European Commission

THE USE OF TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE FOR ADMINISTRATIVE CAPACITY BUILDING IN THE 2014-2020 PERIOD

Compendium of Practices

European Policies Research Centre

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE

This report is part of the Study on The Use of Technical Assistance for Administrative Capacity Building During the 2014-2020 Period (Contract No. 2017CE16BAT088). The Evaluation has been undertaken by the European Policies Research Centre (EPRC) University of Strathclyde (Glasgow, United Kingdom) and Technical University of Delft (Netherlands) in cooperation with Red2Red (Madrid), with a team of experts as follows:

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Disclaimer

1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this Compendium is to present a sample of practices identified in the context of the study on the use of Technical Assistance (TA) for administrative capacity (AC) building during the 2014-2020 period. For the study, National Experts undertook structured case study research to describe in detail how TA is used to develop administrative capacity. The aim was to identify examples of interesting practice of TA use by ESI Funds practitioners at the regional and national levels that can have a positive impact on AC, addressing different management and implementation challenges. The transferability of these practices to other contexts was also considered. Based on this research, fiches have been developed for dissemination among ESI Funds management practitioners and policy makers who are exploring ways to improve their use of TA to strengthen AC. The fiches are structured according to the following headings:

- **Summary box**, with the key components of the practice (issue addressed, type of administrative capacity and focus) and some basic facts.
- **Description of the practice**, including the main tools or measures, the participating actors, the key implementation steps involved etc.
- **Explanation of the rationale**, setting out the needs being addressed and the logic underlying the use of TA.
- **Assessment of the role of TA**, describing the form that TA support takes, the interrelation with other sources of funding etc..
- **Identification of specific elements of interest**, in particular innovative approaches and their beneficial effects.
- **Exploration of factors contributing to effectiveness**, establishing elements important or influential for the introduction, implementation and achievements of the practice.
- **Assessment of transferability**, looking at elements of the practice that facilitate or impede application to other ESIF-managing bodies, institutions, programmes, countries etc..

2. TA SUPPORTING PROJECT APPLICATION & IMPLEMENTATION IN BULGARIA

Key Components

ISSUE: Project application, implementation

AC: Structures

FOCUS: Beneficiaries

Basic Facts

MS: Bulgaria

FUND: ERDF

INSTITUTION: Regional Info Centres

2.1. WHAT IS THE PRACTICE ABOUT?

In Bulgaria, TA supports a network of 27 Regional Information Centres (RICs) to provide information, publicity and transparency on the implementation of ESI Funds and to raise awareness among beneficiaries and all stakeholders. RICs organise Information events for procedures under individual programmes, especially where competitive selection procedures are involved. Capacity building assistance is developed further through specific guidelines and training for beneficiaries, such as in submitting electronic applications, knowledge of financial instruments and, more broadly, the opportunities provided by EU funds to cover their needs and goals. The Centres also provide up-to-date information (including ad hoc advice, guidelines, dissemination of good practice etc.). The capacity-building activities of the RICs have changed over time moving beyond a focus on Structural and Cohesion Funds of a 'one stop shop' in RICs covering all EU funds. TA also supports internal capacity-building for staff involved in operating the Centres. This meets the need to build and maintain competences in dealing with specific features of the Cohesion Policy management and implementation system.

2.2. WHAT IS THE RATIONALE?

Bulgaria has relatively limited experience of Cohesion Policy implementation and it is necessary to continually develop the capacity of potential beneficiaries to prepare quality project proposals. Analyses indicate that this capacity is unevenly distributed across Bulgarian territory. In this context, it is crucial that beneficiaries are informed in a timely and comprehensive manner about the funding opportunities provided by ESIF programmes and that they have the capacity to develop projects that fit with the objectives supported by the programmes.

Moreover, the implementation of ESIF programmes has revealed significant differences in the absorption capacity in individual municipalities, districts and regions, related not only to the lack of adequate information and communication about ESIF but also to lack of skills, experience and capacities. Therefore, tailoring the provision of publicity, information and project support measures to the specific needs of territories is important.

2.3. HOW IS TA FUNDING USED?

TA funding has been used to finance the functioning and activities of RICs network. RICs receive support through different operations in Priority 4 "Technical Assistance for the Management of ESIF" of the OP 'Good Governance'. Three-year financial plans support the functioning of the RICs. The first financial plan was executed between December 2015 and December 2018, the second plan is for the period 2019-2021. Eligible funding activities include: ensuring the functioning of the RIC; production and distribution of information materials; and, organising, conducting and participating in public information events and working with the media. The total value of the investment in the first programming period (2007-2013) in the 27 municipalities was nearly EUR 6 million, with more than 80 new jobs being created. In the current period, the value of the investment for each of the three-year financial plans is EUR 5.2 million.

2.4. WHAT ARE THE KEY BENEFITS?

- **Building important capacities of beneficiaries and potential beneficiaries**. The work of the RICs helps address capacity gaps regarding various aspects of ESIF implementation, mobilising beneficiaries through information events, training in the preparation and management of projects, and discussion of good practices from implemented projects in the RIC area.

- **Network-based approach to capacity building.** Sharing good practice across the network an essential component of RIC support. The network approach means that common challenges, effective solutions and innovative approaches to supporting beneficiaries can be identified and shared across RICs.

- **Tailoring support to respond to local needs.** The RICs, as locally-based information and contact points for the implementation of ESIF, contribute to a stronger territorial dimension in the governance of broader development policy. This ensures that the support is more accessible to beneficiaries and more responsive to specific needs (e.g. targeting specific beneficiary groups or particular training needs). This is an example of the use of TA resources for administrative capacity-building across different territorial contexts, tailoring support to varied capacity issues across Bulgarian regions.

- **Building local 'ownership'.** By attracting a wide range of different interests 'on the ground', the RICs help to raise awareness and stakeholder participation in local communities.

2.5. WHAT ARE THE KEY FACTORS FOR SUCCESS?

- **Strong links between the RICs and the Central Coordination Unit (CCU) in Sofia.** The CCU monitors the effective functioning of the RICs network and systematically directs their activities, improves the competence of information centre staff by organising ongoing training, and initiates and coordinates the carrying out of common information campaigns in the network. Good practice examples and solutions to different issues and problems from different territorial contexts etc. can be disseminated by CCU throughout the network.

- **Good cooperation with the MA and IBs** of the ESIF programmes and improvement of the coordination of information activities between MA and RICs. According to RIC staff, close cooperation is vital in a network-type structure and provides the effective capacity-building with up-to-date, accurate and complete information. This includes the development of RIC staff through work placements with MAs, deepening their knowledge of specific ESIF issues and local needs.

- **Close working relationships with local authorities** is vital in order to build capacity 'on the ground', gaining knowledge of specific needs in different territories. This includes through direct cooperation with the local authority where the RIC is located.

- **Continuous training, specialisation and deepening of the knowledge and understanding of RIC staff** in regard to the ESIF programmes is vital. This includes the implementation of innovative forms of training and the creation of sustainable cooperation with the various operational programmes. For instance, RICs see the benefit of their representatives participating in OP monitoring committees as this strengthens staff knowledge and experience but also provide an efficient communication mechanism to disseminate urgent information on new decisions or protocols rapidly through the network.

2.6. WHO CAN BENEFIT FROM THE TRANSFER OF THIS PRACTICE?

This approach would be beneficial to ESIF programme authorities and potential beneficiaries where there is a clear need to build experience and capacity to develop and implement ESIF operations, particularly where such capacities are territorially differentiated.

3. TA STRENGTHENING EVALUATION CULTURE IN CZECHIA

Key Components

ISSUE: Evaluation

AC: Systems & Tools

FOCUS: Programme authorities

Basic Facts

MS: Czechia

FUND: CF

INSTITUTION: National Coordination Authority

3.1. WHAT IS THE PRACTICE ABOUT?

In Czechia, TA is supporting the shift towards a more coherent ESIF evaluation system, utilising a series of initiatives to strengthen capacity and to promote a stronger evaluation culture. For 2014-2020, as an initiating measure, TA supported the re-establishing and reinforcing of the Evaluation Unit at the National Coordination Authority (EU NCA), at the Ministry of Regional Development ensuring it was adequately staffed, led by experienced evaluation managers and evaluation capacities were systematically built. Subsequently, concrete measures have been developed by the support of the Evaluation Unit. These include:

- **Measures related to organisational and staffing arrangements.** Salaries of employees at EU NCA are made competitive in the labour market to attract high-quality staff into the public sector; funding for externally realised evaluations is available; coordinating actions encompassing evaluation staff in all MAs are pursued, ensuring communication and coordinating platforms, working groups, meetings for sharing practices; participation of EU NCA at meetings with the EC is funded.

- **Systems and tools.** This includes the development and operation of Central Monitoring System (CMS) 2014+ and a special module for evaluations; the introduction of a new approach for tendering of external evaluations, so called "dynamic purchase system"; the use of multiple methodologies and procedures (e.g. for OPs managing authorities binding Guidance for evaluations in 2014-2020 period).

- **Human Resource Development.** Education and training for employees of EU NCA and evaluation units at MAs is provided, including through work experience abroad; educational workshops are held on concrete topics for evaluation units of MAs (e.g. on preparation of evaluation plans, definition of evaluation questions etc.); there are measures to boost exchange of experience and sharing knowledge (e.g. through an annual international evaluation conference, membership costs for participation in networks for sharing experience – e.g. in the Czech Evaluation Society and the IQ-Net, making evaluation outputs more accessible through compulsory storing of final reports and executive summaries in Czech and in English in the CMS 2014+ and in an online library).

3.2. WHAT IS THE RATIONALE?

Despite progress in 2007-2013, there were still substantial gaps in Cohesion Policy evaluation capacity and the overall strategic approach to the management of public policies and programmes in Czechia at the outset of the 2014-2020 period. Outside of the EU funding system and foreign development cooperation, an evaluation culture was practically non-existent. Both the quantity and quality of evaluations were limited, with a focus on process issues rather than Cohesion Policy results or impacts. This diminished the role of evaluation as a management and learning tool. Key issues were the limited availability of skilled human resources and the uneven quality of data from public administrations. To address these issues, increased focus on capacity building in evaluation was proposed for the Operational Programme Technical Assistance (OPTA). This covered evaluation units in managing authorities of OPs but also the capacity of the broader evaluation culture and included an increased emphasis on education, sharing of knowledge of practices and exchange of experience within the community of policymakers, academics, evaluation consultants and other stakeholders. A clearer definition of binding rules in guidance for the evaluation was also prioritised and a more systematic approach to the assessment of the quality of evaluation activities was pursued, including through the increased involvement of academic and scientific sectors in evaluations. Priority was also placed on improving the uptake of evaluation results by policymakers and in strengthening the use of evaluations for decision-making.

3.3. HOW IS TA FUNDING USED?

TA is funding all of these activities. Funding for evaluation capacity building is a specific objective of the OPTA. The indicative budget for evaluation and educational/organisational activities is EUR 2.1 million, plus funding of approx. 6.5 FTE devoted exclusively to the EU NCA for the 2014-2023. Further resources are devoted to equipment/material support. The MA for the OPTA estimates that approximately 8 percent of the entire OPTA allocation of EUR 212 million is channelled to the EU NCA. The EU NCA ensures a range of coordinating, analyses and evaluations for the Partnership Agreement, all MAs, and the wider evaluation community.

