Technical-Assistance-How-To

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A quick guide for EU-funded Technical Assistance proposals and best practices for implementation

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ABBREVIATIONS

TA	Technical Assistance
EU	European Union
TL	Team Leader
EC	European Commission
IPA	Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance[1]
ToR	Terms of Reference
TP	Technical Proposal
CA	Contracting authority

▶Geographical area

The map above illustrates the geographical area covered by IPA 2014-2020 (IPA II)[2] financing instrument of the EC.

▶To whom the article is addressed

This article addresses small and medium business consultancy companies. I am convinced that large consulting companies know in great detail everything contained in this article and even more. But I am also convinced that the expertise of small consultancy companies can be extremely valuable and many companies of this kind are afraid to try to participate in technical assistance projects because they do not have the correct understanding of what needs to be delivered in these projects and in which way. I hope that this article will help them and will give more clarity to those who want to access technical assistance projects funded by the European Union.

▶Context

This article is about Technical Assistance (**TA**) projects financed by the European Union. I would not like to focus too much on the financing mechanisms for TA projects, although there are significant differences between pre-EU-accession and post-EU-accession stages.

I would like mostly to focus on the perspective of the beneficiary and its expectations related to TA projects as well as to the most common issues faced by the companies interested to submit proposals for such projects.

First of all, let's set the grounds for the next sections of this article … so, **what is TA**? Well, there are multiple definitions, some of them very abstract or very technical. The bottom line is that **TA is a specific service to be provision to the beneficiary in order to help him to achieve a specific objective**. The key word in this definition is "**help**". Take a look to the picture above, as Consultant, you are the guy on the top of the mountain and you are helping the other guy (the beneficiary) to claim to the top.

> *So, you are not climbing the mountain on behalf of the beneficiary, the beneficiary is climbing the mountain with your help.*

Understanding this approach is the first (and probably the most important) step towards a good proposal and a further successful implementation. The impact of a good understanding of this approach is decisive for determining the scope of work, the implementation strategy and the project budget.

Another important aspect is that TA is (**first**) about learning-by-doing and (**second**) about securing long-term results.

> *In other words, as Consultant, you need (**first**) to work side-by-side with the beneficiary in order to build the tools and (**second**) you need to create the framework which will allow the beneficiary to continue, further develop and maintain the results after the implementation ends.*

▶Lessons learned

My first TA project was back in 2004. I started that project as Deputy Team Leader and ended it as Team Leader. Since then I was participating as expert and I was coordinating the processes of TA proposals submission and TA projects implementation for many TA projects in my home country and abroad. This experience helped me to look at a TA project in a much more structured way and understand the mechanisms on which such a project is built.

A TA project can be viewed from several perspectives (which can also be considered as lessons learned) which I describe below, not necessarily in order of importance:

🔶Commercial perspective

Here we talk about the fundamental problem of any commercial activity. After all, it's about what the beneficiary wants to buy and what a company has to sell. In the case of TA projects the beneficiary wants to buy the expertise. If your company sells expertise, then you can think of addressing such projects. If your company sells only products (even if we are talking about products applicable to the project area) then it may not be appropriate to address a TA project. Translated into practice, this means that the beneficiary wants to buy a certain amount of expert-days. Logically, the company must have or have access to the right experts in order to propose them to the beneficiary for the expected number of days.

> ***Takeaway***: *In TA projects, you are selling expert-days and this is what the beneficiary expects to buy*

🔶 Resources perspective

This is another fundamental question, what are the resources that I need to implement a project? For TA projects, the answer is simpler than in other cases. The main resources are the experts, the rest is collateral.

The most important are the key experts and it is unlikely to find them all inside your company. Besides, this is also one of the expectations of the beneficiary, namely to propose some independent experts. In theory, no one restricts the proposal of experts from your employees (if they fulfil the requirements) but practically, this cannot happen. One of the reasons is the scope of the work in TA projects.

In all cases, TA projects have at least one technical component (we can call it component or task or activity, it is not relevant) that refers strictly to the field in which the project is being implemented. For these components, it is possible to find key experts within your own company as the field of activity of the company is similar to the field in which the project will be implemented. If you do not find them inside your own company, don't get discouraged, you can contract them from outside.

In addition to the technical components, a TA project usually contains a component of assessment for the alignment of the national legislative framework with the European acquis (of course, in the field of the project), a component for strengthening the technical and administrative capacity (for securing long-term results) and a communication and visibility component. It is unlikely that you can identify within your company all those experts who can cover the entire range of activities required in the ToR.

