

Document 6: Assessment criteria

A two-step selection process⁸ will be organised:

- Step 1 will consist in an **eligibility check by the Call Secretariat and relevant Funding Organisations and an evaluation of the (eligible) pre-proposals by the independent Evaluation Committee (EvC)** against the following assessment criteria: fit to the scope of the call, novelty of the research and impact.

The Call Steering Committee (CSC) will decide on the number of proposals to be invited to Step 2, following the evaluation made by the EvC. Only successful pre-proposals will be invited to submit full proposals.

- Step 2 will consist in an **eligibility check by the Call Secretariat and relevant Funding Organisations and an evaluation of full proposals by the EvC**. Upon explicit request by the EvC members, external reviewer(s) may also be asked to review a given full proposal. The EvC will convene to evaluate and make the final ranking of the submitted full proposals according to the following assessment criteria: excellence, quality and efficiency of the implementation, and impact; and taking into account the reviews obtained from external reviewers, where relevant.

The criteria to be used to assess the quality of pre- and full proposals are detailed below.

1. Criteria for Step 1

1. Fit to the scope of the call (yes/no)

Evaluation Committee members will assess the relevance of the proposed research against the scope and objectives set forth in the text of the Call; any project that does not fit this will not be recommended for funding, regardless of its scientific quality.

Please note that for the criterion ‘Fit to the scope of the call’, proposals should be evaluated according to the adequacy of their objectives and research questions with the scope and objectives of the present call. The quality of the methods however should not be evaluated as part of this criterion.

2. Novelty of the research (1-5; threshold: 3)

Evaluation Committee members will assess the following sub-criteria:

- a) The novelty and originality of the research objectives:

Explanation of the novelty of the planned research; e.g. how does the activity go beyond the state-of-the-art and advance knowledge; to what extent does the proposed work explore novel concepts and the advancement with respect to the scope and objectives of the call? To what extent does the proposed activity suggest and explore creative, original concepts?

⁸ In case very few proposals are received, the CSC can decide with absolute majority to invite all eligible consortia to submit a full proposal in Step 2 without organising an Evaluation Committee in Step 1. Note however that the eligibility check will still be done in Step 1.

- b) Relevance of the proposed work and clarity of the theoretical framework, research questions, and hypothesis to be tested:

To what extent the proposed work can lead to the purpose of the call?

To what extent are the proposed theoretical framework, research questions and hypothesis to be tested clear?

NB: When reading the Call Text, please keep in mind that both research projects generating knowledge from the production of new primary data and research projects conducting research by making use of available data are equally welcome in this call and should thus be equally evaluated.

3. Impact (1-5; threshold: 3)

Evaluation Committee members will assess the expected impact of a proposed project based on the following sub-criteria:

- a) Potential contribution of the proposed research to society, including policy (sub-score 1-5):

To what extent could the proposed work lead to novel / original contribution for tackling societal challenges, including policy challenges?

To what extent does the project appear to have a credible approach/ambition towards stakeholder and/or end-user engagement to achieve the expected societal impact, including policy impact?

- b) Transnational added value (sub-score 1-5):

What is the transnational added value to be expected from the collaboration from the perspective of society, including policy (see Box 1 – what is meant by transnational added value?)

2. Criteria for Step 2

1. Excellence (1-5; threshold: 3.5)

- A- Fit to the scope and objectives of the call (yes/no):

Experts will assess the relevance of the proposed research against the scope and objectives set forth in the scientific text of the call. Any project that does not fit this will not be recommended for funding, regardless of its scientific quality.

Please note that for this criterion, proposals should be evaluated according to the adequacy of their objectives and research questions with the scope and objectives of the present call. The quality of the scientific methods however should not be evaluated part of this criterion but part of the sub-criterion “scientific excellence” (see sub-criterion 1.B); and the quality of, e.g. stakeholder engagement, will be evaluated part of the “impact” criteria (see criterion 3) by policy/management experts.