3.4. WHAT ARE THE KEY BENEFITS?

- **Re-establishment of the EU NCA as a crucial and effective operational structure**. Although the EU NCA existed in 2007-2013, TA support has significantly broadened its activities and this is boosting evaluation capacity and culture. The NCA Evaluation Unit is staffed with high quality employees who, thanks to TA, have received intensive training in specific evaluation aspects (e.g. counterfactual assessment, focus groups, project management), benefited from a range of language/educational activities and obtained a significant level of expertise in organising and assessing evaluations. All employees of the unit undertake several evaluations by themselves in order to acquire capabilities to tender evaluation projects. This enables the EU NCA to better specify tender documentation to select external evaluators and to carry out most process-related evaluations internally. This supports strategic management across the National Coordinating Authority as useful findings from these organisational and process analyses have prompted more interest from other departments of NCA in evaluation outputs. Analytical requests are now coming from these other units in order to support their own managerial purposes. The EU NCA has also used TA support to establish an online single library of evaluations realized with the cooperation of all managing authorities of OPs.

- **Cultivation of a broader evaluation culture in Czechia, building evaluation capacity on the 'supply side'.** Since 2015, TA has supported an annual evaluation conference that is open to the entire evaluation community free of charge. It offers opportunities for common learning and it provides space for mutual interactions among suppliers, the ESIF implementation structure, the academic sector and invited international experts. TA funds the membership of the Ministry of Regional Development as an institution in the Czech Evaluation Society in order to contribute to the overall building of evaluation culture in Czechia, boosting the Society's status and that of evaluation more generally.

- **Building of coordination mechanisms and functional networks, including mutual trust between the central NCA evaluation unit and evaluation units at MAs.** Regular meetings of a working group for evaluation have been introduced, including annual meetings. The meetings are organised in an interactive way and with the prerequisite that a clear goal must be set for each meeting. Tools to stimulate sharing of practices and qualitative methods to find joint solutions are employed. This supports the gradual development of informal communication even during formal meetings, enabling effective "practical translation" of rules and responsibilities.

- **Several evaluation studies of high quality and of international relevance have been realized**. One of the tools that assisted in this shift from quantity to quality was the change in suppliers of external evaluations for the NCA and the Czech Ministry of Regional Development, introduced through the so-called dynamic purchase system, introduced with TA support. The system enables the contracting of external evaluation only to teams meeting clear qualification criteria (e.g. compulsory academic outputs, use of a range of evaluation methods), ensuring that the teams selected are of high quality and necessary competences. For example, three thematic ex-post evaluations summarised the results achieved by the 2007-2013 programmes, employing counterfactual assessment (focusing on R&D, enterprise innovations and waste management and energetic savings). This is seen as an important use of a methodology that has not yet been fully embedded in Czechia. The number of realised (routine and formal) evaluations has decreased while their targeting and quality has improved in comparison to the 2007-2013 period.

- **Evaluation recommendations are used in subsequent practice to a greater extent than before**. More attention is paid to communication of findings and recommendations with relevant actors. This is carried out in conjunction with compulsory follow-up on recommendations, as now required by the Guidance on Evaluation and embedded in the Central Monitoring System. Under this, the relevant personnel are obliged to implement recommendations and to communicate solutions within their institution.

- **'Spill over' effects are apparent** in the establishment of a formal working group for analytical departments from state administration in the framework of the Czech Government Office. This group was initiated through a 'bottom up' process as analysts from domestic programmes and employees from evaluation units in EU programmes gradually recognized they faced very similar problems with the access to data administrated by public institutions and crucial for conducting policy evaluation and analytical work. This platform shares knowledge between the ESIF and national programmes on evaluation methods, identifies common challenges and explores possibilities for joint approaches to solve data issues for evidence-based policy analysis.

3.5. WHAT ARE THE KEY FACTORS FOR SUCCESS?

- **Internal factors influencing the effectiveness of TA support for evaluation capacity include political support and managerial commitment** from the national level and respective MAs to emphasise the role of evaluation in policymaking. As part of this, sufficient TA funding must be dedicated to these far-reaching activities, including investment in high quality human resources and in mechanisms and systems for implementing of findings and recommendations of evaluations.

- **TA support for mutual exchange is key.** Changes in evaluation capacity and culture emerge gradually. This requires long-term interactive, patient work with actors in the system, as capacity-building is dependent on mutual relationships, interactions and trust among the actors. The provision of guidance or methodological tools alone is not enough. Similarly, it is important to have regular 'face-to-face' meetings to inform the management of the programme/organization about completed evaluations and their findings; for efficient capacity building, informal communication is crucial.
- **TA funding for innovative tools is important for collection and dissemination of evaluation findings.** This includes databases for evaluation results or recommendations or tools to communicate findings and recommendations of evaluations according to different target groups, producing not only executive summaries (in Czech and English) but also shorter media statements to spread evaluation results.

3.6. WHO CAN BENEFIT FROM THE TRANSFER OF THIS PRACTICE?

Evaluation capacity improvements in Czechia have potential for transferability among newer member states, which may lack strong evaluation traditions and are seeking to boost capacity among programme authorities, strengthen coordination at national level and support the growth of a broader evaluation culture. A key and easily transferable practice is the establishment on a single online evaluation library, which allows for dissemination of the findings of evaluations, as well as spreading awareness of the value of high-quality evaluations. As with other components of evaluation capacity-building, a crucial factor for applicability in other contexts is political commitment towards such openness and transparency.

4. TA STRENGTHENING COOPERATION & LOCAL ENGAGEMENT IN SAXONY (GERMANY) & CZECHIA

Key Components

ISSUE: Coordination, mobilisation

AC: Structures, Human Resources

FOCUS: Programme authorities

Basic Facts

MS: Germany & Czechia

FUND: ERDF

INSTITUTION: Programme authorities,Interreg Joint Secretariat, Regional Contact Points

4.1. WHAT IS THE PRACTICE ABOUT?

In the Interreg OP Saxony (Germany) – Czechia, TA is being used to support the activities of the Managing Authority, a Joint Secretariat (JS), Certifying Authority, Contracting and Paying Authority in Saxony, Regional Contact Points in Czechia, the Czech national authority and Saxon and Czech staff involved in financial control. The Joint Secretariat is hosted by the Saxon State Reconstruction and Development Bank. The work of the JS prioritises coordination and simplification, given the complexity of implementing the programme in a heterogeneous legal framework with limited available administrative capacities. The Saxon State Reconstruction and Development Bank also manages all other Saxon ESIF programmes, including the Saxon participation in the Interreg Poland-Germany (Free State of Saxony) Programme. This provides scope for the pursuit of synergies and mutual cooperation and sharing of resources and experience across the programmes.

Emphasis is also placed on close engagement with stakeholders and beneficiaries to draw in thematic and territorial expertise and ensure local ownership and commitment. The role of Regional contact Points, the strong involvement of stakeholders in the programme monitoring committee, the participation of Euroregions (based on groupings of local and regional authorities) in the management of four Small Projects Funds and the recent introduction of thematic networks of project partners and regional thematic experts reflects this approach to capacity-building at the local level.

4.2. WHAT IS THE RATIONALE?

Capacity building is a central element in the Interreg programme’s allocation of TA resources, targeting both programme authorities and applicants/beneficiaries. The programme faces challenges in addressing sometimes complex EU fund management and implementation tasks with relatively limited human resources. Key issue in the programme are differences in the legal framework across Saxony/Germany and Czechia contexts and the challenge of addressing variation in rules between the Czech and the Saxon authorities. Territorial cooperation programmes operate in a heterogeneous legal framework, requiring knowledge transfer, coordination and harmonisation mechanisms between programme authorities. There is a need to train staff on new requirements and for a continuous improvement in efficiency to accomplish more in a programme context where the available TA budget has remained relatively constant over programme periods and may even decrease in the future. Thus, amongst the Secretariat and programme authorities, there is a focus on maximising the available support by building on and coordinating existing administrative resources and exploiting synergies.

Experience shows that many problems that occur during project implementation are related to limited project management capacities in project teams. In particular, public partners in some sectors who are used to a simpler and less bureaucratic funding environment, as well as small organisations, find Interreg project management challenging. By mobilising intensive cooperation with broader regional and local stakeholders, the aim is to draw on existing capacity in the programme area and integrate its capacity-building efforts with other regional strategies an initiatives under specific thematic headings.

4.3. HOW IS TA FUNDING USED?

The managing authority is supported in its day-to-day programme management tasks by a Joint Secretariat which has 12 FTEs that are completely financed through TA (including overhead costs). TA also contributes to staff costs in the managing authority, certifying authority and in financial control authorities as well as in Czech Regional Contact Points.

TA has supported capacity-building measures for coordination of existing resources in programme authorities. Measures include: internal workshops for different programme working groups; peer learning activities, in particular work with neighbouring Interreg cross-border cooperation programmes, but also with DG REGIO staff; network meetings of thematic focus groups, involving programme staff and broader regional experts and, attendance of programme staff at peer exchange and capacity-building seminars and activities organised by the Interact Programme.

Customised capacity-building measures are provided for applicants and beneficiaries. Capacity is built through tailored training provision and, in particular, the Secretariat's allocation of a 'single project advisor' to each project who accompanies the project throughout its entire lifecycle and acts as a first point of contact for project partners' questions.

With TA support, the Secretariat also facilitates the close involvement of regional and local stakeholders. Four Euroregions are entrusted with the management of a Small Projects Fund that co-finances intercultural exchange projects, exchanges between municipalities and local associations, cross-border events and public relations work. The Euroregions act as beneficiaries and are responsible for setting up their own (lean) management structure to implement the Small Projects Fund.

4.4. WHAT ARE THE KEY BENEFITS?

- **Building capacity through coordination of resources and pursuit of synergies.** The Joint Secretariat is hosted by the Saxon State Reconstruction and Development Bank, which also manages all other Saxon ESIF programmes, including the Saxon participation in the Interreg Poland-Germany (Free State of Saxony) Programme. As a result, the JS can make use of synergy effects. This includes, for example, drawing on existing capacities for the development of an electronic monitoring system for the programme. Benefits also include the flexible (albeit within limits) deployment of staff resources between programmes. It allows the JS to increase capacities quickly when needed. Moreover, the Programme has cooperated with the neighbouring Interreg cooperation programmes Poland–Saxony and Czechia–Poland on the organisation of the 2019 Annual Programme Event aimed at raising awareness among the wider population in the border region between Saxony-Czechia-Poland. This attracted around 3,000 participants. The event was based on collaboration between the three cross-border programmes and involved the bundling of TA resources from each OP.

- **Identifying and addressing specific beneficiary needs.** Through TA support, the programme offers a diverse range of support such as information events, training, and individual consultations to build capacities in applicants and beneficiaries. Support is needs-based, tailored to the legal specifics of Saxony and Czechia. It is flexible, in that it offers personalised support and provides each project with a single point of contact. An example of how this has had a sustainable impact on the capacities of beneficiaries is the strengthened support for financial reporting and the improved quality of this reporting. This close support is facilitated by the programme's system for ongoing calls for proposals. In programmes with 1-2 calls per year, the capacity to provide specific support is constrained as requests for advice are likely to come around the same time. The system for ongoing calls avoids excessive staff workloads around calls or reporting periods. It makes flexible, tailored support possible, which particularly benefits the less experienced applicants.

- **Strong regional and local anchoring of the programme.** The close involvement of programme stakeholders in the programme pulls additional thematic and territorial expertise and ensures strong local ownership. Experience from the Small Projects Funds shows that they act as an important catalyst for cross-border cooperation, providing participants with new contacts, new ideas and impulses, and build the necessary confidence and capacities for partners to move on to managing larger cooperation projects. This delivery mechanism requires more staff resources at the level of programme management but it clearly builds local capacities and attracts new potential project partners. The recent establishment of thematic networks of stakeholders and partners brings in additional sectoral expertise in projects and is leading to new project ideas that based on regional needs. Meetings are initially organised at the regional level before the discussion is moved to the cross-border level and this will contribute to the drafting of the cooperation programme 2021-2027.

