

7. Social impact



Gender and economic inclusion

The EBRD in 2023 continued to deliver projects under its [Promotion of Gender Equality 2021-25](#) and [Equality of Opportunity 2021-25](#) strategies. These aim to enhance human capital development and resilience through a green and digital economic transition that is just and gender equal.

The persistence and growing intensity of geopolitical crises and natural disasters have underscored the importance of inclusion in EBRD operations. In the face of climate change and digitalisation, disadvantaged regions and people risk falling further behind.

Key highlights

- The EBRD achieved a record proportion of Gender SMART² investments in 2023. It increased to 44 per cent from 37 per cent in 2022 and significantly exceeded the target of 30 per cent set for the year.
- The Bank delivered a record number of operations promoting equality of opportunity across its regions in 2023. Investments with an inclusive objective increased to 204 from 105 in 2022, equivalent to 30.4 per cent of all operations (24.4 per cent in 2022).

Youth in Business programme celebrates its first anniversary in the Western Balkans

The EBRD's [Youth in Business](#) programme completed its first year in the Western Balkans. Young entrepreneurs in the region struggle to access credit lines and expert support to grow their businesses. The programme aims to address these market gaps by providing financial and technical assistance for youth-led or youth-owned MSMEs.

At least one PFI signed up in each of the six countries of the region. The results have been promising, with credit lines worth a combined €27 million signed with seven PFIs, of which €7 million was channelled to 756 youth-led or youth-owned MSMEs.

The EBRD also offered tailored advisory services to more than 1,500 young entrepreneurs to help them develop new skills, improve business performance and unlock growth opportunities. Topics included digitalisation, marketing, strategy, energy and resource efficiency.

New initiative removes barriers for women entrepreneurs

The Women Entrepreneurs Finance Initiative (We-Fi) provided US\$ 5 million (€4.5 million) to the EBRD for its new policy programme supporting women's entrepreneurship. The [Women Entrepreneurs Finance Code](#) will see stakeholders including policymakers, the private sector and financial institutions collaborate to increase funding to women-led businesses.

The EBRD will pilot the programme across 13 countries in the Western Balkans, Central Asia and the southern and eastern Mediterranean (SEMED). Sex-disaggregated data from these regions will be used to design and deliver solutions that reflect the needs of women entrepreneurs.

Since 2018, We-Fi has allocated over US\$ 3.6 billion (€3.3 billion) to women-led SMEs through its partnerships with more than 400 private- and public-sector institutions. The initiative aims to scale up access to financial products and services, capacity building, networks, mentorship and market opportunities. It complements the EBRD's [Women in Business](#) programme and gender-mainstreaming approach.

The Just Transition Initiative

The EBRD's [Just Transition Initiative](#) aims to ensure that the benefits of the green economy transition are shared, while preventing vulnerable regions, communities and workers from falling behind.

The Bank's just transition diagnostics and action plans analyse the effects of accelerated decarbonisation scenarios on carbon-intensive regions, communities and people. These roadmaps also identify new opportunities, including in relation to economic diversification. This has led to the development of action plans across governance, policy and investment dimensions to support a just transition.

In 2023, the Bank had four active just transition assignments in Egypt, North Macedonia, Serbia and Ukraine (the latter being on hold). In Egypt and North Macedonia, it is supporting the just transition elements of the country sector platforms on energy transition (the NWFE and JETIP, respectively). In Serbia, it is helping the government finalise a just transition action plan that will complement the country's national energy and climate plan.

Case study: Supporting North Macedonia's Just Transition Roadmap



North Macedonia approved its Just Transition Roadmap in June 2023, with support from the EU Delegation and the EBRD. It lays the foundations for the government to manage the socioeconomic implications of a phase-out of coal, a sector that employs about 4,000 people, who will be directly impacted by the transition.

Ensuring political buy-in for decarbonisation through a well-managed transition will be key to ensuring North Macedonia can achieve its commitment to reducing net GHG emissions by 82 per cent by 2030. The roadmap sets out governance arrangements, policy reforms, investments and funding sources needed for the just transition and will support the JETIP country sector platform (see page 5).

The EBRD is supporting North Macedonia's decarbonisation goals through direct investments, such as providing a loan to the country's public electricity generation company, Elektrani na Severna Makedonija (ESM), to help it construct solar photovoltaic (PV) generation capacity of 30 MW.

The project is also supporting a just transition with a technical assistance programme to help reskill 480 ESM workers. This includes mapping the existing skills of the workforce, forecasting the company's changing skills needs and assessing redeployment options for employees. ESM will participate in plans for regional development and economic diversification, so that redeployment options align with opportunities. Retraining will include vocational, technical and entrepreneurship courses.

² "Gender SMART" is an EBRD process to enable the systematic integration of gender equality into the Bank's projects.

Human rights

Policy reviews

In 2023, the EBRD carried out a comprehensive engagement and benchmarking process as part of its five-yearly review of its ESP and associated Performance Requirements (PRs) and its AIP. This included assessing the ESP and PRs against those of other MDBs, and reviewing relevant emerging legislation and voluntary standards, such as the [United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#).

