

# Strengthening the participation of civil society in monitoring committees through technical assistance



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## The role of monitoring committees in accelerating transformative projects

To improve the quality of project planning and programming, EU Member States and the European Commission must strengthen public participation in line with the European code of conduct on partnership.<sup>1</sup> This will lead to a stronger sense of community ownership and enhance the way in which project proposals are formulated, delivered, and monitored.

Robust public participation is essential for establishing a shared vision, directing resources towards transformative projects, and future-proofing investments.

<sup>1</sup> European Commission, [Commission Delegated Regulation \(EU\) No 240/2014 of 7 January 2014 on the European code of conduct on partnership in the framework of the European Structural and Investment Funds](#), European Commission, 7 January 2014.

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In turn, this collaborative approach must be reinforced and supported by technical assistance at all levels.

On a broader scale, coordinated and collaborative efforts are needed to identify ways of addressing the major environmental and societal challenges of our time, including climate change, biodiversity loss, and the ever-increasing gap between rich and poor.<sup>2</sup>

Evidence-informed policymaking requires authorities to co-design policies together with the people affected by the rules and decisions arising from these policies. This approach strengthens civic engagement, promotes democracy, and mobilises citizens to tackle complex policies related to issues such as climate change and investment decisions.<sup>3</sup>

The European code of conduct on partnership, which guides effective participation within EU programming, is of significant importance for the rule of law as it empowers public scrutiny through better access to information. Indeed, public oversight is a fundamental pillar in preventing the corruption and misuse of EU funds.

However, public participation should extend beyond formal contributions to EU cohesion policy programmes. It must also inform the creation and development of national and regional policies. Member States are responsible for creating safe spaces for civil society organisations so that they can actively engage in policymaking processes at all levels.

In the spirit of the Treaty on European Union, this approach empowers citizens to have a greater say in the decision-making process. It also unlocks the vast stores of knowledge and talent within civil society, builds trust in institutions, and equips policymakers to manage complex challenges.

By applying these principles to EU cohesion policy funds, partners, particularly civil society organisations, can lead the way in ensuring policies and programmes remain relevant to the changing times in which we live and in orchestrating transformative impacts on society.

## **Climate, cohesion, and transformation: Why partnership is key to ensuring our economies remain resilient**

Climate change, perhaps the single biggest challenge of our times, poses a grave and systemic risk for financial systems, ecosystems, and human life itself. In addition to the obvious physical risks of climate change such as destroyed infrastructure and uninsured losses, there are substantial and costly transition risks, particularly if carbon mitigation efforts are pursued in an uncoordinated or chaotic manner.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Anabela M. Santos, Alex Coad, [Monitoring and evaluation of transformative innovation policy: Suggestions for Improvement](#), *Socio-Economic Planning Sciences*, 2023.

<sup>3</sup> European Commission, [Commission recommendation of 12.12.2023 on promoting the engagement and effective participation of citizens and civil society organisations in policy-making processes](#), *European Commission*, 2023.

<sup>4</sup> Patrick Bolton, Morgan Després, Luiz Awazu Pereira da Silva, Frédéric Samama, Romain Svartzman, [The green swan: Central banking and financial stability in the age of climate change](#), *Bank for International Settlements*, January 2020.

Recent research shows that the inevitable climate damage resulting from past emissions are already six times greater than the costs needed to limit global warming to a 2 °C target.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the cost of inaction, which will only increase over time, is undoubtedly greater than the cost of transformation.

In this context, the EU's cohesion policy plays a crucial role. Regions that are both vulnerable to climate disasters and lack economic agility risk becoming trapped in a cycle of debt, slowing their reconstruction efforts.<sup>6</sup> Thus, climate change is likely to indirectly amplify discontent and create even more of a divide between developed, resilient regions and those that lag behind.

Fortunately, the cohesion policy has both the historical mandate and the resources to deliver transformative projects that can adapt to future change and increase prosperity in Europe's less developed regions, where over 120 million people lived in 2023.<sup>7</sup>

Addressing poverty and inequality through solidarity and the mitigation of internal market effects has always been a core mission of the cohesion policy. Yet, measuring progress solely in terms of growth in gross domestic product (GDP) is a short-sighted, 'quick-fix' approach that fails to address the full scope of the challenge. This shortcoming is highlighted in the Ninth Report on Economic, Social and Territorial Cohesion,<sup>8</sup> which emphasises the need to harness the potential of Europe's disadvantaged regions and the talents of its marginalised communities.

