

# THE COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE ON NATURE-BASED SOLUTIONS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: EMPOWERING CIVIL SOCIETY FOR GREEN TRANSITION

**EU4Green Recovery:**

**Support the implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans**

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# 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2025 EU4Green, project , implemented by the Environment Agency Austria, funded by the EU with co-funding from the Austrian Development Agency, in partnership with IUCN's Regional Office for Eastern Europe and Central Asia (ECARO), launched a Community of Practice on Nature-based Solutions (CoP-NbS) for the Western Balkans. Goal of the CoP is to provide civil society organizations (CSOs) with access to the latest NbS research, tools and networks, addressing critical knowledge and capacity gaps. Through workshops, CSOs gain visibility and influence in regional decision-making, and can showcase community-led NbS projects aligned with the Green Agenda. Two regional CoP workshops (March and September 2025) drew participants from NGOs and academia across the region, who reported interest and positivity.

The discussions emphasised the important role of nature-based solutions (NbS) in achieving sustainable agriculture, increasing ecosystem resilience, and facilitating climate adaptation. There was a strong expression of key opportunities and challenges for NbS, as well as a demand for continued CoP support. To build on this momentum, we recommend the following:

- ensuring the CoP's continuity under IUCN ECARO when EU4GREEN ends (planned mid-2026 (initially End 2025));
- expanding targeted capacity-building (e.g. technical training, knowledge exchange) in line with CoP objectives;
- institutionalizing CSO participation in Green Agenda implementation (e.g. through formal consultation platforms); and
- improving CSO access to financing for NbS (building on CoP discussions on green finance).

These actions will strengthen CSO-led NbS and accelerate the Western Balkans' green transition.

## 2. INTRODUCTION

The CoP NbS was established as a regional platform in 2025 to empower CSOs to deliver nature-based solutions for the Western Balkans' Green Agenda. Jointly initiated by EU4GREEN, implemented by EAA (Environment Agency Austria) and IUCN ECARO, its mission is to “create a robust network of professionals, researchers, policymakers, community leaders, and civil society organisations” focused on NbS. By facilitating exchange of knowledge and best practices, the CoP aims to promote sustainable development and resilience in the region. The CoP's founding meeting took place on 12 March 2025 in Skopje. A follow-up CoP session was held 23–24 September 2025 within a regional conference on “Nature-based Solutions and Sustainable Water Use in Agriculture”. In these events, IUCN and EU4GREEN leaders reiterated that after EU4GREEN's implementation phase, the clear goal of continuation beyond EU4Green for the CoP will be integrated over fully to IUCN ECARO to ensure continuity. This transition (scheduled as EU4GREEN concludes in summer 2026) is designed to sustain long-term benefits for CSOs in the green transition.

The peer-learning structures developed under EU4GREEN—most notably the Community of Practice for Nature-based Solutions (CoP-NbS), established in 2025 as a regional platform to empower CSOs in advancing the Western Balkans' Green Agenda—have demonstrated strong potential for long-term impact. Jointly initiated by EU4GREEN and implemented by EAA and IUCN ECARO, the CoP was designed to build a robust network of professionals, policymakers, researchers and community actors working on NbS. Its founding meeting in Skopje (March 2025) and subsequent regional session in September 2025 confirmed broad commitment to its continuation.

As EU4GREEN concludes in summer 2026, the planned transfer of full responsibility for the CoP to IUCN ECARO—supported by dedicated staff and stable funding—will be essential to ensure continuity and sustained benefits for CSOs. Building on this model, regular regional and bilateral CSO workshops (e.g., on circular economy or air quality) should be formalized within future project frameworks. Over time, these networks can evolve into self-sustaining platforms that leverage collective expertise, strengthen regional cooperation and support CSOs in shaping the green transition.

## 3. CSO ENGAGEMENT IN WORKSHOPS: PRACTICAL NBS AND THE GREEN AGENDA

The CoP workshops provide concrete evidence of CSO engagement in NbS and the Green Agenda. In March 2025 (Skopje), CSOs from across the region attended the inaugural meeting to discuss the CoP's goals. The agenda included presentations on NbS technical guidelines (IUCN NbS Standard, buffer zone guides, Green Agenda Navigator) followed by an interactive session where participants discussed NbS opportunities, challenges, and CSO

roles. A key outcome was broad recognition of NbS as vital for sustainable agriculture and climate resilience – “participants highlighted the potential of NbS to enhance resilience, protect ecosystems, and improve agricultural practices”. Many expressed a strong interest in continuing CoP work.