4.5. WHAT ARE THE KEY FACTORS FOR SUCCESS?

- **Continuity in the institutional set-up and staff managing the programme.** The relationships between the different authorities involved in programme implementation is based on trust and partnership and is the result of the long-standing collaboration between the involved staff. organisational and personnel continuity also facilitates the building up of institutional memory. For these reasons, the programme has already decided to maintain the same institutional set-up in the upcoming programming period.

- **Political support, reflected in careful consideration of the results of independent evaluations.** The programme evaluation plan and TA budget foresees four evaluations during the programme lifetime. Recommendations of the evaluators are taken very seriously and followed up in the monitoring committee with the aim to reduce administrative burden and costs. In particular, the building of capacity and reduction of administration for applicants and beneficiaries (e.g. relating to public procurement and financial reporting) has a high priority in the programme.

4.6. WHO CAN BENEFIT FROM THE TRANSFER OF THIS PRACTICE?

TA support provided through the programme has introduced a number of capacity-enhancing elements that would lend themselves to being transferred to other contexts. This includes transferability to European Territorial Cooperation programmes and other contexts with a management structure that ensures both the bundling and centralisation of tasks in a Joint Secretariat and, at the same time, the decentralisation of tasks to other bodies from different institutional environments. The programme offers a range of capacity-building measures for applicants and beneficiaries, supported by TA. Some, such as information events and trainings, can be easily emulated by other programmes. Training provision is conceived based on identified needs. This customised support is possible because the programme has a system of ongoing calls for proposals, which means that requests for counselling do not come all at the same time around a new call. Programmes with 1-2 calls per year will find it much more challenging to provide 'one-on-one' guidance. Moreover, the strong involvement of programme stakeholders in the Small Projects Fund and the work of thematic networks builds on mature and diverse cross-border cooperation structures.

5. MEDIATING THE '6 CITY' ITI STRATEGY IN FINLAND

Key Components

ISSUE: Supporting new ESIF instruments

AC: Structures, human resources

FOCUS: Programme authorities

Basic Facts

MS: Finland

FUND: ERDF/National

INSTITUTION: 6 City Strategy Office, city coordinators

5.1. WHAT IS THE PRACTICE ABOUT?

The design and implementation of new Integrated Territorial Investments (ITI) is making specific demands on administrative capacities among programme authorities and beneficiaries in 2014-2020. In Finland, a single ITI entitled the 'Six City Strategy' (6Aika) represents an ambitious approach, based on joint participation from six cities that do not share a single functional area.

For coordination and networking purposes, the six cities established a separate (ERDF-funded) project, namely the central Six City Strategy Office with (4 staff members) and also six city-based coordinators. The city-coordinators and personnel in the Strategy Office communicate on a daily basis and organise face-to-face meetings approximately once per month in order to work collaboratively on the Strategy, to react to the emerging needs of the cities. This close communication allows the Office to respond to formal evaluations and informal processes of learning, as part of a process of continuous reflection. The tasks of the office include: facilitating cooperation between the cities and with the MA and intermediate body, supporting project generation, selection and implementation, supporting networking of the project beneficiaries and communication and information activities. The cities developed the ITI strategy 'bottom up' based on their development needs, while the Strategy Office has acted as a coordinator and facilitator during the implementation process. In this way, the Strategy Office acts as a focal point, ensuring consistency within the strategy. At the same time, the involvement of the city-coordinators has enabled the direct participation of all of the cities in all phases of the strategy. The Strategy Office aims to boost the capacity of beneficiaries in the cities to develop and deliver quality projects under this new, innovative mode of investment. Moreover, the Strategy Office acts as a neutral facilitator and mediator between the cities, which are competing in a global inter-city competition to attract skilled-population and investments, while successfully collaborating in the framework of the Six City Strategy. Later in the programme period, more emphasis has been placed on communication of the strategy and its results as well as evaluation. Indeed, towards the end of the programme period communicating and spreading good practices and results from the funded projects has become one of the central activities of the Strategy Office.

5.2. WHAT IS THE RATIONALE?

Funding addresses the need for administrative capacity to support more intensive collaboration. The 6 cities involved in the ITI strategy are located in separate functional urban areas and it was important to ensure strong coordination between them. Despite the joint framing of the Strategy, some differences regarding thematic priorities exist between the cities, stemming for example from the number of inhabitants, economic structure, existing research institutions and city-related strengths. The cities which the ITI connects had some previous experience with collaboration but 6Aika requires them to intensify this. As there was no dedicated structure or personnel resources in place at this scale, the Strategy Office took up an important role in establishing a way of working with the cities and coordinating their inputs. A key role of the Strategy Office and city-coordinators was on the one hand, to help identify common themes relevant for all cities. These themes (Open Data and Interfaces, Open Participation and Customership, and Open Innovation Platforms) are supported by three large-scale ‘spearhead’ projects. At the same time, the Office has helped to identify more specific themes where pilot projects support collaboration between at least two of the cities.

5.3. HOW IS TA FUNDING USED?

The management and coordination structure of the Six City Strategy Office is financed by the six participating cities and through an ERDF OP.

Funding for Office tasks include: facilitating cooperation between the cities, the MA and intermediate body; supporting project idea generation, preparation, implementation, and reporting by the cities; organising project calls and preparing project evaluation and selection process; supporting networking of the project beneficiaries and uptake of project results; monitoring the progress of the strategy and projects; and communication and information related to the Six City Strategy, organising seminars and working group meetings for beneficiaries and other involved staff as well as public events.

5.4. WHAT ARE THE KEY BENEFITS?

- **Capacity to establish an innovative model for coordinating ITI implementation**. The Strategy Office plays an important coordinating role, providing a dedicated structure and personnel to support intercity collaboration. The funding has ensured that the Strategy Office has the capacity to help identify common strategic objectives and specific priorities and to act as mediator and facilitator in the implementation process. The fact that several persons could allocate all of their work time to the strategy made a significant contribution advance this coordinated approach.

- **The development of capacities at city level, including through the work of the 6 city-coordinators.** Some of the participating cities have had previous experience and a track record in attracting project funding and implementing collaborative projects but others have only developed these capacities during the Six City Strategy. These beneficiaries have learned to work together inter-regionally because of the requirement to each project involving beneficiaries from at least two cities. New organisational structures and more entrepreneurial working practices have been introduced in the Strategy.

> *““The Strategy could only be realised thanks to the work of the Strategy Office. They were the “glue” between the cities.”* (City Coordinator, City of Helsinki).

> *“Finding interested beneficiaries within Espoo was one of the most challenging tasks. In the beginning, it wasn’t clear to us what the possibilities of the ITI Strategy are, how external funding can be used. Now this is a lot easier, we have learned a lot about the opportunities and we have found the right partners within the cities.”* (City Coordinator, City of Espoo).

For example, through work on the Six City Strategy, one city administration has hired new, dedicated EU coordinators at the city level in order to facilitate funding applications in the future. The actors in different departments of city organisations have learned to collaborate with businesses and with other cities, working with similar issues. Experts on specific themes, such as Open Data, working in the different cities are now well networked with their colleagues from other city administrations. Although the biggest share of beneficiaries have been the cities themselves, the Strategy Office and city-coordinators have become more skilled in identifying ways to increasingly involve businesses, raising awareness of the opportunities offered by the Strategy to the private sector.

5.5. WHAT ARE THE KEY FACTORS FOR SUCCESS?

- **The ITI model and the role of the Strategy Office benefitted from the structure of public administration in Finland**. Finnish municipalities are powerful both in legal terms and concerning resources and administrative capacity. Thus, the practice described in this fiche was built on existing strengths and experience, taking existing capacities to another stage. Moreover, this political and administrative status was an important source of support as the city coordinators developed capacities and established networks within and beyond the city.

- **A fundamental factor for the success of the strategy has been the joint development of administrative capacity (including decision-making structures) and thematic focus with all cities in a bottom-up manne**r. Much of the initial focus of capacity building was on building a common vision and cooperative culture among the cities. This was a time-consuming but crucial first step in the process and funding for the work of the city coordinators was valuable in this.

- **Including funding for mechanisms to allow continuous feedback and reflection is needed to inform capacity-building.** Regular formal and informal communication between central Office staff and city-coordinators increases the scope to react to changing socio-economic circumstances in the cities, to address emerging issues or needs and to respond to insights drawn from implementation experience. Thus, the strategy (including administrative structures and thematic focus) should not be too rigid, in order to allow changes and re-focus if necessary.

- **Actors from the quadruple helix (public, private, citizens, academia) have to be involved** openly and actively in capacity-building. Although city authorities are the main beneficiaries of the Strategy, public research organisations and universities are also involved and the Office has increased its capacity to identify and engage beneficiaries from the private sector.

5.6. WHO CAN BENEFIT FROM THE TRANSFER OF THIS PRACTICE?

The administrative practices established in the course of the Six City Strategy can in principle be considered suitable to be transferred to other contexts, for local authorities participating as beneficiaries in ITI or other integrated modes of investment that involve collaborative approaches. Sufficient administrative resources need to be allocated to those in charge of coordination and facilitation, in order to ensure that the strategy is not side-lined by other tasks of city administrators. This approach works best where local authorities have substantial autonomy and formal power in the governance system and significant existing administrative capacity to build on.

6. A STRATEGIC APPROACH TO ADMINISTRATIVE STRENGTHENING IN ITALY

Key Components

ISSUE: Strategic HR dev't & training

AC: Human Resources & Tools

FOCUS: Programme authorities

Basic Facts

MS: Italy

FUND: ERDF/ESF

INSTITUTION: National & Regional Admins

6.1. WHAT IS THE PRACTICE ABOUT?

In Italy, Technical Assistance is supporting the interventions of Administrative Strengthening Plans (PRAs, Piani di Rafforzamento Amministrativo). The PRAs were foreseen in the Italian 2014-2020 Partnership Agreement and are programmes, of a two-year duration, in which the national and regional administrations in charge of the management of ERDF and ESF programmes outline the actions to be taken in order to strengthen administrative capacity and put in place the necessary administrative reforms and tools to ensure that the programmes are implemented effectively and efficiently. The PRAs are viewed as the 'necessary link' between TA support which is specifically targeted to programme delivery and the wider, more structural, strengthening of the capacity of public administrations (funded by the programmes' TO11 but also with domestic resources or, indeed, entailing no monetary cost at all). PRA implementation takes place under a governance system designed to ensure that plans have political endorsement, that administrations recieve central government support where necessary, and that progress of deliverables is monitored. There are a total of 29 PRAs, the first 'generation' of which took place over 2015-2017.

PRAs interventions include:

- **Legislative and regulatory simplification**, namely the simplification of laws or regulations which impact on the implementation of the programmes or of public investments more broadly. These types of interventions account for 6% of the total number of interventions.

- **Management and control of procedures.** This concerns procedural simplifications such as the use of Simplified Cost Options; re-engineering of programme implementation phases, such as the centralisation, simplification, standardisation and/or digitalisation of public procurement; improvement of financial management e.g. through e-payments systems; strengthening of monitoring, evaluation, transparency and open government through new systems and procedures). These types of interventions account for 45% of the total number of interventions.

- **Personnel/HR.** This includes recruitment of new staff, training (e.g. in relation to State aid or public procurement), reorganisation (e.g. changes to organigrams or functional charts, introduction of performance incentives and related verification systems). These types of interventions account for 25% of the total number of interventions.

