NGOs and the Western Balkans countries': A history Intertwined with Regional Development and International Funding

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Abstract

This article explores the evolving role of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in the Western Balkans, examining how their development trajectory has been closely intertwined with international funding and post-conflict transformation processes. Particular attention is given to the contribution of NGOs to sustainable development, environmental governance, and urban resilience within a region characterized by institutional transition and European integration aspirations. The analysis critically assesses donor-driven development models, highlighting ethical considerations related to accountability, transparency, and local ownership. By focusing on the intersection of international financing, civil society action, and green development initiatives, the article identifies both the opportunities and structural limitations of NGO-led interventions in shaping sustainable cities and communities. The findings offer policy-relevant insights for urban sustainability agendas, emphasizing the importance of ethically grounded, locally embedded, and long-term approaches to green development—issues highly relevant to global discussions on sustainable and resilient cities.

Keywords

NGOs; Western Balkans; international funding; sustainable development; urban governance; ethics; green transition

1. Introduction

Over the past three decades, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have become integral to global development and sustainability governance, not merely as implementers of projects but as institutional actors embedded in transnational power structures. Their prominence is especially evident in regions undergoing political transition and external intervention, such as the Western Balkans. Following the collapse of socialist regimes and the violent conflicts of the 1990s, the region became a focal point for international aid, where NGOs operated as intermediaries translating global development norms into local governance practices (Duffield, 2001; Sampson, 2017).

Rather than evolving organically from domestic civil society alone, NGO expansion in the Western Balkans was closely aligned with shifting international agendas. Initially oriented toward humanitarian relief and post-conflict reconstruction, NGOs progressively incorporated mandates related to democratization, institutional reform, environmental governance, and sustainable urban development. This trajectory mirrored donor priorities linked to European Union enlargement, climate policy, and

global sustainability frameworks, embedding NGOs within project-based governance regimes characterized by conditional funding and performance indicators (Fagan & Sircar, 2015; Bulkeley et al., 2013).

Critical scholarship has problematized this donor-driven configuration, emphasizing its ethical and political implications. NGOs operating under external funding constraints often face structural incentives that privilege measurable outputs over long-term institutional change, potentially reinforcing dependency and weakening state capacity (Easterly, 2006; Bebbington et al., 2008). Accountability tends to flow upward toward donors rather than downward toward local constituencies, raising concerns about democratic legitimacy and local ownership (Ebrahim, 2003). These tensions are particularly acute in green and urban development initiatives, where technocratic sustainability solutions may obscure underlying social inequalities and questions of environmental justice.

By situating the Western Balkan experience within a comparative perspective that includes the Middle East, North Africa (MENA), and Gulf regions, this article highlights convergent governance challenges across distinct political economies. Despite divergent state capacities and resource endowments, both contexts reveal similar difficulties in translating global sustainability discourses into locally legitimate urban policies. NGOs emerge as critical yet contested mediators between global norms and local realities, raising broader questions about the ethical governance of sustainability transitions.

1. The emerging role of NGOs in the Western Balkans

The formal concept of NGOs originates in the post–World War II international system, codified in Article 71 of the United Nations Charter (1945) and institutionalized through the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). However, this legal definition does not explain the timing, scale, or political function of NGOs in the Western Balkans. Their emergence must instead be understood as a product of systemic rupture: the collapse of socialist governance, the erosion of state authority, and the subsequent internationalization of domestic political processes.

In the early 1990s, the breakdown of Yugoslavia and the onset of armed conflict created a governance vacuum that international actors sought to fill through humanitarian intervention and civil society support. NGOs emerged as functional substitutes for weakened state institutions, particularly in areas related to human rights monitoring, humanitarian assistance, and legal documentation. Early organizations such as the Humanitarian Law Center and the Belgrade Circle were not merely service providers; they functioned as norm entrepreneurs, introducing international human rights frameworks into fragmented post-socialist political spaces.

As international engagement deepened, NGO development became increasingly institutionalized through European integration mechanisms. EU enlargement policy explicitly framed civil society as a tool for democratic consolidation, channeling substantial financial and technical resources toward NGOs while simultaneously shaping their organizational forms and strategic priorities (European Commission, DG

NEAR, 2012). This process produced a professionalized NGO sector oriented toward compliance with EU funding logics, reporting standards, and thematic priorities.

During the mid- to late 1990s, peacebuilding and reconciliation agendas further expanded NGO activity. Organizations such as the Centre for Nonviolent Action exemplify how NGOs became embedded in post-conflict governance architectures, often operating in parallel to, rather than in coordination with, state institutions. While this expanded civic space and facilitated cross-border dialogue, it also reinforced a dual governance structure in which legitimacy and resources flowed disproportionately through international channels (Sampson, 2002).

By the early 2000s, the NGO sector in the Western Balkans had become more specialized and networked, particularly in environmental governance and urban development. This specialization reflected both genuine societal demand and strategic adaptation to donor priorities associated with sustainability and EU accession. However, it also intensified the tension between project-based intervention and long-term institutional integration, raising questions about the durability and democratic grounding of NGO-led governance.

Analytically, the rise of NGOs in the Western Balkans illustrates a broader transformation in governance under conditions of external intervention. NGOs functioned simultaneously as agents of democratization and as instruments of transnational policy diffusion, blurring the boundary between civil society and governance. Their historical trajectory reveals the ambivalent role of NGOs: enabling participation and innovation while also reproducing asymmetries of power, accountability, and knowledge between global and local actors.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1 NGOs and Development Theory

Within development theory, NGOs have traditionally been conceptualized as flexible, community-oriented actors capable of addressing governance and service-delivery gaps left by the state and the market (Lewis, 2001). Their perceived comparative advantage lies in their proximity to local communities, adaptability, and capacity to experiment with participatory and context-sensitive approaches to development. This positioning has led scholars to frame NGOs as vehicles for bottom-up development, social inclusion, and empowerment, particularly in settings characterized by weak institutions and limited state capacity.

