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WBIF Guidelines for Applicants for TA Round 33 for Technical Assistance



1. Introduction

These guidelines accompany the WBIF call proposals for TA Round 33 for public sector technical assistance. The main objective of this document is to provide guidance to Beneficiaries and financial institutions applying for funding in this WBIF call for proposals. It presents the eligibility provisions applicable to project proposals, clarifies how they should be submitted under the newly introduced “phased approach”, and what information the WBIF Project Financiers’ Group expects to receive in applications. The guidelines are structured in 3 chapters: 1) Eligibility provisions, 2) Timetable of the call for proposals and 3) Information on the “Phased approach”.

2. Eligibility criteria for public sector technical assistance grants

The key priorities of the **Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans** (EIP), now integrated in the Global Gateway, guide the eligibility criteria of the current round. Moreover, to achieve the goals of the **New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans**, special emphasis is placed on sectors that are likely to function as key multipliers for social and economic development: connectivity, including sustainable transport, decarbonisation, energy, green and digital transitions, as well as education and skills development, with a particular focus to youth.

Applications for **public sector TA grant support under the current round** are eligible in the following intervention areas: 1) sustainable transport; 2) clean energy; 3) environment and climate; 4) digital future; and 5) human capital development. More detail on eligibility criteria per intervention area is found in section 1 below.

In addition, with a view to **leveraging private sector finance and expertise** for public investments – in particular when the investment design is complex, the operation of the infrastructure is challenging, or when the fiscal space of the borrower is limited – TA applications for the preparation of investments to be implemented under PublicPrivate Partnership (PPP) approach are **strongly encouraged** under the current round. As such, relevant applications should foresee an option analysis of the benefit and opportunity to develop the infrastructure through a Public Private Partnership. This requirement does not apply to applications concerning investments in advanced stages of preparation; in these cases, a justification for not conducting an option analysis must be provided in the GAF. Guidance on potential for PPP is available on the WBIF website in the library (EPEC studies).

2.1. Sustainable transport

Rationale

The Economic and Investment Plan for Western Balkans sets out that significant investment should be directed towards sustainable transport infrastructure in the Western Balkans. Transport-related measures also feature in the New Growth Plan and in the Reform Agendas contributing to the objective of integrating the Western Balkan economies into the EU Single Market through the so-called Green Lane initiative or measures relative Intelligent Transport Systems (ITS) or e-freight.

Investments in transport infrastructure should be future-proof and sustainable (e.g. through proper climate risk assessments and adequate mitigation and adaptation measures) in line with the Guidelines for the Implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans embedded in the Economic and Investment Plan: e.g. rehabilitation of the rail network, deployment of intelligent transport systems, multimodal transport solutions and modal shift. These investments should also be aligned with the Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy priorities, the “do no significant harm” principle and the Paris Agreements.

Fast, efficient and sustainable transport links are crucial, both within the region and with the neighbouring EU Member States in the railway sector.

In June 2024, the Council of the European Union adopted a revised Regulation that includes a Rail Freight Corridor for the Western Balkans. After its adoption, the new Rail Freight Corridor has become an essential tool for

coordinated cooperation to improve international freight traffic and to enhance and improve multimodality in passenger and freight rail transport.

The Core and Extended Core transport networks, with a deadline of 2030 and 2040 completion, should constitute the foundation of the sustainable multimodal transport network, representing the strategically most important nodes and links of the trans-European transport network according to traffic needs. They should stimulate the development of the entire comprehensive network and enable EU action to concentrate on the Trans-European Transport Network components with the highest European added value, in particular cross-border sections, missing links, multimodal connecting points and major bottlenecks.

The Western Balkans region is affected by the changing climate and has already seen the severe consequences of climate change. The Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy for Western Balkans was developed to set common objectives and a list of common measures for making transport greener, sustainable and healthier for citizens.