Cohesion policy funds are among the main sources of financial support for less developed regions, accounting for the majority of public investments in these countries. In the current budget period, these funds, in addition to funds under the Recovery and Resilience Facility, meet up to 20 per cent of the European Green Deal's investment needs.<sup>9</sup>

However, climate neutrality will not be achieved solely through environmental policies. This is why cohesion policy funds are so crucial for the success of the European Green Deal, as they support the implementation of, among other things, specific climate actions, climate-proof investments, and climate adaptation and mitigation measures.<sup>10</sup>

The long-term success of the cohesion policy hinges on regenerative projects guided by post-extractivist models that serve to increase the prosperity of people within planetary boundaries. Given that economic decoupling and climate adaptation are progressing at a faster rate in prosperous regions, cohesion policy funds must accelerate the transformation in territories where they represent the principle source of public investment.

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<sup>5</sup> Maximilian Kotz, Anders Levermann, Leonie Wenz, [The economic commitment of climate change](#), *Nature*, 551–557, 17 April 2024.

<sup>6</sup> Byford Tsang, Juan Pablo Osorio, [Autocracy vs. Democracy: Climate Edition](#), *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 19 March 2024.

<sup>7</sup> European Commission, [Forging a sustainable future together – Cohesion for a competitive and inclusive Europe – Report of the High-Level Group on the Future of Cohesion Policy](#), *European Commission*, accessed 26 June 2024.

<sup>8</sup> European Commission, [Ninth Report on Economic, Social and Territorial Cohesion](#), *European Commission*, accessed 26 June 2024.

<sup>9</sup> CEE Bankwatch Network, [EU funds guidebook](#), *CEE Bankwatch Network*, January 2024.

<sup>10</sup> Agnieszka Widuto, [The European Green Deal and cohesion policy](#), *European Parliamentary Research Service*, October 2021.

The cohesion policy must go beyond simply implementing the principle of ‘do no significant harm’ and become a major catalyst for mainstreaming transformative projects. However, transition and adaptation, both of which describe the dynamics of change, are not the only components of transformative projects.<sup>11</sup>

Truly transformative projects should create fundamentally new systems, not just adapt existing ones. Scholars and experts call for more analytical rigour in defining transformation, which has become a byword for ‘business as usual’.<sup>12</sup> For example, a decarbonisation project reliant on the same patterns of growth in GDP and the same extractivist and consumption models cannot be considered transformative. This ‘false’ transformation also tends to overly focus on technological fixes that maintain the status quo.

In contrast, the thinking behind transformative finance embraces technological and social innovations while disrupting the paradigm of neoclassical economics, which emphasises the growth of free markets. Transformative finance pushes the boundaries set by the frameworks of environmental, social, and governance (ESG) and impact finance. It seeks radical systemic change as opposed to solely focusing on evaluating impact based on benchmark data or the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Whereas SDG finance is still dominated by financial criteria, and impact finance balances financial gain with social and environmental impact, transformative finance fundamentally prioritises non-financial returns like social well-being, environmental health, and shared prosperity.

Therefore, the transformation is geared towards changing mindsets and behaviours, extending beyond the restorative and regenerative impacts to focus on the future. In opposition to the financialisation of housing and nature, transformative finance seeks to reduce the outsized influence of finance in modern economies.

Climate inaction is a double-edged sword that leads to financial loss and discontent, in turn causing reactive budgeting and untransparent decision-making. This vicious cycle ultimately compromises transformative investments. Cohesion policy funds should not serve as a safety net for the brown economy. Instead, they should act as a catalyst for developing one that is future-proof, a critical safeguard for regions left behind.

So, why are so many brown economy projects still clogging up the pipeline? Well, it can be partly attributed to outdated technical criteria predating the European Green Deal, which is indirectly reflected in the number of resubmitted projects. Additionally, climate adaptation and mitigation projects, particularly those that are transformative, require expertise across multiple disciplines, such as engineering, behavioural studies, system dynamics, financial instruments and optimisation, user experience, emotional and collective intelligence, procurement, and competition.

