

Financing partnership –

supporting partners in monitoring and implementation of EU funds from Technical Assistance

For more information

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Common Provisions Regulation No. 1303/2013 as well as the European Code of Conduct on Partnership clearly state that Member States may use the European Structural and Investment Funds to support the effective implementation of the partnership principle. In order for the civil society organisations and their representatives to be able to properly fulfil their role as partners in the process of implementation and monitoring of ESI Funds, it is crucial to ensure that their capacities are appropriately supported. Technical Assistance funds should be used to invest in CSOs organisational and expert capacities as well as the exchange of knowledge and building networks of partners from outside the administration.

Member States and EU funds Managing Authorities should:

- increase partners' capacity
- provide support for trainings and skill-building
- ensure funding for coordination and networking
- cover costs of travel and participation in Monitoring Committees

The comprehensive involvement of partners, as a prerequisite to a high quality partnership, is a key element to ensure a transparent and effective monitoring and implementation of the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF). The programming period of the current EU Cohesion Policy Funds for 2014–2020 saw partnership enter yet another level of quality of partners' participation in preparation and monitoring of the EU funds. The number of civil society members participating in Monitoring Committees increased significantly across the Central and Eastern European countries, and the contributions of the non-governmental partners are increasingly taken into consideration by the Managing Authorities.

The need to ensure quality partnership, including financing of capacity building of partners, is well founded in the ESIF Common Provisions Regulations as well as in the European Code of Conduct for Partnership. However, the practice of implementing those provisions often remains a challenge across the CEE countries.

The purpose of this briefing is to call attention to the deficiencies in providing adequate financial support to partners engaged in the process of implementation and monitoring of European funds, and the resulting challenges facing the civil society in Central and Eastern European countries. We also aim to put forward proposals on how the Member States should address the issue of financing high quality partnership and how the provisions of the Article 17 of the European Code of Conduct for Partnership on building capacities of partners should be translated into reality.

We encourage the European Commission to monitor the developments regarding financing of partnership in ESI Funds on the ground, as part of the Member States' implementation of the Code of Conduct on Partnership. The EC should communicate to Member States and relevant Managing Authorities the need to assess capacity and needs of non-governmental partners engaged in Monitoring Committees, introduce formal regulations for funding non-governmental partners' work in Monitoring Committees, and provide adequate dedicated support for the civil society groups involved in the process of implementation and monitoring of European funds 2014–2020.

BUILDING CAPACITIES FOR PROPER PARTNERSHIP

The increased involvement of partners brings both greater responsibility of civil society representatives for the outcomes of the European Funds, as well as an increased demand for personal, organizational and expert capacities of the partners. Civil society organisations which fulfil the condition of relevance mandated by the "Common Provisions" Regulation No. 1303/2013 usually have the necessary capacities in place and are able to delegate a number of candidates able to work in the Monitoring Committees. This work, however, represents for these organisation an extra burden in terms of staff time, as well as other organizational and expert capacities, which the CSOs must dedicate to ensure the work of their representatives is based on sound expert knowledge and regular exchange of information with the civil society as a whole.

In Central and Eastern European countries the capacity of civil society organizations to fully participate in and influence the decision-making processes is often not sufficient, and the processes themselves not inclusive and transparent enough. The lack of capacity for effective advocacy of civil society organisations in several CEE countries was generally not considered by the Managing Authorities in developing the provisions of Technical Assistance in terms of scope and proposed activities. The challenges faced by the CSOs, related to e.g. inadequate capacities of the staff and limited access to resources, negatively impact the quality of partnership in EU Funds programming, implementation and monitoring.

Organisational and personal capacity building of civil society organisations and their representatives in bodies responsible for the monitoring and implementation of the European funds is a crucial precondition for an effective operationalisation of the partnership principle and multi-level governance. The Technical Assistance funds available to Member States should be used to strengthen the participation and voice of non-governmental partners. It's necessary that this support goes beyond providing information about the structures and processes related to EU funds and addresses the varying needs of civil society groups.

NETWORKING AND COORDINATION

The effectiveness of the work of civil society members sitting in Monitoring Committees depends greatly on gathering information from stakeholders working on or directly impacted by EU funded projects. Networking is an important element of this work, leading to improved communication and exchange of knowledge between CSO delegates to EU funds monitoring bodies. Moreover, for the citizens and organisations outside of the Monitoring Committees to understand the purpose of EU funds and how they should be used to the benefit of people and environment, it is necessary they should be able to share their experience and information with the CSO members within the Monitoring Committees.

Capacity building of civil society partners cannot be limited to the capacities of respective members of the Monitoring Committees or their organisations. It

needs to address, in broader terms, capacities of a wide range of civil society stakeholders, for them to be able to voice their concerns and suggestions for the improvement of the ESIF implementation. Building and maintaining networks requires time and capacities not only of those who organize it, but also of those who participate and share their knowledge. CSO networks or umbrella organisations working on monitoring and implementation of EU funds need to be able to strengthen their outreach capacities and to collect feedback from their members, citizens and activists.

Additionally, collecting opinions from a wide range of stakeholders and turning them into relevant contributions for Monitoring Committee sessions is a resource-intensive work which requires dedicated support. It is our position that coordination, networking and experience sharing between civil society partners engaged in monitoring and implementation of EU funds, including meetings, knowledge exchange platforms and capacities of organising staff should be supported by Member States through funds earmarked for Technical Assistance.