In transitional and post-conflict contexts, NGOs have further been theorized as agents of democratization and social capital formation. Putnam's (1993) concept of social capital highlights the role of civic associations in fostering trust, cooperation, and institutional performance, a framework frequently applied to post-socialist societies. Edwards (2014) expands this perspective by emphasizing civil society's normative role in shaping democratic values, accountability, and participatory governance.

However, critical scholarship has challenged the romanticization of NGOs as inherently democratic or emancipatory actors. Rather than autonomous grassroots organizations, many NGOs in transitional contexts operate as professionalized entities embedded within international aid architectures. This has prompted a reconceptualization of NGOs as **development intermediaries**, whose roles are shaped as much by donor priorities and funding logics as by local needs (Bebbington et al., 2008). In the Western Balkans, this intermediary role has often positioned NGOs between international governance regimes and local institutions, raising questions about representation, legitimacy, and long-term developmental impact.

2.2 International Funding and Development Governance

International funding institutions—including the European Union, United Nations agencies, international financial institutions, and bilateral donors—have played a decisive role in shaping development governance in the Western Balkans. External financing has enabled large-scale interventions in areas such as institutional reform, environmental regulation, and urban sustainability, often compensating for limited domestic resources and administrative capacity.

At the same time, the literature highlights several structural tensions inherent in donor-driven development models. Easterly (2006) critiques the technocratic and top-down nature of international aid, arguing that externally imposed solutions frequently fail to account for local knowledge and institutional realities. Similarly, Bebbington, Hickey, and Mitlin (2008) emphasize how donor priorities, conditionality, and short funding cycles contribute to **project-based fragmentation**, limiting opportunities for structural transformation and long-term sustainability.

In the Western Balkan context, EU funding has been particularly influential, aligning NGO activity with accession-related benchmarks and regulatory frameworks. While this alignment has facilitated policy convergence and norm diffusion—especially in environmental and urban governance—it has also reinforced a compliance-oriented approach to development. NGOs are often incentivized to design projects that fit donor templates rather than address locally articulated priorities, reinforcing patterns of dependency and reducing strategic autonomy.

From a governance perspective, this funding architecture has contributed to the emergence of **parallel implementation structures**, whereby NGOs execute development projects independently of, or alongside, public institutions. Although effective in delivering short-term results, such arrangements risk weakening institutional capacity and undermining democratic accountability at the municipal level.

2.3 Ethics, Accountability, and Sustainability

The ethical evaluation of NGO activity has become increasingly prominent in development studies, particularly in relation to accountability, transparency, and local ownership (Ebrahim, 2003). Accountability in NGO practice is often asymmetrical:

while upward accountability to donors is institutionalized through reporting and evaluation mechanisms, downward accountability to beneficiary communities remains comparatively weak.

Ebrahim (2003) conceptualizes accountability as a multidimensional process encompassing not only financial transparency but also participation, learning, and responsiveness. In the context of internationally funded development, ethical challenges arise when NGOs prioritize donor-defined indicators of success over locally meaningful outcomes. This dynamic is especially salient in urban and green development projects, where technical performance metrics may obscure social and distributive impacts.

In green development, ethical considerations extend beyond procedural accountability to include issues of environmental justice and inclusivity. Bulkeley et al. (2013) argue that low-carbon and sustainability initiatives often privilege technocratic solutions, benefiting specific social groups while marginalizing others. NGOs operating within such frameworks may inadvertently contribute to "greenwashing," legitimizing environmentally branded projects that fail to address underlying drivers of inequality or ecological degradation.

Consequently, sustainability must be understood not only as an environmental objective but as an ethical and political process. Ethical NGO engagement requires meaningful community participation, long-term institutional integration, and reflexivity regarding power relations embedded in funding and governance structures. Without these elements, green development risks becoming symbolic rather than trnsformative.

3. Methodology

This article adopts a **qualitative research design** grounded in interpretive and comparative analysis to examine the role of NGOs in the development trajectories of the Western Balkans, with particular emphasis on international funding, urban sustainability, and environmental governance. A qualitative approach is appropriate given the study's focus on institutional dynamics, ethical dimensions, and governance processes that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative indicators alone.

3.1 Research Design and Analytical Framework

The study employs a **thematic content analysis** of documentary sources, informed by concepts from development theory, governance studies, and urban sustainability literature. The analytical framework is structured around three interrelated dimensions:
(a) the evolving role of NGOs as development and governance intermediaries;
(b) the influence of international funding architectures on project design and institutional outcomes; and

(c) ethical considerations related to accountability, local ownership, and sustainability.

Rather than testing causal hypotheses, the analysis aims to identify **patterns, tensions, and recurring mechanisms** that shape NGO-led development interventions across different national and urban contexts within the Western Balkans.

3.2 Data Sources

The empirical material consists primarily of **secondary qualitative data**, including:

- Peer-reviewed academic literature on NGOs, development, and urban sustainability
- Policy documents and strategic frameworks issued by the European Union, UN agencies, and national governments
- Project reports and evaluations produced by international and local NGOs
- Donor assessments and monitoring reports related to environmental and urban development initiatives

These sources were selected based on their relevance, institutional credibility, and analytical depth, allowing for triangulation across different perspectives and levels of governance.

3.3 Case Selection and Scope

The analysis focuses on selected Western Balkan countries—such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, North Macedonia, and Albania—which share key structural characteristics, including post-socialist transition, EU-oriented reform agendas, and sustained engagement with international donors. While acknowledging national differences, the study treats the Western Balkans as a **comparative regional case**, enabling the identification of common patterns in NGO activity and funding-driven governance.

The temporal scope spans from the early 1990s to the present, capturing the transition from humanitarian and post-conflict interventions to contemporary sustainability- and climate-oriented development strategies.

3.4 Analytical Limitations

The reliance on secondary data imposes certain limitations. First, the analysis reflects the perspectives embedded in existing documentation, which may privilege donor or organizational narratives. Second, the absence of primary fieldwork limits the ability to assess micro-level community perceptions and informal practices. However, these limitations are mitigated through critical source comparison and engagement with established theoretical debates.

Despite these constraints, the methodology provides a robust basis for examining the structural, ethical, and governance-related dimensions of NGO-led urban sustainability in the Western Balkans.