- **IT systems.** The improvement of existing information systems or the introduction of new ones. These types of interventions account for 10% of the total number of interventions.

- **Beneficiary support.** Assistance to beneficiaries involved in the implementation of the programmes, setting procedures and timelines for them, strengthening of the programmes' partnership (e.g. through the setting-up of helpdesks, tutoring, coaching etc.). These types of interventions account for 14% of the total number of interventions.

6.2. WHAT IS THE RATIONALE?

The implementation of ESIF programmes in Italy has historically been hampered by weaknesses in public administration (PA) at both national and regional levels. Existing procedures and recruitment systems have not allowed units to respond to the evolving needs of the services that they provide, and they have struggled to keep pace with digital technologies and the wider evolution of public policies (e.g. cross-sectorality, new themes). The situation has been exacerbated by the cuts imposed by the high public debt and austerity agenda. Italy had an ex ante conditionality attached to institutional and administrative strengthening and the need to ensure administrative capacity for the implementation of EU funds was highlighted in the 2019 Country Specific Report and Council Recommendations.

The PRAs were introduced to implement measures at national and regional levels to strengthen administrative, technical or organisational components of the work of public administrations. There are three formal goals which the PRAs address, namely the strengthening of administrative structures, the facilitation of broader involvement for all actors in the public sector, and the improvement of external functioning of the regional administration.

6.3. HOW IS TA FUNDING USED?

The activities identified in the PRAs draw their funding from ERDF or ESF under TA Priority Axes in the relevant national or regional Operational Programmes. In the first generation of PRAs, TA funding was involved in 20% of the funded interventions. In addition, TA funding in the national operational programme 'Governance and Institutional Capacity' supports the institutional architecture within which the PRAs exist, namely a Technical Secretariat, a national Steering Committee and a PRA Network, comprising working groups and technical fora, organised and coordinated by the Technical Secretariat. This makes TA funding a crucial component of the framework in which PRAs were designed and specified, despite the limited share of supported activities.

6.4. WHAT ARE THE KEY BENEFITS?

- **Creation of an institutionalised opportunity for reflection on administrative strengthening needs.** Public administrations consider more openly any gaps in capacity and needs for improvements, creating a cultural shift. Thus, the PRAs have had a leverage effect as their preparation has resulted in further reflection on activities and improvements in procedures.

- **Awareness-raising among the political governing elites on actual administrative capacity building and reform needs.** The success of administrative capacity building initiatives and PA reforms requires the commitment of political leaders. The fact that the PRAs must be endorsed by the Minister (for national administrations) or Regional President (in the regions) gives the process the necessary political legitimisation and also creates awareness among the political class on the needs of the PA and its actors.

- **Increased focus on planning administrative inputs into implementation, to ensure efficient realisation of programmes.** PRAs require administrations to forecast all the administrative steps that are necessary for the implementation of certain actions, including setting deadlines and targets for them. This focuses the administrations' on the administrative resources required at different stages of implementation. This also highlights the importance of certain procedural steps/activities that are crucial for the overall performance of the programmes.

- **Introducing changes to the governance system.** In some cases, PRAs have been instrumental to the introduction of governance changes (e.g. the establishment of a 'unitary programming office', which serves as a link between political and administrative actors for all activities related to administrative capacity building, creating synergies across a range of capacity building activities undertaken in relation to all the programmes implemented by a regional authority.

- **Training in human resource management.** The implementation of training by PRAs has been valuable, particularly the updating and integration of existing strong technical skills with the necessary managerial skills.

- **Recruitment of additional personnel increasing implementation rate.** The recruitment of new staff has been perceived in some cases to have prompted an acceleration of ESIF commitments, helping to meet N+3 targets.

- **Spillover effects.** It should be noted that as PRA activities are mostly part of wider sets of activities, they contribute to simplification and harmonization within the wider public administration.

6.5. WHAT ARE THE KEY FACTORS FOR SUCCESS?

There are a number of characteristics of the PRAs which are fundamental to their success:

- **Strong political endorsement** is required at all levels in order for success of the governance-based PRAs.

- **The appointment of technical experts or 'referents' with a mandate for overseeing implementation**, as well as providing stringency to the process, these technical referents also mobilise actors and foster dialogue among all involved.

- **The structured governance system,** established both nationally and in the region, with Steering Committees and working groups, was also instrumental to the success of the initiative.

- **A systematic analysis of needs** carried out at the beginning of the process, in order to ensure the interventions meet a real demand.

- **Ongoing learning** which is generated by the governance structure, controlled timelines of the PRAs, and upcoming reflection on the first generation of interventions.

6.6. WHO CAN BENEFIT FROM THE TRANSFER OF THIS PRACTICE?

The practice of introducing PRAs is highly transferable. Elements which are most useful for policy transfer include the governance system, which is comprised of governmental as well as administrative leaders, with technical referents. The focus of the PRAs on project management and timelines with stringent monitoring is also valuable and transferable, as well as the effect of increased dialogue generated within administrations by the PRA network and steering groups. All of these aspects would naturally require the necessary adaptation to suit the different domestic contexts and administrative systems.

7. E-COHESION FOR INSTITUTIONS AND BENEFICIARIES IN LATVIA

Key Components

ISSUE: E-Cohesion, simplification, strategic orientation

AC: Human resources, tools

FOCUS: Programme authorities

Basic Facts

MS: Latvia

FUND: CF

INSTITUTION: ESIF Central Finance and Contracting Agency

7.1. WHAT IS THE PRACTICE ABOUT?

In Latvia, the e-cohesion IT system module has been crucial in the transition towards a more integrated EU funds management system in the 2014-2020 period. The module added important new elements to the ESIF management information system, meeting the requirements specified in the CPR regulation but also other needs identified by the Latvian ESIF authorities, such as the need to provide data to inform management and implementation processes. This is especially important in preparing for next EU funds programming period. The system now includes a Data Analysis Tool (DAT) which allows users to select variables and conduct analysis under selected strategic objectives, measures and projects. The institutions involved in EU funds management use DAT to conduct analysis for planning, preparing forecasts, carrying out audits and for publicising investments. Moreover, the new module addressed the needs of beneficiaries for the integration of information systems to strengthen the role of the Central Finance and Contracting Agency (CFCA) as a 'one stop shop' for ESIF. All documentation and essential guidance is now collected in a single source, facilitating project submission and implementation and enabling beneficiaries to focus on content related issues and sustainable project delivery. The e-cohesion module also generates automatic reminders and warnings about the main project milestones and reporting deadlines.

7.2. WHAT IS THE RATIONALE?

A basic impetus for development of new e-cohesion system were EU e-cohesion requirements for MS. These involved the development of a system for recording and storing in computerised form all necessary data for monitoring, evaluation, financial management, verification and audit purposes. They also included arrangements for all exchanges of information between beneficiaries and ESIF authorities to be carried out by means of digital data exchange systems.

Beyond this, one of the shortcomings of Latvia's decentralised IT system in 2007-2013 was the dispersal of detailed information across institutions. Thus, as part of a broader reorganisation of ESIF management and implementation and the establishment of stronger central coordination, the reform of the information management system went beyond the Commission's formal requirements for e-cohesion. The Latvian authorities have sought to reduce administrative burdens on beneficiaries and improve transparency by moving from a decentralised system for registration and monitoring of

EU funded projects to an integrated system. The aim is to introduce a "once only principle" to limit the demand for documentation which has already been uploaded, to integrate support and guidance in a single source and to provide up to date information to beneficiaries. Moreover, Latvian ESIF authorities wanted to move from a simple data collection to an IT system that could support effective management of EU funds and support the preparation of analytical reports and responses to requests from various stakeholders.

7.3. HOW IS TA FUNDING USED?

TA funding is the key source supporting the management information system and the development of the e-cohesion system module. This includes its establishment and maintenance as well as interoperability with national and EU frameworks, any necessary technical security measures and actions to ensure its functionality.

TA has also been used for investments in human resources: CFCA has hired and trained additional staff members as development of the e-cohesion module requires input from qualified staff members. For external users (local governments, other line ministries) no special training has been carried out but there is help-line assistance from CFCA.

It should be noted that the development of the EU funds management information system and e-cohesion module is an ongoing project. The use of TA resources secures dedicated funding, to develop and continuously improve the e-cohesion module. Initially the system focused on serving the needs of EU funds managing institutions. Subsequently, the e-cohesion system module and its improved functionality is increasingly easing the project implementation process for beneficiaries.

7.4. WHAT ARE THE KEY BENEFITS?

- **One central IT system is now used for registration and monitoring of projects** and it is accessible to all institutions involved in ESIF management, as well as to project applicants and beneficiaries. The number of projects managed within the system has increased significantly and according to surveys conducted by the Central Finance and Contracting Agency, over 90% of respondents have used e-cohesion system and 96% of these were positive about their experience.

- **The e-cohesion module is seen by Latvian authorities as an essential part of the simplification of EU funds administration**, contributing to the reduction of administrative burdens. It facilitates various steps of project submission and implementation, thus enabling beneficiaries to save time and to focus on content related issues and sustainable project delivery. An example of this is the development of a dashboard module/view which allows beneficiaries to have an overview of all on-going project related processes (process of signing of agreements, ongoing evaluations, audits etc.) as well as to see the next actions which should be taken (preparation of reports or other legal documents, planned controls etc.).

- **Moreover, the module has strengthened the utility of the system as a tool for strategic ESIF management and implementation.** The new system has more advanced functionalities, allowing information cross-checking, progress monitoring, report generation and data export. The current systems helps to respond to the regular requests received from the EU and other national level institutions and to address various reporting needs. It also facilitates information and data analysis for assessing EU funds implementation status, while also providing evidence for preparations for the 2021-2027 period. An important element of its added value is data analytics and visualization tool. For example, the e-cohesion system module now facilitates the development of customised reports. It allows, for example, the Managing Authority to develop analysis for assessing the "market demand" in one sector/strategic objective and to use this information in decision making.

> *““The biggest benefit for all parties, involved in the implementation of projects and the management of EU funds, is the availability of all relevant information in one place.”*
>
> Official at CFCA

7.5. WHAT ARE THE KEY FACTORS FOR SUCCESS?

- **Political and administrative support was crucial for this substantial improvement of the ESIF information management system.** One of the key factors which has helped the development of e-cohesion system was the commitment of the Latvian government to establish a one-stop-agency. Consensus on the need for a transparent, digital and effective EU funds management system served for creating a comprehensive system under the responsibility of the CFCA. It should also be noted that CFCA already possessed qualified and highly skilled human capital to build on.

- **When developing the new system, the Central Finance and Contracting Agency consulted with other authorities** about their previous experience in establishing and developing functional information and data systems. This process formed strong links with other official databases and the system also receives valuable data from these other sources, (e.g. the enterprise register information system, the national addresses register, the national register of penalties, tax information system, municipal real estate tax accounting system).

- **The needs of beneficiaries are identified and their experiences in using the system taken into account.** The development of the system was informed by user experiences, including beneficiaries. As noted, the need to enhance overall transparency and usability for beneficiaries has prompted the development in 2019 of a 'Dashboard' as part of the e-cohesion module. Through this, project applicants and beneficiaries can follow the process of project evaluation and the implementation stages of their projects.

- **Scope for flexibility and incremental improvement is vital.** Developing an e-cohesion system is a substantial undertaking and it is important to do this incrementally. The aim is to develop the system further and strengthen its functionality for carrying out monitoring and evaluation activities. Moreover, this approach ensures flexibility to respond to new issues or changing circumstances. For instance, there is potential for further capacity building in the system to meet the changing needs of different stakeholders, to target specific social partners or groups of beneficiaries etc.

