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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF THE EVALUATION

Mid-term evaluation of the JASPERS initiative in 2014-2020

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Joint Assistance to Support Projects in European Regions (JASPERS), which was launched in 2006, is an initiative of the European Commission and the European Investment Bank (EIB) aimed at providing independent and free technical advisory services to all Member States and pre-accession countries¹ in all sectors relevant for EU funded investments.

This evaluation aims to assess the services provided by JASPERS in the period 2014-2018 and how they contributed to the development of high-quality, mature infrastructure projects as well as to the technical capacity of managing authorities and beneficiaries to prepare such projects. It follows the five evaluation criteria defined by the European Commission's Better Regulation guidelines: effectiveness, efficiency, coherence, relevance and EU added value. The analysis was designed to take into account various limitations that were identified. These are linked to the definition of the objectives, data collection and availability, strategic needs analysis etc. and which were addressed via proxy analysis. The baseline for this evaluation is the 2007-2013 period, when JASPERS was operating with a smaller quantitative scope and geographical coverage.

In the 2014-2020 programming period, the general objective of the JASPERS initiative was to improve the quality of investments supported by EU funds, as was the case for the 2007-2013 period. JASPERS assistance covered advisory services for potential investments supported by the following EU funds (mandates): European Regional Development Fund and Cohesion Fund²; Connecting Europe Facility since 2015; Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance Fund (IPA II) since 2016. Over the evaluated period, JASPERS has operated on a demand basis in response to specific requests made by Member States, with the subsequent agreement of the Commission. Each task implemented by JASPERS is referred to as an 'assignment'.

Different types of services provided by JASPERS:

- a) technical advisory services – designed to improve the projects intended for EU financing;
- b) review function – designed to assist Member States and the Commission in assessing whether or not major projects fulfil the quality regulatory criteria required for EU funding;
- c) capacity building and horizontal/strategic support – to strengthen Member States' capacity to identify, prepare and implement projects, and to provide support in preparing national/regional strategies for the implementation of EU cohesion policy.

In 2014-2018, the JASPERS portfolio included 1,096 assignments for all mandates and services. The European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) mandate was the largest in the JASPERS portfolio, with close to 960 assignments, followed by the IPA mandate with around 100 assignments.

The evaluation finds that its activities expanded both in scope and volume during 2014-2018 compared to the previous period. JASPERS also diversified its portfolio by including a new function for the quality review of major ESIF projects. In the first 5 years of the 2014-2020

¹ Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, the Republic of North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Turkey.

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence.

² Referred to as the ESIF (European Structural and Investment Funds) mandate.

programming period, JASPERS received more requests for services than in the entire 2007-2013 period.

Effectiveness

The evaluation finds that the timing of JASPERS advisory involvement in preparing for major projects had a significant impact on its effectiveness. Early involvement of its advisory services was associated with shorter core project preparation relative to the overall project lifecycle.

The evidence suggests that its review function was relatively effective in flagging quality issues. The Commission then included those in its letters to Member States, setting out the reasons for requesting improvements (i.e. interrupting projects).

While a large majority of capacity-building activities were completed and achieved their objective of delivering training to the Member States, there is little evidence that these have triggered a visible ripple effect in reducing Member States' reliance on the support provided for project preparation. This should be the ultimate objective in principle.

Efficiency

The evaluation finds little correlation between work intensity and the duration of assignments. Preliminary evidence on developments over time indicates a need for further in-depth reflection on how to optimise the allocation of work effort and rationalise costs.

While JASPERS services were generally found to be efficient in terms of completing the assignments during the period 2014-2018, the evaluation concludes that the planning and management of administratively closed assignments can be improved.

Coherence

During the period 2014-2018, JASPERS services were coherent with EU requirements set by cohesion policy legislation and the EU-level objectives for climate, environment and regulatory requirements for competition. The evidence also suggests a high degree of internal coherence between the different independent JASPERS divisions. However, there was limited evidence of JASPERS cooperating with other technical assistance initiatives of the Commission.

Relevance

JASPERS advisory services remained relevant in the 2014-2020 period. In addition, for the 2014-2020 programming period, JASPERS provided a new kind of support in the form of reviewing the quality of new major projects submitted for EU funding, as required by the regulations.

Its activities continued to be demand-driven, with assignments initiated wholly at the request of Member States or pre-accession countries. This probably limited the strategic planning of these activities.

EU added value

The consultation carried out indicates that JASPERS services are appreciated by stakeholders due to the technical expertise and EU-wide experience acquired while working in many countries and with the Commission. This is also because accessing support did not entail a public procurement process and was provided free of charge.

Overall, the evaluation finds that:

- JASPERS technical advisory services contributed to a faster and better preparation of projects leading to a faster mobilisation of EU funds.
- JASPERS' general objective has been broadly achieved together with all of the specific objectives, with the exception of the transfer of technical knowledge to Member States in view of reducing their reliance on JASPERS advisory services.
- The evaluation aimed to address all the evaluation criteria in accordance with the Better Regulation guidelines, it relied on several proxy analyses due to various limitations; in particular the limitation concerning the availability of data needed for assessing the effectiveness and efficiency of JASPERS services was significant (more structured performance monitoring at the level of assignments only started in 2017, and was further strengthened only after 2018).
- There is scope for a more structured approach to the planning and monitoring of assignments, with: (i) well-defined and targeted objectives; (ii) clear and realistic timelines; (iii) milestones that enable progress in implementation to be monitored over time.

The developments in 2019-2020 have already addressed most of the points for improvement highlighted by this evaluation. One of the main elements still to be discussed in the 2021-2027 period concerns the monitoring framework, for which the conclusions of the evaluation will be taken into account, as well as the transfer of knowledge (capacity building) to the Member States. The proactive approach implemented in the last 2 years of the 2014-2020 programming period provides reassurance that the JASPERS initiative and its development will be closely scrutinised and monitored by the parties involved.