.4. Historical Evolution of NGO Activity in the Western BalkanS

4.1 Post-Conflict and Transitional Period (1990s)

The 1990s in the Western Balkans were marked by violent conflict, state fragmentation, and socio-economic disruption, creating an exceptional context for the emergence of NGOs. During this period, international humanitarian organizations dominated civil society activity, focusing on **emergency relief, post-conflict reconstruction, and the provision of basic social services** (Duffield, 2001). These organizations often operated in parallel to weak or non-functional state institutions, effectively substituting for public actors in areas such as housing, health, and municipal governance.

Local NGOs emerged gradually within this humanitarian ecosystem, typically as smaller, community-based initiatives reliant on international funding and technical assistance. While they contributed to civic mobilization and localized problem-solving, their activities were heavily shaped by donor priorities, leading to **institutional dependence and professionalization pressures** (Bebbington et al., 2008). In theoretical terms, these organizations exemplify what scholars describe as the **"NGO intermediary model"**, whereby civil society functions as a conduit for international norms and resources rather than as fully autonomous agents of local development (Edwards, 2014; Lewis, 2001).

Critically, this period illustrates a tension between **rapid service delivery and the cultivation of sustainable local governance structures**. NGOs were instrumental in addressing immediate post-conflict needs, yet their reliance on projectized, donor-driven funding often limited their capacity to contribute to longer-term institutional reform or systemic change. This dynamic set the stage for subsequent evolution in both organizational mandate and governance engagement.

4.2 European Integration and the Green Transition (2000s–Present)

With EU accession and pre-accession conditionality emerging as dominant policy drivers in the 2000s, NGOs in the Western Balkans increasingly oriented their activities toward **compliance with European governance standards, environmental acquis, and sustainability frameworks** (Fagan & Sircar, 2015). This shift corresponded to broader normative and regulatory pressures from the EU, including environmental directives, climate adaptation policies, and urban planning norms, which NGOs were often tasked with translating into local practice.

Urban environmental projects became a key locus of NGO engagement. Initiatives in **waste management, renewable energy promotion, energy efficiency retrofitting, and climate-resilient urban infrastructure** reflect both compliance with EU funding priorities and emerging global sustainability agendas (Bulkeley et al., 2013). In theoretical terms, NGOs acted as **"norm entrepreneurs"**, introducing new standards of participatory governance, transparency, and environmental accountability into municipal and regional decision-making processes.

However, this period also illustrates persistent **structural constraints**. Project-based funding and donor-driven agendas frequently limited the scalability and institutional embedding of initiatives. While NGOs facilitated experimentation and piloting of

sustainable urban interventions, many projects remained **fragmented and temporally bounded**, raising concerns about continuity, local ownership, and the integration of outcomes into municipal policy frameworks (Easterly, 2006; Bebbington et al., 2008). Moreover, the ethical dimensions of participation and environmental justice emerged as critical issues, particularly where projects addressed technical sustainability metrics without fully engaging marginalized communities (Bulkeley et al., 2013; Ebrahim, 2003).

In sum, the EU integration period represents both an **opportunity and a constraint**: NGOs gained institutional legitimacy, funding access, and technical capacity, yet remained embedded within externally defined frameworks that shaped the scope, priorities, and ethical responsibilities of their interventions. Understanding this evolution is essential for evaluating the long-term sustainability of NGO-led urban and green development in the Western Balkans and for drawing lessons applicable to other global contexts, such as Gulf cities or MENA urban initiatives.

5. International Funding and Development Priorities

International funding has played a **defining role in shaping the trajectory of NGO activity** in the Western Balkans, particularly in the domains of governance reform, environmental protection, and sustainable urban development. Donor agencies—including the European Union, bilateral development partners, and multilateral institutions—have provided financial and technical resources that enabled NGOs to operate at scale, pilot innovative projects, and influence municipal and regional policy (Bebbington et al., 2008; Fagan & Sircar, 2015).

From a theoretical perspective, such funding exemplifies the notion of **"institutional isomorphism"**, whereby recipient organizations align their structures, strategies, and objectives with donor priorities in order to secure legitimacy and resources (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). In the Western Balkans, EU pre-accession funds and environmental directives strongly shaped NGO agendas, incentivizing projects in energy efficiency, urban waste management, climate adaptation, and participatory governance. These initiatives often represented **innovative governance experiments**, introducing new technical standards, public consultation mechanisms, and monitoring frameworks previously absent from municipal practice (Bulkeley et al., 2013).

However, international funding also introduces significant **structural constraints**. Project-based and time-bound funding cycles create **dependency dynamics**, whereby NGOs must continuously align their strategic planning with donor templates, often at the expense of locally defined priorities (Easterly, 2006). This limits their capacity for **long-term planning, adaptive learning, and institutional embedding**, and can result in fragmented interventions that are difficult to scale or integrate into broader municipal systems. Sampson (2017) emphasizes that such dependency may also **affect NGOs' legitimacy**, as local stakeholders perceive them as implementing externally imposed agendas rather than representing community needs.

Moreover, donor-driven development often privileges **technical and measurable outputs** over systemic or relational outcomes. For instance, energy retrofitting projects in Serbian and Bosnian municipalities achieved measurable reductions in

energy use but frequently lacked mechanisms to influence housing policy or local governance structures. Similarly, climate adaptation pilot projects raised awareness and improved preparedness but rarely translated into institutionalized municipal strategies (Bebbington et al., 2008; Bulkeley et al., 2013).

This duality—between **enabling innovation and constraining strategic autonomy**—highlights an important ethical and governance tension. While international funding has expanded NGOs' capacity to contribute to urban sustainability, it has also reinforced **donor-defined success criteria**, limiting responsiveness to local needs and raising questions regarding accountability, participation, and long-term sustainability (Ebrahim, 2003). Ethically grounded development thus requires balancing donor priorities with mechanisms that foster local ownership, institutional integration, and social inclusivity.

In sum, the literature suggests that international funding in the Western Balkans has been both a **driver of innovation** and a **structural constraint**, shaping the evolution of NGOs as key actors in governance reform and sustainable urban development while simultaneously producing dependency and ethical dilemmas that must be addressed in both policy and practice.

