

Q&A with MS and PC NCPs regarding Twinning in the COVID-19 crisis context
(WebEx meetings of 23 and 30 April)

1) How can we ensure proper functioning of Twinning following the COVID-19 crisis?

With the primary objective to enable the continuation of Twinning projects, Director Lawrence Meredith on 31 March issued a [Note](#) for the attention of EU Delegations (EUDs) and Contracting Authorities (CAs) in IPA and ENI Countries outlining possible flexibility arrangements regarding Twinning contracts in the context of the COVID-19 emergency. Subsequently, the Twinning Coordination Team organised a series of online meetings with the Contracting Authorities to further clarify the arrangements. At the same time, it is important to explore all the possible options and available solutions together with the Member States (MSs), Partner Countries (PCs) and the CAs, such as the application of flexibility arrangements and activities continuing remotely for the time being when possible. With this in mind, we intend to continue and build on the dialogue we have with the MSs as the crisis unfolds.

2) How can we reform Twinning to be a more flexible instrument?

DG NEAR continues the discussion with all the MSs, PCs and CAs to come to a shared understanding and reach consensus on adequate steps forward. Against this background, it is essential that all the stakeholders agree and are on board before moving ahead. It is equally important to preserve the competitive nature of Twinning. As it stands now, the Twinning selection process allows the PCs to have a fundamental say in the selection of the proposals, which is crucial for the ownership of the project and its successful implementation.

3) Can we deviate generously from objectives and activities actually planned or add new activities?

As far as specific projects are concerned, any changes to the objectives or activities have to be jointly assessed on a case-by-case basis and agreed with both the beneficiary administration and the CA. It is important to note that the formal procedure has to be followed in all cases. The CAs are best placed to advise on this.

4) How to formalise activities conducted remotely in terms of eligibility of costs?

The implementing partners are invited to make use of the available corresponding templates of the Twinning Manual. It is recommended to consult and agree on this with the CAs in case of any doubts.

5) How can we ensure that time for MS to submit proposals is extended beyond the standard 8 weeks?

The CAs are advised to extend the deadline beyond the 8 weeks foreseen in the Manual if the situation allows it (e.g. not in conflict with tight contracting deadlines). The CAs are aware of the challenges that the MSs are currently facing.

6) How can we ensure flexibility to start the project and arrival of the RTA?

The Director's Lawrence Meredith note specifically allows flexibility in this regard. In each case, the CAs together with the PCs and the implementing partners assess the situation and jointly agree on the best possible solution. In some cases, it means that the RTA and his/ her RTA Counterpart can start developing the first rolling work plan remotely. In others, it might mean postponing the start of the project. It is essential to approach each situation taking into account the needs and capacities of both the beneficiary administration and the MS(s).

7) How can the EU Delegations assist the RTAs in case of their departure from the partner country?

The RTAs are assisted by both the EUD and their respective MS embassies. The EUDs assist and exercise their duty of care by facilitating the organisation of the departure of the RTA(s) to the extent possible. The implementation of the departure stays under the competence of the MS embassy of the corresponding nationality (or any other EU embassy if the MS of origin of the RTA is not present in the third country), as it is a matter of consular protection and under the current set up of the Treaties is the competence of the EU MS national authorities.

8) How can we purchase necessary IT equipment above the allowed 5 000€ to maintain the possibility to work with partner organisations?

For the time being, the Twinning Manual stipulates that the limit cannot be exceeded and the implementing partners are invited to explore other possibilities available to CAs. Beyond that, the Twinning Coordination Team is looking into the possibility to increase this amount.

9) Can you confirm that all costs related to RTA expenses and other experts' expenses are eligible?

The Director's Lawrence Meredith note indicates what costs are eligible. As a rule of thumb, the costs are eligible other than travelling and per diem for the Short Term Experts. Monthly travel allowance for RTA cannot be paid as the reimbursement is done on the basis that the monthly travel took place. The implementing partners are invited to consult CAs in case of any doubt.

10) Why do CAs have to consult project decisions with the NEAR C.3?

NEAR C3 supports the CAs in the interpretation of the Twinning Manual. That said, the CAs consult NEAR C3 only in case of doubt. CAs have the full responsibility for the decisions related to the management of the contracts.

