Administrative Capacity Building in Europe

The capacity of public administrations to effectively and efficiently perform the various functions required of Government, including the planning and delivery of infrastructure and public services, has an important impact on the everyday lives of citizens and on the functioning of the private sector. The OECD defines capacity building as the means by which skills, experience, technical and management capacity are developed within an organizational structure (contractors, consultants or contracting agencies) – often through the provision of technical assistance, short/long-term training, and specialist inputs (e.g., IT systems). The process may involve the development of human, organizational, material and financial resources.

Originally a concept employed in a development context, notably by the UN and World Bank, the need to strengthen institutions through administrative capacity building (ACB) has become an integral part of the European enlargement process, when ACB programmes became an important element of support to countries aspiring to join the EU and adopt the Acquis Communautaire. Even after accession, new EU Member States continue to receive funding for self-managed ACB operational programs, notably from the structural funds. With billions of euros at stake, improving the effectiveness of how public administrations direct and manage public investment programmes is an urgent challenge. At the project level, the EIB frequently supports implementation capacity development through technical assistance to Project Implementation Units (PIU).

The body of scientific evidence about what ACB measures do and don’t work in different contexts remains thin. What is it that really builds administrative capacity and strong institutions in the long run? Is it simply a question of having a sufficient number of well-trained, adequately paid staff, setting Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), and transparently reporting expenditure and results? Are outsourcing and Public Private Partnerships a magic cure for limited public sector capacity? Are models sector specific, such as for transport, environment and home affairs, or are they generic? Are there benefits from peer learning across public administrations in different EU countries? What lessons are there from the “New Public Management” of KPI measured results, resource prioritization and fiscal discipline?

The purpose of this research is to deepen the knowledge on the conceptual frameworks, diagnosis, metrics, and models for effective ACB in practice. Research proposals are invited on any topic that advances knowledge in this area. However, preference will be given to proposals that adopt a pan-European perspective and address both theoretical and practical aspects of ACB linked to the planning and delivery of infrastructure and related public services. Proposals with a direct link to operational decision-making and with scope to improve absorption of EU funds used for high quality investments are particularly welcome.