- B- Scientific excellence (1-5; threshold: 3.5), including transnational added value will be assessed by means of the following sub-criteria:

- a) Scientific quality of the proposed research goals and objectives: how well does the activity advance knowledge and understanding within its own field and across different fields? Does the proposal contribute to scientific excellence and significant progress toward the state of the art?
- b) Novelty / Originality and innovation of the research goals and objectives: to what extent does the proposed activity suggest and explore creative, original concepts? Clarity of the hypothesis, theories and/or research questions.
- c) Transnational added value to be expected from the collaboration from a scientific perspective (see Box 1 – what is meant by transnational added value?)
- d) Level of mobilisation and integration of different scientific disciplines and competencies in the proposed research (level of interdisciplinarity; see Box 2 – what is meant by interdisciplinarity?). This should be evaluated in terms of relevance regarding the topics and research questions addressed (i.e. to what extent the right disciplines and skills have been mobilised to tackle these topics and research questions)
- e) Relation to other relevant programmes (does the project plan to link-up with other relevant existing programmes and initiatives with a similar focus than the topic of the call?)

Considering that a given project fits within the scope and objectives of the call, its scientific quality is considered before all other criteria and is a prerequisite for funding (as reflected by the threshold value and weighting system of the scores).

NB: When reading the Call Text, please keep in mind that both research projects generating knowledge from the production of new primary data and research projects conducting research from existing data sets are welcome in this call. They should thus be equally evaluated.

2. Quality and efficiency of the implementation (1-5; threshold: 3)

Evaluation Committee members will assess the quality and efficiency of the implementation of the project plan based on the following sub-criteria:

- a) Quality and efficiency of the management structure and procedures, its organisation and coordination: how well conceived and organised is the proposed activity? Is there an operational plan with well-defined milestones in place?
- b) Composition, complementarity, competence and expertise of the consortium (including knowledge and skills complementarity, and balance in terms of gender and career stage): how well qualified are the applicants in terms of scientific knowledge, expertise and experience to conduct the project? What is the quality of previous work in terms of past or potential contributions to, and impact on the proposed and other areas of research? Is the Leading Principal Investigator team (including any identified Co-Principal Investigators) able to lead the project, e.g. having strong management and leadership skills, or having complementarity of expertise and synergy of the members of the team? Is the team composition adequate and did the consortium consider gender balance and career stage balance in its composition?
- c) Level of integration and collaboration between Partners involved in the proposal

- d) Appropriateness of resources and funding requested, with justification (budget, staff, equipment): are the requested investments well justified and relevant?
- e) Project feasibility and risk management, including demonstration of data availability/access where relevant
- f) Data management plan overview and data sharing

3. Impact (1-5; threshold: 3)

The expected Impact of the proposed research for society, including policy, and the quality and efficiency of plans for stakeholder engagement (see Box 3) will be assessed by means of the two following criteria.

Criterion A relates to the expected societal impact, including policy impact, the proposed work seeks to achieve, and its transnational added value from the impact perspective, while criterion B relates to the approach to stakeholder engagement and precise engagement activities planned in the project.

A- Societal relevance, including policy relevance, and importance of the research for solving pressing issues (sub-score 1-5):

The criteria used to evaluate societal and policy relevance – which will be used by the experts and which applicants are invited to consider – are the following:

- a) Clear statement of the application for society, including policy. Any proposal must highlight the importance of the proposed work for solving wider pressing societal issues, including policy issues, related to the scope and objectives of the call, specify how the results will be translated to policy, decision makers and/or other relevant stakeholders, and contain details on the relevance of the proposed research to, e.g., specific management plans and processes, policy instruments or current legislation.
- b) Clearly identified end-users of the research results and ways to engage them. End-users may be different (e.g. wider group) than stakeholders directly mobilised in the project (criterion B), while stakeholders may often also be end users of project outcomes. The proposal will be expected to clearly identify end-users of the project outcomes, highlight potential arrangements for their wider uptake of knowledge and results and, as far as possible, to name organisations and individuals with whom the project plans to work on towards the wider uptake of its results⁹.
- c) Transnational added value to be expected from the collaboration from the perspective of society, including policy (see Box 1 – what is meant by transnational added value?)