However, places of opportunity such as big cities, universities, and large companies typically attract all the talent from these less developed regions; the main recipients of cohesion policy funds. This creates a no-win situation, where the depletion of local resources further contributes to growing discontent in these neglected areas.

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<sup>11</sup> Laura Mai, [Navigating transformations: Climate change and international law](#), *Leiden Journal of International Law*, 25 March 2024.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

## Why are monitoring committees so crucial?

A monitoring committee is a body that oversees the implementation of a programme; in this context, one that uses cohesion policy funding. This committee usually consists of representatives of Member State managing authorities, regional and local bodies, economic and social partners, and relevant civil society organisations.

The European code of conduct on partnership defines partnership as ‘close cooperation between public authorities, economic and social partners and bodies representing civil society at national, regional and local levels throughout the whole programme cycle consisting of preparation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation’.<sup>13</sup>

The code also emphasises the importance of including environmental civil society organisations and the representatives of vulnerable groups with limited access to decision-making. These include environmental partners, community-based organisations, and volunteer groups that have the potential to significantly influence or be significantly affected by the implementation of partnership agreements and their programmes.

Specific attention should be paid to including groups that have little say in influencing programmes likely to affect them, particularly the most vulnerable and marginalised communities at highest risk of discrimination or social exclusion such as persons with disabilities, migrants, and Roma people.

Monitoring committees are primarily tasked with assessing the effectiveness and quality of programmes, approving evaluation criteria, reviewing programmes and progress, and proposing revisions and changes. However, many of these committees fall short when it comes to inclusiveness and collaboration.

Programmes and funding schemes designed in isolation, without involving potential beneficiaries, civil society representatives, and citizens, also have low impact. As a result, the level of absorption and quality suffers. Additionally, public discontent increases because citizens and small businesses are not meaningfully engaged.

Monitoring committees play a critical role in addressing these issues. However, dysfunctional committees can prove costly, particularly when members lack the necessary expertise to provide effective oversight. Poorly applied criteria can also reduce the quality of a project or make it ineligible. Finally, if monitoring is treated as a mere formality, problems that go unnoticed can multiply in severity over the long term.

On the other hand, the understated benefits of well-functioning committees can unlock significant strategic gains. Monitoring committees that meaningfully involve relevant civil society organisations build public trust and rally citizen support. They also serve as a financial safeguard, effectively pre-screening ineligible projects that might otherwise cost millions. Additionally, committees that actively engage civil society can tap into a wealth of knowledge and experience, which managing authorities can harness to enhance programme design.

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<sup>13</sup> European Commission, [Commission Delegated Regulation \(EU\) No 240/2014 of 7 January 2014 on the European code of conduct on partnership in the framework of the European Structural and Investment Funds](#), European Commission, 1, 7 January 2014.

Monitoring committees represented by diverse sections of civil society are also more likely to engage in open and constructive debate during meetings and gatherings of subcommittees. This inherent focus on collaboration places them in a more advantageous position to apply the concepts of the European Green Deal, including the principle of ‘do no significant harm’ and other criteria.

Civil society has the potential to play a far more strategic role in monitoring committees, especially when invited to intervene in the early stages of programme design. With their unique perspectives and insights, these organisations are incredibly useful and reliable partners for advancing the transformative agenda.

Encouragingly, some managing authorities recognise the monitoring committee as a valuable tool for ensuring transparency and partnership, which helps to increase understanding around programme decisions and involve society in the use of funding.<sup>14</sup>

There are examples of managing authorities publicly disclosing the provision of technical assistance to monitoring committees on their programme websites. Others describe in detail the evaluation and approval processes in place, ensuring clear and transparent rules of procedure.<sup>15</sup>

The following section explores a wide range of functional and successful partnerships between civil society organisations and managing authorities, illustrating a commitment to transparency and collaboration in action.

## Examples of good practice

The following examples of monitoring committees in central and eastern Europe highlight diverse levels of involvement, success, and partnership. Despite not representing the totality of practices in central and eastern Europe, they do capture some of the most significant developments in the monitoring committees sphere. They also demonstrate how civil society organisations are finding resourceful ways to finance their activities and make impactful changes.

