

# Less ego and more eco systems of innovative ideas

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The global geopolitical, economic and technological landscapes have undergone profound transformations in the past several years, most notably due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but also to the ongoing wars on European soil and in the Middle East, growing inflation, price rises and shortage of resources, explosion of artificial intelligence technologies, and climate changes that have shaken our blue planet in its entirety. In the tumultuous landscape of the Western Balkans, a region marked by a complex history and diverse cultural tapestry, these changes are felt even more profoundly; therefore, the quest for stability, societal health and economic resilience stands as an imperative shared by public and private entities alike. These new realities are challenging us to rethink our strategies, reimagine our priorities and reflect on the roles of both public and private entities in shaping the future we aspire to. And trust here, in the words of Brian Tracy, is “[t]he glue that holds all relationships together – including the relationship between the leader and the led – and trust is based on integrity” (2).

Across the WHO European Region, including in the Western Balkans, trust is not something we can boast about, especially trust in institutions (3). According to Balkan Barometer, a survey the Regional Cooperation Council is conducting annually in the Western Balkans (4), around two thirds of citizens express a lack of trust in their government or local authority, a sentiment that is particularly strong among those with lower incomes. Social cohesion also confronts notable hurdles, especially in lower-income economies, where issues such as persistent inflation prevail. The latest figures for 2023 reveal that 80% of low-income economies and over 90% of lower-middle-income economies have seen year-on-year food price increases of more than 5%, with many facing significantly higher rates of inflation (5). These surges in food prices are having a devastating impact on the poorest and most vulnerable populations, eroding social cohesion and equity alike. The majority of the region's citizens (82%) feel that the gap between the poor and the rich is consecutively increasing (5). Lack of access to essential health services for 30% of the global population and deficiencies in education (6), with 600 million children worldwide unable to achieve minimum proficiency levels in reading and mathematics (7), are other similar pressing obstacles we are faced with today.

Against this backdrop, it is now or never for all of us, public and private entities included, to get a grip on things and lay the foundations for a healthy society grounded in trust, cohesion and fairness.

To rebuild trust, public entities, including governments and regulatory bodies, must lead by example by demonstrating transparency, accountability and integrity, and by promoting inclusive policies that cater to the needs of all societal segments by tapping into the underrepresented potential of young people and women, in particular. On the other hand, developing the Region's potential will require new sources of dynamism and transformation to overcome deep-seated historical, social, institutional and environmental challenges: less ego and more ecosystems of innovative ideas.

Private entities also have a significant role to play. We need more businesses that take care of societal challenges, promote decent jobs,

support community development projects and embrace technological advantages in an ethical framework.

But nothing works without cooperation. Public and private sectors must draw closer together, and regional cooperation can serve as a powerful mechanism in this regard. Through public–private partnerships, both sectors can address major challenges, including development of a universally beneficial infrastructure. Regular engagement in dialogue and active involvement of the public through various stakeholder platforms are essential for capturing a range of perspectives and aligning actions with common goals.

By following these principles, we can create a future that lasts and represents inclusivity, sustainability and shared prosperity. While this is not an easy task and there are many obstacles to overcome, the potential rewards, such as a resilient economy and a united society, are incredibly valuable and possible to attain.

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<sup>1</sup> All references were accessed 7 March 2024.

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