



EUROPEAN COMMISSION
DIRECTORATE-GENERAL
REGIONAL AND URBAN POLICY

**CALL FOR EXPRESSION OF INTEREST
ON INNOVATIVE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PARTNERSHIP PRINCIPLE IN
COHESION POLICY – PHASE 2 (REOPEN)**

*Strengthening citizen participation through collaboration between public authorities
and civil society organizations*

1. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- (1) Citizens and civil society are central to ensuring good governance, and they have an important role to play in shaping the European Union and its policies. Looking in particular at cohesion policy, engaging with citizens and relevant civil society organisations (CSOs) in decision-making processes brings added value to the implementation of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), Cohesion Fund (CF) and Just Transition Fund (JTF). Managing authorities (MA), intermediate bodies (IB), and beneficiaries of 2021-2027 programmes have a key role to play in this regard as initiators and leaders, but have also a lot to gain from it. Citizen participation can improve the delivery and quality of investments, e.g. by bringing in thematic knowledge and technical know-how as well as greater transparency, accountability, and social inclusion in the implementation process.
- (2) National and regional governments decide on the involvement of relevant stakeholders for programming and management of ERDF, CF and JTF in their territory. The “European Code of Conduct on Partnership”¹ supports Member States to organise such cooperation, as partners should be involved throughout the whole programme cycle, from programming and planning of investments to evaluation of results in monitoring committees.
- (3) On 10 March 2022, DG REGIO launched a call for expression of interest (phase 1) open to public authorities and civil society organizations to test the application of innovative citizen participation approaches for managing and implementing EU funds for cohesion policies. In July 2022, DG REGIO selected seven proposals. Six of them started receiving support by OECD experts.
- (4) The realization of such proposals provides evidence on the implementation of participatory processes, mainly in the context of Policy Objective “Europe closer to citizens” at local level. The ongoing six projects work on the following innovative participatory processes: deliberative processes (in Poland and Romania), co-creation processes (in Slovakia and Romania), youth engagement (in Italy), and multi-stage process to build on deliberative assembly (in Spain).

¹ Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) No 240/2014 of 7 January 2014 on the European code of conduct on partnership in the framework of the European Structural and Investment Funds

(5) On 16 February 2023, DG REGIO launched this second call for expression of interest (phase 2) to extend cooperation between public authorities and civil society organizations on citizens participation in EU cohesion policy. The call closed on 30 April 2023. 3 pilot actions were selected in June 2023. In order to assist up to 10 pilot actions under phase 2, DG REGIO decided to reopen this call for expression of interest until 30 November 2023. One additional pilot action was selected. Since the cumulative number of 10 pilot actions has not been reached the call of expression of interest has been reopened until 31 March 2024. Expression of interest will be assessed on a continuous basis until a total number of 10 pilot actions will be accomplished for phase 2.

2. OBJECTIVE OF THE CALL

(7) Under this second Call, the Directorate General for Regional and Urban Policy of the European Commission (hereinafter DG REGIO) aims to cooperate with up to 10 public authorities responsible for managing or implementing ERDF, CF or JTF either as managing authorities, intermediate bodies or beneficiaries (hereafter public authorities) and 10 CSOs, to engage citizens in cohesion policy (see heading 4 on eligible applicants).

(8) Through this cooperation, DG REGIO seeks to:

a)

- i. Test and assess the application of innovative citizen participation approaches for managing, implementing and monitoring EU funds under cohesion policy.
- ii. Institutionalise use of participatory methodologies in the context of managing, implementing and/or monitoring EU funds under cohesion policy;

b) Identify conditions, actions and resources necessary to build strong and long-lasting partnerships to promote citizen participation in cohesion policy.

c) Collect good practices of citizen participation in cohesion policy to be shared among and beyond project partners.

d) Promote peer learning and support community of practitioners.