As these success stories show, monitoring committees are a cost-effective way of bringing about positive change. From a systemic perspective, it is crucial that monitoring committees embrace effective, professional, and innovative approaches, especially in the context of tackling the pressing challenges of climate and societal inequality. In particular, the climate emergency demands rapid decisions, collaborative solutions, and well-communicated, equitable measures that have public backing.

### Poland

Monitoring committees in Poland have demonstrated their ability to tackle complex issues and come up with impactful solutions. As part of their monitoring committee work, Polish Green Network (PGN) recently established the first working group on the principle of ‘do no significant harm’. The group, chaired by PGN, aims to promote the adoption of this horizontal principle by collecting and discussing good and bad practices, drafting ministerial guidelines, and organising workshops for implementing institutions.

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<sup>14</sup> Freie Hansestadt Bremen, [Monitoring Committee](#), *EFRE Bremen*, accessed 26 June 2024.

<sup>15</sup> Southern Regional Assembly, [Southern, Eastern, & Midland Regional Programme 2021-2027: Rules of Procedure of the Monitoring Committee](#), *Department of Public Expenditure and Reform of Ireland*, 24 January 2023.

PGN recently scored another substantial win by preventing a potentially harmful river regulation project worth approximately EUR 170 million. They successfully argued their case to the managing authority that the project violated the European code of conduct on partnership and the EU Water Framework Directive.<sup>16</sup> Thanks to their efforts, and following confirmation by the European Commission of its ineligibility for funding, a vote on the project was withdrawn by the monitoring committee.

In another successful intervention, PGN convinced Poland's Ministry of Development Funds and Regional Policy to extend technical assistance to partners operating in fields outside public administration, including civil society. Previously, the only costs that monitoring committee participants could be reimbursed for were travel and accommodation. Now, civil society organisations are eligible for a grant up to EUR 15 000 a year, helping them cover the costs of meeting with experts and carrying out external research.

The participation of Polish civil society organisations such as PNG demonstrably improves project quality. Monitoring committees comprising relevant members of civil society lead to enhanced project criteria that better reflect the needs of potential beneficiaries.

Inclusive monitoring committees can also significantly reduce administrative burdens. For instance, PGN identified the inclusion of non-compliant waste incinerators in the draft of one operational programme, saving valuable time and resources. Demonstrating the scale of the challenge, the scheme, although eventually removed, was subsequently proposed as an investment in a different programme financed by the EU's Modernisation Fund, which has no public oversight.

This is a prime example of how a functional and effective committee has the capacity to facilitate faster policy screenings, minimise the cost of inaction, and remove problematic investments that delay the implementation of transformative projects.

Technical assistance has played a crucial role in strengthening capacity among Polish partners. PGN, for instance, received a technical assistance grant to conduct capacity-building activities, such as identifying recommendations for improving funding opportunities to empower civil society organisations.

Sharing templates of solutions, such as technical assistance grants for committee members, can be a valuable resource for monitoring committees in other countries. Going forward, best practices exchanged during the meetings of the European Community of Practice on Partnership – a forum for those involved in implementing cohesion policy funds – should be used to inform revisions of the European code of conduct on partnership and improve standards among partners and stakeholders.<sup>17</sup>

## Hungary

A positive example from Hungary is the training provided to non-governmental members of various monitoring committees. Civil society organisations involved in the monitoring committees overseeing Hungary's operational programmes were offered a series of trainings. These sessions provided an overview

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<sup>16</sup> DIRECTIVE 2000/60/EC.

<sup>17</sup> European Commission, [European Community of Practice on Partnership](#), *European Commission*, accessed 26 June 2024.

of the cohesion policy, rules, and institutional structures, including the specifics of the operational programmes.

In addition, non-governmental members of monitoring committees now qualify for remuneration, which is a positive step towards professionalising their work. Under this initiative, delegates of non-governmental organisations with voting rights are entitled to receive remuneration for participating in monitoring committee meetings and for the work involved in preparing for these meetings.

The remuneration for in-person meetings is one-fifth of the average monthly salary of full-time employees with higher education qualifications. For written decision-making procedures, the amount is one quarter of that offered for in-person meetings.

