

COUNTRY PERFORMANCE IN ACHIEVING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

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Abstract

Sustainable development is one of the most debated aspects all around the world. In order to achieve sustainable development, 17 sustainable development goals were developed in 2015 by United Nations (UN). They play an important role for the society and countries should be aware of the benefits gain if all are achieved until 2030. The paper aims to present an analysis of the SDGs achievement in 10 eastern and south-eastern countries, tracking the evolution of these SDGs in two consecutive years, in order to be able to outline a picture of actual stage of the implementation both for EU member states and non-EU member states. The study conducted to reach the objective is a qualitative and quantitative one. For selected period, it can be highlighted that every analyzed country has improved their experience in achieving SDGs in order to contribute to 2030 Agenda. SDG 1 was the goal that was achieved by 7 out of 10 countries selected for the study. We concluded that countries are aware of the importance to achieving the SDGs and also, are aware of the benefits that sustainable development at the global level can bring.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals, Sustainability, Decision making, Accountability

Clasificare JEL : M20, M49, Q01

1. Introduction

Economic development is very important to any society, but its benefits must outweigh the costs, including the costs of environmental conservation and protection. In this context, the attention should be focused on the ways in which sustainable development principles can and should be applied in the various sectors of the economy and social development [12]. The awareness of the need for collective measures at global level and their application through an appropriate international framework has led to the emergence of the concept of sustainable development. The concept of conservation and rational use of resources for future generations is one of the major features that distinguishes sustainable development policy from traditional environmental policy. The latter follows the internalization of the assumption of environmental degradation within companies. The central idea of sustainable development is the long-term stability of the economy and the environment, which determines the integration and recognition of economic, environmental and social concerns throughout the decision-making process.

The implications of sustainable development in decision-making processes within companies and not only are determined, in particular, by the ecological perspective of sustainable development due to the fact that society and the economy are dependent on the health of the environment.

The concept of sustainable development was shaped at a time when the subject of the environment was at the forefront of political debates. In September 2015, UN countries adopted a new set of goals to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure prosperity for all, as part of a new sustainable development agenda. Each objective has specific targets to be achieved in the next 15 years. In order to achieve the goals, everyone has to contribute: governments, the private sector, civil society and ordinary people. Therefore, the goals of sustainable development should be targets and challenges for all countries - not what the rich should do for the poor, but what all countries should do for the global well-being of this generation and those who will come.

Sustainable development is a complex and ambiguous concept that for many decades has aroused a great interest for both central authorities and most of the population. In literature a variety of researches can be identified, researches that emphasize the main dimensions of the concept. From a

summary analysis of these research it can be observed that all contains at least three dimensions considered to be the essence of the concept. Because the synergy of these different implications is intended, it is commonly accepted that sustainable development has three dimensions:

- Social inclusion - equal opportunities for people, which involves well-being, quality of life and sustainable human development;
- Sustainability for the environment - the ability to use natural resources without undermining the balance and integrity of ecosystems;
- Economic development - efficiency of economic and technological activities, stimulation of investments and productivity, economic growth.

SDG are focused on the objectives established at UN Summit in the 90's, designed by the political elite [4]. Giupponi and Gain (2016) highlighted that SDG have been drawn after a series of measurable objectives and demanded an impressive worldwide effort and cooperation [10]. According to Caiado et al. (2018), barriers concerning implementation and assesment of the 2030 Agenda represent one of the major issues at international level [6].

SDG are considered to have a key role in the next ten years, influencing in the same time, many of international poltcal decissions, funding issues regarding sustainable development. In the same time, they will design the dynamics of natural capital [17].

Moreover, SDG are expected to be used by governments in order to fight against extreme poverty and to overdue the challenges that come with ensuring environmental, economic and social sustainable development [7]. Also, Jayasooria (2016) sustains that the SDG agenda provides an opportunity to redefine the Social Workers role to be people of empowerment, social-economic development, human rights and the environment [11].

Sustainable development requires a long-term structural strategy for global economic and social systems, aimed at reducing the burden on the environment and natural resources at a permanent viable level, while maintaining economic growth and social cohesion.

The research focuses on a brief analysis regarding the importance given by Eastern and South-Eastern European countries to implementing the SDGs. First of all, we outlined the sustainable development goals proposed by the UN. After that, throughout a quantitative and qualitative analysis, we pointed out the state of art of the implementation of SDG in 10 Eastern and South-Eastern European countries.