7.6. WHO CAN BENEFIT FROM THE TRANSFER OF THIS PRACTICE?

This use of TA is of benefit to programme authorities wishing to build the capacity of their ESIF information management systems in order to engage more closely with beneficiaries and to strengthen strategic ESIF management and implementation. Beneficiaries gain from accessing a single, comprehensive information system that is simplified and 'user friendly'. In this integrated approach, effective organisational and technical links must be in place and a shared understanding between institutions involved in EU funds management about the user needs of the system and the division of responsibilities is crucial.

8. THE 'VERSATILE PROJECT MANAGER' IN LITHUANIA

Key Components

ISSUE: Efficiency, Simplification

AC: Human resources, systems

FOCUS: Programme authorities

Basic Facts

MS: Lithuania

FUND: ESF

INSTITUTION: European Social Fund Agency

8.1. WHAT IS THE PRACTICE ABOUT?

As part of a process to eliminate wasteful administrative practices and ease the burden on beneficiaries, the ESF Agency in Lithuania has introduced the 'versatile project manager' model. The former separation of project manager, financial manager and public procurement specialist functions created lengthy administrative procedures for individual project verifications. These have been integrated in a single manager who has overview over specific projects and who has the ability to carry out a range of management and support tasks. The foundation for the successful transition from multiple positions to versatile project manager was built on a comprehensive capacity building plan developed by the Agency.

8.2. WHAT IS THE RATIONALE?

The introduction of the 'versatile project manager' model was part of a broader response to the growing number of projects to be managed by the Agency and the growing pressure to meet deadlines. This prompted the Agency to analyse its procedures and look for innovative solutions. Several bottlenecks that limited the performance of the entire system were identified. At that time, the Agency had a range of employees, each responsible for a narrow function in project implementation support and control processes. Thus, the payment application presented by a beneficiary was checked by three Agency employees – the project manager, the financial manager, and a specialist in public procurement. The project supervision system caused difficulties in terms of responsibility sharing as projects did not have a single designated 'owner' within the Agency. This led to the decision to introduce the concept of a versatile project manager, which gradually replaced the functional division of tasks at the Agency.

8.3. HOW IS TA FUNDING USED?

All activities related to the 'versatile project manager' initiative are financed by TA. This is generally covered under staff costs, as employees use their working time for various related activities but also includes development of new procedures and organisational structures, preparation of training programmes, etc. A comprehensive capacity building plan and parallel human resource management initiatives, funded by TA, were developed by the Agency before the actual transition to the versatile project manager practice.

The capacity building plan included two training programmes and an internal mentoring course. One training programme was developed for former project managers (covering the managerial part of an ESIF project) and the other programme was tailored to the needs of former financial managers (covering the financial part of an ESIF project). Training programmes were targeted at the skills related to public procurement requirements, project management, and financial management and designed accordingly. The training programmes were complemented with a mentoring course.

The majority of the staff trained to acquire the skills of versatile project management had prior experience in either project management or financial management. Thus, each group of employees had some knowledge that was new to the other group. Knowledge sharing between the employees was seen as a valuable opportunity to ensure that training was practically oriented and that the experience of the Agency was preserved and utilised by the versatile project managers. During the mentoring stage, employees mainly worked in pairs. For instance, financial managers provided necessary consultations and checked finance related documents prepared by project managers, and vice versa.

8.4. WHAT ARE THE KEY BENEFITS?

- **The introduction of the position of the 'versatile project manager' has led to an increase in the efficiency of Agency's services.** On average, the duration of project assessment has decreased by 28% to 13 hours, duration of check of payments claims has decreased by 34% to 13.8 hours, and project report verification has decreased by 76% to 1.7 hours.

- **The administrative burden for project beneficiaries has also been reduced.** The number of lines that beneficiaries should fill in a payment claim has been reduced from 78 to 64 as there is no need to provide the same information twice (for project manager and financial manager). Project beneficiaries also receive comments on submitted documentation through a single document that includes both managerial and financial issues. Moreover, the versatile project manager serves as a counsellor for beneficiaries in most cases as he or she has the comprehensive understanding about the entire project and is aware about specific issues the beneficiary is facing within the organisation or project.

8.5. WHAT ARE THE KEY FACTORS FOR SUCCESS?

- **Organisational commitment to the transition is crucial**, as the introduction of the versatile project manager model inevitably involved flux, uncertainty and pressures on staff. The successful transition from multiple positions to versatile project manager was, thus, built on a comprehensive capacity building plan and human resource management initiatives.

- **Active staff involvement in the capacity building process has helped to reduce pressures.** The two-way mentoring process, when the same employee is a trainee and a mentor in the same project, increased the confidence of Agency's employees and encouraged better communication within the Agency. A survey of the working environment was also carried out. These measures, as well as constant open communication bridged the gap between existing and required staff competences and capacities and strengthened commitment to the changes.

- **'Piloting' of the initiative with staff.** It is also important to note that the project was piloted with a small group of employees before starting the full scale training project. Feedback from this informed the training programmes and facilitated the implementation process.

8.6. WHO CAN BENEFIT FROM THE TRANSFER OF THIS PRACTICE?

The versatile project manager concept has the potential to be adopted by any country and any managing authority or intermediate body managing ESIF projects. However, this requires a significant change in culture and expansion in the specific functions of employees. Staff should accept the transition and be committed to the idea of taking on a new list of responsibilities. Moreover, comprehensive and focused training courses should be designed and implemented in order to ensure the capacities of employees meet these increased requirements. Finally, given the time pressures of ESIF implementation, human resources must be managed so that the routine tasks of the institution are carried out while the transition is underway.

9. A 'NETWORKED' APPROACH TO COMMUNICATION IN POLAND

Key Components

ISSUE: Effective communication

AC: Structures, HR

FOCUS: Programme authorities

Basic Facts

MS: Poland

FUND: CF

INSTITUTION: Department of European Funds Promotion

9.1. WHAT IS THE PRACTICE ABOUT?

In Poland, TA is being used to build the capacity for a 'networked' approach to communication and publicity activities. This is strengthening the scope for coherent, standardised approaches to communication across the countries national and regional programmes and increasing the potential for formal and informal knowledge exchange and learning across programme authorities. A key aim is to build capacity among programme authorities to provide coherent and coordinated actions increasing the visibility of Cohesion Policy and the effective reaching of target groups among beneficiaries and the general public.

Support from Poland's Technical Assistance Operational Programme (TA OP) is contributing to this by funding the production of standard rules and templates for information, promotion and publicity activities and through the development of a single portal for EU funds that provides up to date information for beneficiaries and the general public. Communication capacity-building is apparent in the development of uniform tools and standard templates for communication activities.

TA is also supporting the national Steering Group and network of programme communicators that has an important coordinating role to play in the context of ESIF in Poland, where 22 national and regional Operational Programmes are being implemented in the current period. The Steering Group's specific tasks include coordination of communication activities, agreeing on the directions and priorities of promotion activities; ensuring the exchange of information and effective cooperation between communication officers, follow up on emerging needs and demands for individual target groups, and raising the knowledge and skills of the Steering Group members and network. The Steering Group meets 3-4 times to discuss the prominent issues of communication. Communication priorities are agreed to ensure the consistency of activities with Poland's Communication Strategy. The operation of the network includes regular training provided by the Department of European Funds' Promotion to communication officers from MAs. This training responds to specific needs raised by officers (e.g. on materials adapted to the needs of people with disabilities, use of Facebook and Google, organising comprehensive promotional campaigns etc.). Thus, the Steering Group and network has a clear capacity building purpose, The network's regular meetings and training provision are important in building bonds and mutual trust among participants from different programme contexts. These formal and informal exchanges build knowledge and experience and help identify overlaps and synergies in communication activities.

9.2. WHAT IS THE RATIONALE?

Ex post analyses from 2007-2013 recommended the strengthening of Poland's ESIF communication arrangements to ensure coordinated activities across all 22 of the country's programmes. The aim was to develop an integrated, coherent system, capable of reaching target groups of beneficiaries and the broader public. There was a strong need for strengthened 'coordination capacity' that could combine the pursuit of communication activities through channels relatively close to the potential beneficiaries at regional or local levels with an overarching, integrated approach. As part of this, the need to develop structures and systems to embed capacity in the communication system, retain employees and maintain institutional memory was identified.

9.3. HOW IS TA FUNDING USED?

the TA OP supports the coordination of the information and promotion system, including through exchange of experience and the organisation of working groups and networks. Funding is provided through the project "Supporting the coordination of the information and promotion system of European Funds in 2018-2020", amounting to approximately €230,000.

9.4. WHAT ARE THE KEY BENEFITS?

- **TA support of the Steering Group and network contributes to the development of a standard approach to ESIF communication and the achievement of synergies across programme authorities**. Regular meetings mean that it can respond flexibly to emerging needs identified by members or prompted by new EU or national guidelines.

- **The training provided through the network is seen as valuable by members**, including its focus on modern forms of interactive advertising and marketing, on the internet and social media. This is in keeping with the evolution of communication activities where beneficiaries are perceived as partners rather than recipients and their active engagement is encouraged. This is also important for building active relationships with specific target groups, such as people with disabilities. TA support is vital for participation in the network. All of these activities are financially supported by TA, giving communication officers in MAs opportunities for professional development.

> *"The greatest added value, [is in] improving communication, facilitating the exchange of experiences, building bonds and mutual trust. Through this we help each other and solve problems together".*
>
> Communication officer for Regional OP MA, Poland

- **Also important is the embedding of capacity through knowledge exchange, the creation of informal networks and mutual trust.** The network provides a forum for discussing problems, solutions, good practice; there is open discussion and optimal communication activities are decided on jointly. Of particular value are efforts to use the network to draw together practices and experiences from different programme contexts into a coherent structure. The exchange of knowledge and experience between national and regional communication units can help identify recurring challenges and potential solutions, explore synergies, and assess the scope for streamlining activities.

9.5. WHAT ARE THE KEY FACTORS FOR SUCCESS?

- **The development of a network approach has been facilitated by Poland's institutional framework** where 16 self-governing regions have had Cohesion Policy managing authority status since the 2007-2013 period. The coordinated pursuit of communication activities through channels relatively close to the potential beneficiaries at regional or local levels was recognised as good practice in the second half of the 2007-2013 period and this provided a good basis for further evolution.

- **Exchange of experience is vital, not just internally but also linking in with EU level networks** (including the Commission's INFORM network events, *inform-inio*). This is deemed very valuable and should be strengthened. Thanks to such structures, communication officers at programme level have the opportunity to network with practitioners from other Member State contexts.

- It is planned to maintain the operation of the Steering Group and network in the next period in order to embed this capacity. However, **the role of financing, particularly TA funding, is crucial** if these network-based approaches and trust-based links are to become embedded.

9.6. WHO CAN BENEFIT FROM THE TRANSFER OF THIS PRACTICE?

This network or partnership-based approach to EU funding communication activities is transferable to other Member States, particularly those with regionalised ESIF management and implementation systems. This approach, in the context of the regionalisation of communication units, facilitates exchange of experience (through regular interactive meetings) and professionalization of communication activities (through targeted training of officers).