The option of contracting external experts sometimes leads to a paradox, there are companies that do not actually have any field of activity (except in the field of consultancy in general) but only access to external experts and thus win TA projects. It is pretty weird, but it's happening.

The second important category of experts is that of non-key experts. Unlike key experts, they should not be nominated in the proposal or contracting stages but only when needed during the project implementation. Non-key experts can be identified within your own company, but be careful, they cannot be used in the project unless you fully comply with the selection procedures and have the official approval for their deployment.

The common characteristics of key and non-key experts is that they are nominated, thus visible to the beneficiary. There is a third category of experts that is not visible to the beneficiary, namely experts from the backstopping team. One of the beneficiary's expectations is to prove that the backstopping team can provide all necessary support for the team of experts during implementation. No one thinks that the team of experts can implement the project alone, in fact, if you say so in the technical proposal, you will certainly not be selected to sign the contract.

> ***Takeaway 1****: In TA projects, the resources are the experts (key and non-key experts), everything else is collateral*
>
> ***Takeaway 2****: Although backstopping experts are not visible, the way in which they will provide the team of experts with the needed support is of crucial importance and shall be very well explained in the TP*

🔶 **Budget perspective**

At first sight, the budget of a TA project is not very complicated to be estimated. As mentioned above, we are talking about a number of expert-days (key and non-key experts) that need to be multiplied by the daily rate negotiated with the experts. And yet, the budget estimation poses at least two big problems. The first problem is related to the correct understanding of the scope of the work. The second issue is related to the additional costs for the backstopping team, logistics expenses, possible expenses with the tools that you will use as support, etc.

As far as the issue of the scope of the work is concerned, always keep in mind what I mentioned above "**you are not climbing the mountain on behalf of the beneficiary, the beneficiary is climbing the mountain with your help**".

Certainly, the experts' opinion will always be that the budget is not enough for what the beneficiary has chosen to achieve from the project. If we were to make an analogy, the opinion of the experts will always be that the beneficiary wants a skyscraper but has allocated money only for the foundation. The essence of a TA project is not that. If the beneficiary wanted to appoint you to deliver a skyscraper, he would not have launched a TA project but a supply or works project. The beneficiary's expectation is to receive the detailed plans of the skyscraper, to practically learn from you about how to build it and to get enough knowledge so that he can expand and maintain it after the implementation of the Technical Assistance project has been completed. One of the best ideas is to get a professional project manager involved in the proposal stage who can balance the scientific opinion of the experts and correctly delimits the scope of the work.

Regarding the costs associated with the backstopping structure, the key to success lies in optimisation. As much as possible, do not induce additional costs on top of the overheads you already have as a company. If additional tools are needed, choose the rental option for the duration of the project. If you need dedicated software platforms, look for providers who can rent you these platforms or who can provide you with all needed services. If it is necessary to develop such platforms (although I rarely encountered such cases), focus on open source, cloud hosted systems.

We can certainly talk about how the maximum budgets for EU-funded projects are established, about the fact that the level of funding depends directly on the amount of funds allocated by the beneficiary state for co-financing, about the fact that there were projects that were stopped by the EC precisely because that the beneficiary state has given up on co-financing. All these elements, together with the priorities established by the beneficiary state, contribute to the establishment of the maximum project budgets as we find them when we read the project documentation. This topic does not bring value to the article because the maximum budget announced for a project cannot be changed or influenced once the project was launched.

> ***Takeaway 1****: Get professional PM support from the proposal stage in order to establish correctly the scope of the work*
>
> ***Takeaway 2****: For the additional costs, focus on OPEX, not CAPEX*

🔶 Implementation perspective[3]

All EU-funded projects are designed, implemented and evaluated based on a project lifecycle management approach that is accepted as a standard at EC level. This approach is called the Logical Framework Approach and you can read here more about it (https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/sites/devco/files/methodology-aid-delivery-methods-project-cycle-management-200403_en.pdf).

Even if it may seem to be outdated, it is still in place and it is essential that the implementation of a TA project respects it. I have encountered quite a few cases where those who were involved in the proposal stage (as well as those involved later in the implementation stage) for TA projects did not understand either the methodology or why they should fit into it. There is only one correct answer to this dilemma, namely that the project was designed as such and if you try to redefine it in a different way, most likely those who evaluate your offer will not understand what you have offered and will not be able to see if what you have offered can lead to the achievement of the project objectives.