2. Sustainable development goals

Worldwide, there is a high awareness that the economy and the organizations within it must change the way they are organized [16]. Implementing sustainable development is based on a new approach to how we organize our economies and organizations that become a necessary and natural part of daily practices [2]-[3]. In 2015, the UN adopted the 17 SDGs and they became applicable at the beginning of 2016. These goals were issued in order to address economic and social development aspects such as: poverty, hunger, health, education, climate change, gender equality, water, sanitation, energy, environment and social justice. These 17 SDGs were preceded by the eight UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) set in 2000, but they differ in some major aspects.

Companies play a decisive role in the implementation of these sustainable development objectives, an aspect that is aware of both investors and their management. They understood that it is not enough for companies to focus only on short-term profits, because long-term prosperity can be impacted by natural disasters, social unrest or economic disparity. The companies that are aware of this challenge and, at the same time, are involved in taking action will be one step ahead and this can bring them benefits. The SDGs have the role both to shape new markets and opportunities for all companies and for the society as a whole, but at the same time they show us where we should be

in 2030 in terms of sustainable development. In order to achieve these global goals and be well-positioned in 2030, we must get involved and transform the global goals into local business and also to be awareness of the benefits gained if these goals are achieved.

The way in which sustainable development will be impacted by these goals and will achieve the desired results, clearly depends on understanding and effectively shifting from an unsustainable government to one for sustainability that recognizes the roles played and the responsibilities assumed by local and subnational governments. Although countries have different levels of development and national realities differ, this should not affect any country and society because sustainable development must be universally applicable and accomplished to all countries. Only in this situation can we say that sustainable development has been achieved and can bring long term benefits. The 17 SDGs are presented below (table 1).

Tabel 1. Sustainable development goals

No.	UN SDG	Central idea of the SDG
SDG 1	<i>No poverty</i>	Poverty eradication in all its forms and in any context
SDG 2	<i>Zero hunger</i>	Eradicate hunger, ensure food security, improve nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture
SDG 3	<i>Good health and well-being</i>	Ensuring a healthy life and promoting the well-being of all people at any age
SDG 4	<i>Quality education</i>	Ensuring quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all
SDG 5	<i>Gender equality</i>	Achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls
SDG 6	<i>Clean water and sanitation</i>	Ensuring the availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all
SDG 7	<i>Affordable and clean energy</i>	Ensuring everyone has access to affordable energy in a safe, sustainable and modern way
SDG 8	<i>Decent work and economic growth</i>	Promoting sustained economic growth, open to all and sustainable, full and productive employment and decent work for all
SDG 9	<i>Industry, innovation and infrastructure</i>	Building resilient infrastructures, promoting sustainable industrialization and encouraging innovation
SDG 10	<i>Reduced inequalities</i>	Reducing inequalities within countries and from one country to another
SDG 11	<i>Sustainable cities and communities</i>	Developing cities and human settlements so that they are open to all, safe, resilient and sustainable
SDG 12	<i>Responsible consumption and production</i>	Ensuring sustainable consumption and production patterns
SDG 13	<i>Climate action</i>	Take urgent measures to combat climate change and their impact
SDG 14	<i>Life below water</i>	Conservation and sustainable use of oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development
SDG 15	<i>Life on land</i>	Protecting, restoring and promoting the sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainable forest management, combating desertification, stopping and repairing soil degradation and stopping biodiversity loss
SDG 16	<i>Peace, justice and strong institutions</i>	Promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, access to justice for all and the creation of efficient, responsible and inclusive institutions at all levels
SDG 17	<i>Partnerships for the goals</i>	Strengthening the means of implementation and revitalizing the global partnership for sustainable development

Source: own projection adapted after UNDP, 2015 [18]

Achieving the SDGs will be possible if today's innovative and ambitious solutions are integrated to become tomorrow's norms in each community and jurisdiction in the world, but at the same time, if all the states realize that without the full involvement of all societies these steps cannot be taken.

Actively achieving SDGs is very important for the companies from all over the world, regardless of their size. All the countries make efforts for the implementation of development goals as included in 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Implementation has started, but time is running out fast and the progress in many areas is slower than expected and needed in order to achieve the targets until 2030 as included in the Agenda.

Accountants play an important role in helping companies align with the SDGs that are considered relevant for their business. The way of implementing sustainable development goals can be considered one of the major challenges the countries and companies are facing [6]. Sustainability and sustainable development are ambitious issues, but also very contested, due to the different ways of understanding these concepts [5]-[1].

3. Performance in achieving SDG's

The research focuses on analyzing the results of SDG implementation in 10 states in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe. The states chosen for the analysis are presented in table 2.