10. DELEGATING RESPONSIBILITIES AND BUILDING LOCAL 'OWNERSHIP' IN POLAND (WAŁBRZYCH ITI)

Key Components

ISSUE: Supporting new ESIF Instruments

AC: Structures, Human Resources

FOCUS: Programme authorities & beneficiaries

Basic Facts

MS: Poland

FUND: ERDF & ESF

INSTITUTION: ITI Intermediate Body

10.1. WHAT IS THE PRACTICE ABOUT?

In Wałbrzych in Poland, TA support for Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI) is focused on the local level as there is full delegation of tasks to a municipal implementing body. The decision behind this organisational solution was based on an agreement between regional authorities (the Marshall Office) and local leaders represented by the Wałbrzych Mayor. The tasks of the Wałbrzych ITI Intermediate Body (IB) include design of the strategy, definition of selection criteria, preparation and launch of project calls, provision of information to beneficiaries, assessment of project proposals and signing and supervising the implementation of grant contract (including financial management, monitoring and reporting). In some of these tasks, the IB cooperates closely with the Managing Authority and other IBs, but TA is vital in building the capacity of Wałbrzych to carry out these functions. A key objective was to incentivise partnership arrangements among local stakeholders, especially among self-government units by increasing their sense of ownership, strengthening trust between them and programme authorities and ensuring continual dialogue. The direct involvement of local stakeholders at all stages of the design and implementation process has built capacities and boosted their involvement in the implementation of ITI projects.

10.2. WHAT IS THE RATIONALE?

The basic motivation for this use of TA was the strong push from local leaders to take responsibility for the development processes in their area. Wałbrzych had some experience of this role as a capital city under a previous regional administrative system (1975–1998). Local communities had cooperated around common waterworks and transport initiatives and in recent years local leaders implemented several development initiatives, including through the use of EU funds.

Local authorities wanted to build on this experience of collaborative work. The establishment of the ITI IB as a local executive agency with fully delegated powers was seen as a means to mobilise potential beneficiaries in local communities to produce quality applications during the 2014-2020 programming period. The IB has the competences and status to incentivise participation from local communities. Moreover, it has been able to build close links with local stakeholders and to act as a crucial intermediary, coordinating local level, 'bottom up' inputs and broader programme-level objectives. Through this 'brokerage' role, the ITI IB has increased levels of trust between stakeholders, beneficiaries and programme authorities involved in the implementation of the ITI strategy. These ambitions have required dedicated capacity-building in the ITI IB in Wałbrzych and among partners in local communities.

10.3. HOW IS TA FUNDING USED?

The Wałbrzych Agglomeration Intermediate Body receives financing from TA of the Dolnośląskie Voivodship Regional Operational Programme. Funds are allocated through yearly projects. Wałbrzych IB is a newly established organisational unit of the Wałbrzych Commune, which means the local authorities supervise it, but it is an independent institution of the Municipal Office. Currently, the ITI IB consists of 10 units with 50 employees. During the period of organisational growth, the biggest challenge was to recruit, train, and retain skilled and experienced staff. Technical Assistance funds allowed the creation of an attractive remuneration and incentives system. This helped in recruiting administrative staff from other regional and local administrative units. The role of TA funding is indispensable in maintaining the operations of the IB. Wałbrzych IB also benefits from coordination with the Managing Authority on information and communication tasks, for instance through regional promotional campaigns.

10.4. WHAT ARE THE KEY BENEFITS?

- **The use of TA to provide extensive support for potential beneficiaries.** A wide range of information and counselling meetings with potential beneficiaries are organised. The geographical proximity of such meetings was a key factor in making these services more accessible to local communities. In 2018, the Polish government assessed the individual performance of some of the regional ITI IBs and the work of Wałbrzych IB received the highest ratio of positive assessments by the beneficiaries in comparison to the average assessment of other Polish ITI IBs.

- **The IB acts as a 'broker' between local level beneficiaries and programme authorities.** IB staff actively analyse the most common problems of applicants and either publish additional information and support (presentations about types of errors to avoid during the procedures) or – in the case of more profound challenges – discuss possible modifications of selection procedures with the Managing Authority and during Monitoring Committee meetings. In such cases, the ITI IB has acted as important "broker" between final beneficiaries in local communities, and regional level implementing authorities and Monitoring Committee members.

- **The ITI IB has built a sense of ownership and trust**. The IB is closely engaged with potential beneficiaries, collecting opinions and expectations about planned activities. Full delegation of responsibilities means that the IB can respond directly to this feedback, ensuring a tangible impact on implementation, for instance through the modification of project selection criteria to meet specific needs 'on the ground'. Such an approach has strengthened the sense of ownership of the ITI Strategy among stakeholders. The fact that the outcomes of close, regular dialogue with the ITI IB have a direct, concrete effect on how the Strategy is implemented builds local commitment.

10.5. WHAT ARE THE KEY FACTORS FOR SUCCESS?

- **Previously existing networks combined with political leadership and trust.** The special role of the IB and its performance was possible due to already existing, although not very strong and embedded, partnership arrangements in the territory.

- **Strong and ambitious political leadership.** The Wałbrzych municipality was determined to take the full responsibility for the implementation of the ITI and this was an important factor in the decision at the regional level to create the local executive agency as a fully delegated IB. The lesson learned from this experience is that Technical Assistance funds are most effective when facilitating initiatives built on already existing capacities (even if not very strong), such as determined leadership with clear mission and vision, as well as previous cooperation mechanisms.

- **Close cooperation with the Managing Authority, other IBs and stakeholders**. Services provided for potential beneficiaries and beneficiaries were coordinated to ensure an integrated approach to the support of project generation and implementation across all programme authorities. This ongoing coordination is built on both formal measures (e.g. integrated regional communication plans) and informal networks.

- **Availability of suitable service providers or qualified experts**. External specialists were used only in a very limited way but they were important in providing input on Cohesion Policy regulations and technical expertise in areas such as environmental protection, urban regeneration and R&D management.

- **Administrative leadership continuity and low staff turnover.** The most crucial factor that contributed to the successful organisational development of the ITI IB was the stability of the administrative leadership and low staff turnover. TA has played a vital role in attracting and retaining staff.

10.6. WHO CAN BENEFIT FROM THE TRANSFER OF THIS PRACTICE?

This use of TA to build capacity for the implementation of EU-funded instruments at the local level is transferable to other contexts. To transfer such local-level approaches, emphasis should be put on securing both stable and efficient human resources management systems. The local context, internal administrative and political dynamics, as well as the density of stakeholder networks play a vital role in this fully delegated model of ITI implementation.

11. TA SUPPORTING INNOVATIVE TOOLS IN PORTUGAL

Key Components

ISSUE: Launch of innovative tools

AC: Structures, HR

FOCUS: Programme authorities & beneficiaries

Basic Facts

MS: Portugal

FUND: ERDF, ESF

INSTITUTION: Portuguese Social Innovation Mission Structure

11.1. WHAT IS THE PRACTICE ABOUT?

In Portugal, TA has been used to establish capacity to support innovative actions in the field of social innovation. As this is a 'cross-cutting' subject related to different sectors of society, a unit has been established with the purpose of managing and implementing social innovation actions and therefore ensuring dedicated, coordinated support to all the involved actors. This unit, the Portuguese Social Innovation Mission Structure (EMPIS) implements the Portugal Social Innovation Initiative (PIS) which uses EU funds to finance innovation and social entrepreneurship projects through financial instruments (loans, equity and bonds). EMPIS has a management support team (responsible for administrative, asset and human resources management, as well as communication and strategic support), a technical financing team (overseeing the implementation of PIS financial instruments) and a technical activation team (regional representatives in charge of creating a pipeline for promoting participation in PIS projects). The governance model of EMPIS, characterized by its network approach covering all Portuguese territory, allows beneficiaries to be directly supported by EMPIS units and staff. It also facilitates networking between social innovation and economic entities, public and private investors and public administration.

11.2. WHAT IS THE RATIONALE?

Recent years have seen a growing interest in ESIF support for social enterprises, strongly driven by a growing recognition of the role they can play in the current period of economic and social recovery, by bringing innovative solutions for social cohesion and inclusion, job creation, growth and the promotion of active citizenship.

However, this is a relatively new area for ESIF support and new approaches are needed to develop and stimulate an 'ecosystem' of innovation, social entrepreneurship and promotion of social investment in Portugal. The PIS initiative seeks to do this primarily through the use of Financial Instruments: potential beneficiaries can face different challenges when expanding their social innovation business, and therefore they apply for the PIS financial instruments in order to be supported.

TA capacity-building is crucial for this in providing operational support for EMPIS. The structure responsible for implementing PIS, consisting of units for management support, technical financing through the Financial Instruments, and an activation team that seeks to stimulate engagement in PIS 'on the ground'.

11.3. HOW IS TA FUNDING USED?

Portugal's TA funds the establishment and operation of EMPIS. This involves staff salaries, operational costs and costs associated with training addressed to management team. TA funding is also used for financing the operating and human resources expenditures of the Technical Financing Team and the Technical Activation Team. The beneficiary is the Agency for Development and Cohesion (ADC), which is responsible for financing the EMPIS structure.

11.4. WHAT ARE THE KEY BENEFITS?

- **Training for stakeholders in a relatively new, increasingly important field.** EMPIS is implementing a training plan for all the actors involved in PIS, ensuring they develop the particular needs on the main issues of funding, social innovation and impact assessment.

- **Training for stakeholders in the use of Financial Instruments.** PIS support is based on Financial Instruments (loans, bonds, equity etc.) and EMPIS helps build capacity on the use of these.

- **Network structure guarantees comprehensive territorial coverage for capacity-building.** Alongside a Management Team based in Lisbon, Technical Activation Teams (Regional Representatives) are based throughout the country, organising conferences and guidance sessions. This allows the provision of tailored support that addresses specific needs and builds close links and trust between EMPIS and social innovation actors 'on the ground', vital in the establishment of a social investment ecosystem.

"There are many projects and fieldwork with great human value and with excellent results, only entities such as Portugal Inovação Social and EMPIS will be able to give voice to these projects to leverage them and allow them to be answer not only at the national but also international level".

Escola de Rubgy da Trofa, beneficiary of Partnerships for Impact Financial Instrument

- **Developing new processes of public procurement based on performance.** A specific feature of EMPIS work is the development of Social Impact Bonds in Portugal, a payment by result mechanism. Performance-based specifications allow public authorities to specify their needs in general terms by describing what general functions they require rather than specifying the minute details of the inputs and process required to get there. The private sector can then innovate and generate savings in resource use and in operating costs. EMPIS is working across public policy areas to ensure the sustainability of social innovation measures and this includes the development of tools through which, under the right conditions, public procurers can stimulate markets to deliver innovative and sustainable solutions.

11.5. WHAT ARE THE KEY FACTORS FOR SUCCESS?

- **Institutional setting.** EMPIS operates under the aegis of the Agency for Development and Cohesion which has overall responsibility for regional policy coordination and technical decision-making, under the supervision and control of the Ministry of Planning and Infrastructure. Thus, EMPIS is close to public policy and government units across sectors key for social innovation. Also, EMPIS could map its network of Regional Activators onto Portugal's sub-national administrative framework, to ensure balanced and tailored territorial coverage.

- **Political support.** The political support of the Central Government facilitates EMPIS work in raising awareness about the PIS programme, and disseminating all the related information about calls, provision of tools, events, etc.

- **The network model.** By coordinating participation from economic entities, public and private investors and public administration, EMPIS benefits from a network approach. Actors from different backgrounds face common challenges and there is clear benefit for EMPIS facilitation of exchange of experience

- **'Front loading' TA support.** Investment of substantial time and TA resources to capacity building in the early stages of the initiative was crucial. The challenge of raising awareness, mobilising stakeholders, particularly encouraging the private sector to invest in the creation of a social investment market and to establishing a functional network structure required significant work at the launch stage (e.g. through a series of regional meeting events).