It is also very important to understand that we are talking about a project lifecycle management methodology and not about a project implementation methodology or a project management methodology. Thus, the logical framework approach covers the initial phases when the project is proposed to the EC and funding is requested for it, goes through the implementation phase of the project and is used later in evaluating the results achieved. The stage in which it intersects with the company that has been selected for implementation is the implementation stage only. No one restricts a Consultant to use any implementation methodology it deems appropriate and any project management methodology desires. It is indeed appropriate to prove in the TP that you will be using a well-proven methodological approach for each activity within the project and that you are proposing a recognised project management methodology (I personally prefer PRINCE2, but PMI cannot be excluded even though it may seem too complex for a TA project). What is important is that whatever methods/methodologies/tools you propose/use should be linked to the general approach that is the logical framework approach. One good idea is to involve a professional PM, experienced in EU-funded projects even from the proposal stage in order to create the link between the implementation (project management) methodology and the logical framework approach.

Takeaway 1*: The Logical Framework Approach is the base on which the project development strategy shall be developed*

Takeaway 2*: Get professional PM support from the proposal stage in order to create the link between your implementation strategy and the Logical Framework Approach*

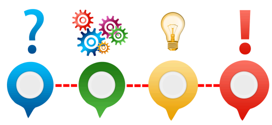
🔶 **Proposal perspective**

This was perhaps the most difficult lesson I learned about TA projects. We are talking here about what the quality of a technical proposal means that directly reflects (I could even say brutally) in the evaluation score.

The evaluator's expectations from a technical proposal are to see that you understand the context in which the project will be carried out, that you have a clear strategy for implementation, that you are proposing a realistic planning and that you have the necessary resources for what you have proposed to implement. All these aspects should be directly applied for the project in question, the generally valid descriptions and the assertions that you understood and that you will implement do not bring any value and will not bring you a good score in the evaluation. For example, the detailed text and diagrams of your internal processes and your internal project management methodology is of no value in the context of a technical proposal for a TA project, even if it is based on universally recognised methodologies and even if you generate tens of pages of beautiful text and pictures on this topic. What brings value to the technical proposal is how exactly this methodology will be applied to the project, how it will integrate into the logical framework, how to map the specific outputs to the expected results, and how results will be evaluated and measured.

With regard to certain products you already have and which are applicable to the project, it does not bring value to the technical proposal to suggest or to say that you are offering those products, remember that in a TA project the beneficiary does not buy products but expertise. Instead, it is worthwhile to describe in detail the experience you have and which has led to the creation of those products and the way you will work together with the beneficiary to achieve similar results. The products should be presented as an example of the results you reach during implementation and you must necessarily link everything to the results that the beneficiary expects at the end of the implementation.