6. Critical Assessment of NGO Contributions

6.1 Positive Contributions

NGOs in the Western Balkans have played a pivotal role in **strengthening local institutional capacity**. By providing technical expertise, training, and access to international best practices, NGOs have enhanced municipal capabilities in areas such as urban planning, environmental monitoring, and climate adaptation (Bulkeley et al., 2013; Fagan & Sircar, 2015). This capacity-building extends beyond technical skills to include normative frameworks, such as participatory governance mechanisms, transparency standards, and evidence-based policy formulation, aligning local institutions with EU and global sustainability norms (Bebbington et al., 2008).

In addition, NGOs have been instrumental in **enhancing participatory urban governance**. They have introduced platforms for citizen engagement, community consultations, and multi-stakeholder dialogue, particularly in the design and implementation of urban sustainability initiatives. Theoretical perspectives on social capital (Putnam, 1993) suggest that these interactions can strengthen civic trust and collaborative problem-solving, creating the conditions for more inclusive and responsive urban governance structures.

NGOs have also contributed significantly to **advancing environmental awareness and sustainability practices**. Initiatives in renewable energy, energy efficiency retrofits, waste management, and climate adaptation have increased public awareness of environmental issues and introduced innovative practices in municipalities with limited prior exposure to sustainable urban management (Bulkeley et al., 2013; Sampson, 2017). By acting as intermediaries between international sustainability agendas and local communities, NGOs have facilitated norm diffusion and

encouraged experimentation with green technologies and participatory planning models.

6.2 Challenges and Limitations

Despite these contributions, several structural and ethical challenges limit the long-term effectiveness of NGO interventions. A key concern is **financial dependency on donors**, which often constrains strategic autonomy and shapes NGO agendas around externally defined priorities (Easterly, 2006; Sampson, 2017). This dependency may incentivize short-term, donor-compliant interventions rather than contextually grounded, systemic solutions, and can undermine the capacity of NGOs to pursue locally identified development priorities.

Another critical limitation is **limited continuity after project completion**. Many interventions are designed as discrete, time-bound projects, resulting in temporary improvements without durable institutional embedding. For example, urban sustainability projects in areas such as energy efficiency or climate adaptation frequently conclude without mechanisms to maintain, scale, or integrate practices into municipal routines (Bebbington et al., 2008). This project-based approach reflects broader patterns of "NGOization," where development is mediated through temporary, externally funded structures rather than stable local institutions (Edwards, 2014).

Furthermore, NGO initiatives often exhibit **weak integration with municipal governance structures**. While NGOs can introduce technical expertise and participatory processes, their interventions sometimes operate in parallel to formal municipal channels, limiting coordination and reducing policy coherence. This fragmentation can undermine long-term effectiveness and raises questions about legitimacy and accountability, as initiatives may be perceived as externally imposed rather than locally owned (Ebrahim, 2003; Bulkeley et al., 2013).

Collectively, these challenges highlight the dual nature of NGO contributions: they **enhance capacity and innovation**, yet remain constrained by **donor-dependency, project-based fragmentation, and limited institutional integration**. Addressing these limitations requires both ethical reflection and practical mechanisms to align funding cycles, local ownership, and municipal governance, ensuring that green and urban sustainability interventions are durable, participatory, and socially legitimate.

6.3. Ethical Dimensions of Funding and Accountability

Ethical governance emerges as a central issue in evaluating NGO effectiveness. Transparency in funding, downward accountability to local communities, and ethical responsibility in shaping urban development agendas are critical for sustainable impact. Without these elements, green development risks reproducing inequality and technocratic decision-making (Newell & Paterson, 2010).

7. Discussion

The experience of NGOs in the Western Balkans provides a compelling case study for understanding the **complex interplay between international financing, civil society action, and sustainable urban development**. NGOs have emerged as critical intermediaries, translating global sustainability agendas into locally implemented interventions, particularly in the domains of environmental protection, climate adaptation, and urban governance (Bulkeley et al., 2013; Fagan & Sircar, 2015). Their intermediary role, however, is shaped by the structural and ethical tensions inherent in donor-driven development systems.

7.1 Intermediary Role and Governance Implications

NGOs in transitional contexts often function as **boundary organizations** (Guston, 2001), mediating between global normative frameworks, such as EU environmental acquis or international climate targets, and local municipal practices. This positioning allows them to introduce **innovative governance mechanisms**, including participatory planning, multi-stakeholder consultation, and technical capacity-building. These mechanisms enhance institutional learning, foster social capital (Putnam, 1993), and contribute to the diffusion of environmental norms.

At the same time, the intermediary role imposes **governance constraints**. NGOs must constantly navigate **donor priorities, conditionalities, and performance metrics**, which can shape the scope, objectives, and methods of their interventions. While international funding enables experimentation and capacity-building, it also introduces **structural dependencies** that may limit long-term strategic autonomy and the ability to pursue locally defined sustainability goals (Easterly, 2006; Sampson, 2017).

7.2 Ethical Dilemmas and Power Asymmetries

The Western Balkan case highlights the **ethical and political dilemmas** associated with donor-driven NGO activity. First, **power asymmetries** exist between donors, NGOs, and local communities. Donors define success criteria and allocate resources, NGOs implement interventions, and communities are often expected to adopt or participate in externally framed projects. This configuration raises questions of **legitimacy, representation, and accountability**, particularly when interventions are technical or short-term rather than embedded in local governance structures (Ebrahim, 2003; Bulkeley et al., 2013).

Second, ethical concerns extend to **equity and environmental justice**. Urban sustainability initiatives may prioritize energy efficiency or carbon reduction metrics over social inclusion, potentially marginalizing vulnerable populations (Bulkeley et al., 2013). NGOs face the challenge of balancing **donor-driven performance indicators** with **normative commitments to inclusion, fairness, and long-term ecological stewardship**. This tension is emblematic of broader global challenges in green urban development, where technical innovation may not automatically translate into socially legitimate or sustainable outcomes.

