Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership

Building a sustainable and innovative Blue Economy: mastering digital opportunities and fostering resilience

Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership

Fourth Joint Transnational Co-funded Call

SBEP Call 2026

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ACRONYMS

AI	Artificial Intelligence
CA	Consortium Agreement
CSC	Call Steering Committee
COI	Conflict of Interest
DMP	Data Management Plan
DTO	Digital Twins of the Ocean
DST	Decision Support Tools
EC	European Commission
EU	European Union
EPSS	Electronic Platform Submission System
GVA	Gross Value Added
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
HE	Horizon Europe
IEC	International Evaluation Committee

JCS	Joint Call Secretariat
MSP	Marine Spatial Planning
MPA	Marine protected area
NCP	National Contact Point
NbS	Nature based solutions
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
PFO	Participating funding organisation
PI	Principal Investigator
R&I	Research & Innovation
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SME	Small and medium enterprises
SRIA	Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda
SSH	Social Sciences and Humanities
TRL	Technology Readiness Level

IOC	Intergovernmental Oceanic Commission

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership (SBEP, hereafter ‘the Partnership’) is a Research and Innovation (R&I) Partnership which started in 2022 under the Horizon Europe Programme, and is part of the Cluster 6 (Food, Bioeconomy, Natural Resources, Agriculture and Environment). The Partnership has a seven-year lifespan with a planned investment of more than 250 million euros.

The Partnership combines 74 partners of pan-European, regional and national agencies and funding organisations from 30 countries, to align socio-political priorities for marine and maritime research and innovation. The vision of the Partnership, defined in the Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda 2024-2026 is to:

- *“Design, steer and support a just and inclusive transition to a regenerative, resilient, and sustainable blue economy.*
- *Boost the transformation needed towards a climate-neutral, sustainable, productive, and competitive blue economy by 2030*
- *Create, enhance and sustain ocean health and the social, environmental and economic well-being of the people by 2050”.*

The activities of the Partnership aim to:

- *Support the Green Deal and Digital transformation to a modern, resource efficient and – through excellence in sustainability – competitive economy with no net emissions of greenhouse gases by 2050.*
- *Enable R&I cooperation in the blue economy in Europe and beyond through a portfolio of projects and actions reducing fragmentation across disciplines, sectors, geographical areas and communities to respond to policy strategy.*
- *Advance sustainability and resilience of blue economy sectors by promoting joint projects that enable new blue jobs and skills, engage citizens, and fully contribute to the well-being of coastal and maritime communities.*
- *Develop innovative governance frameworks, contributing to the removal of outdated regulations that hinder progress, and advancing fit-for-purpose legal frameworks to support transformation.*

In this sense, the application of the vision and objectives of the Partnership are notably carried out through the joint transnational co-funded calls for Research and Innovation (R&I) projects.

1.1 The SBEP in the EU Policy Landscape

The Partnership is committed to making a significant contribution toward achieving the EU’s political priorities by leveraging sustainable solutions and accelerating the green and digital transitions of economic activities related to the ocean, seas and coasts. It seeks to strengthen the EU Blue Economy through the alignment of national, regional and EU research and innovation priorities, pooling efforts and resources, and enhanced

cooperation between the European Commission (EC) and participating countries. By bringing together stakeholders from science, industry, policy and civil society across Europe and beyond, the Partnership supports the co-development of impact-oriented solutions and cutting-edge innovations - technological, nature-based, social, economic and cultural - contributing to a healthy ocean, a sustainable and productive blue economy, and the well-being of citizens.

In pursuing these objectives, the Partnership fully embraces the ambitions of the EC, including those set out in the recent EU Ocean Pact (and the upcoming Ocean Act proposal), which provides a more integrated vision for addressing marine biodiversity loss, climate resilience and the long-term sustainability and competitiveness of the European blue economy. Perceived as the “Blue Arm of the Green Deal”, the Partnership contributes to the implementation of key EU policies and strategies, including the European Green Deal, Digital Europe, the Marine Strategy Framework Directive, the Marine Spatial Planning Directive, the 2030 Climate Target Plan and the Zero Pollution vision for 2050, as well as the EU Strategies on Coastal Communities and Islands.