To respond to calls from the inaugural CoP for stronger policymaker engagement, the second CoP meeting (23–24 Sept 2025) was convened within a larger agricultural sustainability conference, with EU4GREEN supporting the integrated format to enable direct exchanges between CSOs and policy actors. This two-day event included a keynote on IUCN global NbS standards, break-out sessions gathering regional NbS best practices (e.g. sustainable grazing in Albania). Again, CSO participation was high and feedback “overwhelmingly positive”. Discussions once more emphasized NbS for resilient farming and ecosystem health, aligning with the Western Balkans’ Green Agenda priorities. In both workshops, CSOs acted as active partners rather than observers: they contributed field-based insights, helped shape the CoP agenda, and expressed strong interest in ongoing participation.

The table below summarizes these two key workshops:

Event	Focus and Activities	Key CSO Outcomes
<b>Inaugural CoP NbS Workshop</b> 12 Mar 2025, Skopje	Introduction of CoP goals; presentations on IUCN NbS Standard, Riparian Buffer Zone guide, interactive workshop on NbS opportunities, CoP support and CSO roles.	High engagement by CSOs from the Western Balkans; broad acknowledgement that NbS are critical for sustainable agriculture and resilience. Participants gained knowledge and networks, and many expressed strong interest in future CoP activities.
<b>“Measures on the Field” Conference</b> 23–24 Sep 2025	2nd CoP meeting within regional agriculture conference; keynote on global NbS standards; breakout on NbS best practices (e.g. sustainable grazing); exhibition of green projects.	CSOs shared regional NbS examples, reinforcing practical learnings. The workshop report notes “overwhelmingly positive” feedback and a strong collaborative spirit.

These workshops illustrate that CSOs are deeply engaged in practical NbS implementation. By drawing on local knowledge and international expertise, CSOs link ground-level projects to broader policy goals. Crucially, the CoP framework gave CSOs a voice: the [Green Agenda Navigator](#) and consultative formats ensured CSO input was channeled into regional NbS planning.

## 4. CSO ROLES AND CAPACITIES IN NBS IMPLEMENTATION

Civil society organisations in the Western Balkans play crucial roles in knowledge transfer, stakeholder engagement and project implementation for NbS. The CoP addresses key capacity gaps by equipping CSOs with tools, methods and information to design effective NbS projects. For example, CoP workshops organized by EU4Green included sessions on the IUCN Global NbS Standard and practical guides for riparian buffer zones, directly enhancing technical skills. The CoP also strengthens networking: by linking CSOs with practitioners, researchers and policy actors, it fosters partnerships and continuous collaboration. Such

connections increase CSOs' influence. In practice, CSOs can use these connections to advocate for NbS in national Green Agenda processes and to pilot community-based NbS initiatives (e.g. sustainable grazing for habitat conservation, as highlighted in workshop case studies). Through shared learning and local experimentation, CSOs become active drivers of NbS tailored to regional needs such as biodiversity loss or climate resilience.

## 5. CONSTRAINTS ON CSO'S IN NBS INITIATIVES

Although CSO engagement is growing, organisations in the Western Balkans still face significant resource and systemic barriers to implementing nature-based solutions. The emphasis on capacity building points to persistent gaps in technical expertise and access to information. The CoP's priority of disseminating "the latest research, case studies, and practical applications" implies that, before the CoP was established, CSOs had limited access to these essential resources.

Funding remains a major barrier. The CoP dedicated a session to green finance—featuring a panel on "Financing Nature-based Solutions" and expert contributions from EAA that highlighted existing funding opportunities—underscoring the urgent need for more accessible financing channels for CSO-led NbS initiatives. CoP discussions also examined the 'key opportunities and challenges in implementing NbS', with participants highlighting institutional obstacles such as bureaucratic complexity, policy gaps and financial shortfalls. That these issues framed the workshop signals they are central constraints to CSOs' ability to advance the Green Agenda.

The interactive workshop format – which gave CSOs space to "reflect on challenges, identify opportunities, and express their vision for the CoP" – highlights that CSO capacity limitations and policy uncertainties are critical issues to address within a CoP.

*Evidence:* Workshop agendas show participants were asked about the challenges CSOs might face in promoting NbS. The allocation of sessions to green financing and NbS standards further implies that bridging knowledge gaps and securing funding are priority needs.

## 6. RECOMMENDATIONS

To capitalize on these gains and overcome remaining hurdles, we offer the following regionally tailored recommendations:

- Institutionalize the CoP NbS under IUCN ECARO. Ensure that the CoP is formally sustained when EU4GREEN ends (mid-2026). This includes assigning dedicated staff and a modest budget for ongoing CoP activities. Continuity will preserve momentum and allow accumulated knowledge and networks to endure. Clarify funding, ownership and institutional responsibility (RCC, SWG, IUCN ECARO or others) for

regional activities to ensure the platform is jointly set up and resourced to become self-sustaining.