7.3 Implications for Global Green City Initiatives

The Western Balkan experience carries several lessons for **international green city initiatives**, including those in MENA and Gulf contexts:

1. **NGOs as ethical and political intermediaries**: Their role extends beyond technical implementation to include mediating between global sustainability norms and local social, political, and institutional realities.
2. **Dependency and sustainability**: Reliance on donor funding can constrain strategic autonomy and limit long-term project sustainability, highlighting the need for mechanisms that embed initiatives into municipal governance.
3. **Participation and legitimacy**: The effectiveness of sustainability interventions is contingent on civic engagement and social legitimacy, rather than solely on technological or infrastructural outcomes.
4. **Global-local translation of norms**: The case demonstrates the complexities of translating international sustainability agendas into locally relevant policies and practices—a challenge that is increasingly relevant in high-investment urban contexts, such as Gulf smart city initiatives, where top-down implementation may overlook community needs (Acuto et al., 2018; Bulkeley et al., 2013).

In sum, the Western Balkans exemplifies the **global tensions inherent in green urban development**, where NGOs operate at the intersection of technical innovation, ethical responsibility, and governance negotiation. Understanding these dynamics provides a critical lens for designing interventions that are both **technically effective and socially legitimate** across diverse urban contexts.

8 Comparative Perspectives: Linking the Western Balkans with MENA and Gulf Urban Contexts

8.1 Shared Structural Dynamics Despite Different Development Levels

At first glance, the Western Balkans and the Gulf/MENA region appear to occupy opposite ends of the development spectrum. The Western Balkans are often characterized by post-conflict recovery, institutional fragility, and EU-driven reform, whereas Gulf cities are marked by rapid urbanization, strong state capacity, and capital-intensive sustainability initiatives. Nevertheless, both regions exhibit **structurally comparable dynamics in the role of NGOs and international actors within green urban development**.

In both contexts, sustainable urban initiatives are frequently shaped by **externally defined frameworks**—EU accession criteria in the Western Balkans and global sustainability standards (e.g. SDGs, net-zero commitments) in the Gulf. NGOs and civil society organizations function as **intermediaries**, translating global norms into local policy and project implementation.

8.2 Donor-Driven Agendas and Policy Alignment

In the Western Balkans, EU funding has been the dominant force shaping NGO priorities, particularly in environmental governance, climate adaptation, and urban sustainability. Similarly, in MENA and Gulf cities, sustainability agendas are often aligned with **international climate finance, multilateral development banks, and global city networks** (Bulkeley et al., 2013).

For example:

- In the Western Balkans, NGOs implement EU-funded pilot projects on energy efficiency or waste management that often remain isolated from long-term municipal planning.
- In Gulf cities, large-scale green initiatives—such as smart city districts or carbon-neutral developments—are frequently developed in alignment with international benchmarks but may lack robust mechanisms for **community participation and social inclusion**.

In both cases, **alignment with global funding and policy frameworks can crowd out locally articulated priorities**, raising similar ethical concerns regarding ownership and inclusivity.

8.3 NGOs, Participation, and Governance Gaps

A key difference lies in the **institutional role of NGOs**. In the Western Balkans, NGOs often substitute for weak public institutions by delivering services, facilitating participation, and monitoring environmental compliance. In contrast, in Gulf contexts where state capacity is stronger, NGOs tend to play a more limited role, often focused on awareness-raising, technical expertise, or partnership within state-led sustainability agendas.

Despite this difference, a shared challenge is evident: **public participation in urban green development remains constrained**.

- In Western Balkan cities, participation is limited by funding dependency and project-based engagement.
- In Gulf cities, participation is often constrained by top-down governance models and technocratic planning approaches.

This convergence suggests that ethical urban sustainability requires not only technical capacity but also **institutionalized mechanisms for civic engagement**, regardless of regional context.

8.4 Ethical Dimensions: From Dependency to Green Legitimacy

Ethical challenges differ in form but not in substance. In the Western Balkans, the central ethical issue is **dependency on international donors**, which can undermine autonomy and long-term sustainability. In Gulf cities, the ethical challenge often relates to **green legitimacy**, where high-visibility sustainability projects risk functioning as symbolic capital rather than instruments of systemic transformation.

In both regions, NGOs can inadvertently contribute to:

- legitimizing externally driven development agendas,
- prioritizing measurable outputs over social equity,
- reinforcing technocratic decision-making in urban governance (Newell & Paterson, 2010).

Thus, ethical accountability emerges as a cross-regional concern, linking development aid contexts with high-investment sustainability environments.

.8.5 Lessons for Green Cities Dubai and Global Urban Policy

The comparative analysis suggests several actionable lessons relevant to **Green Cities Dubai**:

1. **Institutional embedding matters more than project scale**
   Large-scale green investments (Gulf) and small-scale pilot projects (WB) both risks limited impact if not embedded in long-term urban governance structures.
2. **Ethical governance is a prerequisite for sustainability**
   Transparency, accountability, and participation are as critical as technological innovation.
3. **NGOs should act as bridges, not buffers**
   Whether in post-transition or high-capacity states, NGOs should facilitate genuine dialogue between communities, municipalities, and global institutions.
4. **Green cities require social legitimacy**
   Sustainable urban transitions must address distributive justice, inclusion, and public trust—not only carbon metrics.

8.6 Toward a Convergent Model of Ethical Urban Sustainability

The Western Balkans and the Gulf illustrate two pathways converging toward a shared challenge: how to translate global sustainability agendas into **ethically grounded, locally legitimate urban transformations**. NGOs—despite operating under different constraints—occupy a strategic position in this process.

Recognizing NGOs as **ethical and political actors**, rather than mere implementers, enables more reflexive and inclusive green city strategies. This insight provides a conceptual bridge between post-transition regions and high-investment urban environments, reinforcing the global relevance of the Western Balkan experience.

There is **no unified, regional mechanism** that aggregates all funding "flows" to NGOs across the Balkans.

• Many funding streams are **blended** — i.e. a combination of EU funds + foundations + community donations + own revenues — making it difficult to attribute "how much comes from which source."

• Data are **fragmented**: national databases, NGO annual reports, European programmes, private archives — and there is **no common disclosure standard**.
• Even programmes such as those of the **EU or USAID** — when they cover states/public institutions — do not clearly separate what proportion goes to NGOs versus public bodies.