Progress should be made on both the implementation of technical standards and connectivity reform measures (e.g. aligning/simplifying border crossing procedures, railway reform including unbundling and third-party access, information systems, maintenance schemes, road safety), thus speeding up the completion of the indicative extension of the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) to the Western Balkans and accelerating full alignment with the EU acquis, namely as regards digital and clean energy technologies.

The regional action plans on Transport Facilitation, Rail, Road, Road Safety and Multimodality shall act as frameworks for investments.

TA applications in the transport sector should aim at preparing investments to be later funded by EU funds (in particular Sector Operational Programmes/National IPA funds or by WBIF investment grants) and must respect the following eligibility criteria:

Key areas of intervention

Subsector	SOP / national IPA	WBIF
Railways infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Railway TEN-T Comprehensive network, railway stations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rehabilitation of existing and construction of new resilient and smart transport infrastructure on the TEN-T core and extended core railway network
Road infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Road TEN-T Comprehensive network and others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rehabilitation of existing and construction of new resilient and smart transport infrastructure on the TEN-T core roads network
Subsector	SOP / national IPA	WBIF
Maritime/Inland waterways infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inland waterways TEN-T comprehensive network Coastal protection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inland waterways TEN-T Core network Port infrastructure
Intermodality		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Terminals/multi-modal hubs
Urban Mobility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sustainable urban transport* 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rapid urban transit systems

* Priority area(s) for Sector Operational Programmes without the actions eligible under WBIF.

Note: The above table refers to EU funds only. In addition, Bilateral Donors can support small-scale investment projects in all the sectors described above regardless of the division of sub-sectors into “SOP/national IPA” and “WBIF”.

2.2. Clean energy

Rationale

The Economic and Investment Plan for Western Balkans, together with the Guidelines for the Implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, set out that support towards energy transition will be reinforced. Strong emphasis is placed on energy market integration, decarbonisation, clean energy, just transition, increased digitalisation of the system and smart grids, energy efficiency, including modernisation of district heating, and energy security. Clean Energy also features prominently in the New Growth Plan for the region and in the Reform Agendas of each of the economies. Integration and decarbonisation of Energy markets is the main priority. This will take into account also the need for an equivalent carbon price to the EU Emissions Trading System’s carbon price or the application of the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) to allow for the continued electricity market coupling from 2030 onwards.

In December 2022, the Western Balkans partners made commitments under the Energy Community Treaty concerning the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions energy efficiency and renewable energy targets by 2030. On this basis, they have developed their respective National Energy and Climate Plans setting out the steps to achieve these targets. Investments funded under the Reform and Growth Facility shall be in line with the Western Balkans partners’ Energy and Climate Plans, their Nationally Determined Contribution and ambition to reach climate neutrality by 2050. They shall contribute to the mitigation of climate change and to the ability to adapt to its adverse effects, and foster climate resilience. In particular, funding under the Reform and Growth Facility shall promote the transition towards a decarbonised, climate-neutral, climate-resilient and circular economy.

At the same time, there has been progress in the implementation of renewable energy policies in the Western Balkans and investments in renewable energy (conventional solar and wind power plants) have started to flow in. However, further investments and policy measures in decarbonising energy production and/or consumption shall be key to delivering decarbonisation targets, including being able to avoid potentially negative consequences of the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) and ensuring a just energy transition. The mobilisation of the private sector would contribute to the nascent industrial clean energy ecosystems and can be a regional economic game changer. Progress should be made on transposing the new Electricity Integration Package within the Energy Community to ensure full market integration of Contracting Parties, which includes the six Western Balkans partners, into the single European electricity market.