▶Practical guide

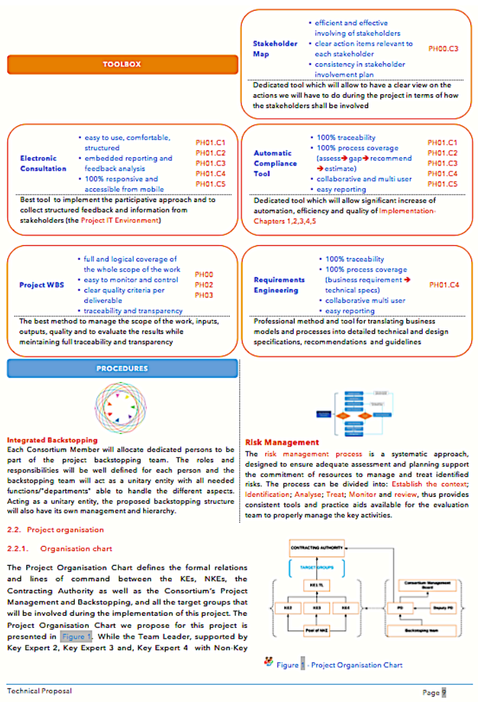


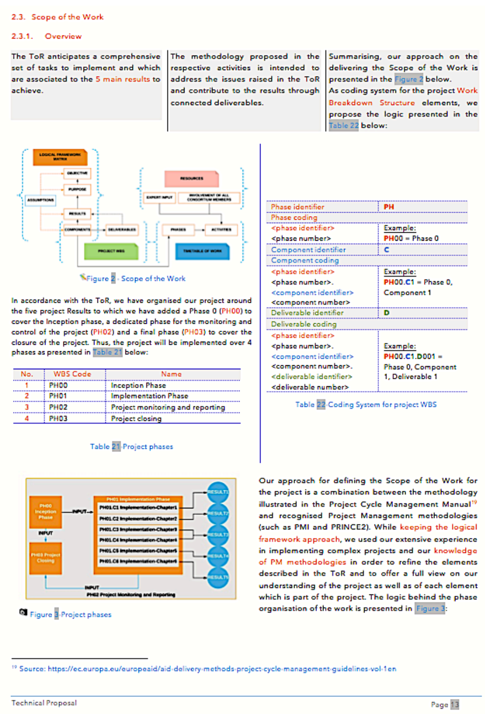
TA Proposal

Layout and aspect

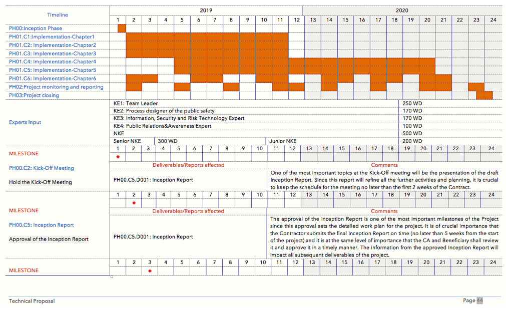
Do not ignore it. Although a TA proposal is not a fashion magazine, it is a document that represents you and shall highlight your strengths in all aspects. Use pictures and diagrams as much as possible. Use a consistent colour schema (no more than 3 colours but always the same and in the same way). Alternate one-column text sections with two (max. three)-columns text sections in order to break the monotony. The key is to make the evaluators to read your offer. If you don't have the experience, ask for advice, there are consultants on the market who can provide you with a lot of useful stuff including (but not limited to) templates and content. Some examples of how a TP shall look like are shown below:

Samples page layout

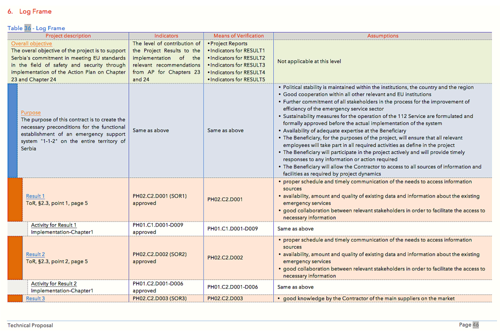




Sample timetable of work



Sample log frame



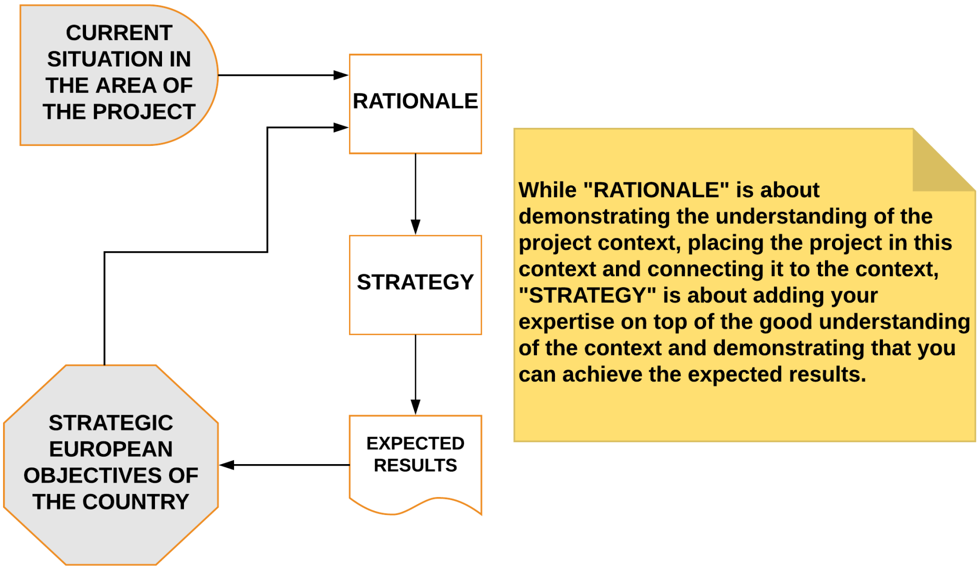
🔶 Structure

Provide all the needed information in order to allow the evaluators to understand your TP. Be aware that, whatever information you include in the TP, the evaluators expects to clearly identify the following key points/sections:

- ☑ the **Rationale**
- ☑ your **Strategy** for the implementation
- ☑ detailed description of the **Backstopping** functions
- ☑ the **contribution of each Consortium Member** in the implementation
- ☑ the **Timetable of Work**
- ☑ the **Log Frame**

A good idea will be to include in your TP as one of the first sections a guide of where the relevant information can be found in the document. Another good idea is to add (when applicable) a “related info” section to each chapter in order to guide the reader to the relevant information for a certain topic without duplicating that information.

🔶 Rationale and Strategy



Rationale and Strategy logic

The "**Rationale**" section should be dedicated to demonstrating how well you understood the context in which the TA project will take place. It usually has a significant weight in the evaluation grid and should be treated with due importance. It is very important to demonstrate that you understood the context of the project and managed to place the project in this context. Typically, the topics you need to address in this section are related to:

- ☑ the political, economic and social situation of the beneficiary country
- ☑ the European context of the beneficiary country
- ☑ the context of the project under the aspects representing the important components of the implementation (technical, legal, technical&administrative capacity, public awareness, etc.)
- ☑ key stakeholders
- ☑ understanding objectives, purpose and expected results
- ☑ understanding what the beneficiary country has already achieved in the field and how to use the results already achieved
- ☑ the assumptions and risks that you envisage for implementing the TA project

The "**Rationale**" section should present a top-down analysis, starting from the existing macro framework in the beneficiary country, placing the TA project in this framework and linking it to those issues that are relevant and can influence (positively or negatively). If you will describe only general presentations and you will not concretely customise the positioning of the project and how the results obtained by the project will contribute to the achievement of some European objectives of the country, the score obtained in the evaluation will be minimum.

> ***Takeaway1:*** *The "**Rationale**" section is a first analysis of the existing situation in the project area. If you fail to demonstrate that you have understood the existing situation it will be difficult (if not impossible) to demonstrate that you will be able to successfully implement the project and that you will achieve the expected results*

> ***Takeaway2:*** *Typically, a TA project is not a single action but part of a wider plan. It is obligatory to link the project to this plan and show how you use the results already achieved and how the project will contribute to achieving further results in the future.*

The "**Strategy**" section should be dedicated to the way you propose the implementation of the project. It is a logical continuation of the "**Rationale**" section in the sense that it should show what and how you will add on top of the existing situation in order to achieve the expected results. Summing up, "**Strategy**" must present:

- ☑ the methodological approach for implementation,
- ☑ the formal organisation of the project,
- ☑ the activities you will carry out for implementation,
- ☑ the resources you make available for implementation.

Typically, the terms of reference (ToR) describe the activities to be carried out for implementation as well as the main resources to be provided (key experts and non-key experts). These descriptions should be considered as minimum requirements and the starting point for building up the implementation strategy. As far as the key experts are concerned, you cannot change their number and you cannot change the requirements, you have to focus on proposing the most experienced experts and with as many projects as possible in their portfolios. As for non-key experts, you have a fairly large freedom in proposing other categories/experts to what is described in the ToR. In terms of implementation activities, it is advisable to detail the activities described in the ToR and/or to add other relevant activities. It is very important to describe each activity from all points of view: duration of implementation and timing, involved resources, inputs and outputs, workflow diagrams (if applicable), methodologies used, etc.

> ***Takeaway**: Quantity vs. quality: Although the "**Strategy**" section offers the freedom to add additional details to the ToR requirements, the quantity will not bring you any higher scores in the evaluation. If adding additional levels of detail in your strategy will prove a significant improvement of the quality of the expected results, then do it, otherwise will not bring anything to your final score.*

🔶 HOW vs. WHAT

As we have shown before, **WHAT** needs to be done in a TA project is quite clearly described in the terms of reference. The only thing you can do in this sense is to add additional levels of detail (if needed). The difference is made by **HOW** to implement **WHAT** is to be implemented. This must be the main concern for the technical proposal.