Table 2. Selected countries

<i>Code</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>EU Member</i>	<i>GDP per capita (current US\$) - 2018</i>	<i>GDP growth (annual %) - 2018</i>
<i>BGR</i>	Bulgaria	Yes	9272.6	3.1
<i>HRV</i>	Croatia	Yes	14869.1	2.6
<i>GRC</i>	Greece	Yes	20324.3	1.9
<i>MNE</i>	Montenegro	No	8760.7	4.9
<i>MKD</i>	North Macedonia	No	6083.7	2.7
<i>ROU</i>	Romania	Yes	12301.2	4.1
<i>SRB</i>	Serbia	No	7234.0	4.3
<i>SVN</i>	Slovenia	Yes	26234.0	4.5
<i>TUR</i>	Turkey	No	9311.4	2.6
<i>UKR</i>	Ukraine	No	3095.2	3.3

Source: own projection

These have been selected to identify whether there are differences in SDG achievement between member and non-EU member states.

The first instrument taking into account for evaluating the 10 selected states is the SDG index. The SDG Index is a composite index generated by the arithmetic average of the scores estimated for individual indicators. A global ranking of countries based on their overall index score between 0 and 100 is made to reflect the initial status of countries on the SDGs [14].

All in all, the development and use of composite indices are becoming increasingly significant instruments for evaluating broader socio-economic and environmental perspectives that can help in policy analysis as well as in effective public communication [8]-[13]. Many of these indices, such as the Human Development Index (HDI) of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Better Life Index of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) are referred to frequently in various research and policy documents. By their nature, composite indices ‘summarise complex and multidimensional issues in a simple manner’ and provide ‘a single estimate’ [8], which can be useful for tracking progress and for comparing among various entities.

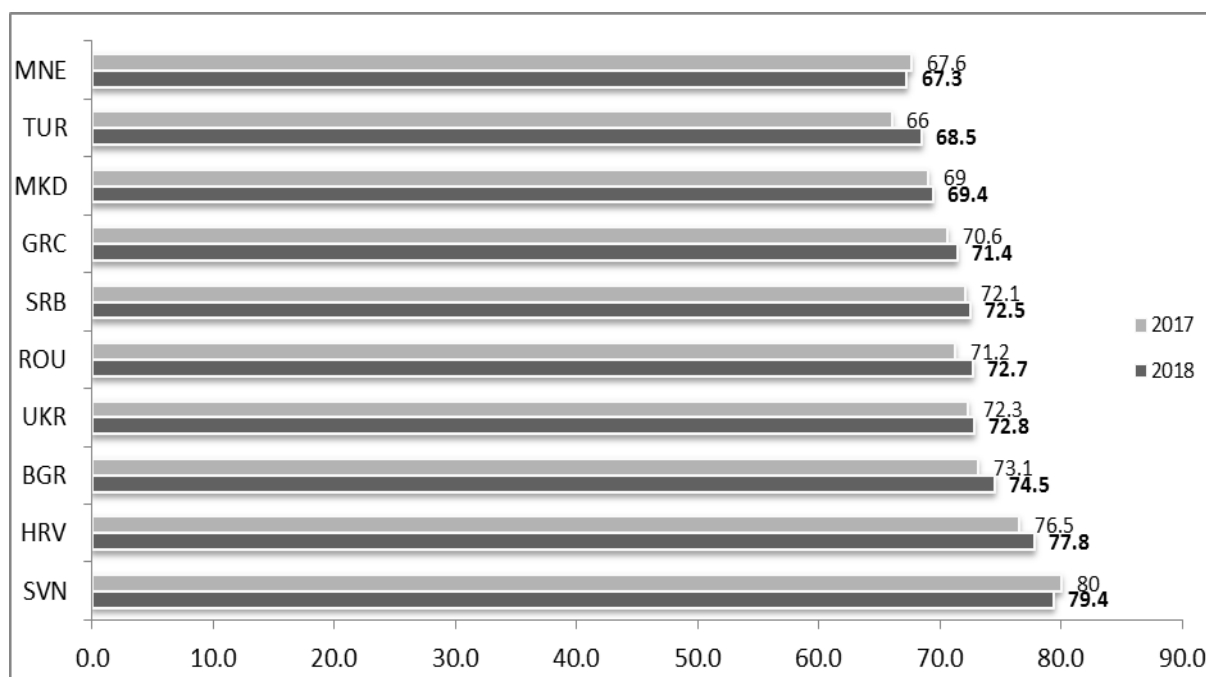


Figure 1. SDG Index evolution in selected countries

Source: own projection adapted after Sachs et all. (2019) [15]

As can be seen in Figure 1, most of the selected countries registered positive results regarding the SDG Index. The biggest increase of this indicator was registered in the case of Turkey, due, in particular, to the performance achieved in SDG 4, SDG 6 and SDG 8. This state also made small progress at SDG 7 and SDG 17. At the same time, the involvement of this indicator with regard to Slovenia and Montenegro can be underlined. If in the case of Slovenia, this score is determined by the regressions registered both in the case of SDG 14 and in the case of SDG5, in Montenegro the most significant decreases were identified for SDG 5 and SDG 6. The other analyzed states continue their upward trend regarding the 17 SDGs. Thus we can highlight their interest in achieving the main purpose of the 2030 Agenda.