Key areas of intervention

TA applications in the energy sector should aim at preparing investments to be later funded by EU funds (in particular, Sector Operational Programmes/National IPA funds or by WBIF investment grants) and must respect the following eligibility criteria:

Subsector	SOP / national IPA	WBIF
Electricity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Transmission of internal electricity transmission lines, if not on the PECO/PMI lists, that significantly contributes to market integration and/or to the integration of RES 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Transmission lines contributing to market integration (between Western Balkans partners and/or with EU Member States), sustainability (integration and transmission of renewable energy) and security of supply. Distribution network upgrade Digitalisation of the network Energy storage: battery storage and pumped hydro storage
Renewable energy production		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rehabilitation of hydropower plants Innovative renewable energy solution projects (if not supported through EFSD+ guarantees and proven not to be revenue generating)
Energy efficiency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Public buildings District heating 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Public and private buildings and businesses through REEP Education and health facilities through WBIF: energy efficiency measures for infrastructure in the education sector (from early childhood education to high level education) and in the health sector (hospitals and health centres)

Note: The above table refers to EU funds only. In addition, Bilateral Donors can support small-scale investment projects in all the sectors described above, regardless of the division of sub-sectors into “SOP/national IPA” and “WBIF”.

2.3. Environment and climate

Rationale

The Economic and Investment Plan for Western Balkans, together with the Guidelines for the Implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, set out that significant investment should be directed towards greening the Western Balkans and mainstreaming environmental and climate requirements in other sectors. WBIF support focuses on the implementation of the plan’s flagship on waste and wastewater management.

One of the main goals of the Green Agenda is to reduce water pollution and to address water conservation and flood protection across the region. There is a high share of the population in rural areas (30 to 50%) with only basic sanitary facilities and wastewater collection, while urban areas with collection of wastewater via sewer networks discharge mostly untreated wastewater.

Even though there have been improvements in waste management through the adoption of circular economy principles, there is still much progress to be made in the Western Balkans. Support will be provided to upgrade basic infrastructure in line with relevant EU standards in the area of water and sanitation (including investments in drinking water treatment and supply and sewerage systems covering multiple agglomerations with a regional

coverage or in the major cities) and pollution prevention measures. Moving to a circular economy, addressing waste management, recycling, sustainable production, and efficient use of resources will play a significant role in lowering the carbon footprint.

Key areas of intervention

TA applications in the environment sector should aim at preparing investments to be later funded by EU funds (in particular Sector Operational Programmes/National IPA funds or by WBIF investment grants) and must respect the following eligibility criteria:

Subsector	SOP / national IPA	WBIF
Water management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rehabilitation of existing and construction of new Drinking water and wastewater treatment plant (\leq €15 million (\leq€30 million for Serbia))* River basin management/flood prevention 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rehabilitation of existing and construction of new drinking water and wastewater treatment plants ($>$ €15 million ($>$ €30 million for Serbia)
Waste management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rehabilitation of existing and construction of new of waste management centres (\leq €20 million (\leq€30 million for Serbia))* Closure of non-compliant landfills Equipment* 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rehabilitation of existing and construction of new waste management centres ($>$ €20 million ($>$ €30 million for Serbia) Closure of non-compliant landfills, including rehabilitation according to EU standards (only if in association with waste management centres)
Air quality/noise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Services/ works/ equipment * 	<ul style="list-style-type: none">
Nature protection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Management of natural resources, resource protection (deployment of reservoirs, irrigation; green and blue infrastructures; ecosystem restoration and resilience; restoration of carbon rich habitats; water retention)* 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Actions that address water pollution and have co-benefits of improving resilience to extreme climate events or contributing to nature conservation and restoration, such as nature-based solutions or green infrastructure, will be prioritised.
Industrial pollution/ chemicals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Services (studies) Cleaning/remediation of local waste dumpsites 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Integrated industrial decarbonisation and depollution solutions
Circular economy		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support will be provided to waste management, recycling, sustainable production, and efficient use of resources for the green and climateneutral economy.

* Priority area/s for Sector Operational Programmes.

Note: The above table refers to EU funds only. In addition, Bilateral Donors can support small-scale investment projects in all the sectors described above regardless of the division of sub-sectors into “SOP/national IPA” and “WBIF” and without any financial thresholds.