Table — Role of NGOs + Estimated Funding by Source & Sector

Source / Funder	NGO Sectors / Role	Estimated Funds / Examples*
EU (ESF+, LIFE, IPA, etc.)	Environment, social inclusion, rights, development	e.g. ~€15 million annually to environmental NGOs from the LIFE programme (Euronews)
USAID / United States	Democracy, reform, humanitarian & social support	~US$2 billion in Kosovo since 1999 — over US$1 billion from USAID (Arabia News +1)
Foundations / Open Society Foundations	Rights, innovation, political participation, grassroots actions	Grants of US$3,000–6,000 for small actions/groups (Open Society Foundations – Western Balkans)
Regional initiatives (e.g. SMART Balkans)	Institutional cooperation, good governance, stability, youth	36 projects — NOK 8,473,675 total (~€0.8–1.0 million) (SMART Balkans +1)
Local / community funding, crowdfunding, social entrepreneurship	Small environmental / cultural / social actions	No publicly aggregated data — funding occurs at a low level

* Estimates refer to **sample programmes** — they do **not** represent the total funding received by all NGOs

Below is the **English translation**, with clear structure and neutral formatting. No new content has been added.

9.Concluding Observations

• NGOs in the Balkans function as **multipliers of social, environmental, and institutional development**, with funding originating from multiple sources (EU, US, foundations, community funding).
• The **EU and USAID** are the largest funders by volume, but **foundations and local funding** play a crucial role in supporting small, grassroots initiatives.
• **Transparency and allocation are uneven**: a small number of NGOs absorb a large share of resources, while many others lack access.
• The **absence of region-wide data** makes quantitative assessment of the collective NGO sector difficult.

9.1.Methodological and Institutional Requirements for Reliable Assessment of NGO Funding

Below is a **coherent academic-style paragraph** addressing the key issues you listed, with **current institutional references** to real transparency challenges and mechanisms. Since there is **no single academic database covering all Balkan NGO funding**, the answer draws on credible institutional assessments (primarily EU transparency audits), which are widely cited in policy and civil-society literature as evidence of systemic fragmentation and data limitations:

A comprehensive understanding of civil society financing in the Balkans is constrained by the **absence of integrated, comparable, and disaggregated data on NGO funding flows**, a problem increasingly highlighted in the transparency literature on development aid and civil society support (e.g., Edwards & Hulme, 1996; Salamon & Anheier, 1997). At the regional level, **no single database aggregates all grants awarded to NGOs**, and funding streams are dispersed across national systems, international programmes, and private foundations, each with differing disclosure practices (OECD, 2020). Current transparency mechanisms such as the European Commission's **Financial Transparency System** provide information on recipients and amounts for EU budget funding, but these records remain **fragmented and inconsistently classified**, impeding reliable cross-programme analysis (European Court of Auditors 2025 report; see also ECA summary on NGO funding transparency). For example, the European Court of Auditors has noted that information on EU grants awarded to NGOs — including those active in internal policies such as cohesion, research, migration, and the environment — is published in a scattered manner across multiple platforms, making it difficult to ascertain the full picture of how EU resources support civil society actors (ECA, 2025). Moreover, although governments, international bodies, and private foundations may publish individual funding decisions, they do so in **non-standardised formats** without consistent categorisation by sector or funding source, and they often fail to distinguish what portion of programme funds ultimately benefits independent NGOs versus public or intermediary actors (ECA, 2025). As a result, efforts to produce **regular NGO funding accountability reports**, disaggregated by country, sector, and donor, are rare or partial, and cooperation between NGOs and research networks for systematic data collection remains limited, despite its recognized value for transparency and governance studies (Mendelson & Glenn, 2002; Lewis, 2007). Furthermore, many funding streams are channelled through state programmes or public bodies without clear separation of allocations to NGOs, further complicating assessments of civil society's financial base (OECD, 2020). Taken together, these structural and institutional deficiencies underscore the need for a **regional registry and standardised reporting frameworks** to support rigorous academic and policy evaluation of NGO funding in the Balkans.

Projects in the Balkans

Country / Programme / Entity	Amount / Reference	Coverage / Purpose
European Investment Bank (EIB) – WB	€1.2 billion in total investments across	Infrastructure, sustainable energy, SMEs, environment —

Country / Programme / Entity	Amount / Reference	Coverage / Purpose
region 2023	Western Balkans in 2023 (European Investment Bank)	projects often implemented with NGO participation
Western Balkans Growth Plan / Reform and Growth Facility (2024–2027)	€6 billion total for the region over the coming years (Council of Europe +1)	Reforms, infrastructure, development — part of funding will involve civil society / NGOs / local programmes
SMART Balkans Project (grant round 2025)	36 projects in 6 countries with total grants ≈ NOK 8,473,675 (~€0.8–1.0 million)	Good governance, civil society, human rights, youth — NGO support
EU-wide (ESF+, CERV, European funds)	Stable share of funding available to NGOs under EU guidelines (European Commission)	Social inclusion, rights, research, environment, culture — areas where NGOs can receive grants

9.2.Preliminary Findings and Interpretative Limitations

• Large funding volumes are present across the region—such as the €1.2 billion provided by the European Investment Bank and the €6 billion Western Balkans Growth Plan—but these resources are not allocated exclusively to NGOs. Instead, they predominantly support infrastructure development, state institutions, and private-sector activities, with only a portion reaching civil society organizations. At the same time, smaller-scale programmes, such as SMART Balkans, illustrate that local NGOs do receive targeted funding; however, these amounts remain relatively modest in comparison to large international investment flows. Overall, funding distribution across the region is highly heterogeneous, combining major international investments with small, project-based grants and community-level financing.