TRAININGS AND EXPERT KNOWLEDGE

Networks of civil society organisations are often organised around specific issues, such as the environment, human rights, social rights and services, anti-discrimination, transparency, freedom of information etc., and in those areas they possess a high level of expertise. However, looking at the question of quality partnership in ESIF, we need to take into account the wide range of areas covered by the Funds' interventions, the high level of detail, broad impacts and significant amount of public funding at stake. Effective engagement of civil society partners in the processes of monitoring and implementations of EU Funds often requires specific expert knowledge, which the organisations representing the non-governmental sector could be lacking.

Building on the framework provisions of the Article 17 of the Code of Conduct on expert capacity development activities, Technical Assistance funding should cover a wide range of activities aiming to build expert knowledge among civil society partners. Among others, civil society organisations need to be able to build their expert capacities through commissioning expert studies, consultancy, trainings, exchange of best practices and study visits.

For the Managing Authorities, the CSOs can well serve as a source of information about the implementation of horizontal principles such as sustainable development, equality and inclusiveness, transparency and efficiency. At the same time, Managing Authorities should not treat the partnership with civil society as a form of service which delivers research commissioned by the public sector. Civil society organisations must be able to decide by themselves about the content and form of expert studies they need for the fulfilment of their role in partnership. In this way the CSOs will be able to bring into the monitoring process new inputs and issues, which might otherwise be neglected by the Managing Authorities or other institutions.

COSTS OF PARTICIPATION

The ability of the civil society representatives to participate in the sessions of Monitoring Committees is crucial to ensure the implementation of the partnership principle in all countries and regions. The participation at the Monitoring Committee meeting is often the most effective channel the civil society delegates have to present the information collected from the ground or voice their expert opinions of subjects being discussed.

Participation in meetings requires not only the time spent in the meeting, but also preparation, often including reading of hundreds of pages of background documents and collecting feedbacks from constituency, as well as the time spent on travel to the venue. Travel costs are currently often covered by the Monitoring Committee members themselves, which is not desirable given the limited resources at the disposal of civil society organisations.

To ensure quality partnership, technical assistance must be available to cover staff time costs of the organisation delegating the CSO representative as well as the related overhead costs including management and coordination. All travel and accommodation costs incurred by partners from outside the administration and related to their work in the Monitoring Committees should be reimbursed upon request.

Good practice: the case of Poland

In Poland, civil society partners are eligible to receive financial support in relation to their work in the Monitoring Committees for the ESI Funds 2014–2020. The Managing Authorities are obliged to provide financial assistance to partners sitting in Monitoring Committees for capacity building, travel reimbursement and commissioning expert studies related to issues subject to discussion during Monitoring Committees sessions. This obligation comes from a governmental document “Guidelines on the functioning of Monitoring Committees 2014–2020”, issued by the Ministry of Infrastructure and Development.

These Guidelines, which outline the obligatory minimum of commitment, apply equally to all Managing Authorities, both at the national level as well as for the regional Operational Programmes. According to the provisions, each Monitoring Committee adopts an internal regulation which specifies, among others, the amount of funds available to civil society representatives for capacity building, yearly or during the whole budgetary period.

The regulation outlines for example, how much support the Managing Authority makes available for trainings of partners in subjects relevant to their work in the Monitoring Committees, as well as the amount of funds provided for ordering expert studies and research. The Guidelines also oblige the Managing Authority to offer to reimburse the costs of travel to the Monitoring Committee meetings as well as the costs of accommodation during sessions. The source of the funding of the involvement of partners in the implementation and monitoring of ESI Funds should be the Technical Assistance funds for the given national or regional Operational Programme. Above ensuring the obligatory minimum, each Managing Authority has the option to use the Technical Assistance funds to cover other costs, with the purpose of supporting members of the Monitoring Committee representing partners from outside the administration.

Constructive alternatives: the case of Slovakia

In Slovakia, individual Operational Programmes have funds allocated under the Technical Assistance chapter to provide refunds of travel costs and direct personnel costs connected to personal working time spent at Monitoring Committee meetings. However, the conditions for such refunds are very strict and require that the Monitoring Committee members are employees of partner organizations. In practice, this limitation excludes the possibility of vast majority

of CSO members in Monitoring Committees to receive reimbursements, as most of them are working as experts and have no employment contracts.

Civil society groups actively involved in the monitoring and implementation of ESIF in Slovakia came up with a proposal to finance the monitoring activities of CSO partners through a specific project funded from the Operational Programme Technical Assistance. The CSOs demand for such a project is actively supported by The Plenipotentiary of the Slovak Republic Government for the Development of Civil Society. The idea of this project was first discussed among CSOs Chamber of the Council of the Slovak Republic Government for NGOs, subsequently among CSOs members in Monitoring Committees and then it was submitted to the Central Coordinating Authority (CCA) for European funds.

Currently, there are negotiations ongoing between CSOs, CCA and the Plenipotentiary office staff, aiming to select the most appropriate form of support (national project, global grant, call for applications) and identify the scope of activities which should be supported. National project seems to be the best option for CSOs, as it brings the lowest administrative burden to partners while keeping the control in hands of Managing Authority. The office of the Plenipotentiary would play the key role as the formal beneficiary of the national project for the support of partners in Monitoring Committees.



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