2.4. Digital future

Rationale

The Economic and Investment Plan for Western Balkans calls for the region’s digital transition and includes digital infrastructure as one of its ten flagships. Digital transition also features prominently in the New Growth Plan for the region and in the Reform Agendas of each of the economies. Among other reforms, which will be financially supported through the Reform and Growth Facility, the Western Balkan partners are committing to advance on the roll-out of secure and sustainable digital infrastructure in full compliance with the EU’s 5G cybersecurity toolbox.

Key areas of intervention

TA applications in the digital sector should aim at preparing investments to be later funded by EU funds (in particular Sector Operational Programmes/National IPA funds or by WBIF investment grants) and must respect the following eligibility criteria:

Subsector	SOP / national IPA	WBIF
Infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> e-governance, e-procurement, education, e-health, electronic public services projects supporting alignment with EU’s rules related to data protection EU practices to mitigate cybersecurity risks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ultra-fast and secure broadband (including 5G) with to governments, households, businesses, education and health, connections with remote areas, connection to EU digital backbones. Full alignment with the EU’s 5G cybersecurity toolbox and technology neutrality must be ensured secure, energy-efficient, trustworthy and AI-ready data centres, edge and cloud infrastructures, as well as linking to EU initiatives on high-performance computers and/or GEANT programme; these efforts must ensure cyber-resilience Exploring synergies with other connectivity areas, such as transport and energy, in the context of infrastructure sharing Investments in improving the digitalisation of infrastructures in the fields of education (from early childhood education to high-level education) and health (hospitals and health centres).

Note: The above table refers to EU funds only. In addition, Bilateral Donors can support small-scale investment projects in all the sectors described above regardless of the division of sub-sectors into “SOP/national IPA” and “WBIF”.

2.5. Infrastructures for human capital development

Rationale

The Economic and Investment Plan for Western Balkans puts strong emphasis on the investments in infrastructures that unleash the potential of human capital development among other, in the fields of education and skills, research and innovation, which has been fully taken forward by the new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans and respective national Reform Agendas. Investments in health infrastructure are now included under Clean Energy (energy efficiency measures) or the Digital Future sectors digitalisation in health). Among other reforms, which will be financially supported through the Reform and Growth Facility, the Western Balkan partners are committed to advancing in the areas of education and skills, labour market and employability, research and development.

Key areas of intervention

TA applications in the human capital development sector should aim at preparing investments to be later funded by EU funds (in particular Sector Operational Programmes/National IPA funds or by WBIF investment grants) and must respect the following eligibility criteria:

Subsector	SOP / national IPA	WBIF
Education & Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Investments contributing to the Economic and Investment Plan Flagship 10 Youth Guarantee*any other activity in line with IPA III programming framework, EIP, ERP*	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Infrastructure investments necessary for implementation of concrete reforms included in Reform Agenda
Social inclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none">any activity in line with IPA programming III framework, EIP, ERP*	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Infrastructure investments necessary for implementation of concrete reforms included in Reform Agenda
Employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none">any activity in line with IPA programming III framework, EIP, ERP*	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Infrastructure investments necessary for implementation of concrete reforms included in Reform Agenda
Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none">any activity in line with IPA III programming framework, EIP	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Investments in energy efficiency and digitalisation under the WBIF are covered under the Digital Future and Clean Energy sectors
The above-mentioned investments must be sustainable and comply with clean energy and decarbonisation targets, environmental protection, and disaster resilience.		

* Priority area(s) for Sector Operational Programmes.

Note: The above table refers to EU funds only. In addition, Bilateral Donors can support small-scale investment projects in all the sectors described above regardless of the division of sub-sectors into “SOP/national IPA” and “WBIF”.

