into their national development strategies. However, each country in the Western Balkans has followed its own timeline and approach for aligning national policies with the SDGs, often through national strategies and action plans.

Achieving the SDGs can help the region address critical challenges such as political instability, unemployment, and environmental degradation while improving quality of life and fostering greater regional cooperation. The SDGs also align closely with the region's aspirations for European Union integration, as adopting these goals is essential for meeting EU standards and promoting sustainable development.

Since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, Western Balkans are making concerted efforts to advance gender equality, particularly in land ownership and control, contributing significantly to **the implementation and reporting on SDG 5**. These efforts are vital for ensuring that women have equal access to land and resources, which is a key component of sustainable development and social inclusion in the region.

SDG 5 is focused on achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls. It recognizes that gender inequality remains one of the most pervasive barriers to sustainable

development, and that empowering women and girls is crucial to the achievement of all the SDGs.

SDG Indicator 5.a.1. highlights the gender disparities in access to agricultural land, aiming to monitor gender equality in land ownership and rights across countries. Equal access to land is a key factor for women's economic success and empowerment. Guaranteeing women's equal rights to land ownership and control not only promotes economic efficiency in rural areas but also contributes to the realization of various other SDGs, such as poverty reduction (Goal 1), food security (Goal 2), and the welfare of households, communities, and countries (Goals 3, 10, 11 and 16, among others).

Gender equality and women economic empowerment in the Western Balkans

The Western Balkans aim to align with EU standards, but gender equality progress varies. Despite progress, traditional values, limited social services, and gendered labor force dynamics continue to hinder women's socio-economic empowerment. Whilst women's land rights are vital to development, complex obstacles prevent women from effectively enjoying these rights in the Western Balkans. They range from inadequate legal framework and poor implementation to patriarchal practices and religious precepts.

Despite their significant involvement in agriculture, women often have limited control over household income and agricultural assets due to low social status, persistent gender stereotypes, and weak land ownership rights (FAO, 2020). They also encounter many different types of obstacles such as restricted access to technical knowledge, barriers to extension services and training, and overrepresentation in informal employment. These challenges are further compounded by gender inequalities in decision-making processes, which remain pervasive in agriculture across Europe (Shortall et al., 2017).

Rural women in the Western Balkans have strong potential to lead sustainable ventures in sectors like agritourism, traditional crafts, and the green economy. However, systemic barriers such as limited resources, inadequate infrastructure, and deeply rooted sociocultural norms restrict their participation and leadership. Key challenges include limited access to land, livestock, financial services, and ownership of assets, which hinder economic security and opportunities for rural women (SWG RRD Report 2024).

Overall, while there is progress in policy and support programs, rural women in the Western Balkans continue to face significant barriers that limit their economic empowerment and leadership roles. Access to land, financial resources, and equal property rights are critical areas for improvement.

Approach and methodology for monitoring and reporting of SDG 5 in the Western Balkans

From 2022 to 2024, the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) collaborated to provide technical support to Western Balkans in the collection of data required to measure SDG Indicator 5.a.1, which focuses on gender equality in land ownership and control. This support aimed at enhancing national statistical systems in the region to ensure accurate data collection, following internationally recommended methodologies for SDG Indicator 5.a.1.

The approach involved collaboration between the National Statistical Offices (NSOs) and the Ministries of Agriculture (MoA) in the Western Balkans. NSOs played a central role in the production of reliable data for SDG Indicator 5.a.1. To collect the data required for the SDG 5.a.1, there is a need to use either household or agriculture surveys.

In 2022, GIZ and FAO engaged national gender statistical experts from across the Western Balkans. These experts were tasked with determining the most effective survey methods for collecting the necessary data while adhering to international standards. As a result, a pilot survey was conducted in September 2023 in the Western Balkan Six (WB6). This pilot served as an important step in refining the data collection methods.

The MoAs, as the key authorities responsible for agricultural and rural development policies, hold crucial agricultural data and maintain registers of farms and agricultural holdings. Their close cooperation with the NSOs was essential for accurate data exchange and statistical analysis. As such, this approach facilitated dialogue and collaboration between these two critical institutions.

Regional cooperation and capacity building

A major milestone occurred in October 2023, when experts from NSOs, the Regional Rural Development Standing Working Group in Southeast Europe (SWG RRD), and government representatives from the MoAs across the Western Balkans gathered at FAO Headquarters in Rome. This regional roundtable aimed to review the progress made in the data collection process and to plan the next steps for the effective reporting of SDG Indicator 5.a.1.

As a follow up, national capacity-building activities were conducted by FAO experts in the third quarter of 2024 in WB6. These activities were designed to enhance participants' understanding of the methodologies required for SDG Indicator 5.a.1, ensuring the accurate and consistent collection of data at the national level. By 2026, the data collection process for the SDG indicator 5.a.1 is expected to be completed in the Western Balkans.

Raising awareness on land ownership rights for rural women

An important aspect of the regional efforts was the awareness-raising campaign initiated by GIZ in collaboration with national non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The campaign focused on the critical issue of land property rights, particularly inheritance rights for rural women. By equipping women with knowledge of their rights to land ownership, the initiative empowered them to secure their land, contribute to local economic development, and challenge existing gender inequalities in rural areas. This effort contributed to advancing broader goals of gender equality and economic empowerment in the region.

Results

The land ownership by women in the Western Balkans varies across countries due to different legal, cultural, and socio-economic factors. However, in general, women's access to and control over land remains limited, especially in rural areas where traditional gender roles often

persist. Data on women's land ownership specifically is scarce, but some general trends and estimates can be drawn from available reports and studies.

Aiming to improve status of women in the land ownership and to increase availability of gender disaggregated data, NSOs used the FAO methodology and developed modules to collect the data needed for monitoring SDG indicator 5.a.1.

In addition, the statistical data would be used by relevant Ministries, particularly MoAs in the process of evidence-based agriculture and rural development policy design, monitoring and evaluation.

Conclusion

Traditional inheritance practices, cultural norms and limited access to financial resources for purchasing land remain major obstacles to be addressed in securing equal access of women and men to land ownership in the Western Balkans.

All WB6 must proactively inform and educate women about their constitutional and legal rights to access, ownership and co-ownership of land and other forms of property, financial services, inheritance and natural resources (SDG 5.a.). In addition, as a complementary step the countries need to undertake the reporting on SDG indicator 5.a.1 in conjunction with SDG indicator 5.a.2, as the systematic collection of sex-disaggregated data on secure rights to land will help measure progress on gender equality in land ownership in practice.

Keywords: SDG 5, women empowerment, agriculture and rural development policies, gender equality, land ownership, gender disaggregated data