- (9) To achieve this objective, DG REGIO will cooperate with and use the expertise of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) for implementing the pilot. The OECD experts will:
- a)
 - i. Accompany public authorities and CSOs in establishing the right methodology for participation.
 - ii. Advise public authorities and CSOs (if involved) in institutionalisation of participatory methodologies².
 - b) Support public authorities and CSOs in building an enabling environment for collaboration and partnership.
 - c) Advise both public authorities and CSOs in the implementation of participatory processes.
- (10) Work will be carried out in the framework of a pilot action. Public authorities and civil society organisations will receive support for their joint proposal to implement in an innovative way the partnership principle in the context of design, implementation and/or monitoring at the level of programme, strategy and/or investment under 2021-2027 programmes.
- (11) The innovative character of project proposals will be assessed taking into account existing best practices on innovative citizen participation, including deliberative processes (see for example the OECD publications “[Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions](#)” and “[OECD Guidelines for Citizen Participation Processes](#)”), and the specific context and challenges in order to determine the potential lessons that can be learned.
- (12) The proposals selected will complement the applications selected in phase 1 and already in phase 2, by widening the participatory methodologies applied, and by broadening the typology of actors to also cover actors at regional level.

² See OECD publication “[Eight ways to institutionalise deliberative democracy](#)”

- (13) Provided that the minimum requirements to be shortlisted are fulfilled, at least one eligible proposal which aims at applying a participatory process at regional level and at least one eligible proposal which aims at applying a participatory process in the context of a Territorial Just Transition Plan will be selected.
- (14) The experiences from the pilot projects will contribute to improving operational knowledge to be disseminated through publications, capacity building activities, and through a REGIO Peer2Peer+ community.
- (15) The pilot will require active participation of the selected public authorities and civil society organisations. They will need to delegate employees to participate in interviews/discussions/meetings/workshops and to contribute to/review documents in English. They are expected to commit to make necessary resources (financial and human) available to participate in this pilot.
- (16) This Call will not result in the award of funding to the public authorities and civil society organisations expressing their interest in participation in this pilot. The costs associated with the participation in this pilot may be covered through technical assistance funding of the concerned operational programme.
- (17) Applicants are expected, or at least encouraged, to have previously validated the proposal with the political level in charge of the implementation of the concerned operational programme. Political commitment is essential for the implementation of participatory processes and to ensure impact in the decision making.
- (18) Assistance will be provided by the OECD to public authorities and civil society organisation in two phases:

step I (review of project proposals/training/assistance to plan and set-up activities)

step II (assistance to complete activities and feed-back to beneficiaries)

The pilot is expected to be completed in December 2024 with the publication of the final report and public presentation of results.

3. EXPECTED OUTCOMES

(19) The Action provides a basis for the dissemination of good practices across EU Member States on citizen participation. It encourages public authorities to collaborate with citizens and CSOs throughout the cohesion policy cycle, which can be replicated in other policy areas and by other authorities in the same Member State. In general terms, this action aims at raising awareness and building skills at the EU level on citizen participation, CSO collaboration, and open government.

4. WHO CAN APPLY UNDER THIS CALL

(20) The Call for expression of interest targets public authorities responsible for managing or implementing the ERDF, CF or JTF either as managing authorities, intermediate bodies or beneficiaries (hereafter public authorities) jointly with

(21) Civil society organisations (CSOs). A CSO is a non-profit organisation (private or public). Natural persons are not eligible.

(22) Participation of civil society organisations is optional in case the pilot action focuses on institutionalising participative methodologies.

(23) Selected public authorities and civil society organisations will commit to minimize the environmental impact of activities necessary for the implementation of pilot projects. They are also invited to set up gender balanced teams and to ensure an inclusive workplace during the entire duration of cooperation with OECD experts.

(24) Selected public authorities and civil society organisations already receiving assistance under phase 1 of this call are not allowed to apply.

5. ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

(25) To be eligible, the expression of interest will have to meet all the following eligibility criteria:

ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA		REFERENCE IN THE APPLICATION FORM
1.A	<p>The proposal is jointly presented by a public authority and a civil society organisation (if involved).</p> <p>The public authority and civil society organisation have appointed a dedicated interlocutor to work with the European Commission/OECD on the pilot project.</p> <p>The application form is signed by representatives of both the public authority and civil society organisation with the power to commit resources for this pilot for a duration of 18 months.</p>	Section 1 and signature
1.B	The managing authority has informed the relevant national coordinating body/ministry (or equivalent) about the application.	Section 2
1.C	The public authority and civil society organisation (if involved) have pre-identified the instrument or operational programme that will be open for participation of citizens. Applicants have identified the moment in the management cycle of the ERDF, JTF or CF where citizens' inputs will be used. Applicants commit to implementing a participatory methodology that is innovative, meaning going beyond consultations of the public or already implemented methodologies. Applicants have pre-identified a specific methodology to apply in the context of management of the ERDF, JTF, Cohesion Fund, for example a deliberative process, a participatory budget, a digital platform, etc.	Sections 4
1.D	The public authority (or the relevant authority) has expressed political commitment to implement the participatory process – and take the relevant inputs into consideration – as part of this project.	Section 2, 3 and 6

6. CRITERIA FOR SHORTLISTING EXPRESSIONS OF INTEREST

(26) The eligible expressions of interest will be assessed in a two-step selection process:

(27) As a first step, expressions of interest will be checked according to the following criteria:

CRITERIA FOR SHORTLISTING APPLICANTS		REFERENCE IN THE APPLICATION FORM
2.A	Clarity in ambitions and expected long - term impact from involving citizens	Section 3
2.B	<p>Relevance of operational objectives to reach through innovative citizen participation mechanisms.</p> <p>In case the pilot action focuses on institutionalising the participation mechanisms, the applicant should demonstrate a good</p>	Sections 4

	experience of applying the participation mechanisms for achievement of operational objectives.	
2.C	Quality of envisaged cooperation between public authority and civil society organisation.	Section 5
2.D	Appropriateness of team from public authority and civil society organisation.	Section 6

(28) In the second step, expressions of interest will be checked against the following criteria:

CRITERIA FOR SHORTLISTING APPLICANTS		REFERENCE IN THE APPLICATION FORM
2.D	30-minute interview where applicants explain their motivation to cooperate in the pilot action and support expected from the OECD on the implementation of the innovative participatory process chosen.	N/A

ASSESSMENT PROCESS

- (29) DG REGIO will assess expressions of interest on a continuous basis according to criteria described above.
- (30) Expression of interest will be checked against the eligibility criteria and assessed according to the selection criteria of this Call.
- (31) The assessment will be carried out by a selection panel consisting of representatives of the European Commission. The OECD representatives will participate in the selection panel as observers in an advisory capacity. The final decision on the shortlist will be taken by the European Commission.
- (32) Applicant will be informed about the decision taken after completion of each step of the assessment process.
- (33) The selection panel will inform eligible applicant, invited for interview at least two weeks in advance of the day of interview.
- (34) The applicant will receive the result of the assessment within 8 weeks from reception of their expression of interest.
- (35) The shortlisting of an expression of interest does not constitute a binding commitment – either implicit or explicit – on the part of the European Commission to provide support to public authorities and civil society organisations.

7. PROCEDURE FOR SUBMISSION OF EXPRESSION OF INTEREST

- (36) Public authorities and civil society organisations expressing their interest to participate in this pilot should complete jointly the application form provided in Annex 1 of this Call.
- (37) The application form is to be completed in English.
- (38) The expression of interest should be submitted electronically to the following email address: REGIO-E1-ADMINISTRATIVE-CAPACITY@ec.europa.eu

8. ELIGIBLE PERIOD FOR SUBMISSION OF EXPRESSIONS OF INTEREST

- (39) Expressions of interest submitted **until 31 March 2024** will be assessed until a total of 10 pilot actions under phased 2 is selected.
- (40) Expressions of interest submitted after the end of the eligible period will not be considered.

9. CONTACT

In case of any questions, please contact REGIO-E1-ADMINISTRATIVE-CAPACITY@ec.europa.eu

ANNEX I

Application form