Feedback was collected from internal and external stakeholders through a dedicated [web page](#) and through various online and in-person meetings. More than 800 people attended the ESP and AIP launch webinars and over 180 organisations responded to client and consultant surveys on issues including climate change, biodiversity and nature, supply chains, gender and gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH), human rights and digitalisation. Meetings were held with CSOs to discuss the Bank's performance and areas for improvement on human rights and workers' rights. These included Bankwatch, the Accountability Council, the Coalition for Human Rights in Development, the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the International Labour Organization (ILO), the International Trade Union Congress (ITUC) and Building and Woodworkers International (BWI).

Supply chains

Tackling supply chain risks remained a key priority this year. The Bank completed a number of supply-chain risk assessments – on cobalt, cotton, soya and palm oil – and launched further assessments including batteries and energy storage systems and the renewable energy sector in Türkiye. The Bank also provided technical support to renewable energy sector clients on developing or improving their supply-chain management systems. The MDBs' coordinated approach to solar supply-chain due diligence continued to progress towards greater supply-chain transparency. In the wind sector, labour audits of high-risk wind turbine suppliers became firmly embedded in project due diligence.

In a bid to improve working conditions for garment industry workers, the EBRD-supported Better Work Uzbekistan pilot became fully operational in June 2023 and now operates countrywide, thanks to cooperation with the World Bank, IFC and ILO. Better Work Uzbekistan launched a [new website](#) in 2023 and hosted seminars on labour inspection reform, union registration and the promotion of freedom of association and collective bargaining.

Gender-based violence and harassment

On behalf of the MDB working group on sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (SEAH), the EBRD joined the steering group for the development of a [common approach to the prevention of SEAH](#), an initiative led by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. The common approach aims to combine existing practices, policies and standards on safeguarding into one practical guide for actors in the humanitarian, international development and peacekeeping sectors.

Research commissioned by the EBRD in 2022 on GBVH risks and response in conflict-affected Ukraine provided the content for a short guide for clients on such risks, including practical guidance and details of local support services for survivors of SEAH. The EBRD has multiple projects in Ukraine in all regions and sectors, including municipal infrastructure, agribusiness, manufacturing and transport. The information was shared during a Bank-hosted health and safety meeting on conflict and post-conflict environments in early 2023, with participants from IFIs, occupational health and safety associations, and trade unions.

The Bank carried out a GBVH risk assessment of the ride-sharing sector for one project in Central Asia, working with the client to develop a “respectful journeys” action plan to be piloted from 2024. The ride-sharing sector has the potential to increase employment opportunities and freedom of movement for people, especially marginalised groups, such as women, immigrants, people with disabilities and those with low education or literacy. However, it faces significant challenges in ensuring the safety of drivers and passengers. Addressing the risk of GBVH is expected to increase the number of users and improve workforce retention and diversity. A GBVH sector brief has been developed and will be added to the [collection of briefs](#) available on the EBRD website.

Civil society engagement

CSOs are both influential audiences and partners of the EBRD in the economies where it invests. They promote public dialogue, ensure the inclusion of under-represented individuals and communities while holding governments, policymakers and the private sector publicly to account. Their input is integral to the EBRD's decision-making processes and helps the Bank to create impactful change.

Russia's ongoing war on Ukraine and the earthquakes in Türkiye and Morocco had a profound impact on EBRD operations in 2023. CSOs were at the forefront of the emergency response to these crises and were crucial partners to the Bank. In September, CSOs in Ukraine met EBRD President Odile Renaud-Basso to discuss the economic inclusion of war veterans, internally displaced people and people with disabilities, as well as the rule of law and monitoring of reconstruction funding. CSOs in Türkiye's earthquake zone were key in assessing the damage and identifying the needs and priorities of local communities.

In 2023, the EBRD set up its first [Civil Society Steering Committee](#). Working with the Bank in an advisory capacity, it is formed of 12 CSO representatives from across the Bank's regions, covering a range of themes. It will provide valuable input and suggestions on a variety of topics, including country and sector strategies, human rights and environmental issues, as well as the Civil Society Programme that takes place at the Bank's Annual Meeting. The next committee will be selected in 2025.

The Bank's collaboration with CSOs in 2023 included 18 country and sector strategy consultations, 11 meetings between CSOs and the EBRD President, and 6 meetings with the EBRD Board. Some 13 public consultations supported the development of the EBRD's new energy and mining sector strategies (see page 22). More than 200 civil society and private sector stakeholders took part.

Over the past decade, the EBRD has carried out 36 technical cooperation projects under the Bank's [Capacity Enhancement Framework](#), totalling around €11.3 million. Training and mentoring initiatives have helped to enhance the skills of stakeholders in economies where the EBRD operates and have supported the Bank's delivery of better and more inclusive policies and investments.

Case study: Enhancing civil society participation in solid waste management in Jordan



In 2023, the EBRD rolled out a capacity-building and awareness-raising project on solid waste in partnership with the Greater Amman Municipality in Jordan. Solid waste management is crucial to maintaining clean and sustainable communities, and local engagement is key.

Implemented by Oxfam Jordan, together with other CSO contractors, the project supported the EBRD's Solid Waste Crisis Response by promoting sustainable solid waste management practices among Amman residents, including refugees. Municipal engagement with local communities was supported, helping to nurture a culture of responsibility.

Awareness-raising activities were held across Amman, reaching about 185,000 citizens. More than 230 local residents joined 14 user groups that will propagate solid-waste-management practices in their neighbourhoods. Some 22 municipal staff were also nominated as focal points, who will engage with local communities on waste management strategies.