11) Can we have a fast-track procedure to define new Twinning?

Twinning as an institution-building tool has been designed to support medium to long-term policy reforms rather than to provide short term or crisis assistance, where perhaps TAIX or other means of technical assistance can be more suitable. When it comes to identification and formulation of new Twinning projects, the process is always conducted in keeping with the Commission's programming cycle of financial assistance.

12) How do we ensure that remote working arrangements become a permanent possibility in Twinning?

The spirit of the Twinning instrument is linked to the physical deployment of civil servants from MSs to PCs. As the backbone of any project, the RTA's presence within the beneficiary administration and his/her daily work with the RTA Counterpart is the most clear example. The presence ensuring the connection between administrations is very important in Twinning projects as experts from MS bring not only technical expertise, but also a model and an administrative culture. The possibility of remote working has been introduced for the first time under the current crisis circumstances, hence being a first test it is as well a learning process where it is already evident the agreement of all the implementing stakeholders remain fundamental. We are ready to assess which measures have proved to be effective and if the rules can be further adapted.

13) Can we have more flexibility with regard to the current requirement of side letters, addendums and steering committees every three months?

The rules and procedures of the Twinning Manual continue to apply in the current context of COVID-19 crisis and the flexibility arrangements, even for the remote activities. In case of any doubt, the implementing partners are invited to consult CAs.

14) How can we ensure the Manual is clearer, especially for remote working arrangements, and that there is greater coherence between its provisions and the decisions of the CAs?

As a rule, CAs follow the rules and procedures of the Manual and consult NEAR C.3 in case they have doubts regarding the interpretation. In the context of the COVID-19 crisis, NEAR C3 has conducted a series of Video conferences (VTCs) with the EUDs colleagues in the IPA and

ENI regions to ensure coherence in the application of the flexibility arrangements. Similar VTCs will continue to be organised on a regular basis with this objective in mind.

15) Can the EC encourage PCs to make use of remote working arrangements?

NEAR C.3 is in regular dialogue with the CAs and PCs and one of the objective of these exchanges is to encourage flexible solutions in the short/medium term, such as organising activities remotely whenever suitable and possible.

16) How can we improve coordination between different actions in the PCs?

One of the key roles of the EU Delegations in the field is to ensure coordination under different actions. For instance, via regular meetings with the Heads of Missions chaired by the Head of Delegation or meetings of Cooperation Attachés of the EU MS Embassies and the Head of Cooperation and his/her team. Against this background, NEAR C.3 will continue to play its role and contribute to enhance coordination among different actions during the programming cycle and the dialogue with colleagues at the EU Delegations.

17) How can we ensure that PCs have the necessary IT equipment?

Purchasing IT equipment is normally not a main objective in Twinning projects, however in the exceptional current context the CAs are actively exploring ways to provide support in this regard, possibly by other funds available in the framework of other instruments. Building on this experience the PCs could develop strategic IT contingency plans with capacities and needs clearly identified to optimise business continuity. Based on these plans the development partners could then best support the gaps identified by the PCs. This is an approach that, for instance, the SIGMA programme is promoting in IPA countries and beyond, for example in Jordan.

18) Can we ensure that the information following the evaluation process is more in-depth and detailed?

When informing about the results of the selection process, the CAs share the evaluation grid. The CAs are well aware of the importance of the statements provided by the evaluation grids and are accustomed to substantiate their choices and be specific, when defining weak points or particular comments, which were the defining elements for the non-awarded proposal vs the selected one. The MSs can also always ask for additional feedback to the CAs.

19) Can we encourage French-speaking PCs to accept proposals from non-French speaking PCs?

Every Twinning has a language assistant and extra interpretation and translation assistance can be mobilised for implementation purposes. In this regards, we are consistently advising CAs that it is not necessary for the MSs experts to be fluent in the official working language of the PC.

20) Can we extend the remote missions for experts beyond 3 working days?

The implementing partners should agree on the duration of the mission, which would best support the successful project implementation. Once the agreement has been reached, we invite them to consult and agree with the corresponding CA.

