



Reskilling for the Green Transition in Coal-Dependent Economies

Programme: RECONOMY (HELVETAS / Sida)	Countries: North Macedonia, Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro, BiH (Western Balkans)
Sector: Energy Efficiency	Market actors and partners: CeProSARD, Solar Macedonia, Green Building Councils (North Macedonia, Kosovo, Albania, Montenegro, BiH)
Intervention Period: 2021-2025	JT Dimensions: Social Inclusion, Skills Development, Sector Transformation

CONTEXT AND JUST TRANSITION RELEVANCE

The Western Balkans remains one of Europe's most coal-dependent regions. In North Macedonia, coal accounts for the majority of electricity generation, with REK Bitola - the country's largest coal-fired thermal power plant - employing thousands of workers and anchoring the energy system of the south-west of the country. Across the region, Kosovo's KREK (the Kosovo electricity utility) and other fossil fuel-based operators face similar structural exposure. Workers in coal dependent industries face increasing uncertainty as EU accession commitments, the EU Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (2020), and rising energy prices all accelerate the shift away from fossil fuels and towards energy efficiency and renewable energy, which require different and often unfamiliar technical skills. In North

Macedonia, plant operators at REK Bitola are acutely aware that the transition is coming and the plant itself has begun installing its own solar capacity and is already exploring pathways for gradual reskilling of its workforce.

At the same time, the construction and renovation sector — central to energy efficiency — suffers from fragmented coordination, low awareness of green standards, and an absence of credible sector institutions capable of driving the transition. The market lacks the platforms, professional pathways, and shared standards needed to absorb the demand for green skills that the transition will generate. Women and young professionals face structural barriers to entry into what remains a male-dominated industry.



JUST TRANSITION ACTIVITIES

RECONOMY intervened at both levels: skills development for energy efficiency and energy demand forecasting through cascading RETScreen training as practical reskilling tools for workers and technical professionals operating in coal-dependent industries, and supporting Green Building Councils (GBCs) as the institutional set-up to anchor energy efficiency in the construction sector.

1. RETScreen Training of Trainers — A Cascading Reskilling Model

RECONOMY supported Solar Macedonia (a national solar energy association) to organize an international Training of Trainers (TOT) on RETScreen, which is a multilingual energy analysis tool available in different languages relevant for the Western Balkans. Training trainers rather than end-users directly created a multiplication effect as certified trainers have used RETScreen across SME consultancies, university curricula, and major industrial operators. One graduate, a professor at the University of Tirana, further strengthened and updated his Master's degree programme in energy modeling by integrating the latest RETScreen knowledge and methodologies gained through the training, thereby enhancing energy analysis education in Albania, a country where energy analysis capacity had previously been very limited. Other consultants used it for expert case study with both SMEs as well as with international organizations. A cost-sharing licensing arrangement facilitated by Solar Macedonia further lowered access barriers without additional donor funding.

2. Training at REK Bitola Coal Plant — Embedding the Transition from Within

The most directly Just Transition-relevant deployment saw one of Solar Macedonia's collaborators, who was actively involved in the RECONOMY-supported TOT program development, deliver RETScreen training to workers at REK Bitola through EBRD funding. Structured in groups of 15 over 2.5 months, and covering both installers and engineers (aged 20–50), the training applied a three-tier competency framework, with all eligible participants formally certified. REK Bitola is already investing in its own solar capacity and gradually preparing its workforce for the shift, the newly acquired skills are immediately applicable to this internal transition. Kosovo's KREK utility has since approached Solar Macedonia to request the same programme, with middle management seeking information to bring senior leadership on board, a regional signal that energy utilities are anticipating the transition.





3. Green Building Councils — Institutional Infrastructure for the Green Transition

RECONOMY established new GBCs in North Macedonia, Kosovo, Albania, and Montenegro, and strengthened the existing council in Bosnia and Herzegovina. These membership-based platforms bring together construction companies, technical experts, and policymakers around shared sustainability standards. In a Just Transition context, GBCs provide the collective voice and coordination capacity needed to translate regulatory commitments into market practice. As the programme manager for the Western Balkans has noted, the GBCs hold potential to address energy poverty and coal-dependent regions in future programming. Early results show that Kosovo GBC onboarded 11 members in its founding year and generated over EUR 7,000 in membership fees.

4. Opening New Professional Pathways — Women in the Energy Sector

Women represent over 50% of participants in RECONOMY-supported GBC activities, an important number, taking into account that the sector is historically male-dominated. GBC North Macedonia, GBC Albania, and GBC Bosnia and Herzegovina are all led by women, and dedicated gender and youth outreach strategies have been developed. A new course from Impact Wise Solutions specifically targets women as future energy efficiency consultants. While still emerging, these efforts contribute to broadening participation in traditionally male-dominated sector. This shows increased inclusiveness with regards to the energy and construction sector.

KEY RESULTS

5

Green Building Councils supported, including 4 newly established

200+

University students annually introduced to RETScreen energy modelling tools

20-25%

Salary increase – reported for trained workers

50%+

Women participation in Green Building Council activities

Long term impacts and cascading effects: Participants of the RETScreen Trainings have enhanced their project portfolio. The trainings have also contributed to strengthening local analytical capacity for energy auditing, financial modeling and energy transition planning, helping bridge the gap between academic education and labor market demand in the green economy.



INSTITUTIONALIZATION AND SCALING

Deepening Impact in Coal-Dependent Regions

The most immediate opportunity for deepening Just Transition impact lies in North Macedonia and Kosovo. At REK Bitola, the RETScreen training represents a first engagement with a workforce that is already thinking about the transition. Scaling this to include more workers and linking it explicitly to future developments could transform this pilot into a more structured reskilling programme. At the same time, the approach from KREK Kosovo signals interest for regional expansion to other countries facing similar transition pressures.



GBCs as a Platform for Just Transition in the Construction Sector

In future programming, GBCs offer an institutional pathway for addressing Just Transition in the construction sector at a systemic level. The energy poverty dimension, connecting energy efficiency benefits to low-income households who cannot independently afford renovation, remains an underdeveloped opportunity. GBCs could serve as an entry point, bringing together different actors including municipalities, financial institutions, and national energy agencies to make buildings more affordable for low-income households. This would extend the Just Transition logic from worker reskilling to household-level energy justice, ensuring that the green transition reduces energy costs for the most vulnerable.