- Expand capacity-building for CSOs. Continue and scale up training, peer-learning and knowledge exchange as prioritized by the CoP. For example, organize additional thematic webinars on NbS design, a toolkit on funding opportunities, or workshops on monitoring NbS outcomes. Create demonstration sites and peer-to-peer learning opportunities to close technical gaps and strengthen advisory support.
- Enhance networking and regional collaboration. Build on the CoP's success in linking CSOs across borders. Encourage joint projects and study tours under the CoP umbrella (e.g. cross-economy exchange on sustainable agriculture practices). Formalize working groups (e.g. on climate-NbS, water management) to facilitate targeted action, analyze potential frameworks where to include and sustain them. Regular bi-annual or annual CoP meetings should be institutionalized. This will deepen the peer-support structures that participants valued in the workshops.
- Integrate CSOs in Green Agenda policymaking. Use the CoP as an official consultation platform for the Western Balkans Green Agenda. For example, mandate that draft NbS-related strategies or legislation be circulated through the CoP for feedback. This aligns with the CoP's envisioned role "as a platform for consultations regarding the Green Agenda process". Such institutional inclusion will leverage CSOs' on-the-ground insights in policy development and ensure NbS actions reflect local needs.
- Facilitate CSO access to NbS financing. Address the funding barrier highlighted in workshops by linking CSOs with financial instruments. Options include establishing small grant programmes for pilot NbS projects or working with development banks to earmark funds for CSO-led NbS. The CoP could provide guidance on green finance and help CSOs form consortia to bid for EU and donor funding. Reliable financing will enable CSOs to turn NbS ideas into tangible projects on the ground.
- Monitor and communicate CoP impact. Develop simple indicators to track CSO involvement and NbS outcomes over time (e.g. number of CSO-led projects, hectares of ecosystem restored). Regularly disseminate success stories through the CoP network. Clear evidence of progress will sustain stakeholder buy-in and can attract additional support.
- Strengthen municipal–CSO collaboration at the local level. Promote structured local workshops and joint planning so municipalities and CSOs co-design and co-implement NbS, leveraging municipal mandates and CSO community trust and technical knowledge. This will help translate regional priorities into locally appropriate actions and secure community buy-in.

## 7. ANNEX

### WORKSHOP AGENDA HIGHLIGHTS

The inaugural CoP NbS meeting (12 March 2025, Skopje) featured opening remarks by IUCN and EU4GREEN leaders, followed by sessions on NbS standards and tools. Key agenda items included the IUCN Global NbS Standard, practical guides for riparian zones. An interactive afternoon workshop asked participants to discuss “key opportunities and challenges in implementing NbS” and “what role CSOs can play in advancing the Green Agenda”. These structured discussions ensured that CSO perspectives on NbS needs were captured from the outset.

A second CoP session (23–24 Sep 2025) was embedded in a broader conference on “Measures on the Field – NbS in Agriculture”. Its program included a keynote on IUCN NbS standards for agriculture, breakout groups collecting Balkan best practices, and an exhibition of regional NbS projects. These activities highlighted practical examples (e.g. sustainable grazing for habitat conservation) and promoted cross-border learning among CSOs and stakeholders. Each workshop concluded with a plenary to summarize lessons and plan next steps under the CoP framework.



# Inaugural meeting of the Community of Practice on Nature-based Solutions in the Western Balkans

12 March 2025 | Hotel Limak,  
Skopje, North Macedonia

Time	Agenda item
09:00 – 9:15	<b>Welcome and Opening Remarks</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Oliver Avramoski, IUCN ECARO</li> <li>Laura Hohoff, EU4GREEN/EAA</li> </ul>
09:15 – 10:00	<b>Community of Practice of Nature-Based Solutions in the Western Balkans Initiated by EU4GREEN &amp; IUCN</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Overview of the initiative, including goals and objectives - Benefits for Civil Society Organisations and regional stakeholders, Peter Tramberend, EU4GREEN/EAA</li> <li>CoP NbS as a platform for consultations regarding the Green Agenda process and revision of key NbS related deliverables, Fabien Techene, IUCN ECARO</li> </ul>
10:00 – 10:40	<b>Who is the CoP NbS?</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Participants present themselves and their experience in NbS and express their expectation towards the CoP NbS</li> </ul>
10:40 – 11:00	<b>Coffee /tea break</b>
11:00 – 11:30	<b>IUCN NbS Standard and application of NbS pilot projects</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fabien Techene, IUCN ECARO</li> </ul>
11:30 – 11:50	<b>Nature-Based Solutions for Riparian Buffer Zones in the Western Balkans - A Practical Guide</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Peter Tramberend, EU4GREEN/EAA</li> </ul>
11:50 – 12:15	<b>Green Agenda Navigator</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lazar Jovičić, Belgrade Open School</li> </ul>
12:15 – 13:45	<b>Lunch</b>
13:45 – 14:45	<b>Interactive workshop- Participants' expectations and vision of the CoP NbS</b>  Guiding Questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What are the key opportunities and challenges in implementing Nature-Based Solutions?</li> <li>How can the Community of Practice for Nature-Based Solutions best support your work?</li> <li>What role can Civil Society Organizations play in advancing the Green Agenda, and what challenges might they face?</li> </ul>
14:45 – 15:15	<b>Advancing Nature-Based Solutions &amp; Green Finance</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Christoph Chrysalis, EU4GREEN/EAA</li> </ul>
15:15 – 15:45	<b>Panel Discussion: Financing Nature-based Solutions</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Elena Gavrilova (EU4GREEN)</li> <li>Mark Rupa (Agriculture University of Tirana, CNVP)</li> <li>Andrey Ralev (Bankwatch)</li> <li>Filip Stojanovski (Centar for Climate Change)</li> <li>Robertina Brajanoska (MES)</li> <li>Irena Djimrevska (GIZ MK)</li> </ul>
15:45 – 16:00	<b>Key conclusions and closing the event- CoP NbS next steps</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ivana Tomasevic &amp; Peter Tramberend</li> </ul>

