

Concept note on the response of the Institution Building Tools to the COVID-19 crisis in support of the Team Europe approach

May 2020

The **Communication on the Global EU Response to COVID-19** of 8 April 2020¹ emphasises the role of technical assistance in assisting Partner Countries to manage the COVID-19 outbreak, its repercussions in key sectors, and the preparation of coordinated exit and recovery strategies.

With their reliance on cooperation between the Commission and Member States to deliver assistance to beneficiaries, TAIEX and Twinning **embody the spirit of Team Europe**. Against this background, it is key that the instruments are fully used in the operationalisation of Team Europe packages and the development of an integrated, evidence-based technical assistance approach.

The National Contact Points (NCPs) in Partner Countries and in Member State (MS) remain an intrinsic part of the institution building instruments and the **success that they are**. Building on the close cooperation within the Institution Building Community (IB Community), and further to consultations with representatives from MS and PC, this note sets out the **efforts of the Institution-Building Community to support Team Europe by ensuring the continued functionality and responsiveness of both TAIEX and Twinning** in crisis situations. Further to consultations, all parties concur in identifying the following immediate challenges:

- securing the availability of experts,
- jointly assessing and addressing needs arising from the pandemic and its aftermath,
- building up online solutions.

Initial steps taken to cope with the pandemic

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, a **number of initiatives have been taken to ensure the business continuity** of both TAIEX and Twinning focussing in particular on the following aspects:

- Engaging the community of experts and practitioners to explore joint solutions and maximise the efficiency of our response;
- Prioritising TAIEX activities with a COVID-19 dimension to ensure targeted and swift action on key priorities;
- Introducing increased flexibility² for the implementation of Twinning projects;
- Providing guidance and support on Twinning implementation, supporting continued implementation/preparation of projects and gathering operational information;
- Continuous assessment of experiences and lessons learnt from online implementation of Twinning projects as well as cross-learning from experiences with digital solutions to TAIEX;

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/joint_communication_global_eu_covid-19_response_en.pdf

² Flexibility arrangements regarding Twinning contracts in the context of the COVID-19 emergency situation, Ares(2020)1847623 - 31/03/2020

- Preparing for a gradual return to normality for TAIEX and Twinning, combining the key assets of the tools with the best practices and lessons learnt from the crisis.

Preparing for digital leap

The pandemic revealed the need for **innovative solutions to enable the digital leap** of both TAIEX and Twinning. Developing online solutions to keep TAIEX and Twinning operational is key as a response to the pandemics and its consequences. The following actions are being put in place:

- an **operational manual for online workshops and expert missions** to facilitate partners and experts to go on-line with their events (translation to French is foreseen)
- The addition of a **facility for simultaneous interpretation** is also being addressed in parallel to the work on the manual.
- The first fully-fledged online workshop, mobilising experts of four Member States took place on 12 May for the six Western Balkan countries (<https://twitter.com/LMeredithEU/status/1260191675915423744>)
- To speed up and facilitate the application process for on-line events, a **simplified summary application form** is available and already used. As of now applications for on-line events using this form can be send to the following mailbox: NEAR-TaskCard@ec.europa.eu.
- The possibility to make enhanced use of existing local expertise until the travel restrictions are eased has also been considered yet it may be challenging within current rules.

The diverging IT robustness and capacity remains a **concern**. Several additional options are under consideration such as the **provision of local IT support** for the beneficiaries, **including renting of rooms for videoconferences** to offer a digitally equipped space for the exchanges.

For **Twinning, the flexibility arrangements** facilitating the use of on-line solutions assisted in keeping 72 out of 101 ongoing projects working remotely having adapted their work plans to the changed circumstances and needs of the Partner administrations. Twinning partners, together with EU Delegations and Contracting Authorities re-designed jointly with the EU Member States and the Partner Countries suitable activities to implement them on remote and other activities that requires physical presence (e.g. on-site visits/study visits) have been postponed. Continued monitoring of the situation with focus on clarifying arising questions and learning from lessons learned. Reflecting on new ideas including on how to better equip Twinning with on-line solutions will be an important feature for forthcoming discussions of the Institution Building Community.

The contribution of TAIEX and Twinning to the Team Europe approach going forward

It is clear that the pandemic will have severe global impact, with repercussions felt in many sectors of socio-economic life. It is therefore key to get an overview of the needs of the individual Partner Country and beneficiary in order to ensure targeted, efficient assistance, and to allow Member States administrations to plan their interventions and resources. On the basis of lessons learnt in the past two months and consultations with NCPs in MS and PC, a number of steps can be identified going forward.

Partner Countries have agreed to **map their individual (short and long term) needs** linked to the COVID-19 and to identify the sectors in which they see the biggest potential for TAIEX online implementation. This should allow for **enhanced** efficiency in a context of

limited availability of experts. These requests are now prioritised and aggregated into **thematic clusters** and will be addressed to Member States administrations, which indicated having expertise in the same clusters to secure the availability of experts and swift implementation using on-line option.

