

EMPOWERED NEWSLETTER #1



FRAMING THE CHALLENGE

Across the world, more than 1.3 billion people – or roughly 16% of the global population – live with some form of disability (*WHO, World Bank*). Persons with disabilities (PwDs) are often disproportionately affected by poverty, exclusion from education and employment, and limited access to social and health services.

According to the International Labour Organization, the global unemployment rate of PwDs is at least twice as high as that of persons without disabilities, while the World Health Organization estimates that in low- and middle-income countries only 5–15% of PwDs who need assistive devices actually have access to them.

In the **Western Balkans**, persons with disabilities continue to face serious barriers in everyday life. Fewer than **30% are employed**, compared to **over 55% of the general population**. Access to inclusive education is uneven, with many children still placed in segregated settings or excluded entirely. Local governments often lack the resources and expertise to design sustainable inclusion policies.

A REGIONAL STEP TOWARDS INCLUSION



Against this backdrop, the project **Empowered – Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities, Regional Cooperation and Development in the Western Balkans** takes a concrete step towards change. Running from **September 2024 to October 2028**, it aims to strengthen the rights, employability, and social inclusion of persons with disabilities (PwDs) through partnerships between local authorities, civil society, and the private sector.

Funded by the **German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)**, Empowered is implemented by **Arbeiter-Samariter-Bund (ASB)** in cooperation with project partner organizations **IDC, CDI, Alfa Center, PREDA Plus, ADRF, and LIR CD**. With activities in **15 municipalities**, the initiative combines local action with regional cooperation to make disability inclusion a lived reality.

BRINGING GLOBAL STANDARDS TO THE WESTERN BALKANS

Still, the region is moving closer to EU standards. Most of Western Balkan countries have ratified the *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)*. While the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* and the *EU Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030* call for accessibility, equality, and full participation of PwDs in education, employment, and community life. That is why Empowered works to turn these commitments into concrete change across the Western Balkans.





EMPOWERED IMPACT

September 2024 / September 2025

Institutional partnership and local engagement

Covers all activities related to formalizing cooperation and involving municipalities and cities:

- Partnership agreements were signed and working groups for PwD inclusion were established with municipalities in Foča, Travnik, Bosanska Krupa, Pljevlja, Nikšić, Leskovac, Novi Pazar, Dimitrovgrad, Demir Kapija, Valandovo, Prizren, South Mitrovica, and Istog.
- These efforts paved the way for local inclusive projects, including the installation of elevators in public institutions and improvements to community infrastructure supporting schools and associations.

Through these efforts, a solid institutional framework for 30 local inclusive projects was established, ensuring strategic and technical support from local authorities while enabling systemic responses to the needs of persons with disabilities. At the same time, local institutions, CSOs, and PwDs themselves were empowered to take an active role in planning and implementing inclusive projects, strengthening their capacity to apply the legislative framework effectively and creating opportunities for collaborative problem-solving.

Capacity building and empowerment of local actors

This cluster focuses on educational and training initiatives aimed at strengthening local stakeholders:

- Trainings and workshops – partners jointly organized sessions on policies and regulations, project cycle management, and the rights of persons with disabilities.
- Focus groups and public consultations – carried out through collaborative efforts to encourage participation and dialogue.
- Workshops and capacity-building initiatives – designed to reinforce the role of local institutions and CSOs in fostering inclusion.

Regional Cooperation and Advocacy



- The Regional Conference in Skopje gathered high level decision-makers and civil society actors to address inclusive employment and policy implementation.
- A regional meeting in Skopje reinforced institutional commitment to disability inclusion.
- The establishment of the regional working group stands as a tangible outcome of cross-country cooperation and joint commitment.
- Close collaboration with international partners, has considerably boosted the project's visibility and established a stronger foundation of credibility.

Significance: These actions promoted cross-country cooperation, strengthened institutional support, and advanced a shared regional vision for disability inclusion. By connecting political and societal levels, they generated advocacy momentum for long-term policy change.

[learn more about project](#)