⁹ Biodiversa produced a stakeholder engagement handbook and a guide on policy relevance and science-policy interfacing for researchers preparing a proposal, both relevant to help plan the wider uptake of knowledge results in policy and/or society. These are accessible online (Stakeholder Engagement Handbook: <https://www.biodiversa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/stakeholder-engagement-handbook.pdf>; Guide on Policy Relevance: <https://www.biodiversa.org/1563/download>) and will be given as background information to the experts. We recommend you to use them when designing your project and preparing your proposal.

B- Approach to stakeholder engagement (sub-score 1-5):

The criteria used to evaluate the level of transdisciplinarity, as defined in Box 3, and stakeholder engagement planned at the different stages of the project - which will be used by the experts and which applicants are invited to consider – are the following:

- a) Rationale for the stakeholder engagement planned in the project
- b) Identification of appropriate stakeholders to be engaged in the project, i.e. precise organisations and as far as possible, individual representatives of these organisations, what role they would have, and the desired outcomes of their engagement.
- c) Description of precise interests and support/investment from identified stakeholders on the specific aims of the project, including of their involvement at the proposal development stage² (e.g. relating precise project objectives to specific stakeholders’ ongoing and/or future activities).
- d) Methods/activities proposed for engagement of relevant stakeholders, planning of the engagement and allocation of sufficient resources to its implementation
- e) Evidence that the necessary skills to engage stakeholders are available in the project team or will be obtained (e.g. through relevant training, or the use of external sources)
- f) Methods and plans for knowledge and/or technology transfer

Box 1 – What is meant by Transnational added value?

Transnational added value is the value resulting from the transnational research project, which is additional to the value that would have resulted from research projects funded at national or regional level.

Evidence of transnational added value can either be found directly among the countries involved in the research, or through indirect value accrued as a result of their joint work. Such value could for example include relevance to international policy and management processes, linking expertise and efforts across international teams, or upscaling or downscaling of efforts, methodology and knowledge across countries and regions.

Furthermore, for this call, the transnational added value should be end-user oriented and benefit environmental and societal actors beyond researchers, generating insights on the way.

Box 2 – What is meant by interdisciplinarity?

Interdisciplinary science refers to the **involvement of multiple academic disciplines**. Research teams should therefore span all disciplines of relevance for their project, be it from natural, social, and technical sciences, humanities and/or arts. Proposals should demonstrate how they will ensure the equitable and appropriate combination and inclusion of relevant academic disciplines, collaboratively integrating their approaches and skills.

- This will be evaluated by scientific experts, part of the criterion “Excellence”

Box 3 – What is meant by transdisciplinarity?

Transdisciplinarity refers to the **inclusion of non-academic stakeholders working together with researchers from multiple scientific disciplines at the different stages of the project to co-produce new knowledge relevant for society**. Where relevant, stakeholders should be involved in different stages of the project (e.g., initial phase when defining research objectives and strategies, in implementing the project through data collection or analysis, to contribute to better dissemination of the knowledge gained, and/or to facilitate a systemic approach to a challenge. However, this involvement must not be an end in itself, but should be designed to add clear value to the project.

- Transdisciplinarity will be evaluated by policy/management experts, part of the criterion “Impact”

Box 4 – What is meant by stakeholders vs end-users?

A **stakeholder** is a person or group or anyone who is affected by or has an interest or stake in a particular issue. Examples of stakeholders include policy makers, governments; business leaders and industry representatives; representatives from non-profit groups or other citizen organisations; and individuals from loosely defined user groups.

An **end-user** is defined as a person or group that makes use of the knowledge and/or tools in a position to apply the information or tools being generated by a research project in a way that is of direct consequence to the concerned issue.

All end users could also be considered stakeholders, but not all stakeholders are end users.

3. Scoring system

Scoring system at Step 1

The first two criteria (“fit to the scope of the call” and “novelty of the research”) will be assessed by the scientific EvC members, while the “impact” criteria will be assessed by the policy/management EvC members.

No additional criteria should be used for the evaluation.

For the criteria ‘novelty of the research’ and ‘impact’, a score out of a scale of five will be assigned to each proposal. The EvC members have the possibility to use half scores.