- **Embedding capacity.** EMPIS provides guidance and supporting tools (a handbook, evaluation grids, glossaries, etc.) for beneficiaries, spreads information about PIS through dissemination materials and publishes updated information on the web site, making information and guidance available for all the interested actors.

11.6. WHO CAN BENEFIT FROM THE TRANSFER OF THIS PRACTICE?

National ESIF authorities seeking to create or strengthen specific arrangements supporting innovative tools in the field of social entrepreneurship can draw on these experiences. National and sub-national ESIF authorities looking to strengthen capacity for administrative coordination across administrative levels and policy sectors can also benefit. The network-based EMPIS model ensures country-wide coverage and facilitates cooperation between public and private stakeholders and social and economic sectors in the development of innovative social entrepreneurship projects.

12. A SYSTEMATIC APPROACH TO STAFF TRAINING IN SLOVAKIA

Key Components

ISSUE: Systematic training

AC: Systems, tools

FOCUS: Programme authorities

Basic Facts

MS: Slovakia

FUND: ERDF

INSTITUTION: Department for Administrative Capacities

12.1. WHAT IS THE PRACTICE ABOUT?

In its Partnership Agreement for 2014-20, Slovakia committed itself to adopting a coherent strategy to strengthen the management of human resources. This identified key issues addressed and proposed solutions to address them. A priority in this strategy was the introduction of a central, standardised training system for staff participating in Cohesion Policy delivery. Related to this, a new Department for Administrative Capacities was created in the Government Office of the Slovak Republic. One of main tasks of the department has been to develop the "Central Training Plan" (CTP).

The CTP focuses on the key competences required for sound management and implementation of Cohesion Policy interventions, taking into account EU and national frameworks for the programming period 2014-20. A 'competency framework' was used to identify training needs and design modules for programme authorities (managing authorities, intermediate bodies, certifying authority, audit authority and staff of other institutions with a role in the delivery of Cohesion Policy in (e.g. the Office of Public Procurement, OLAF, Anti-Monopoly Office, etc.).

CTP managers coordinate preparation and delivery of training modules under the main themes. They communicate with the target groups – institutions and persons responsible for human resources development/training as well as lecturers. CTP provides training on key themes related to Cohesion Policy delivery, while individual institutions can initiate training on other specific topics. Specific training is organised outside of CTP by MA/IB and financed by TA from the corresponding mainstream programme. For each staff position, CTP defines a set of "compulsory" and "non-compulsory" training modules, reflecting the content of work and key competences required. Progress achieved in the "learning path" of individual employees is regularly monitored and assessed.

The delivery of CTP training modules started in spring 2017. The overall target is to train 7,000 participants during the programming period 2014-2020. By the end of 2018, a total of 307 training sessions had taken place, with more than 10,300 participants. Implementation of training courses will continue in 2019 and 2020, although the number of participants is expected to decrease as employees progress on their "learning paths".

Total costs of preparation and implementation of CTP during 2016-18 financed from OP Technical Assistance amount to 1.5 million euros. Feedback from participants, lecturers and institutions is collected on a regular basis and so far this indicates satisfaction with training content and quality and with the use of e-learning modules.

12.2. WHAT IS THE RATIONALE?

Studies and evaluations of Cohesion Policy implementation in Slovakia from the 2007-2013 period identified capacity gaps at the level of Managing Authorities, Intermediate Bodies and Audit Authorities. Despite TA investment, significant challenges remained in terms of staff turnover and retention of institutional knowledge and memory. In 2012, the Government Office of the Slovak Republic commissioned a study to identify the main causes of insufficient administrative capacity and efficiency. This identified issues with staff turnover and the lack of a standardised training system for human resources involved in Cohesion Policy delivery. Training activities implemented in the 2007-2013 period lacked a systematic approach, responsive management and relevance to the practical needs of target groups.

12.3. HOW IS TA FUNDING USED?

TA funding for the CTP is provided through Priority Axis 1 in the OP Technical Assistance. This includes a specific measure targeted at stabilising human resources involved in EU Cohesion Policy delivery. In this, the financing and training of human resources involved in management, control and audit of ESI Funds, together with the introduction of a transparent and fair system of remuneration are expected to contribute to a stable implementation system, a reduction in staff turnover and the smooth delivery of Cohesion Policy. Achievement of these objectives is measured through the following indicators: number of employees with salary funded from OP Technical Assistance, number of participants in the Central Training System and number of participants in specific training courses.

12.4. WHAT ARE THE KEY BENEFITS?

- **The introduction of CTP provided a focus and raised the awareness of human resource development issues among institutions participating in ESIF management**, as one of the prerequisites for successful implementation of funds. CTP is a good example of how TA can support cooperation between strategic players to achieve a new, common objective. From the outset, the Department for Administrative Capacities closely cooperated with the Central Coordination Authority and Certifying Authority. There is a common understanding of the importance of the quality of human resources for the smooth and sound implementation of Cohesion Policy.

- **A systematic approach to training of human resources engaged in ESIF management was introduced.** A 'competency framework' for the design of CTP sets out working positions or job profiles with a description of main tasks involved and the qualification and skills required. For each working position, there is a specific package of "compulsory" and "non-compulsory" training modules. The training programme defines "learning paths" for various target groups according their job profile and required competences. This starts with introductory modules and theoretical background and continues towards practical problem solving modules. Modules include e-learning.

- **The launch of the CTP involved the development of a comprehensive information and communication system that is innovative in the Slovakian context.** An information system for CTP management was crucial given the number of staff covered. It is the first comprehensive information system for management of training activities in the state administration in the country. The information system contains registers of all employees participating in Cohesion Policy, information on training modules, lecturers etc. This in itself is a valuable human resource management tool.

12.5. WHAT ARE THE KEY FACTORS FOR SUCCESS?

- **The impetus and specific support for change provided at EU and national levels was an important factor for ensuring effectiveness.** Commission services in the Position Paper and later during the negotiations clearly underlined the importance of strengthening administrative capacities for more effective implementation of Cohesion Policy in 2014-20 period.

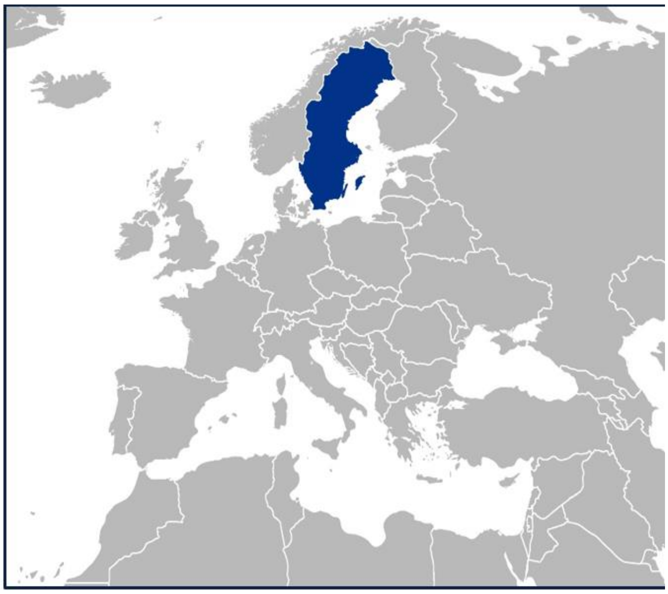
- **The establishment of new, dedicated structures responsible specifically for administrative capacities** (and training activities), especially the Department for Administrative Capacities was crucial for spearheading the design, implementation and financing of the training programme.

- **The effective introduction of the CTP was possible partly due to the strong system of central level coordination in Slovakia**. The Central Coordinating Authority and Ministry of Finance (Certifying Authority, Audit Authority) are in charge of the development of a common methodological and implementation framework for ESI Funds at national level. The development of a comprehensive, standardised approach to training is facilitated by this structural model.

12.6. WHO CAN BENEFIT FROM THE TRANSFER OF THIS PRACTICE?

Institutions managing and implementing ESIF programmes in Member States where the development of human resources and administrative capacity is hampered by institutional flux, staff turnover or other institutional factors.

13. COORDINATING SUPPORT TO BENEFICIARIES IN SWEDEN



Key Components

ISSUE: Project generation & implementation

AC: Structures, Tools

FOCUS: Programme authorities & beneficiaries

Basic Facts

MS: Sweden

FUND: ERDF

INSTITUTION: Unit for Operational Support

13.1. WHAT IS THE PRACTICE ABOUT?

In Sweden, the ERDF Managing Authority (*Tillväxtverket*) established the Unit for Operational Support in 2014 to facilitate a standardised approach to improve the development, selection and implementation of projects administered through regional offices across the country. The Unit has developed several initiatives, targeting both beneficiaries and staff working in ERDF administration to strengthen this coordinated approach to project support. A key tool for external support for applicants and beneficiaries is the Handbook for EU projects, which is available online, providing guidelines for the application process and for reporting. This was published for the first time in 2014. Similarly, for internal use, a handbook has been developed for project staff and economists working on the administration of ERDF projects in regional offices. Innovative approaches involve the use of on-line tools, which have been enhanced since 2014 and mean that project officers generally work more digitally. The Unit also develops course material and manages staff training.

13.2. WHAT IS THE RATIONALE?

The Unit for Operational Support was established as part of a comprehensive organisational restructuring in 2014. In the previous programme period, it became evident that there was not a standard approach among regional offices of the MA in the provision of services for beneficiaries. First, there was a need to develop a set of standard guidelines that was accessible to all beneficiaries across the regions. Second, there was a need to ensure that regional offices were able to provide comprehensive, coordinated support to beneficiaries. The establishment of the office required capacity building through investment in staff recruitment and training, and the development of an integrated online system to provide support and guidance to staff and beneficiaries.

13.3. HOW IS TA FUNDING USED?

The salary of the staff at the Unit for Operational Support and the regional project officers are funded 50% by TA and 50% by domestic funding. The main share of the TA funds is used for salary costs. The Unit focuses on the development of templates and forms in order to simplify the work for applicants and project officers and to reduce the number of errors. As noted, the Unit has developed tools to support staff involved in ESIF implementation as wells as applicants and beneficiaries in the Handbook for EU projects, which is available online. The Unit organises competence development initiatives for the project officers. Most of the competence development initiatives for project officers are managed by the Unit itself, but in some cases external expertise is engaged.

13.4. WHAT ARE THE KEY BENEFITS?

- **The general quality of the applications has improved and implementation has become more efficient.** The Handbook for EU projects makes clearer to beneficiaries what is required and how to fill in the application form correctly, and thereby it helps reduce the number of mistakes made by applicants. The Handbook also provides guidance for reporting, which facilitates the payment process. Implementation of projects has become more efficient. Managing authorities take on average 26 days less to finalise payments and have a low error rate in ERDF project development at 0.3% in 2018.

- **The internal training and competence development efforts have raised the capacities of project officers**, allowing them to make more informed decisions and reduce errors. Training sessions have been organised for officers on topics such as public procurement and eligible costs, which are areas where errors were frequently found. In recent years e-learning seminars and pre-recorded lectures have been used more frequently. This saves travel time and is more cost efficient. The Unit targets its activities at all regional offices. However, it is also possible to provide tailored support to offices that experience specific challenges.

- **The Unit's activities have led to a more coherent approach to project administration being adopted across the country.** The Unit has supported this through the development of the handbooks for external and internal use, the online discussion forum and competence development initiatives for project officers. The digital support system Guru (handbook and discussion forum) encourages dialogue between staff that have different functions in the administration of the ERDF and domestic programmes. Further, the internal handbook is useful when welcoming new staff, project officers and economists, to the MA, as an introduction on how to approach ERDF project administration.

