



Press Release

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Greece: technical assistance should focus on “sustainable reforms”, say EU Auditors

Technical assistance to help countries in crisis such as Greece should focus on sustainable reforms and on helping business continuity by strengthening national administrations, according to the European Court of Auditors. In a new report on the Task Force for Greece set up in 2011 by the European Commission, the auditors recommend that, in future, such bodies should be based on a strategy with well-defined objectives, while the assistance should be prioritised and focused.

The Task Force focused on reforming public administration in Greece, improving the tax system and bringing about a return to growth by fostering its business environment. The auditors examined whether it had fulfilled its mandate and whether the assistance had made an effective contribution to reform. They obtained evidence from the Commission, service providers, Greek government departments and other stakeholders.

“Although the Task Force proved itself as a mechanism for delivering complex technical assistance, there were weaknesses in the design of some projects and only mixed results in terms of influence on the progress of reform,” said Mr Baudilio Tomé Muguruza, the Member of the European Court of Auditors responsible for the report.

Technical assistance was delivered to the Greek authorities in accordance with the mandate, but it did not always advance the reforms sufficiently, say the auditors, while noting that their assessment has to be seen in the context of the volatile political situation in Greece. The need for urgency meant that the Task Force was set up very rapidly, without a full analysis of other options or a dedicated budget. It had no single comprehensive strategic document for delivering assistance or for deciding priorities.

The delivery of assistance was relevant and broadly in line with the programme requirements, and the Task Force developed a flexible and diversified system for delivery. However, there were weaknesses at project level: procedures to select service providers were not always based on a thorough analysis of the available alternatives, and some long-term assistance contracts did not clearly state what they were expected to deliver.

The purpose of this press release is to give the main messages of the special report adopted by the European Court of Auditors. The full report is on www.eca.europa.eu

ECA Press

Mark Rogerson – Spokesperson T: (+352) 4398 47063

Damijan Fišer – Press Officer T: (+352) 4398 45410

12, rue Alcide De Gasperi - L-1615 Luxembourg

E: press@eca.europa.eu @EUAuditorsECA eca.europa.eu

M: (+352) 691 55 30 63

M: (+352) 621 55 22 24

The system for monitoring progress was effective, but the breadth of checks on external providers was highly variable, say the auditors. Moreover, it did not systematically monitor how the Greek authorities followed up recommendations or the broader impacts of the assistance.

The impact on the progress of reform was mixed, since implementation was beyond the Task Force's control and subject to external factors. Progress on structural spending was good, but only partially effective in public administration and taxation reform.

Recommendations

The auditors recommend that any entity for delivering technical assistance should be based on a strategy with well-defined objectives; that technical assistance should be prioritised and operate in accordance with existing legislation; and that it should focus on strengthening the capacity of national administrations with a view to business continuity and the sustainability of reforms.

They also recommend that the Commission should:

- create a pool of external experts who could be deployed on an ad hoc basis on technical assistance projects in Member States.
- streamline the number of technical assistance partners to ensure coherence and reduce the effort needed for policy coordination
- select service providers based on a comparative analysis and clearly define the scope of the technical assistance to be delivered
- ensure that the implementation of technical assistance is systematically monitored and evaluated, with lessons being fed back into the process.

Notes to Editors

In Spring 2010, facing severe financial crisis, Greece requested financial assistance from the international community. The response by the euro-area Member States and the IMF was to put in place an economic adjustment programme. In summer 2011, the European Commission launched a programme of technical assistance to be coordinated by a body known as the Task Force for Greece, to help implement the reforms agreed by the Commission and the Greek authorities. The Task Force focused on supporting implementation of the reforms required by the economic adjustment programmes and accelerating the absorption of EU funds. Assistance was delivered by Task Force staff and experts from the civil service in other Member States, from international organisations and from the private sector. It took a variety of forms: from ongoing support to the Greek authorities by resident experts, to studies, reports and dedicated workshops.

Special Report No 19/2015 "More attention to results needed to improve the delivery of technical assistance to Greece" is available in 23 EU languages.