21) Teleworking is a cultural obstacle for the Partner countries not used to these means of working and are usually seen with scepticism mainly because of lack of IT skills and capacities.

Twinning can contribute to cultural shifts. When experts from MS work in PC they bring with them not only technical expertise, but also an administrative model and culture. Under the current circumstances, adapting with flexibility the activities in some cases Twinning projects have included trainings on how to deal with teleworking.

22) Work Achieved in some projects can become secondary in these circumstances where managing the crisis has become a priority.

Twinning activities may be shaped, in some cases, to support the crisis management, in complementary with results achieved and future actions planned. This possibility has been used, for example, in two projects in Israel, one in Waste management sector and one in Telecommunications, where adaptations were made to improve safety of staff in first case and readiness of increased traffic of data in the second.

23) How can we make sure that Resident Twinning advisors' assistants stay in their jobs when the project is suspended?

Once suspended, all subcontracts (like the service contract with the RTA Assistants) is either suspended or terminated depending on the provisions therein. An early termination of contract may have a penalty fee, which can be paid as it is a cost that cannot be avoided (irrevocable cost).

24) As some activities cannot be carried out remotely and are postponed or cancelled, can projects be extended and is an introduction of a simplified project extension procedure under consideration?

The extension procedure of the contract must follow the general rules foreseen for grant contracts, where an extension is considered a substantial change to the original contract and, therefore, an addendum must be produced with all original signatories, no shortcuts are currently possible.

25) Would it be possible for the Twinning community to introduce a preferably universal, set of more advanced on- and offline tools to use for reporting and monitoring (including Mission Report/Mission Certificate signatures), as well as for communication and document sharing (incl. IT solutions) during the remote Twinning project implementation process?

The rules, procedures and reporting forms of the Twinning Manual continue to apply in the current context. Twinning is an assistance delivery modality and as such so far has not been focused on providing IT solutions to the Twinning partners. As part of the learning process undertaken in the context of this crisis, we would take into consideration any contribution that the Twinning community would share in order to facilitate the use of IT technologies for the remote implementation of Twinning projects.

26) Some of the projects have raised concerns over sharing confidential data via online servers. What is the position of the EC on how the security of the data shared via online platforms during teleworking can be ensured?

The CAs have the responsibility to ensure the confidentiality of the data that need to be confidential as well as the protection of data related to individuals in the context of the call for proposals, selection, evaluation and contracting of project. With regard to the confidentiality of data transmitted during remote activities, the organiser must ensure a level of security sufficient for the type of information that may be streamed or stored in servers. In addition, the organiser must always inform the participants about the conditions of the seminar (if it will be streamed by internet, if will also be stored for a period, etc).

27) What are the recommendations regarding the project visibility activities such as conferences, roundtables, etc. during the time of the pandemic?

In all situations, the guidelines on communication and visibility will apply and the acknowledgment of the funding source must be visible during the events. It is recommended that the arrangements are discussed and agreed with the relevant CA.

28) Will there be any guidelines introduced by the EC specifying common rules, approaches and tools for operations online?

All online experiences in Twinning are still at an early stage. It is therefore premature to define common rules, approaches and tools for online operations in the various PCs, an analysis of the experience gathered will be done to assess the feasibility of defining common rules.

29) Will Twinning projects be more flexible in terms of revising/modifying the activities that envisage PC financial contributions, with a view of better adjusting to the new reality created as a result of the pandemic?

Twinning projects require in-kind contributions rather than direct financial contribution to activities. The revision of activities is already foreseen under the Twinning contract and it is recommended that Project Steering Committees and Interim Quarterly Reports be used to re-assess the projects in order to better adapt them to the changing situation.

30) What are the possible ways of addressing the issue of study visits during the pandemic? What would be an alternative method of delivering more or less the same results without holding the study visit, if necessary?

The first recommendation would be to postpone the study visits until it will be possible to implement them. The essence of the study visits is to observe onsite experiences in a MS. If it is not possible to wait, in dialogue with the CA and the MS, the alternative could be to re-think what the study visit was going to cover initially and to re-organise it in as a remote activity with the MS colleagues hosting the study visit via audio-visual tools