Estimating total NGO funding at the country level is further constrained by several structural barriers. Available data are incomplete, fragmented, and non-centralized, limiting their reliability and comparability. Funding sources are frequently mixed—originating from the EU, development banks, private donors, foundations, international organizations, and local contributions—making it difficult to isolate NGO-specific allocations. In addition, many NGOs do not fully disclose detailed financial statements. Finally, reported "funding" does not necessarily correspond to operational income, as resources are often earmarked for specific projects, infrastructure, or service delivery rather than for core organizational costs

9.3Comprehensive and Systematic Assessment of NGO Funding

A truly comprehensive assessment of NGO funding requires the establishment of a coherent **institutional, methodological, and data-governance framework**. The

literature on development finance and civil society consistently highlights the absence of standardized, comparable data as a core obstacle to reliable assessment (OECD, 2011; OECD DAC, 2018).

First, the creation of a **common, region-wide registry or database** for all NGO grants and funding flows is essential. Such registries are widely recognized as a prerequisite for transparency, comparability, and accountability in development assistance and civil society financing (European Commission, 2017; World Bank, 2020). A centralized registry should systematically record funding sources, beneficiaries, financial amounts, thematic focus, and implementation timelines.

Second, **mandatory disclosure by public authorities, international donors, development banks, and private foundations** is necessary to address information asymmetries. Research on aid transparency emphasizes that voluntary reporting mechanisms are insufficient and tend to produce fragmented and selective data (Transparency International, 2013; OECD, 2018). Disclosure requirements should clearly distinguish funding allocated to NGOs from resources directed to state institutions or private-sector actors.

Third, **institutionalized cooperation between NGOs and academic or research institutions** is critical for ensuring methodological rigor and data validation. Empirical studies show that partnerships between civil society and research networks improve data reliability, facilitate impact evaluation, and reduce reporting bias (Ebrahim & Rangan, 2014; Anheier, 2018). Research institutions can provide standardized methodologies, while NGOs contribute operational and contextual insights.

Finally, funding data must be **systematically disaggregated by country, sector, funding source, and time period**. Disaggregation is a well-established requirement in impact assessment and public finance analysis, enabling cross-country comparison, sectoral evaluation, and longitudinal trend analysis (OECD DAC, 2019; World Bank, 2021). Without such categorization, aggregate figures risk obscuring structural inequalities and misrepresenting the actual distribution of resources within the NGO sector.

Academic / Formal Options

NGO Presence and Impact Across the Balkans: An Analysis Using KPIs

Country	Key Sectors	Major NGOs / Networks	KPIs
North Macedonia	Education, social cohesion, humanitarian action	MCIC, Youth Educational Forum	1. Number of beneficiaries / communities 2. Active / completed projects 3. Project completion rate 4. Partnerships with public institutions
Serbia	Environment, sustainable	ECOIST, Humanitarian	1. Hectares protected / environmental projects 2.

Country	Key Sectors	Major NGOs / Networks	KPIs
	development, green policy	Law Center	Pollution reduction or environmental indicators 3. Legislative / policy influence 4. Training sessions & participants
Bulgaria	Culture, public consultation, civic participation	Open Society Foundation (Sofia)	1. Cultural / social events 2. Public participation / reach 3. Training programmes 4. Beneficiary evaluation (surveys)
Kosovo	Youth, culture, civil society	Youth Initiative for Human Rights, Riinvest	1. Youth participation 2. Volunteers / staff numbers 3. Social impact / visibility 4. Financial sustainability
Western Balkans (regional)	Green transition, environment, EU integration	Balkan Green Foundation, SMART Balkans	1. Regional projects 2. EU compliance / reporting 3. Funding application success rate 4. Policy-making participation

Sectors of Action — KPIs by Sector

Sector	KPIs
Environment / Sustainable Development	Protected hectares, training actions, sustainability indicators, policy influence
Social Cohesion / Welfare	Beneficiaries reached, completed projects, access to social services
Human Rights / Governance	Reports produced, trainings, legislative impact, accountability participation
Youth / Education / Culture	Participants, events / workshops, project visibility, positive feedback
EU Integration / Policy Support	Successful proposals, public consultations, linkage to EU projects

Success Evaluation & Reporting

Outputs and outcomes of NGO activities are closely linked to Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), which serve as a structured framework for monitoring and evaluating organizational impact. KPIs capture both **quantitative measures**, such as the number of beneficiaries reached or hectares of land protected, and **qualitative outcomes**, including improvements in rights, participant satisfaction, and community engagement (Hatry, 2015; Ebrahim & Rangan, 2014). The systematic collection and reporting of KPIs allow for **comparative assessment across countries, sectors, and funding sources**, enabling researchers and policymakers to identify patterns of effectiveness, resource allocation efficiency, and areas requiring targeted support (OECD, 2019; World Bank, 2020). By linking outputs to measurable outcomes, KPI-

driven evaluation provides a robust evidence base for both accountability and strategic decision-making within the NGO sector (Anheier, 2018).

9.4.Indicative Data Representation

Sheet 1: NGOs

NGO_ID	Name	Country	Year_Founded	Legal_Status	Sector	Website / Contact
1	MCIC	North Macedonia	1993	NGO	Education / Social Cohesion	www.mcic.org.mk
2	ECOIST	Serbia	2005	NGO	Environment	www.ecoist.rs
3	Youth Initiative for Human Rights	Kosovo	2001	NGO	Human Rights / Youth	www.yihr.org
4	OSF Sofia	Bulgaria	1990	Foundation	Civil Society / Culture	www.opensocietyfoundations.org

9. Conclusions: Toward Ethical and Inclusive Green Urban Governance

This article has examined the historically embedded relationship between NGOs, international funding, and development trajectories in the Western Balkans, with a particular focus on sustainable and green urban transformation. The analysis demonstrates that NGOs have played a decisive role in shaping post-conflict recovery, governance reform, and environmental initiatives, often operating in contexts of weak state capacity and high donor influence. Their contribution to urban sustainability—through participatory planning, environmental advocacy, and climate adaptation projects—has been substantial, yet structurally constrained.

The Western Balkan experience reveals a persistent tension between innovation and sustainability. While NGOs have enabled experimentation and norm diffusion, their reliance on project-based international funding has frequently resulted in fragmented interventions, limited institutional embedding, and dependency dynamics that undermine long-term impact. Ethical challenges—particularly those related to accountability, local ownership, and representation—remain central to any meaningful evaluation of NGO effectiveness.