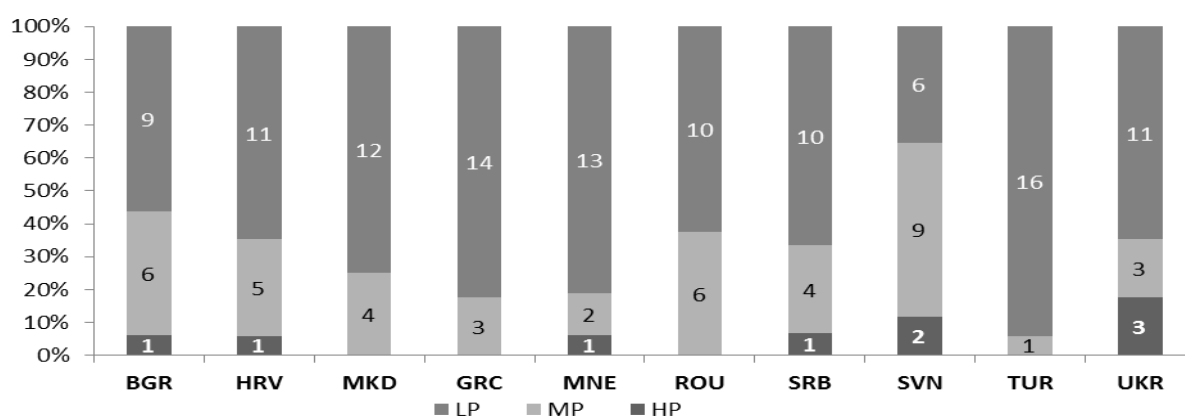


Figure 2. SDG performance in selected countries, 2017

In 2017, the countries that have achieved at least one SDG are: Bulgaria, Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia, Slovenia and Ukraine. Ukraine has achieved 3 goals, while Slovenia has achieved 2. The

other countries mentioned have only one goal achieved. Considering that the 17 SDGs appeared in global attention only in 2015, we can appreciate that the analyzed countries have focused their attention towards achieving these objectives. Although achieving them involves a substantial effort both at the governmental level and at the level of private entities, we note that timid steps are being taken to achieve these objectives according to the 2030 Agenda, both at EU and non-EU countries.

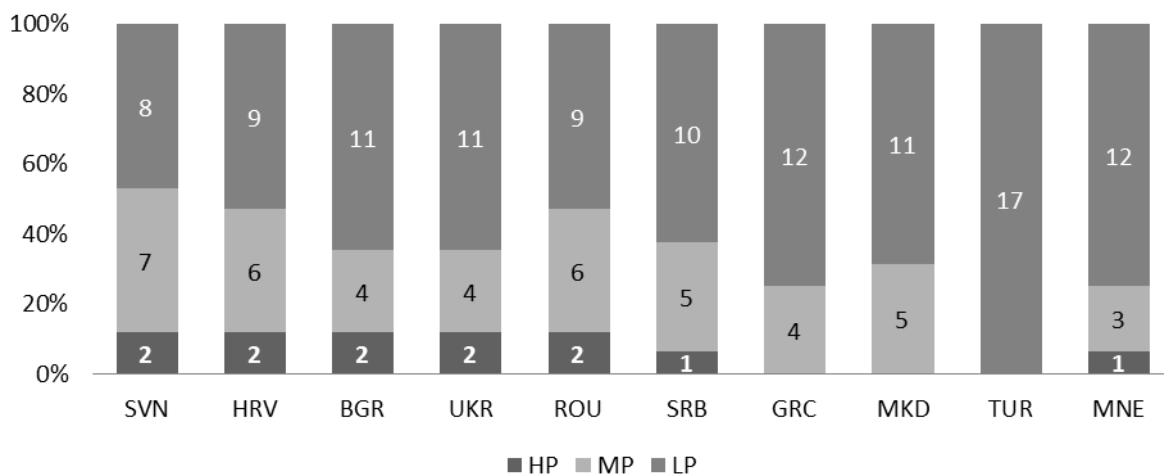


Figure 3. SDG performance in selected countries, 2018

In 2018, the countries seem to be aware of the importance and impact of these goals on achieving sustainable development that requires efforts at all levels of society and we can point out the much higher implications for achieving these SDGs. Thus, countries like Croatia, Bulgaria managed to reach 2 of the SDGs, and Romania managed to reach 2 SDGs compared to none in 2018. Slovenia, Serbia and Montenegro remained constant compared to 2018, only one SDG is being achieved. Also, it can be seen that countries have not remained indifferent to achieving the SDGs and are making progress from year to year. At the same time, countries still have to fight to achieve these SDGs, given that the vast majority of SDGs have poor performance.

