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P8_TA(2017)0223

Future perspectives for technical assistance in Cohesion Policy**European Parliament resolution of 18 May 2017 on future perspectives for Technical Assistance in Cohesion Policy (2016/2303(INI))**

(2018/C 307/15)

The European Parliament,

- having regard to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union and in particular Title XVIII thereof,
- having regard to Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 laying down common provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund, the Cohesion Fund, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund and laying down general provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund, the Cohesion Fund and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund and repealing Council Regulation (EC) No 1083/2006 ⁽¹⁾ (hereinafter ‘the CPR’),
- having regard to Regulation (EU) No 1299/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 on specific provisions for the support from the European Regional Development Fund to the European territorial cooperation goal ⁽²⁾,
- having regard to Regulation (EU) No 1300/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 on the Cohesion Fund and repealing Council Regulation (EC) No 1084/2006 ⁽³⁾,
- having regard to Regulation (EU) No 1301/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 on the European Regional Development Fund and on specific provisions concerning the Investment for Growth and Jobs goal and repealing Regulation (EC) No 1080/2006 ⁽⁴⁾,
- having regard to Regulation (EU) No 1304/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 on the European Social Fund and repealing Council Regulation (EC) No 1081/2006 ⁽⁵⁾,
- having regard to 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 ⁽⁶⁾,
- having regard to the proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of the Structural Reform Support Programme for the period 2017 to 2020 and amending Regulations (EU) No 1303/2013 and (EU) No 1305/2013 (COM(2015)0701),
- having regard to its resolution of 16 February 2017 on investing in jobs and growth — maximising the contribution of European Structural and Investment Funds: an evaluation of the report under Article 16(3) of the CPR ⁽⁷⁾,
- having regard to its resolution of 9 September 2015 on ‘Investment for jobs and growth: promoting economic, social and territorial cohesion in the Union’ ⁽⁸⁾,

⁽¹⁾ OJ L 347, 20.12.2013, p. 320.⁽²⁾ OJ L 347, 20.12.2013, p. 259.⁽³⁾ OJ L 347, 20.12.2013, p. 281.⁽⁴⁾ OJ L 347, 20.12.2013, p. 289.⁽⁵⁾ OJ L 347, 20.12.2013, p. 470.⁽⁶⁾ OJ L 74, 14.3.2014, p. 1.⁽⁷⁾ Texts adopted, P8_TA(2017)0053.⁽⁸⁾ Texts adopted, P8_TA(2015)0308.

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- having regard to its resolution of 10 May 2016 on new territorial development tools in cohesion policy 2014-2020: Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI) and Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) ⁽¹⁾,
 - having regard to the special report of the Court of Auditors of 16 February 2016 entitled 'More attention to results needed to improve the delivery of technical assistance to Greece',
 - having regard to the in-depth analysis entitled 'Technical assistance at the initiative of the Commission' published by its Directorate-General for Internal Policies (Department B: Structural and Cohesion Policies) in September 2016,
 - having regard to the letter from the Committee on Budgets,
 - having regard to Rule 52 of its Rules of Procedure,
 - having regard to the report of the Committee on Regional Development (A8-0180/2017),
- A. whereas technical assistance, whether at the initiative of the Commission or of the Member States, plays an important role in all phases of implementation of cohesion policy and is an important instrument for attracting and retaining high-quality employees in administration, creating a stable system for the management and use of the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESI Funds), and resolving bottlenecks in implementation and in assisting users to develop quality projects; whereas options for use of technical assistance in the preparation phase of programmes should be explored;
- B. whereas local, regional and national authorities often lack the necessary capacity to efficiently and effectively implement the ESI Funds and organise a partnership with other public authorities including urban authorities, economic and social partners and civil society representatives in accordance with Article 5 of the CPR; whereas administrative capacity varies greatly across Member States and regions;
- C. whereas partners involved in the preparation and implementation of cohesion policy should also be targeted by technical assistance measures, in particular in the field of capacity building, networking and communicating on cohesion policy;
- D. whereas the national, local and regional authorities have difficulties in retaining qualified personnel, who tend to leave for better-paid jobs in the private sector or for more lucrative posts within the national authorities; whereas this is an important hindrance for the capacity of the public authorities to successfully implement the ESI Funds and to achieve the goals of cohesion;
- E. whereas there is space for improving the monitoring and evaluation of technical assistance despite the emphasis on more result orientation in the 2014-2020 programming period and the fact that almost half of this period has elapsed;
- F. whereas there is a need to optimise the link between technical assistance on the Commission's initiative and technical assistance measures carried out at national and regional level;