From this perspective, there are several key elements that need to be highlighted. Firstly, we are talking about a collaborative and participatory approach. The implementation strategy must show concern about how to involve as much as possible all key stakeholders. If you manage to show how you will be able to get the stakeholders involved also outside of the formal framework of the project and persuade them to take ownership for activities/results, you will get extra points. Secondly, we are talking about using to the maximum possible extend the existing results in the project area. This is even more necessary if the existing results have been obtained through European funding (besides the normal efficiency desire, in these cases the problem of double financing also occurs). If you show and demonstrate in the strategy that that you can use and expand on what already exists, you will earn points. Thirdly, we are talking about securing long-term results that can only be achieved through an appropriate transfer of knowledge and - very important - through an institutional transfer of knowledge that is least influenced by labor force movements.

> ***Takeaway**: Participatory approach, building on existing blocks and (institutional) transfer of knowledge are the key points to make the difference in the evaluation*

📍 TA Implementation

A TA project involves complex activities whose essential characteristic is good and continuous collaboration with key stakeholders. In addition, TA projects involve a fairly high load of administrative and reporting tasks. Project teams are usually multinational and multidisciplinary and do not always work in the same place. As I mentioned, the key to success is the involvement of all parties in the implementation activities. Keeping all these things under control and staying focused on results can become a difficult task for any team leader or project manager. That's why it is good to think of how can you automate some of the activities. Using dedicated platforms, you can have multiple benefits:

☑ reporting becomes much easier and more transparent
☑ the approval process can be moved online and can become much faster
☑ access to mobile resources allows a more active involvement and creates a very good image and perception about your team
☑ feedback collection is much more structured and processing and reporting is becoming extremely easy

It is obvious that the use of specialised tools and platforms for managing the implementation of a TA project also creates financial advantages. Thus, in the case of a **"global price"** TA project, these tools will save a lot of expert-days while the amounts you bill will not depend on the number of expert-days thus generating extra profit margin. For TA **"fee-based"** projects, the use of such tools and platforms, in addition to driving the same expert-day economy, will optimise the costs that you will have with the backstopping team and which are included in the daily rate of key and non-key experts, thus increasing the profit margin of the project.

Below we present briefly the key features of the two possible platforms that can successfully support the implementation of a TA project and can contribute decisively both to achieving high quality results and to increased financial performance and a higher profit margin. It is important to remember again, if you decide to use such support platforms to implement TA projects, do not buy them or develop them with your own resources. The best solution (OPEX vs. CAPEX) is to rent such platforms during the project implementation.

TA management platform

Project Library / Project Knowledge Management Database

This module represents the project content repository. Documents and other type of content shall be accessible based on the role of each team member, dedicated access rights and permissions shall be granted by the administrator. External (stakeholders such as CA, Beneficiary) shall be granted with access rights and permissions.

Communication platform

This module shall allow the team members (and when needed other stakeholders also) to stay in contact during the project implementation. The module shall provide fast communication methods including instant messenger and shall give a special attention to the possibility to access all the communication features from the mobile devices.This module shall also provide the support for online meetings such as Skype or WEBEX meetings.

Contacts database

This module shall provide all the users (team members and stakeholders) with all needed contact information for the parties and individuals involved in the project implementation.

Calendar and Project Implementation Events

This module shall provide the project calendar and the events scheduling functionalities. Thus, using this module, each event can be scheduled, invitations can be sent to the future participants (using the above mentioned contact database), presentation materials can be uploaded to be available for participants review and minutes of meetings and/or other outputs from the events can be published afterwards.

Reporting

This module will be dedicated mostly to the

Privacy

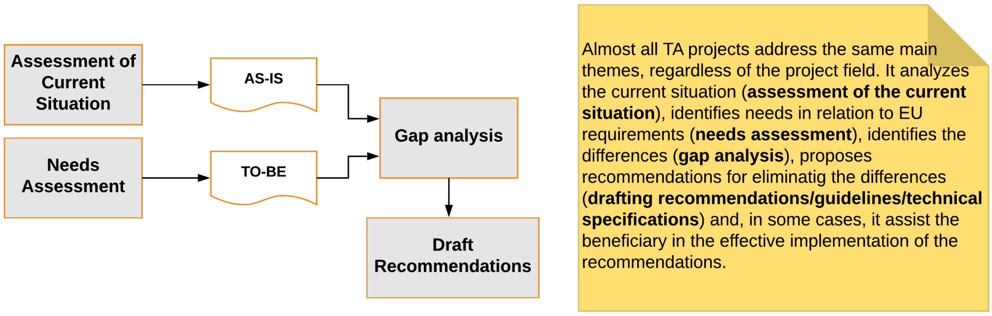
The platform will collect personal informaproject team. The functionalities shall include timesheets reporting, progress reporting and team evaluations. This module shall contribute to an increased efficiency of the services by allowing the team to focus on the work rather than on traditional paperwork related to reporting.

tion from stakeholders and project team. With respect to the EU GDPR Directive, the platform shall implement the needed measures and functionalities in order to comply with the mentioned requirements and to respect the individual rights related to privacy and personal data protection. A Privacy Policy shall be in place, the Cookies Policy shall be transparent and visible and dedicated forms for data privacy enquires shall be available.

