

Crédit Agricole's blueprint for growth and innovation

The CEO of the group's investment bank talks to **Michael Klimes** about climate change, AI and recognising the limits of the market

You can tell a lot about an organisation by the person who leads it and how they came to be there. Jean-François Balaÿ has been at Crédit Agricole's corporate and investment bank for over 35 years and has never worked elsewhere.

He became chief executive of Crédit Agricole CIB in May 2025 and has held senior leadership positions over the past decade, including deputy CEO of the investment bank as well as its chief risk officer.

This gives him an intimate knowledge of the institution's lending activities and the philosophy that underpins its decisions. That expertise is critical as the entire Crédit Agricole group has just published its plan for the next three years — and there is no better person to explain Crédit Agricole CIB's place within that than Balaÿ.

"We as the investment bank have a global reach but are conservative with our risk appetite, [which] is very clear and focused on the sectors we are involved in where we want to grow steadily," he says.

Strategy-wise this means the investment bank is concentrated on maintaining a strong position in real assets where Balaÿ says Crédit Agricole CIB is ranked consistently in the "top five" of league tables. He says it leads telecoms "especially in Europe" and "globally" in shipping, aviation and project finance.

With IB revenues broken down, 35 per cent comes from France, a quarter from the rest of Europe, just over a fifth from the Americas, including Latin America, 16 per cent from Asia-Pacific, and only three per cent from the Middle East.

The three-year action plan

The wide and deep footprint Crédit Agricole CIB has across these sectors is the foundation on which the bank wants to generate additional revenue to meet the targets set out in the medium-term plan to 2028.

These include generating €1bn of sustainable finance revenue which represents an 11 per cent compound annual growth rate from 2024-2028; net bank income in Europe excluding France to be in excess of 6 per cent CAGR on average over the same period; the share of revenue growth outside Europe to be 40 per cent; and the IB's cost-to-income ratio to stay below 55 per cent by 2028.

What does the bank want to do more of with its



Career history

2025

Chief executive officer, Crédit Agricole CIB

2021

Deputy CEO, Crédit Agricole CIB

2018

Deputy general manager, Crédit Agricole CIB

2016

Head of risks and permanent control, Crédit Agricole CIB

2012

Head of debt optimisation and distribution, Crédit Agricole CIB

1989-2009

Various positions at LCL and Calyon (absorbed by Crédit Agricole)

real assets footprint to hit these goals? According to Balaÿ, Crédit Agricole CIB wants to use the strength it has in real assets like infrastructure or transportation to generate additional revenue in distinct ways.

First, it wants to increase the origination and distribution of these real assets through various distribution channels, whether that be primary distribution or co-origination with investors to broaden the investor base, as well as monitoring the bank's risk weighted assets and balance sheet.

Second, it wants to look at increasing the secondary sale of some assets on a case-by-case basis, and also to develop relationships with insurers and pension funds which find these assets attractive with a good remuneration and sound risk.

Some of the latter transactions can be arranged via a project finance structure thanks to the regular and attractive cash flows of these real assets. Crédit Agricole CIB is keen to find partners on the private debt side where in certain cases it can provide financing to investors that buy the bank's assets.

Doing all of the above requires the bank to remain ahead of the game in a world that is extremely competitive and moves ever more quickly with the evolution of artificial intelligence. Staying relevant, therefore, requires internal and external innovation working in tandem.

"At the forefront with the marketing team, meaning the originators and senior bankers, we have worked to ensure we are open to new solutions that can be proposed to clients," Balaÿ says.

On the product side Crédit Agricole has invested in the cash management aspects of transaction banking across receivables, supply chain and inventory financing.

And at the international banking conference Sibos in September/October it signed a memorandum of understanding with the Chinese fintech Ant International to help innovate in blockchain-based treasury solutions, cross-bank transfer platform integration and AI-driven FX solutions.

"All of this shows that in terms of business we have a mindset towards innovation to make sure that we can propose answers [to clients]," Balaÿ continues.

Internally, Crédit Agricole CIB has gathered intelligence on what is happening outside the investment bank to see what can be improved across the institution's work processes.

"We have a small innovation team which is directly reporting to me now, with some team members who are coming from the IT or other business arms so that we have the antennas towards the market to see what is happening, and then what we can apply to our internal processes," he says.

This group works in close collaboration with the AI team to identify the use cases for technology within the investment bank. Crédit Agricole CIB has found around 90 use cases across the IB with 40 in capital markets.

"For the back office, we've set up some AI robots to identify within documentation the financial covenants, and on the capital market side they get support to get



Looking ahead: the Crédit Agricole group has just published its plan for the next three years

guidance on pricing and market trends,” Balaÿ says.

Crédit Agricole CIB has also created a closed chatbot called Alfred that employees can use to ask questions, and intends to develop a co-pilot to help staff get used to AI tools.

“Let me give you an idea of how this works. Just before the IMF meetings [in mid October] I was in New York and one of the teams showed me how they were using these tools to create a PowerPoint presentation, it was quite impressive,” he adds.

But there is more to AI than creating smart presentations, which can be grouped into three broad applications, according to Balaÿ: the development of better product offerings, upgrading internal back-office processes, and team members researching clients in a secured environment.

“The one point I want to emphasise about all this is that AI is just a tool and humans are always the ones making the decisions,” he says.

The bank's underlying ethos

While technology is important, Balaÿ is adamant that one must never forget the importance of teamwork.

“You succeed as a team and that is something I experienced before as deputy CEO when I was in charge of that business line,” he says.

“It was at a smaller scale [than his current leadership role] but it was the same situation, so to say. We

succeed as a team with common goals and if you face difficulties then you have to be there as well.

“Teams may have an issue and they ask: ‘How can we solve this?’ so you can give ideas about what is feasible whether it is a transaction or finding a solution with a client; it can be many things.”

Strong team work is anchored in the basic principles that guide the investment bank and the wider group, says Balaÿ.

“We always go back to the principles that mean we have a clear strategy in a given sector and understand what the bank is prepared to do.

“This is known by the origination and sector teams and then you can explain to clients what you can do alongside what the market can accept.”

One area where Crédit Agricole CIB has not altered its principles is its climate change targets, but the bank has to operate within what the market can deliver.

“We are not changing engagement, or targets, but we know it is challenging, and it may take longer to reach some objectives,” he says. “If you take the automotive sector, we’ve seen the sales of electric vehicles have been slower than initially thought, so it might take longer.”

Recognising the limits of the market is one point that Balaÿ flags. “The whole ethos of a banker is to say what is feasible and what is not.” ■