The National Society of Conservationists – Friends of the Earth Hungary, along with other non-governmental organisations, successfully advocated for the establishment of a cross-cutting subcommittee to oversee Hungary’s energy operational programmes. Supported by the European Commission and Hungary’s managing authorities, the subcommittee began its work in October 2023.

At their four meetings held to date, the subcommittee has played a key role in discussing and providing feedback on energy-related draft calls for proposals. Their work involves evaluating selection criteria, the eligibility of beneficiaries and activities, and financial instruments.

The subcommittee also works to ensure that the different energy-related programmes synergise and cohere, and that there is clarity on the funding allocations and demarcations between EU funding streams. Finally, by offering feedback on implementation, the subcommittee helps to identify and incorporate best practices into planning, implementation, and evaluation processes.

Due to the efforts of the energy subcommittee, several draft calls for proposals have improved significantly, with some concepts sent back for further revisions. To ensure non-profit organisations are able to work effectively within the subcommittee, the National Society of Conservationists and other groups have proposed several improvements to the subcommittee’s terms of reference and operating rules.

In addition to the positive impacts in Hungary, the formation of the subcommittee has also set an inspiring example for organisations further afield. During a training event organised by the Latvian non-governmental organisation Green Liberty, representatives from Hungary shared their experiences with non-governmental organisations active in monitoring committees in Latvia. This peer-to-peer learning exercise, aimed at strengthening capacity between partners, serves as a model for future collaboration.

## Slovakia

While the concept of public participation is a relatively new phenomenon in post-socialist countries, Slovakia is making strides in consolidating its approach. The Office of the Plenipotentiary of the Government for the Development of Civil Society has been instrumental in encouraging greater participation, recognising its potential to unlock expert knowledge and the unique perspectives of local stakeholders. In particular, the office has advocated heavily for a more participatory approach to preparing calls for proposals.



In tandem, the role of civil society in monitoring committees has become increasingly important. Slovakia's state administration, which typically lacks expert capacity, has come to view regional stakeholders and civil society as useful partners for implementing policy decisions.

For many years, experts from civil society were not recognised or compensated for their active involvement in the programming and monitoring of EU funds. Since 2017, coordination capacity has increased thanks to the establishment of various partnership projects throughout Slovakia, which support official engagements with the country's state authorities. These activities include participatory monitoring, working groups, research, and surveys aimed at improving calls for proposals, rules and criteria, and the nomination mechanism of civil society representatives within the EU funds system.

## Czech Republic

The Czech Republic offers a prime example of successful public participation. One non-governmental organisation was awarded a grant to create a talent pool and networking instrument to facilitate the selection and appointment of civil society representatives to monitoring committees.

Government ministries can now seek out qualified candidates for relevant platforms or monitoring committees through public tenders published on the website of the governmental office responsible for civil society relations. The facility works as a two-way channel, fulfilling the technical needs of governing bodies by ensuring a pool of qualified candidates for monitoring committees and serving as a support facility for civil society organisations, helping them secure financial support to participate in these committees.

The facility also allocates resources for contracting specialists and experts that are not readily available within the talent pool of participating civil society organisations.

## Estonia

A positive development from Estonia is the approval of a roadmap focusing on empowering partners involved in cohesion policy funds for the 2021–2027 period. The roadmap highlights the important role of technical assistance in financing capacity-building initiatives related to implementation.

The roadmap also aims to improve the participation of social partners in the design of different policies, fostering a more collaborative approach. Additionally, it supports initiatives like an equality competence centre, which functions as a consulting and training unit dedicated to promoting gender equality and fair treatment across different sectors.

Finally, the Estonian government has made a significant commitment to secure technical assistance resources aimed at strengthening the analytical capacity and engagement of social partners and civil society organisations.

## Latvia

In Latvia, technical assistance is being used to support a series of capacity-building seminars for civil society organisations. The initiative aims to equip these groups with the knowledge and skills needed to effectively participate in monitoring committees.

An important aspect of the programme is its focus on topics and development areas suggested by the civil society organisations themselves. This ensures that the seminars address the most pressing needs and challenges faced by Latvian society, maximising the impact of the programme.

## Conclusions

This briefing sheds light on the role of monitoring committees within the EU and the specific procedures involving committees of representatives that enable Member States to take part in shaping implementing acts.