2.6. Additional eligibility criteria

- The underlying investment projects of technical assistance grant must be endorsed by the Ministry of Finance, unless no financing from the national budget is expected (e.g. projects under the responsibility of a municipality).
- TA applications must support preparatory work for EU-funded eligible investment projects (mostly by WBIF and SOP/National IPA) and/or by Bilateral Donors funds. For example, without limitation, masterplans, (pre)feasibility studies, cost-benefit analyses, environmental and social impact assessments, comprehensive risks assessments, including disasters and climate change risks and vulnerability, preliminary and detailed designs), targeted capacity building and implementation support (including tender documents preparation procurement assistance), sector development studies, and general capacity building.
- Activities related to the technical review, check and verification of any project design(s) as per national legislation, other activities specific to the urban planning and/or land ownership (e.g. the preparation of urban plans, documentation for land expropriation, etc.) that fall under the Beneficiary's responsibility as part of its due diligence and control for the project management are not eligible for grant funding.
- Support for overcoming specific obstacles delaying project preparation or implementation may be accepted, provided that for faltering projects, the grant application provides a thorough analysis of the causes and a clear and logical use of the grant to drive their progress.
- For projects with preparatory studies under development (e.g. the feasibility study is under preparation), grant financing for the next stage will not be provided until those studies are completed and their results are approved by the beneficiary and Lead IFI. Similarly, additional grant financing will not be considered when a grant has already been awarded but not disbursed.
- To ensure efficient use of resources, proposals should reflect the logical sequence of the project cycle and, therefore, should be confined to immediate needs. For example, if a feasibility study is required, assistance for designs and tender documents should not be part of the grant request but rather be applied for in the future if the feasibility study proves positive.
- TA applications for the preparation of investments to be implemented under PPP approach are strongly encouraged under the current round. As such, relevant applications should foresee an option analysis of the benefit and opportunity to develop the infrastructure through a Public Private Partnership. This requirement does not apply to applications concerning investments in advanced stages of preparation; in these cases, a justification for not conducting an option analysis must be provided in the GAF. Guidance on potential for PPP is available on the WBIF website in the library (EPEC studies).

3. Maximum co-financing rates for WBIF technical assistance grants

The WBIF grant can finance 100% of costs for technical assistance.

For clarifications regarding the call for proposals, please contact the WBIF Secretariat at ENESTWBIF@ec.europa.eu. The WBIF grant can finance 100% of costs for technical assistance.

4. Timeline of the call for proposals

The European Commission and the Bilateral Donors launch a WBIF call for Technical Assistance (TA) applications for financial support through the **Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance III** and **Bilateral Donors contributions** to the European Western Balkans Joint Fund (EWBJF) to support the preparation of infrastructure projects to be financed by EU-funds (mostly by WBIF and SOP/National IPA) and/or by Bilateral Donors funds, including the **Reform and Growth Facility** established under the New [Growth Plan for the Western Balkans](#).

Selected technical assistance grants must support the preparation of investment projects addressing the WBIF Blending Investment Priorities as presented at the 1st Strategic and Operational Board meetings (16 and 17 December 2021), here relevant: 1) sustainable transport; 2) clean energy; 3) environment and climate; 4) digital future; and 5) human capital development.

The tentative timeline for the call for proposals is shown below.

Event	TA Round 33
Launch of the call for proposals	5 August 2025 (written procedure)
Pre-notification deadline	11 September 2025
Submission deadline	25 September 2025
Endorsement deadline	02 October 2025
Screening (until)	24 October 2025
1 st Paris Group	13 November 2025
Assessment (until)	18 December 2025
2 nd Paris Group	16 January 2026
Project Financiers' Group	Written Procedure (February 2026)
Operational Board	Written Procedure (February/March 2026)

5. Guidelines for phased TA submission and GAF

This document provides guidance on the use of the “new phased TA GAF”.

5.1. General overview

New phased approach / additional PG & PFG meetings

The TA GAF is split into 2 phases. There will be more Paris Group (PG) meetings per year. All PG meetings will cover the so-called “1st and 2nd” PG meetings, meaning that in each meeting, both Phase 1 and Phase 2 applications will be deliberated (the same PGs will also serve the purpose of discussing screening and assessment of investment grants for public and private sectors, when these are due).

