

Government representatives from North Macedonia, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and Serbia met in Skopje for a regional conference on Air Quality Management – Issues, Solutions, and Financing Approaches. Jointly hosted by the Government of North Macedonia and the World Bank, the conference was an opportunity to learn from experiences from the Western Balkans and from EU and other countries (such as India and China) about innovative ways to approach air quality management, mobilize knowledge, and encourage stronger regional cooperation in this area.

Ambient air pollution (AAP) is a serious global health problem that accounts for an estimated 4.2 million premature deaths per year worldwide. Exposure to fine particulate matter (PM_{2.5}) is especially dangerous to human health because these particles find their way deep into lungs and bloodstream resulting in serious health effects. Premature deaths and illnesses caused by air pollution can result in increased health expenditures and labor productivity losses. People in Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans are frequently exposed to extremely high air pollution in urban areas often exceeding the levels considered safe by the WHO.

“Addressing air pollution in the Western Balkans is an environmental and public health challenge that needs to be urgently addressed and it is high on the agenda of the World Bank as well as many other partners working in the region,” said Marco Mantovanelli, World Bank Country Manager for North Macedonia and Kosovo. “We are pleased to be a part of these discussions today and are committed to continuing to support action to reduce air pollution and establish credible Air Quality Management systems in the region through advisory services, technical assistance, and mobilizing financing for investments.”

“We value the analytical support from the World Bank and are looking forward to working with them and other development partners to mobilize the needed financing to help improve our air quality and reduce the impacts poor air quality has on people’s health,” said Jani Makraduli, Deputy Minister of Environment and Physical Planning, also emphasizing the need for regional collaboration. “These discussions help to strengthen cooperation in the Western Balkans, which is particularly important given that a significant portion of air pollution is transboundary.”

The conference provided an opportunity to the World Bank to catalyze regional exchange and knowledge sharing and to present analytical findings from upcoming studies on the health and economic damage from air pollution in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and North Macedonia.

The conference also discussed that a comprehensive approach to tackling air pollution in the Western Balkans could be composed of three core components: (a) Data, knowledge, and

strategy, including development of comprehensive air quality management plans and investment strategies; (b) Measures to reduce exposure to air pollution in short-term, especially for the young, weak, and vulnerable; and (c) Measures and investments into the persistent medium- to long-term reduction of pollution levels below internationally accepted standards.

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