Monitoring committees have traditionally been viewed as purely formal bodies of ambiguous mission and purpose. However, in recent years, many civil society organisations, embodying the European code of conduct on partnership, have invested significant time and expertise in redefining the objectives of these committees. They remain committed to ensuring that these precious yet limited resources are leveraged to deliver more cohesion and impact across the EU.

Yet, despite the significant progress made to date, challenges remain. Regrettably, the minutes of various monitoring committee meetings reveal numerous instances of stakeholders with secondary roles exercising too much power, bogging down proceedings in technicalities to the detriment of the involvement of civil society organisations. Thankfully, a critical mass determined to overhaul this imbalance in representation is now underway.

### Monitoring committees enable more robust projects

Cohesion policy funds have proven to be an invaluable testing ground for multilevel governance and cross-sectoral collaboration. EU reforms implemented throughout the years have progressively introduced more stakeholders, expanded the participation of authorities from the subnational to regional and local levels, and, perhaps most importantly, explicitly recognised the importance of involving civil society organisations.<sup>18</sup>

Initially, including more partners in monitoring committees was primarily aimed at creating a feedback loop to ensure projects better aligned with real-world needs, providing a reality check for managing authorities and increasing the eligibility of projects.

To an extent, this focus on broader cooperation has served its purpose. Indeed, some argue this movement is informed by a strategic motivation intended to counterbalance the tendencies of Member States to exert greater centralised control over cohesion policy spending.<sup>19</sup>

We are now witnessing a positive shift in which monitoring committees are not only providing oversight and social input, but also ensuring more stringent programming criteria and the favouring of future-ready projects.

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<sup>18</sup> Agnes Batory, Andrew Cartwright, [Re-visiting the Partnership Principle in Cohesion Policy: The Role of Civil Society Organizations in Structural Funds Monitoring](#), *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 698, July 2011.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 701.

With a focus on agility, these committees are bringing about a conceptual paradigm shift in the approach to project selection, notably through their commitment to prioritising the principle of ‘do no significant harm’.

### Broader engagement is the path forward

Regardless of the future direction of the cohesion policy, achieving climate targets on time requires broader and deeper engagement. All levels of government will need to leverage every ounce of expertise to adapt to global challenges, principally the climate emergency.

Organisations that adopt the principles of partnership and build capacity at an early stage through technical assistance will be ideally positioned to increase local capacity and understand and participate in state reforms and policymaking.

Additionally, regions that already have a mature and well-developed civil society organisation ecosystem in place will be better equipped to cope with the potential complexities of future national reforms supported by cohesion policy funds.

The participation of civil society in monitoring committees also provides benefits beyond formal monitoring. They play an active role in identifying and preventing harmful projects, coordinating capacity-building efforts, refining selection criteria to enhance project quality, supporting other non-governmental organisations, and improving processes and system knowledge.

Lastly, on a practical level, collaboration within the European Community of Practice on Partnership creates a space for mutual learning among members of various task forces.

Irrespective of how public oversight evolves, the key takeaway from this briefing is that civil society organisations are essential components of monitoring committees. They can lead the way towards more transformative projects that reduce the costs of consensus and encourage a strategic vision that embraces future change.

### Recommendations for enhanced public participation

1. Managing authorities should clearly communicate the mandate of the monitoring committee. The term ‘monitoring’ can be misleading and may narrow the perceived scope and purpose of the committee.
2. More training through technical assistance should be provided to newly appointed monitoring committee members, particularly in the areas of fund architecture, intervention logic, and policy objectives. Cross-operational programme trainings would be particularly beneficial.
3. Technical assistance for enhanced networking with partners from other EU countries has the ability to unlock untapped potential for improved monitoring and comitology.
4. Technical assistance should prioritise the involvement of civil society organisations in the preparation of partnership agreements and operational programmes.

5. Monitoring committees should utilise effective communication and talent screening to attract representative, agile, and competent members of civil society to their ranks.
6. Monitoring committees should improve public relations, the transparency of their work, and the impacts of their decisions.
7. Monitoring committees should leverage technical assistance to mount capacity-building initiatives such as professional onboarding procedures, coaching opportunities, and peer learning.
8. Monitoring committees should increase their visibility, proactively interact with citizens' assemblies, and embrace innovative methods of engaging with the wider public.



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