Technical assistance at the initiative of the Commission (Article 58 of the CPR)

1. Notes that the resources available for technical assistance at the initiative of the Commission were increased by comparison with the previous programming period, to 0,35 % of the annual allocation of the ERDF, ESF and CF, after deductions for the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) and the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD);
2. Welcomes the Commission's activities funded by technical assistance, in particular its work on the TAIEX REGIO PEER 2 PEER instrument, the Competency Framework and Self-Assessment Tool, the Integrity Pacts, the Guide for practitioners on how to avoid the 25 most common errors on public procurement and the Study on stocktaking administrative capacity on public procurement in all Member States; calls on the Member States to make use of such initiatives; stresses that such instruments should have a greater role in the post-2020 cohesion policy and accordingly urges the Commission to raise awareness at local and regional level, including at island level, regarding their use; recommends

⁽¹⁾ Texts adopted, P8_TA(2016)0211.

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that the scope of the TAIEX REGIO PEER 2 PEER instrument be extended to all partners in accordance with Article 5 of the CPR in order to ensure the broad exchange of experience, to contribute to capacity building, and to facilitate capitalising on good practices;

3. Considers it necessary that the Commission initiate an assessment on the effectiveness and added value of the implementation of the 'Integrity Pacts — Civil Control Mechanism for Safeguarding EU Funds';

4. Notes the work of the Task Force for Greece and the Support Group for Cyprus on the implementation of the ESI Funds in those two countries, and in particular on absorption rates, while bearing in mind that this is only one of the indicators for a positive assessment of cohesion policy; notes, however, that according to the European Court of Auditors' special report entitled 'More attention to results needed to improve the delivery of technical assistance to Greece', there have been mixed results in achieving effective and sustainable reform; calls therefore on the Commission to report on results achieved by the Structural Reform Support Service's operations in Greece; stresses the need to continue and improve the work of the Task Force for Better Implementation, based on the experiences of the 2007-2013 programming period, in order to support other Member States which are experiencing difficulties in implementing cohesion policy;

5. Takes note of the establishment of the Structural Reform Support Programme (SRSP), and recognises a number of potential benefits for cohesion policy, as well as for other areas; calls for it to be made coherent and consistent with the country-specific recommendations in the area of cohesion policy; considers, however, that any possible prolongation of the programme should not detract from cohesion policy thematic objectives and that resources should not be taken away from ESI Funds technical assistance; calls on the Commission, in cooperation with the Member States, to ensure maximum coordination and complementarities between the actions financed by the SRSP and the technical assistance provided under the ESI Funds so as to concentrate its efforts on achieving cohesion policy objectives as effectively as possible;

6. Takes note of the technical assistance strategy prepared by the Commission's DG for Regional and Urban Policy; suggests the development of a broader technical assistance strategy to ensure more effective coordination covering all DGs that deal with the ESI Funds, as well as the activities of the Structural Reform Support Service related to cohesion policy, in order to streamline the support provided, avoid duplication and maximise synergies and complementarities;

7. Highlights the importance of technical assistance in the domain of financial instruments, the use of which is exponentially increasing while they are rather complex by their nature; welcomes, in this respect, the partnership between the Commission and the European Investment Bank on the establishment of the fi-compass platform; calls on the Commission to better streamline the technical assistance in order to cover areas where managing authorities and beneficiaries encounter most challenges; welcomes the technical enhancements of the European Investment Advisory Hub for the combination of ESI Funds with the European Fund for Strategic Investments (EFSI); stresses, however, that a sign of greater capacity and simplification in this specific area should ultimately be less need for technical assistance in the domain of financial instruments; stresses, furthermore, the need for complementarity with technical assistance measures carried out downstream at national and regional level;

8. Welcomes the support provided to Member States under the Joint Assistance to Support Projects in European Regions (JASPERS) technical assistance facility, which provides expertise to Member States to help them prepare major projects cofinanced by the ERDF and CF; is looking forward to the special report of the European Court of Auditors foreseen for 2017, which will aim to check whether JASPERS has improved the development of assisted major projects cofinanced by the EU and thus contributed to higher project quality as well as to increasing Member States' administrative capacity; stresses in this regard the need for a careful analysis of how JASPERS activity for the period 2007-2013 providing independent quality review (IQR) has improved project quality and cut the time taken for approval of major projects by the Commission;

