



EMPOWERED

Project results for 2025 and through the second half of 2026

Advancing inclusion of persons with disabilities in the Western Balkans

Introduction

Empowered is a regional project aimed at **improving the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the Western Balkans**. The project is led by **Arbeiter Samariter Bund Deutschland e.V.** and funded by the **German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development**. It runs from 1 September 2024 to 30 April 2028. Through advocacy, capacity building, and direct support at both regional and local levels, the project contributes to more inclusive policies, better services, and greater participation of persons with disabilities in social and economic life.

Project overview and overall impact

During the reporting period **from 2025 to mid-2026**, the Empowered project achieved significant results in strengthening the **inclusion of persons with disabilities** at both regional and local levels, through a combination of **advocacy, institutional cooperation, capacity building, and direct support** to beneficiaries. The project contributed to placing the rights of persons with disabilities more prominently **in public policy, local planning, and cooperation** between institutions and civil society.

Regional cooperation and joint action

At the regional level, one of the key achievements was the **establishment of the Regional Working Group on the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities**, which brought together relevant stakeholders from several Western Balkan countries and created space for joint action and experience sharing. During this period, **two regional conferences** were also held, in Skopje and Sarajevo, bringing together representatives of institutions, organizations of persons with disabilities, and other partners. These gatherings contributed to **stronger regional cooperation, the exchange of good practices, and the identification of common directions for future action**.



As part of the regional cooperation efforts, representatives of the **Empowered teams, relevant ministries, civil society organisations, and local authorities from all six Western Balkan countries** took part in **a study visit to Croatia and Slovenia**, exploring community-based services, supported housing, deinstitutionalisation, inclusive employment, and sustainable financing models, while exchanging expertise and developing concrete pilot actions for the WB6 region.



Local-level implementation in 15 municipalities

At the local level, Empowered was active in **15 target municipalities**, supporting the development of local inclusion plans, the work of municipal working groups, and the design of concrete inclusion-oriented initiatives. A total of **13 Local Inclusion Plans were formulated**, while **15 municipal working groups** were established and engaged in the process. In addition, **29 participants took part in public consultations**, **39 participants participated in focus groups**, and **135 interviews were conducted with key stakeholders** to identify local needs and priorities.

The project also contributed to local improvements through support for **practical measures** such as:

- **installation of lifts in public institutions;**
- **equipping schools, kindergartens, and health centres;**
- **strengthening local associations and service providers working with persons with disabilities.**

Building on these activities, **27 Local Inclusion Projects** were developed, helping municipalities move from planning to action and create more accessible and responsive local environments for persons with disabilities.

Capacity building and empowerment

Another important component of the project was **capacity building**. Local stakeholders received **Project Cycle Management (PCM) training**, which strengthened their ability to design and implement quality projects and local initiatives. In total, **15 representatives were trained in project proposal development**. As a result, **six projects were signed with municipalities**, while **five projects are currently being implemented**.

More than **50 organisations and local authorities** also completed **training on the basics of project communication**, while **advocacy campaigns** will be developed in each of the participating countries under the project's umbrella.

In parallel, the project organised **psychosocial workshops and career counselling for persons with disabilities**, supporting both personal development and greater participation in social and economic life. Overall, **11 persons with disabilities completed vocational training**, while **567 hours of support were delivered through 171 workshops**. These activities helped build confidence, improve skills, and create better conditions for inclusion and long-term empowerment.

Conclusion

Overall, the Empowered project made **a strong contribution** during 2025 and the first half of 2026 by **combining regional cooperation, local implementation, capacity building, and advocacy**.

Its results demonstrate that **meaningful inclusion is achieved through sustained partnership**, practical local action, and continued engagement with institutions and communities. The project has laid **a solid foundation for further progress toward a more inclusive Western Balkans**.

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