

JASPERS: Technical Assistance for Project Preparation

The enlargement of the European Union has added ten new Member States to the Union. Virtually all regions in these countries are covered by the top priority Convergence Objective for aid provided under the EU Structural Funds. Two other countries, Bulgaria and Romania, will join the EU in the near future.

The European Commission has joined forces with the European Investment Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, which have a long record of successful cooperation in financing projects in central and eastern Europe, to develop a new technical assistance initiative designed to improve the preparation of projects proposed for financing by EU Funds and help the Member States to use the grant finances provided by the Union more rapidly and more effectively.

The initiative is called JASPERS ('Joint Assistance to Support Projects in European Regions').

Assistance from JASPERS is available to prepare high-quality projects which are eligible for support from the Structural and Cohesion Funds in EU Member States covered by the convergence objective but with priority being given to large projects and to projects in the ten Member States that joined the Union in 2004 and to Bulgaria and Romania.

The project preparation facility is available for infrastructure projects aimed at upgrading the transport networks, environmental schemes and investments improving energy efficiency and using renewable energy. It also covers the improvement of intermodal transport systems and urban transport as well as large projects in other sectors such as health, education and urban redevelopment.

JASPERS is implemented by a team made up of experts from the Commission, EIB and EBRD based in the European Investment Bank, in Luxembourg and in regional offices in central and eastern Europe.

However, the project preparation activities of the JASPERS unit will be clearly separated from the lending activities of the EIB and the EBRD.

Assistance from JASPERS is provided free of charge to the beneficiaries.

JASPERS is managed by a steering committee with members from the Commission's DG Regional Policy, the EIB and the EBRD that will meet regularly and ensure strategic guidance for the instrument.

JASPERS: Method of Operation

JASPERS operates on the basis of action plans drawn up annually for each country in cooperation with the Beneficiary State concerned and the European Commission. These take into account the specific conditions of individual countries and can be modified, if required, taking account of changed circumstances.

JASPERS is aimed at providing assistance as required for any stage of the project cycle from the early stages of project conception through to the final application for EU funding or the decision to provide EU funding by the national authorities (the responsibility for decisions depends on the size of the project). This assistance may cover technical, economic and financial aspects and any other preparatory work needed to deliver a fully developed project. It is geared to providing advice, ensuring coordination, developing and reviewing project structures, removing bottlenecks, filling gaps and identifying problems not addressed, e.g. state aid,

environmental impact assessment, etc. However, much of the detailed technical work remains the responsibility of the respective Beneficiary States.

JASPERS focuses on larger projects with total costs exceeding EUR 25 million for environmental projects and EUR 50 million for transport or other sectors. However, there will be flexibility about these thresholds in the case of the smaller countries or where projects serve as pilot actions for best practice.

There is no obligation to combine EU Funds with EIB and EBRD loans if JASPERS assistance is used and the national authorities may borrow if they wish from EIB or EBRD for projects prepared with assistance from JASPERS.

There is no change to existing legal responsibilities. The decision to provide a EU grant for a project remains the responsibility of the European Commission.

Who to contact?

The Managing Authorities for the Structural and Cohesion Funds operating in the Beneficiary States act as central coordinators for each country. They can request assistance directly from JASPERS headquarters in Luxembourg and will be able to approach JASPERS' regional offices once they are operational. Offices are scheduled to be opened in Warsaw, Bucharest and Vienna by early 2007.