Further to meetings with NCPs from MS and PC, we have jointly identified **priority sectors of intervention**. Member States (DE, EE, ES, FI, FR, IT, LT, PL, RO, SE, SI) have also signalled their expertise availability including in the following clusters: **digital** (interoperable IT components and system. E-governance; cybersecurity; e-education; e-health); **security** (cybercrime, police, border management, civil protection, internal security); **internal market** (statistics, finance Customs; audits); **health and welfare** (service systems, youth wellbeing, education, vulnerable group support, social security, domestic valance, food safety), **rule of law** (gender equality), **environment** (management of civil aviation). Partner Countries (AL, AM, DZ, GE, LBE, ME and TN) have communicated their needs in terms of priority sectors of intervention. Overall, most demands focus on the **health sector** (enhanced responsiveness to crisis in short and long term at institutional and operational levels) and **economic recovery** (mitigation of COVID-19 impact in terms of employment policy support to the most vulnerable (women and young people) and support to SMEs/start-ups). In addition, **digital** (in particular, e-education and e-governance) has been also widely mentioned by Partner Countries.

This information will serve as a basis to design targeted actions as well as the mentioned above clusters. **Flagship events** should be prepared in health sector, the economic recovery, education, cybersecurity and fight against domestic violence. **The support of the Institution Building Community to implement and fine-tune the new approaches will be instrumental for their successes.**

The discussions within the Institution Building Community confirmed, that the flexibility arrangements introduced for **Twinning** were highly appreciated and have enabled telework for all the stakeholders. However in some instances, continuing Twinning projects was not possible due to the specific circumstances, set objectives and corresponding decisions taken by the Authorities at country level or by the relevant Contracting Authority in dialogue with the implementing partners. In such cases, the activities had to be suspended. It is already anticipated that projects' activities in the field should resume as soon as situation allows.

Partner Countries remain engaged in the **preparation of new Twinning projects**. **Member States have confirmed their interest and commitment** to respond to calls for proposals and to implement Twinning projects. Following the advice of the Institution Building Community we will endeavour to shorten the delays of the inter-service consultations for projects responding to COVID, and continue to advise the Contracting Authorities to allow longer delays for the submission of proposals whenever possible. The frequent interactions and discussions will continue to learn from the on-going lessons and to reflect on new ideas to further equip Twinning to react in crisis situations. In this context, a set of Frequently Asked Questions will be developed and up-dated on continuous basis. The possibility of creating a dedicated discussion groups to reflect on specific topics will be also piloted.

Twinning experts present in a given Country may also provide temporary assistance, following the specific rules provided in the Manual, to countries other than the one of their

posting, which can offer an additional possibility to implement short-term actions including TAIEX events.

Taking into account the need to increase the number and quality of online exchanges as a permanent feature of peer-to-peer operations, a suggestion has been put forward to explore possibilities for developing a TAIEX **e-platform** allowing for wider access to the most successful exchanges and best practices. Such e-platform would need to build on the current TAIEX IT system with careful analysis of possible functionalities and thus developed in a longer-term perspective. In a short term and to timely share information, use of the “**TAIEX library**” feature will be enhanced to quickly inform all NCPs on the details of each implemented COVID 19 event. Such information should be available within one hour of the event being approved for implementation.

Co-ordination and knowledge gathering

In pursuing all above actions it is important to **avoid duplication and overlaps** between technical assistance provided by TAIEX and Twinning and other assistance programmes. The TAIEX and Twinning consultation processes, involving relevant Commission DGs and services and EU Delegations, will be further geared to play an important role in this respect.

Furthermore, **knowledge exchanges** allowing **TAIEX and Twinning experts** to share their experience on specific sectors will be facilitated. The **in-depth knowledge of TAIEX** and in particular **Twining experts** who can provide **first-hand information** on the needs and challenges represent a resourceful added value and additional opportunity of cross-fertilization.

Going back to normal: preparation

Once **experts** are able to travel again, we will adjust the TAIEX rules to enable the possibility of supporting the acquisition of personal protective equipment for travelling experts, and offering transportation via taxi as opposed to public transport, as well as ensuring social distancing in meeting rooms, in line with the national measures in place.

The digital solutions will be used in a **longer-term perspective** to mitigate the economic and social consequences and to build overall resilience. The aim is to enlarge the offer, not to replace the face-to-face experience, and to **further “green” the TAIEX Instrument**.

Next steps

The cross-learning and coordination including cross-fertilisation between Twinning and TAIEX will be ensured via the **regular dialogue** on COVID-19 measures **with NCPs from MS and PCs and the EU Delegations** in the countries. Such dialogues will be organised in a sequential manner with possibilities to create specific working groups and explore new ideas, which may arise during the implementation of the instruments. Furthermore, discussions with other stakeholders active in the field of public expertise can be foreseen to ensure cross-fertilisation and co-ordination of efforts. For Twinning projects, the design of a method to gather information regarding the SDGs will be further pursued.

This concept note should be therefore treated as a **starting point**, which should evolve in line with the progress made, new developments introduced and overall pace of discussions within the Institution-Building Community.