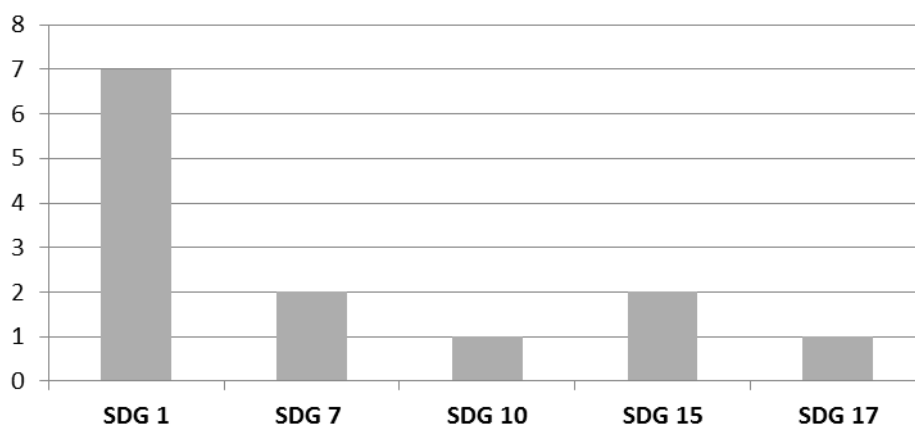


Figure 4. SDG achieved per country in 2018

SDG 1 seems the main objective considered by most of the analyzed countries, this being achieved by 7 of the 10 countries comprised in the study. Countries that have managed to achieve SDG 1 include: Slovenia, Croatia, Ukraine, Romania, Serbia and Montenegro. SDG 7 and SDG 15 are the

next ones that come to complete the pursued goals and targets. Both were checked by 2 countries. Bulgaria managed to tick both, while Slovenia only ticked SDG 7, and Romania SDG 15. Ukraine also presents as achieved SDG 10, while Croatia SDG 17.

Even if there are needed great efforts in order to achieve all the goals until 2030, the countries must be aware of the benefits gained if this target is achieved.

4. Conclusions

It took almost 46 years for the SDG concept to be shaped and transformed into a global agenda concept. SDG means more than the combination of environment, ethics and economy, it is about having a new attitude towards the other and towards nature. It is also about the fact that all the states should realize that without the full involvement of all societies these steps cannot be taken and the goals could not be achieved. All in all, the interest of the companies and countries not only for the defense of the planet and the environment, but also for the help of the communities, will be increasing, due to the numerous climatic changes that we are experiencing right now and which will be emphasized in the future. Also, in the future, the legislation will be more severe and will tend to direct companies and people towards fair behavior in the environment, in particular.

Therefore, an important role in the goals' achievement is played by the accountants who help companies align with the SDGs that are considered relevant for their business. The accounting information contributes to the implementation, development and monitoring of objectives with both direct and indirect information. So, all the levels of the society in each country should focus on the steps needed for the achievement of the goals proposed for a more sustainable development. We can point out that the countries comprised in our study make efforts to align and achieve the goals and it seems that they are aware of the importance of these goals and the benefits they bring if they will be achieved. Such a conclusion is in accordance with other relevant studies in the field that point out that achieving SDG has a crucial role in the future existence of the planet. In present, the SDG are very debated and the process of achieving them is observed by many of the stakeholders. There are many issues that still need improvement in order to achieve these goals according to 2030 Agenda and steps are followed worldwide.

The steps taken are not very great, but progress can be observed from year to year. From the countries analyzed we observe that at present Romania, Croatia, Bulgaria, Slovenia and Ukraine have achieved 2 goals, while Montenegro and Serbia have only one. It can be mentioned that efforts are made in both EU and non-EU countries.

As a first conclusion, it is noted that countries have made real progress in adopting and realizing the importance of these objectives that can change the future we already know if changes are not made worldwide in protecting and conserving nature, changes regarding the implementation, innovation and research of new technologies in certain areas that are highly polluted or that can cause certain accidents that bring with them certain serious consequences that can have a devastating impact on nature and people for decades or even centuries.

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