

Recommendation Regarding ERDF (Structural Funds – European Regional Development Fund)

Preamble

In its recommendation dated 19.9.2012 the Austrian Council for Research and Technology Development dealt with the question of structural funds. In 2013, the formal framework conditions were defined at a national level for the funding period from 2014 to 2020, with confirmation by the European Commission then being required. In addition to the recommendation already issued in this regard, a number of structural issues will now be highlighted and examined separately in this document.

Starting position

During the current funding period from 2007 to 2013 the certifying and the audit authority are attached to the Federal Chancellery and the managing authorities to the individual provinces. The operational programmes forming the basis here were drawn up separately for each province. This gives rise to very small-scale programmes, which, depending on the budget, offer only limited scope for the implementation of projects with a long-term effect. And this is not the only disadvantage here. For example, structures for the managing authority need to be established in every province, and and coordination with the other partners involved in implementing the structural funds involves liaising with a large number of individuals, especially at a federal level. A uniform state of knowledge and harmonised approach to handling is thus only possible to a limited extent. The implementation of projects and programmes in more than one province involves a huge amount of administrative effort and almost never takes place.

The existing guidelines governing eligibility for funding are highly specific to the individual structural funds and offer leeway for their interpretation. In current standard practice there is no legal certainty as regards their implementation and application, with this aspect coming in for a good deal of criticism as a result. No harmonisation of the guidelines with other programmes has taken place.

Objectives

As matters currently stand regarding the preparations underway for the funding period from 2014 to 2020, a general reduction in available resources is to be expected. It is therefore advisable to ensure administration of the resources is kept as simple as possible and to create a high level of synergy.

The guidelines forming the basis for financing projects with resources from structural funds must be clearly defined and modelled on the customary approaches of other programmes. There must be legal certainty for the recipients of such funds. It must be possible for any differing interpretations to be settled by neutral arbitration bodies, and the effort involved in managing resources from structural funds needs to be reduced to the required level. This applies not only to the structure of the programmes – including the structure of the authorities – but also to handling of the projects.

Recommendation

The Austrian Council recommends that the provinces come to an understanding as regards a joint operational programme and thus to the setting-up of a joint managing authority. The Austrian Council however recommends taking account of the regional requirements and needs of the individual provinces and giving expression to them in the operational programme in the interest of an overarching solution for Austria. To this end, province-specific sub-items should be introduced to ensure organisational leeway for the individual provinces in terms of content and budget.

The Austrian Council recommends that the tasks of a joint administrative authority be allocated to a technically competent but neutral body. Where a high level of technical expertise and the necessary acceptance as a neutral body are concerned, the business office of the Austrian Conference on Spatial Planning (ÖROK) would be an ideal choice as the managing authority in both regards.

The Austrian Council recommends the drafting of suitable guidelines to deal with problems which come about through application of the general framework guidelines.