Stakeholder consultation

This module must have a great impact on connecting the project team with the stakeholders. The actions for collecting opinions and feedback from the stakeholders as well as consolidating the information and provide in-depth analysis shall be automated by this module. The functionalities of this module shall include (without being limited to):Online questionnaires to be used for specific feedback collection; Online questionnaires for collecting the information for assessing the existing situation and needs; Questionnaires to be used within the workshops and seminars for collecting information and for the event evaluation; Online certification questionnaires in order to evaluate the participants. The module shall also provide dedicated functionalities for creating distribution lists for the questionnaires and to set time limits for receiving the information from the stakeholders. Moreover, consolidated reporting and analysis shall be available. Furthermore, all functionalities shall be available in a secure environment and under a well controlled system of access rights and permissions in order to ensure privacy and confidentiality (where applicable). All functionality shall be accessible from mobile devices also, thus increasing the possibility and willingness of the stakeholders to provide the needed information.On the project team side, this module shall allow a huge increase of efficiency and effectiveness for the activities related to the collection, consolidate, report and integrate the opinions and feedback from the stakeholders.

AS-IS/To-BE assessments, gap analysis, requirements engineering



Typical TA activities

An integrated rules mapping and change governance platform can be used to provide a granular view of the relationship between the **AS-IS** and **TO-BE** situations and the organisational entities, processes, assets and plans that they relate to. Areas requiring remediation will be recorded as risks against any "identified gap" and captured in the context of associated organisational entities, processes, locations, assets etc. This will support an ability to consolidate requirements into single bodies of work where appropriate, whilst maintaining a clear view of how each activity relates back to the "identified gap" that it has been created to address. Individual remediation plans will then be scoped, capturing details of cost components, impacts, program risks and dependencies within the platform. Then with the platform's ability to perform dynamic scenario analysis, stakeholders will be able to efficiently review and assess the relative time, cost and risk impact of alternative investment approaches and at the same time interrogate, pivot and report information quickly and effectively.

▶New trends and challenges for TA proposals

One of the current trends is limiting the number of pages for the technical proposal. It is quite difficult to accomplish this especially in projects with high complexity. It becomes even more difficult as the evaluation grid mentions that the main chapters of the technical proposal will be scored. The challenge grows for global price contracts where key experts are not evaluated (key experts just need to qualify). Naturally, the question arises: how could the information that would normally stretch over more than 100 pages be consolidated and aggregated in a way that will bring a higher score when comparing with other technical proposals? There are various techniques to accomplish this. Starting with those that available to everyone (document formatting, page margins, efficient use of free spaces that usually remains on the page, chosen fonts that should allow writing with a smaller size but still allowing easy reading of the printed document) going through techniques to illustrate the content using images and diagrams and, obviously, the ability to extract the essence in fewer and shorter phrases. Using these techniques makes a difference when the technical proposal will be evaluated.

▶What PMC can do for you

PMC
engage innovation

If we refer to the proposal phase, PMC can be the ideal partner for participating in TA projects. The international experience, the network of experts in various fields, knowledge about competition, local connections in many of the beneficiary countries of IPA funding make PMC a serious partner in such projects. In addition (but also separate from the possibility of partnership) PMC can offer the full range of services and tools for bidding in TA projects. In this case, we are talking about personalised templates of technical proposals, complete drafting of technical proposals or some sections of technical proposals, methodologies for the project approach and management of TA projects (logical framework approach) and consultancy in the commercial area of the proposal phase.

If we refer to the TA implementation phase, PMC can provide professional support for project management by assuming the responsibility of Project Director. Additionally, all management, communication and support platforms for implementation can be offered by the PMC as a lease for the duration of the project.

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1. http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/funding/ipa/
2. same as 1
3. https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/project-modality_en