By integrating a comparative perspective with MENA and Gulf urban contexts, the article highlights that these challenges are not confined to aid-dependent or post-transition regions. In high-capacity urban environments, such as Gulf cities,

sustainability initiatives face parallel ethical dilemmas, including top-down governance, limited civic participation, and the risk of green legitimacy without social inclusion. In both contexts, NGOs operate as intermediaries within global sustainability regimes, navigating power asymmetries between international frameworks and local urban realities.

The comparative analysis suggests that **ethical governance is a prerequisite for sustainable urban transformation**, regardless of regional development level. Green cities cannot be built solely through technological innovation, large-scale investment, or pilot projects; they require institutional continuity, social legitimacy, and meaningful participation. NGOs are most effective when they function not as parallel implementers or symbolic partners, but as bridges that connect communities, municipalities, and global policy agendas.

For international platforms such as *Green Cities Dubai*, the findings underscore the importance of integrating ethical accountability, local ownership, and long-term institutional embedding into green urban strategies. The Western Balkan case offers transferable lessons: sustainability must be socially grounded, funding must support structural change rather than perpetual experimentation, and NGOs must be recognized as ethical and political actors within urban governance. Addressing these dimensions is essential for advancing inclusive, resilient, and genuinely sustainable cities in diverse global contexts.

Here's your text rewritten in a **more polished academic style**, with integrated references to strengthen credibility. I've added indicative references from governance, development, and urban sustainability literature; you can replace or expand them with specific sources you're citing in your work.

The specific NGOs listed in your sample table (MCIC, ECOIST, Youth Initiative for Human Rights, OSF Sofia) **are** not necessarily those officially registered on a common European-wide list such as the Council of Europe's European Social Charter participatory status list or similar EU civil-society registries**. The European Social Charter system or Council of Europe** operates its own categorization of INGOs with participatory status**, but this is a** distinct institutional list **focused on NGOs that formally cooperate with the Council of Europe, and it is not a comprehensive register of all NGOs in the Balkans. (Portal)**

- The **Council of Europe grants "participatory status"** to certain international NGOs (INGOs) that meet criteria for democratic governance and represent civil society across several member states. These INGOs are included in the Conference of INGOs and may be **entitled to submit collective complaints under the European Social Charter**. (Portal)
- The Conference of INGOs database contains information on those INGOs holding this participatory status; there are **over 300 such organisations** participating at the Council of Europe level. (Portal)
- Being on this list is **not automatic for all NGOs** — especially smaller, national-level NGOs — and many NGOs that operate in the Balkans are active locally or regionally without participatory status with the Council of Europe.

Examples of NGOs that *do* appear on broader European civil-society platforms include:

- **UNITED for Intercultural Action**, a large European network against nationalism and racism active across Council of Europe member states and holding participatory status. (Βικιπαίδεια)
- **European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN)**, a network of anti-poverty NGOs which has consultative status with the Council of Europe. (Βικιπαίδεια)
- Other international organisations with participatory or consultative status can be found in the **INGO database of the Council of Europe** (searchable by name, field, country). (Portal)

By contrast, many of the Balkans-focused NGOs you listed (e.g., MCIC, ECOIST) may be **active at national and regional levels**, and are sometimes members of EU-level networks like **CONCORD** (the European confederation of development NGOs) or hold **EU programme accreditation**, but they are *not necessarily* on institutional registries such as the Council of Europe's formal participatory status list.

10.CONCLUSION

This article has examined the historically embedded relationship between NGOs, international funding, and development trajectories in the Western Balkans, with a particular focus on sustainable and green urban transformation. The analysis demonstrates that NGOs have played a pivotal role in shaping post-conflict recovery, governance reform, and environmental initiatives, often operating in contexts characterized by limited state capacity and high donor influence (Anheier, 2018; Ebrahim & Rangan, 2014; OECD, 2011). Their contribution to urban sustainability—through participatory planning, environmental advocacy, and climate adaptation projects—has been substantial, though structurally constrained by fragmented funding mechanisms and institutional weaknesses (Bulkeley & Betsill, 2005; Feger et al., 2020).

The Western Balkan experience illustrates a persistent tension between innovation and sustainability. While NGOs have enabled experimentation, policy diffusion, and normative change, their dependence on project-based international funding frequently results in fragmented interventions, limited institutional embedding, and donor-driven dependency dynamics that undermine long-term impact (Banks et al., 2015; Tvedt, 2006). Ethical challenges—particularly regarding accountability, local ownership, and representation—remain central to any meaningful evaluation of NGO effectiveness (Brown & Kalegaonkar, 2002; Smillie, 1995).

By adopting a comparative lens that includes MENA and Gulf urban contexts, the analysis highlights that these challenges are not unique to aid-dependent or post-transition regions. In high-capacity urban environments such as Gulf cities, sustainability initiatives face parallel ethical dilemmas, including top-down governance, limited civic participation, and the risk of "green legitimacy" without social inclusion (Hickmann et al., 2020; Reiche, 2010). Across both contexts, NGOs

operate as intermediaries within global sustainability regimes, navigating complex power asymmetries between international frameworks and local urban realities (Ferguson, 1994; Keck & Sikkink, 1998).

The comparative perspective suggests that ethical governance is a prerequisite for sustainable urban transformation, regardless of regional development level. Technological innovation, large-scale investment, or short-term pilot projects alone cannot generate genuinely sustainable cities; institutional continuity, social legitimacy, and meaningful participation are essential (Lehmann, 2010; Evans, 2016). NGOs are most effective when they function not as parallel implementers or symbolic partners, but as mediators connecting communities, municipal authorities, and global policy agendas (Anheier & Kendall, 2002; Ebrahim, 2003).

For international platforms such as Green Cities Dubai, these findings underscore the importance of embedding ethical accountability, local ownership, and long-term institutional capacity into green urban strategies. Lessons from the Western Balkans indicate that sustainability must be socially grounded, funding should support structural change rather than perpetual experimentation, and NGOs must be recognized as both ethical and political actors within urban governance frameworks. Addressing these dimensions is essential for advancing inclusive, resilient, and genuinely sustainable cities in diverse global contexts (Bulkeley et al., 2011; Hodson & Marvin, 2010).

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