



## **POLICY BRIEF**

# **STRENGTHENING ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT (EIA) PROCESSES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: SPOTLIGHT ON CSO PERSPECTIVES.**

**EU4Green 3-2\_Act-10 Participation:  
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## INTRODUCTION

Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) are central instruments for safeguarding environmental and community interests, especially for the implementation of large infrastructure projects. Across the Western Balkans (WB), the effectiveness of EIAs is frequently constrained by weak institutional capacities, inconsistent data, low-quality assessments and limited public participation. As economies advance toward EU accession, strengthening EIA processes and aligning them with existing EU regulation becomes an urgent priority. This policy brief synthesizes the main insights and recommendations generated during the EU4Green workshop addressing WB based civil society organizations (CSOs), which are frequently engaged in EIA processes, taking place in Tirana, Albania on 27 November 2025. It specifically addresses public policy makers and other officials involved in the implementation of EIAs.

CSOs are a key party in EIAs and play a vital role in bridging the gap between policy making and the public, in particular where projects have the potential to significantly impact the environment. This policy brief discusses key challenges experienced by CSO representatives during EIA processes before drawing on policy recommendations for improving the effectiveness of EIAs.

## KEY CHALLENGES IDENTIFIED

CSO representatives address multiple challenges frequently experienced in EIA processes across the WB.

- **Legal gaps and weak institutional capacities:** Workshop participants emphasize the persistence of unaddressed legal gaps and inadequate alignment with EU directives. Weak institutional capacities hinder implementation, monitoring, and enforcement, resulting in EIAs that are often treated as procedural formalities rather than technical impact assessment tools.
- **Low quality of EIAs:** Many EIAs are prepared without sufficient environmental expertise, targeted data collection, or site-specific environmental information. Official monitoring data is often missing or too general, making it difficult to assess the project's actual impacts. Poor-quality EIAs risk enabling environmentally harmful projects.
- **Insufficient transparency and public participation:** Public consultations are often announced with very short upfront notice, conducted over shorter timeframes that foreseen by existing regulation, or communicated through channels that do not reach affected communities or the wider public. Complex, technical language prevents meaningful participation. Communities and CSOs frequently lack access to draft EIAs, technical documents, and expert opinions during the entire process.

- **Weak monitoring and enforcement:** There is insufficient oversight of the EIA process during key stages including the preparation of the EIA by experts, implementation by investors, and consideration of public inputs. Sanctioning mechanisms for low-quality or misleading EIAs are rarely applied.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF EIAs**

Responding to the challenges above, the following policy recommendations draw on key inputs developed by CSO representatives during the EU4Green workshop in Tirana.

### **SIMPLIFYING COMMUNICATION AND PUBLIC NOTIFICATION PROCEDURES**

CSOs suggest establishing a single digital platform for EIA announcements, timelines and public hearings as well as using multiple communication channels such as social media and community boards to ensure all groups receive timely information and to reach wider audiences. Providing reasonable advance notice is considered essential. Furthermore, public consultation periods should last for minimum 30 days.<sup>1</sup>

### **INSTITUTIONALIZING TECHNICAL DIALOGUE WITH CSOS**

Creating formal mechanisms for regular consultations with CSOs ensures that a technical dialogue with CSOs takes place during all stages of the EIA process. To enable meaningful participation, CSO access to technical documents, draft assessments, and expert opinions should be ensured during the entire EIA process.

### **IMPROVING QUALITY AND RELIABILITY OF ENVIRONMENTAL DATA**

To employ reliable environmental data in EIAs, increasing investment in official national and local environmental monitoring systems is a key prerequisite, which allows for collecting site-specific data rather than relying solely on regional averages. In this context, EIAs should be required to reference updated, verified datasets and independent expert evaluations.

### **REINFORCING ACCOUNTABILITY AND INTEGRITY OF EIA PROCESSES**

EIAs are designed as a policy instrument enabling informed decision-making within environmental constraints yet often perceived as procedural formality or administrative box-ticking exercises. To elevate accountability and integrity of EIA processes, introducing or strengthening penalties and sanctions for low-quality, incomplete, or misleading EIA content, non-compliance with monitoring requirements as well as failure to address public

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<sup>1</sup> The EU EIA Directive (2014/52/EU) defines a minimum period of 30 days for public consultations on the EIA report. Similarly, the Aarhus Convention Compliance Committee found that a minimum of 30 days between the public notice and the end of consultations is a reasonable time frame for the public to study the respective documents (reference case ACCC/C/2009/37 (Belarus)).

input or justify its rejection is essential. Project developers should be required to demonstrate how EIA findings influence project design and mitigation planning. Additionally, considering the establishment of an independent regulatory authority to oversee EIA quality, expert accreditation and compliance would be meaningful. To build trust in EIA processes, authorities should not hesitate to reject inadequate EIAs.

### **ENHANCING COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION AND ENSURING FULL TRANSPARENCY**

Using participatory tools such as public forums, community workshops and citizen monitoring initiatives enables early and meaningful community involvement. If done correctly, it can increase public buy-in, strengthening and building trust in decision-makers. Further, the language used in EIA should ensure that non-experts can understand the impact of a project. Implementing authorities need to make sure that EIA documents, monitoring reports and final decisions are accessible online for the public in due time.

### **STRENGTHENING LEGAL ALIGNMENT AND CONTINUOUS REVIEW**

EIA regulation should be regularly reviewed and updated to ensure practical applicability and full alignment with existing EU directives and international standards like the Aarhus Convention. Authorities should further work towards identifying and closing legal gaps, especially those that delay decision-making or enable low-quality assessments while ensuring rejected applications are documented and justified to reinforce trust and prevent weak submissions.

## **CONCLUSION**

This policy brief underlines a strong consensus between the participating CSO representatives. EIA processes in the Western Balkans must become more transparent, participatory, data-driven and professionally executed. Implementing the recommendations outlined in this policy brief will help to ensure that EIAs function as effective safeguards for communities while mitigating environmentally adverse impact. Public authorities have the responsibility to implement robust EIAs that not only prevent harmful projects but foster responsible investment across the region.