9. Notes that since technical assistance was first used in the area of cohesion policy no global analysis has been carried out to establish the actual contribution it makes; points out that it is therefore difficult to make a detailed assessment of how important it is and of the contribution it makes in terms of administrative capacity-building and institutional strengthening with a view to ensuring that ESI Funds are managed in an effective way; calls, therefore, for an increase in

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information and transparency with regard to technical assistance activities, for Parliament to play a more significant role in monitoring and follow-up, and for a thoroughgoing, comprehensive study to be carried out on its contribution to the area of cohesion policy;

10. Recalls the importance of adequate and targeted indicators fit for measuring the results and impacts of ESI Funds spending and the availability of technical assistance for respective monitoring; considers that the introduction of common indicators was a first step in this direction, but was accompanied by a number of deficiencies, such as the excessive focus on output, the lack of a long-term perspective, and the mismatch of tailor-made information needs; calls urgently on the Commission to invest in improving the reporting and evaluation system by developing more appropriate indicators ready for use in the next programming period;

11. Calls on the Commission to prepare measures and resources to set up technical assistance for the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies, having taken into account the varied experiences and rates of success of implementing such strategies, as well as the fact that the strategies' participants include non-Member States and countries with limited funds and insufficient human resources; considers that this would be more effective in helping to prepare major projects at the macro-regional level that could receive funding under cohesion policy;

12. Stresses the importance of implementing specific technical assistance measures to promote re-industrialisation in depressed areas so as to attract industrial investments in high-tech and innovative sectors with a low environmental impact;

13. Calls on the Commission to establish technical assistance, namely Member States Working Groups, in order to prevent delays in developing the bodies and operational programmes that will be needed under cohesion policy in the Member States after 2020;

Technical assistance at the initiative of the Member States (Article 59 of the CPR)

14. Stresses that the available EU cofinancing for technical assistance at the disposal of the Member States under the five ESI Funds in the 2014-2020 programming period amounts to around EUR 13,4 billion;

15. Emphasises that technical assistance is in essence different from other actions financed by the ESI Funds and that it is a particularly difficult and complicated task to measure its results; considers, however, that, given its necessity, the level of resources available under it and its potential, there is a strong need for an approach that is strategic, transparent, coordinated at the various levels of governance and for flexibility to meet needs identified by managing authorities in the Member States;

16. Highlights that the 2019 performance review will shed light on the results of the use of technical assistance in the 2014-2020 programming period and ensure that these do not come too late for the discussions on the post 2020-period; calls, therefore, for a wider debate and analysis at an intermediate stage on the efficiency and results of technical assistance;

17. Is concerned that in certain Member States technical assistance does not sufficiently and effectively reach the local and regional authorities, which usually have the lowest administrative capacity; highlights that it is crucial to establish sound and transparent communication channels between the different levels of governance in order to successfully implement the ESI Funds and achieve cohesion policy goals, while restoring trust in the effective functioning of the EU and its policies; considers that all partners in cohesion policy play an important role to this end and proposes that the Commission directly engage in the empowerment of partners in the next financial programming period; calls on the Member States to significantly step up their efforts to simplify the implementation of cohesion policy regulations, including in particular the technical assistance provisions; welcomes, therefore, the example of a multi-layered system of implementing cohesion policy in Poland (3 pillars of technical assistance) which enables a more result-oriented, coordinated strategic and transparent approach and generates greater added value; asks for stricter control of the results of the activities of private firms providing technical assistance to public administrations, in order to prevent potential conflicts of interests;

18. Stresses that technical assistance focused on developing human potential must be used in the service of needs that were previously identified in employee development plans and specialised staff training;

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19. Emphasises that the capacity of the lower levels of governance is also essential for the success of the new territorial development tools, such as Community-led Local Development (CLLD) and the Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI); calls for the continued decentralisation of the implementation of CLLD; notes that while it may be difficult to measure the effects of technical assistance, it is by no means impossible, particularly when looking at the benefit-cost ratio; emphasises that in some Member States technical assistance provided for the establishment of a complete system for the implementation of the ERDF and the establishment of a system for the implementation of ITIs is showing a negative benefit-cost ratio; notes, however, that high costs could partly be explained by specific circumstances requiring higher efforts, such as the setting-up of a new scheme; calls, accordingly, for clear control mechanisms to be put in place, in particular as regards non-transparent negotiations on technical assistance; recalls the important role of Local Action Groups, in particular for implementation of CLLD, and considers that technical assistance should be made available by Member States to support their valuable contribution to sustainable local development in the Union;