Threshold:

Proposals that do not meet the criterion ‘Fit to the scope of the call’ will not be ranked nor considered for invitation to Step 2.

Besides, there is no shared interest for proposals with a final score lower than 3 for ‘novelty of the research’ and for ‘impact’. These proposals will not be ranked nor considered for invitation to submit full proposals evaluated at Step 2.

Final score:

The final score given to a proposal will correspond to an aggregation of the scores given to the two criteria (equal weight for the two criteria). The overall score will correspond to a score out of a scale of ten points.

The EvC groups the pre-proposals based on their scores and assigns them to one of the following three categories:

- “A” very favourable for invitation to Step 2;
- “B” could be invited to Step 2;
- “C” not favourable for invitation to Step 2.

As needed, and if deemed relevant, the EvC can differentiate proposals within group B (i.e. define sub-groups within group B).

The CSC will decide on the number of projects to be invited to Step 2, based on the groups made by the Evaluation Committee and their explanations.

Nota Bene:

- A general feedback from the evaluation committee will be communicated to the applicants invited to submit a full proposal in Step 2. However, no individual feedbacks will be sent to them at this stage.
- Applicants that are not invited to submit a full proposal will receive feedbacks from the EvC regarding the strengths and weaknesses of their pre-proposals with respect to the assessment criteria used in Step 1. They will receive this feedback in May, following the first step of the selection process. No score nor rank will be communicated.

Scoring system at Step 2

The overall aim of the ranking system is to allow a transparent ranking that still allows for some flexibility, and to fund as many high-level projects as possible.

The two first criteria (‘excellence’ and ‘quality and efficiency of the implementation’) will be assessed by the scientific EvC members and potentially external reviewer(s), if explicitly requested by the latter. The third criterion ‘impact’ will be assessed, by the policy/management EvC members and potentially by external reviewer(s) if explicitly requested by the latter.

No additional criteria should be used for the evaluation.

For each criterion, a score out of a scale of five will be assigned to each proposal. The EvC and external reviewers have the possibility to use half scores.

Threshold:

Proposals that do not meet the criterion ‘Fit to the scope and objectives of the call’ will not be ranked nor considered for funding.

Besides, there is no shared interest for proposals with a final score lower than 3.5 for ‘excellence’ and lower than 3 for ‘quality and efficiency of the implementation’ and for ‘impact’. These proposals will not be ranked, and not be considered for funding.

Weighting system:

The following weighting system will apply for the different criteria:

Criteria	Weight
Excellence	7
Quality/efficiency of the implementation	3
Impact	6

The final score given to a proposal will correspond to an aggregation of the scores given to the three criteria, taking into account their respective weights. The overall score will be transformed into a score out of 15 points.

The EvC ranks as many projects as possible. However, around the threshold, the EvC can decide to equally rank proposals with a same final score that it considers of equal quality.

Example:

If a proposal receives a score of 4 for excellence, 4 for quality and efficiency of the implementation and 5 for impact, the aggregation of the scores taking into account their respective weight will give a score of 70. This score will be transformed into a score out of 15 points, i.e. 13.

Nota Bene: Both selected and non-selected applicants will receive feedbacks from the EvC regarding the strengths and weaknesses of their full proposals with respect to the assessment criteria used in Step 2 following the selection process. No score nor rank will be communicated.

4. Use of generative artificial intelligence in assessment

The Evaluation Committee members are selected for their expertise and experience in their field. We seek their knowledge and judgement of an application in relation to the assessment criteria, and value their unique perspectives.

EvC members, including potential external reviewers, must:

- not use generative AI tools as part of their assessment activities
- comply with relevant EU level intellectual property and data protection legislation¹⁰
- not take into account or speculate within their assessment whether generative AI has been used to develop the application

¹⁰ Regulation - EU - 2024/1689 - EN - EUR-Lex and https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/document/download/2b6cf7e5-36ac-41cb-aab5-0d32050143dc_en?filename=ec_rtd_ai-guidelines.pdf

The release of confidential material into generative AI tools constitutes a breach of confidentiality and integrity.