Please note that the working language will be English



## AGENDA

### MEASURES ON THE FIELD:

#### Nature-based Solutions and Sustainable Water Use in Agriculture in the Western Balkans

A Two-Day Regional Conference hosting the 2nd Meeting of the Community of Practice on Nature-based Solutions in the Western Balkans (CoP on Nbs) — showcasing innovative best practices and practical handbooks focused on Nature-based Solutions and sustainable water use in agriculture.

- 23-24 September 2025
- Crown Plaza Hotel Podgorica, Cetinjska 7, 81000 Montenegro
- In Country and online (Working Language: English with Translation to Montenegrin, Albanian, Macedonian Language)

#### DAY 1: September 23<sup>rd</sup>

09:00 – 09:30 **Registration of Participants & Morning Coffee**

- Participants arrive, complete registration, and network with others

09:30 – 10:15 **Opening and introduction of the Regional Conference**

10:15 – 10:45 **The IUCN Global standards for Nature-based Solution with a focus on agriculture**

- Orsolya Nyárai, IUCN

10:45 – 11:15 **COFFEE BREAK**

11:15 – 12:25 **Best Practices from the Balkans: Nature-based Solutions for Agriculture**

- Best practices from the plenum, workshop in break-out session

12:25 – 12:45 **Best practice in Albania – Sustainable Grazing as measure for habitat conservation**

- Genti Kromidha, Institute for Nature Conservation in Albania

12:45 – 14:00 **LUNCH BREAK**

14:00 – 15:15 **Guided Walk / Transport to Europe House**

15:15-15:30 **WELCOME at Europe House**

- Welcome drink and networking

15:30 – 17:00 **EU4Green “Greenest examples of the Western Balkans” photo contest**

- Award Ceremony
- Opening of Photo Exhibition with 15 selected finalists
- Exhibition, drinks, finger food and networking



This project is co-funded by the European Union



DAY 2: September 24<sup>th</sup>

09:00 – 09:15	<b>Opening and introduction of the Regional Workshop</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Peter Tramberend, EU4GREEN - EAA</li> </ul>
09:15 – 9:45	<b>Sustainable Water Use and Water Storage in Agriculture – A Handbook</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Helga Lindinger &amp; Andreas Bartel, EU4GREEN - EAA</li> </ul>
09:45 – 10:15	<b>Crop Selection under Climate Change Conditions</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Prof. Dr. Ordan Chukaljev – Ss. Cyril and Methodius University Skopje</li> </ul>
10:15 – 10:45	<b>On-going activities for Climate Change Adaptation in Agriculture</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Darko Konjevic, Standing Working Group for Regional Rural Development in <a href="#">South East Europe (SWG)</a></li> </ul>
10:45 – 11:15	<b>COFFEE BREAK</b>
11:15 – 11:45	<b>Best Practice Water treasure – Assessment of available water resources</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Helga Lindinger, EU4GREEN -EAA</li> </ul>
11:45 – 12:15	<b>Best practice – Water management at the farm</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Biljana Petrovska-Mitrevska (Agricultural Advisor, NMK)</li> </ul>
12:15 – 13:30	<b>LUNCH BREAK</b>
13:30 – 15:00	<b>Interactive workshop - Participants’ experiences in sustainable agriculture</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Joint identifying success factors, key barriers and developing recommendations</li> </ul>
15:00 – 15:15	<b>COFFEE BREAK</b>
15:15 – 16:00	<b>Group Reporting &amp; Open Discussion</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sharing outcomes and practical recommendations.</li> </ul>
16:00 – 16:15	<b>Wrap up and closing</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Summary of the day, key messages</li> </ul>



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## REFERENCES

1. EU4GREEN - Mission Reports on the two meetings of the Community of Practice for Nature-based Solutions