> *"We use the internal handbook on a daily basis. When I look back at the previous period, we did not have a unified approach. This has changed. Today, it is also easier to start as a new employee, because you have clear guidelines to relate to."*
>
> Project Officer

- **Digitalisation of the Unit's activities has been extensive, making the implementation of competence development initiatives more efficient and more cost effective.** By using the digital tools, travel time for bringing together staff from the regional offices is reduced, and with the resources saved it is possible for the staff to prioritise participation in more competence development activities. Most recently *Tillväxtverket* has purchased a digital learning tool, which can be used for different purposes across the divisions of the authority, including for officers responsible for the ERDF. Tailored tests can be made for staff, and through the responses they submit, gaps in knowledge can be identified. They are then given an individualised guidance for where to source the knowledge they are missing, e.g. regarding specific administrative procedures.

- **The Unit provides support not only for project officers working with the ERDF, but also the national programmes.** The involvement of project officers with different functions in the administration of ERDF and national programmes has supported a common approach and has also enhanced awareness of the different programmes which has facilitated more referrals for applicants to pursue the most suitable funding opportunity within the authority.

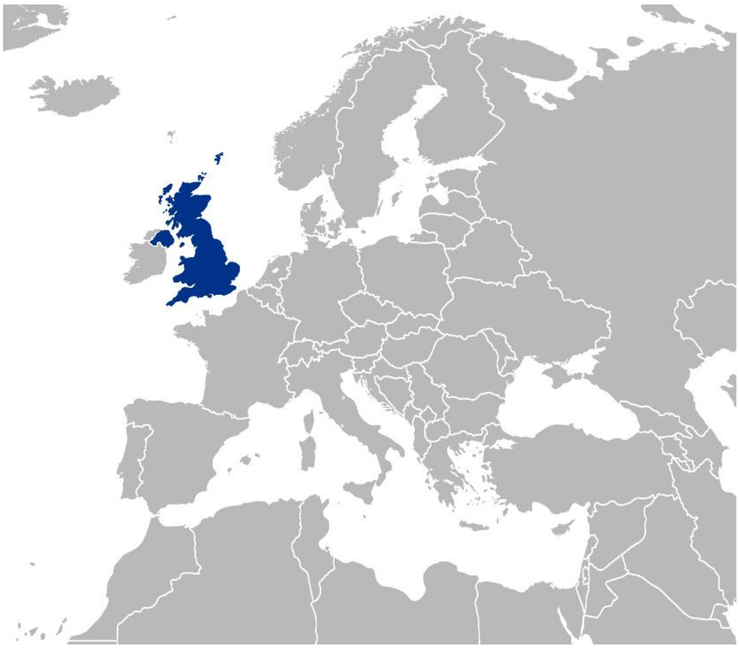
13.5. WHAT ARE THE KEY FACTORS FOR SUCCESS?

- **Close coordination with and support from central government.** In Sweden the Government cannot decide or influence how the national authorities organise internally. Thus, the decision to establish the Unit was made entirely by the management at *Tillväxtverket.* However, the authority maintains a close dialogue with the Government Office, which supports the way the authority has organised its capacity building and operational support for national programmes and the ERDF.
- **Need to recruit and retain competent staff in the central office**, covering different functions (project application support, legality, finance) that are in place across the country.
- **Nurturing a culture of cooperation among staff through digital tools.** Administrative staff across regional offices previously accustomed to working in separate settings are incentivised by these tools to participate in building a cooperative approach. By using the digital tools, travel time for bringing together staff from the regional offices is reduced, and with the resources saved it is possible for the staff to prioritise participation in more competence development activities. It is increasingly common to include all regional offices for online video meetings rather than bringing them together in one location. This applies not only to competence development, but also to regular meetings organised by the Unit,
- **Need for beneficiaries to have access to and capacity to use online support.** The online Handbook for EU Projects now provides a coherent, standardised source of guidance for applicants and beneficiaries across the country. National online tools and electronic systems that can be used at different stages of the project cycle are an important factor in the provision of this type of coordinated support.

13.6. WHO CAN BENEFIT FROM THE TRANSFER OF THIS PRACTICE?

The opportunity to establish a unit to provide operational support to both the administration of ESIF and domestic programmes may also prove beneficial and more cost-efficient elsewhere. Further, the benefit of increased efforts on digitalisation, for instance through the use of a digital discussion forum for staff, is a potentially valuable lesson that can be adopted by other managing bodies.

14. STRENGTHENING REGIONAL ENGAGEMENT IN UK (WALES)



Key Components

ISSUE: Information, support for beneficiaries, strategic targeting

AC: Structures

FOCUS: Beneficiaries

Basic Facts

MS: UK (Wales)

FUND: ESF & ERDF

INSTITUTION: Regional Engagement Teams

14.1. WHAT IS THE PRACTICE ABOUT?

TA funding in Wales has been used to establish regional engagement teams (RETs) in the four Welsh regions. The RETs have the overarching aim of ensuring that EU funding proposals add value to existing and future opportunities within these regions. Through interaction with applicants, beneficiaries and stakeholders, as well as a 'regional proofing' process, RETs ensure that projects are developed and implemented in alignment with regional strategic development priorities. The specific functions of the RETs are as follows:

- **Maintain a strategic overview of regional priorities and activities**. Acquire intelligence on regional priorities/discussions from regional working groups, participate in networking and regional engagement.
- **Regional proofing and prioritisation of operations**. Support regional partnership structures to ensure consensus on proposed activity (prioritisation), carried out by the RETs for each project application to ensure the best strategic fit with regional development priorities and wider investment activity.
- **Ensure regional priorities and interests in EU programmes**. Ensure regional consideration and participation in national strategic projects and regular engagement and reporting with the Managing Authority.
- **Identify potential integration/duplication/gaps in activity**. Ongoing mapping of activity across all funding streams across the region. Promote networking amongst projects/contacts through engagement and events.
- **Raise profile and awareness of ESI funds regionally**. Promotion of opportunities and successes of projects through regular newsletters, press releases, dissemination events and workshops.
- **Support regional aspects of monitoring and evaluation and cross-cutting themes**.
- **Support regional partnership structures, reflective of regional needs and opportunities**

The establishment of RETs allows for operations funded under the Welsh Cohesion Policy programmes to receive support in project design and implementation, increasing their value, and integrating them more effectively into a wider, coordinated regional strategic rationale.

14.2. WHAT IS THE RATIONALE?

The primary rationale for the creation of Regional Engagement Teams (RETs) has been to help support the new approach to implementation introduced for the 2014-20 Welsh Structural Funds programmes. Implementation in the current programming period has focused on the financing of a much smaller number of operations but with a much greater regional strategic rationale. There is a strong focus on strategic targeting of ESWIF (based on an economic prioritisation framework), regional spatial focus and organisational simplification (based around local authority structures). This approach is designed to maximise impact, encourage collaboration, increase the coherence of the investment and add value to the use of the funds. Technical assistance money has been used to co-finance the RETs to act as the regional partnership interface supporting this strategic approach.

In 2018, a new priority axis was introduced alongside the three existing Welsh OP priorities, namely 'Public Service Improvement through Regional Working'. This additional priority is designed to encourage new regional planning and service models, to deliver improved public service provision. The aims and objectives of this priority align with those of domestic strategies set out by the Welsh government.

14.3. HOW IS TA FUNDING USED?

TA assistance is provided to the four RETs from both the ERDF and ESF OPs. TA provides only partial funding for the RETs, which require a source of match funding. Staffing is the largest cost element for funding the RETs and other co-funded costs can include travel and subsistence, training, administration, publicity and marketing. The co-financing model differs to some degree between the four RETs. Some RETs have a single local authority acting as sole match funder while others have a lead partner local authority but with cash match funding also provided by other local authorities in that region.

14.4. WHAT ARE THE KEY BENEFITS?

- **At a managing authority level, RETs have provided a top-down, regional perspective, increasing the strategic coordination of initiatives at regional and local levels.** Through regional proofing and assistance in the delivery phase, RETs are also ensuring not only that investments are coordinated and optimised, but that they are targeted as possible to the particular demands and conditions of individual regions. The operation of the RETs also demonstrates to the European Commission that compliance with the partnership principle is active and ongoing.

- **At the regional level, the work of the RETs creates a stronger environment of collaboration and partnership, as well as 'joined-up' delivery of operations within Welsh territories.** Links to domestic regional organisations and potential collaboration opportunities are often identified by RETs in their respective regions which, through partnership and cooperation, can improve the effectiveness of involved initiatives.

- **Beneficiaries also see increased value from the presence of RETs in their respective regions**. RETs represent a regional overview and interface for stakeholders, providing a voice for regions in nationally-led programmes, working for the region as a whole, and communicating between regional stakeholders and higher levels of government and Cohesion Policy related organisations. RETs improve the quality of projects and their design by regionally proofing to the requirements of the region and, in doing so, also facilitate cooperation between stakeholders at regional and local levels. This has strengthened the representation and 'voice' of some actors, including from the third sector. Networking organised by the RETs has proven very beneficial for stakeholders and project leaders, with RETs able to draw organisations together, increasing the flow of information and improving the implementation of projects.

"The RET acted as an unbiased facilitator, making introductions and setting up conversation between organisations. This led to a very positive interaction, including amendments to the original proposal for Structural Funds finance. Although funding was not in the end successful in this case, the links and relationships formed had a positive value in themselves".

Structural and Regional Development Funds Manager, Bangor University)

14.5. WHAT ARE THE KEY FACTORS FOR SUCCESS?

The RETs effectiveness in Wales is connected to numerous key factors for success including:

- **Continuity of staff and expertise**: Length of time in post and breadth of experience are key elements influencing the effectiveness of regionally based personnel. Staff who have been involved with multiple programming periods and understand EU funding streams other than ERDF/ESF are especially valuable

- **Regional location**: The geographical location of RETs is important for the build-up of regional knowledge, credibility and connections.

- **Solid understanding of regional development context**: Personnel of the RETs must have a solid understanding of the regional development structures and initiatives within and without the Structural Funds framework.

- **Relationship building and networking**: It is important that RETs encourage partnerships and collaborations with regional partners and maintain good relationships to act effectively as catalysts for cooperation and support the delivery of operations.

- **Communication**: Effective communication is key for most aspects of RET work. This is important in multiple ways, including the dissemination of information and building relationships between organisations and stakeholders.

- **Negotiation and brokerage skills**: Effective coordination and negotiation between stakeholders, partners and organisations is important in ensuring maximum impact in projects within the RETs region. This includes being able to take an objective view of regional development needs and provide continuity in follow up.

- **Simplified structure and less bureaucracy**: The simplification of RETs compared to their previous programming period counterparts has increased the effectiveness of their operation. More focused attention and communication from RETs has allowed for greater responsiveness to changing needs and situations as well as improving stakeholder engagement, and general effectiveness

14.6. WHO CAN BENEFIT FROM THE TRANSFER OF THIS PRACTICE?

The RETs have provided a model of a regionally based interface that can bring together good knowledge of a range of regional policy and funding streams, an overview of regional development needs and gaps, and also strong links and relationships with regional organisations and potential project leaders. The RET model is an example of useful practice which has the potential to promote and support collaborative, strategically targeted and coherent regional investment activity. The experience to date of the operation of the RETs has resulted in considerable support for their future operation and role. In theory, the RET model is fully transferable to any EU (or non EU) co-funded policy framework.

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