20. Draws attention to the need for technical assistance activities to include support for technically and economically feasible projects, enabling Member States to put forward strategies eligible for cohesion policy funding;

21. Notes with concern that in the implementation of integrated actions for sustainable urban development, while tasks are delegated to urban authorities which act as intermediate bodies, they often do not receive the necessary technical assistance for building up their capacity; considers in this context that technical assistance should be enhanced at the level of urban areas, taking into consideration the role played by urban authorities in cohesion policy and the need to create strong capacity for further implementation of the European Urban Agenda and the Pact of Amsterdam;

22. Notes that the 2014-2020 programming period provides for greater involvement of local authorities; stresses that this implies greater technical and administrative skills; asks the Commission to study initiatives and mechanisms enabling local operators to fully exploit the programming opportunities provided by ESI Fund regulations;

23. Draws attention to the European code of conduct on partnership, which defines the need to help the relevant partners strengthen their institutional capacity with a view to the preparation and implementation of programmes; stresses that many Member States are not applying the European code of conduct on partnership; considers, moreover, that the main principles and good practices enshrined in Article 5 of the aforementioned code of conduct and concerning the involvement of relevant partners in the preparation of the Partnership Agreement and programmes should actually be implemented, with particular focus on the issue of timely disclosure and easy access to relevant information; stresses the need for clear EU guidelines to increase consistency and eliminate regulatory uncertainty;

24. Highlights the need to entrust technical assistance, with funding, to qualified nationals able to provide ongoing support; stresses, however, that this funding should not under any circumstances act as a substitute for national financing in this area, and that there should be a gradual strategic shift towards activities which generate greater added value for cohesion policy in general, such as capacity-building, communication or experience-sharing;

25. Stresses the importance of including institutions that are not part of the management system but which have a direct impact on the implementation of cohesion policy; recalls that these institutions must be offered assistance to expand and improve their administrative capacities and standards through education, knowledge exchange, capacity-building, networking and establishing the IT systems that are needed to manage the projects; highlights that increased communication on and the visibility of the results and successes achieved with the support of ESI Funds can contribute to regaining citizens' confidence and trust in the European project; calls, therefore, for the creation of a separate envelope for communication within the technical assistance at the initiative of the Member State; calls on the Commission to promote the fungibility of technical assistance measures to allow for economies of scale to be made and for the financing of measures common to various ESI Funds;

26. Stresses that, to reduce excessive procedural complications, technical assistance in the future should be increasingly focused on the beneficiary/project level regardless of whether it relates to the public, private or civil society sector, in order to ensure the supply of innovative and well-designed projects fitting in with already existing strategies and avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach; calls on the Member States to develop mechanisms to involve ESI Funds beneficiaries in the

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implementation and monitoring of technical assistance; recommends that the Member States establish a network of info-points to enable potential beneficiaries to learn about available sources of funding, operational programmes and open calls, as well as to learn how to fill in application forms and implement projects;

27. Points out that technical assistance must be seen as a simple, flexible instrument that can be adjusted to suit changing circumstances; takes the view that technical assistance must contribute to the sustainability of projects, i.e. the amount of time they last, focusing on key areas of cohesion policy and favouring long-term outcomes, for example projects that create lasting employment; highlights, in that regard, that technical assistance may be used for testing innovative solutions pilot projects;

28. Calls for better reporting by Member States in the post-2020 programming period of the types of actions financed by technical assistance, as well as the results achieved; stresses that greater transparency is needed in order to increase the visibility of technical assistance and track how and where it is spent, with the aim of achieving better accountability, including a clear audit path; considers that regularly updated and publicly available databases of actions planned and undertaken by the Member States should be considered in this respect, drawing on the experience of the Commission's Open Data Portal for the ESI Funds;

29. Notes that, in the current programming period, Member States had a choice of including technical assistance as a priority axis within an operational programme or having a specific operational programme dedicated to technical assistance; calls on the Commission to analyse which option has achieved greater results and enabled better monitoring and evaluation, taking account of the different institutional set-ups of the Member States;

30. Calls for increased use of technical assistance in the area of European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) and related programmes, and especially in the field of cross-border cooperation, as those areas have their own specificities and require support in all phases of implementation, with a view to enhancing that cooperation and increasing the stability of the programmes concerned;

31. Asks the Commission to consider all these elements in the context of the preparation of the legislative proposals for post-2020 cohesion policy, i.e. experience from the current and previous programming period;

32. Calls on the Commission to implement an ex-post evaluation of both centrally managed technical assistance and technical assistance under shared management;

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33. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council and the Commission.