The **first phase GAF** contains information required by DG ENEST to enable a meaningful understanding of the application and screening, in line with the policy framework and the eligibility criteria of the call, followed by a first deliberation in a PG meeting. Once the application passes the first phase (PG meeting), the second phase starts. In this **second phase GAF**, additional sections will open, which applicants must complete during the assessment phase. Once completed, a second deliberation of these “Phase 2” GAFs follows in the next PG meeting. The final GAFs are submitted to the PFG. The second deliberation in a PG meeting can occur at any PG meeting immediately following the previous one or any subsequent PG meeting, depending on the progress of completing the GAF.

While the possibility to carry over one GAF from one PG to another increases flexibility and allows applicants to develop the application at the appropriate pace and in line with the complexity of the required study, this mechanism must not result in an open-ended process, whereby GAFs are submitted and remain open in the system for an undetermined period of time. DG ENEST may therefore decide to remove applications from the system if

they have been idle for too long. In addition, if the template for TA GAFs is updated, applications still in the MIS (pre 1st PG, or idle before 2nd PG) will be cancelled and must be resubmitted.

The GAF, once approved, **contains the Terms of Reference (ToR)**. The MIS is programmed in a way that allows relevant GAF components to be extracted, which will then become the ToR, compiled into a single document, which will be uploaded to the MIS under the GAF as a separate document (under the attachments). From this point, the ToR are passed on to the EIB for IPF-implemented TA or to the Lead IFI for Joint Fund financed TA.

The stages for a phased GAF submission and the approval sequence are shown below.

Stage	Author/s	Comment
Pre-notification	NIPAC	No changes, same MIS fields (N.1 to 14, 17 and 18)
Submission Phase 1	NIPAC	Phase 1 fields open in MIS, shown in green in Annex (include most of the ToR sections)
Endorsement	Lead IFI	No changes
Screening	European Commission	Will screen only phase 1 fields, this includes the ToR fields
Paris Group	PG members	Approves phase 1 GAF, delays for next PG (for improvement) or rejects
Submission Phase 2 & Assessment	NIPAC & Lead IFI	Phase 2 fields open in MIS, shown in blue in Annex, also phase 1 fields for improvement, updates etc.
Paris Group	PG members	Approves entire GAF, delays for next PG (for improvement) or rejects
PFG	PFG members	Approves and sends to OB for approval, on-hold, or rejects GAFs.
OB & AoC (where needed)	OB & AoC members (where needed)	Approves GAFs in physical meeting, or written procedure.

5.2. Terms of Reference

The following sections of the GAF will become sections of the ToR, and should, for this reason, be drafted with a view of “becoming parts of the ToR”, this includes both phase 1 and 2 sections. Following approval by the OB, the MIS will automatically generate the ToR and these will be uploaded to the MIS under the grant attachments. DG ENEST will provide technical assistance to the beneficiaries in the preparation of the GAF (and the ToR requirements) on a regular basis.

Section	Title
2	Grant code
7	Beneficiaries
10	Action/Grant Application name
11	Lead IFI
14	Total WBIF grant amount (€)
16	Implementation of TA activities
17	Responsible authority of the Beneficiary
18	Implementing entity(ies)
19.1	Background and context of the Project
19.2	Needs/demand analysis
19.3	Project map
19.4	Project description
19.5	Reference documents
21.1	Alignment with the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans
21.2	Alignment with the Growth Plan and the Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans
21.3	Alignment with Green Agenda objectives
21.4	Compliance with adopted national/sectoral/regional strategies
23.1	Description of entities involved
23.2	Organisational set-up
Section	Title
28.2	Detailed scope of work and results for TA grant activities (the Action)
31.2	Detailed planning of TA activities