Building on this foundation, the Partnership also strengthens the science-policy interface across a broad range of marine and maritime policy domains. It contributes to the objectives of major EU initiatives and regulatory frameworks, including the European Climate Law, the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030, the Farm to Fork Strategy, the Circular Economy Action Plan, the Eighth Environment Action Programme, the Nature Restoration Regulation and the Common fisheries policy.

To maximise impact and avoid fragmentation of efforts, the Partnership seeks to build synergies and complementarities with other European Partnerships, initiatives and programmes, including the EU Partnership on Animal Health and Welfare, Biodiversa+, Clean Energy Transition Partnership (CETP), Driving Urban Transitions (DUT), FutureFoodS, Water4All, Zero Emission Waterborne Transport (ZEWT), Partnership for Research and Innovation in the Mediterranean Area (PRIMA), JPI Oceans, Circular Bio-based Europe Joint Undertaking, the European Aquaculture Technology and Innovation Platform (EATIP), the EU Mission Restore our Ocean and Waters, including its Mission Lighthouses, and the European Institutes of Innovation and Technology (EIT): Knowledge and Innovation Communities (KIC).

Beyond Europe, the Partnership contributes to global efforts to address ocean and sustainability challenges. It supports the objectives of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, notably SDG 14 (Life Below Water), and contributes to the challenges identified under the UN Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development. More broadly, its activities align with international efforts to advance a productive, resilient and environmentally sustainable ocean economy through improved governance, scientific knowledge, technological innovation and international cooperation.

1.2 The 2026 Joint Transnational Call

The Partnership implements its Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda (SRIA) through a set of impact-oriented Intervention Areas (IAs), which are updated annually to reflect emerging challenges, opportunities and R&I needs within the blue economy. These

Intervention Areas provide the strategic framework for the Partnership’s activities and guide the development of its Joint Transnational Calls.

For 2026, four Intervention areas have been identified as priorities:

1. *Transitioning Blue Economy Sectors*
2. *Managing Sea Uses*
3. *Blue Bioresources*
4. *Resilient Coastal Communities and Businesses*

In this context, the Partnership launches its fourth joint transnational call entitled **“Building a sustainable Blue Economy: mastering digital opportunities and unlocking resilience”.** The Call mobilises financial resources at national and regional levels through 34 Participating Funding Organisations (PFOs) from 29 countries, complemented by a contribution from the European Union.

The Call encompasses all four Intervention areas, converted for this call into four Priority areas as follows:

- ***Priority area 1:*** *Transitioning the blue economy sectors for sustainability and strategic autonomy*
- ***Priority area 2:*** *Managing sea-uses by advancing digital and ecosystem-based approaches*
- ***Priority area 3:*** *Promoting sustainable blue bioresources through innovation in production and harvesting*
- ***Priority area 4:*** *Building resilience in coastal communities with infrastructure and businesses*

The Priority areas, as well as their respective research directions, are described in Sections 2.0.

1.3 Co-branding by the UN Decade of Ocean Science

Aligning with the previous calls, the 2026 JTC is co-branded as part of the UN Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (or “the Ocean Decade”). In this context, the R&I projects co-funded as part of this Call will be endorsed as **Ocean Decade projects**.

The Ocean Decade, coordinated by UNESCO’s Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC/UNESCO), provides a global framework calling for a transformation in the generation and use of ocean knowledge. It aims to reverse the cycle of decline in ocean health and to strengthen the sustainable management of the ocean, seas and coasts. To this end, it offers a platform for scientists and stakeholders from diverse sectors to co-design and co-deliver the scientific knowledge and partnerships needed to accelerate advances in ocean science.

In this context, the Ocean Decade co-brands this call as a means of stimulating new initiatives in co-designed and co-delivered knowledge and solutions for a sustainable ocean economy, as part of the Ocean Decade Action Framework. Annex G provides complete overview on this co-branding by the Ocean Decade, including benefits to the endorsed projects.

2.0 JOINT CALL DESCRIPTION

2.1 Priority areas

The four Priority areas, structured in thematic areas and research directions, are presented below. Proposals must address primarily one Priority area but may integrate multiple Priority areas where relevant. Within a Priority area, it is not compulsory to cover all thematic areas and respective research directions in the proposal.

Specific cross-cutting enablers from the Partnership’s SRIA have been identified for this Call as particularly important for all Priority areas. These include:

- *The use and application of digitalisation;*
- *The inclusion of Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) perspectives;*
- *The implementation of Nature-Based Solutions (NbS).*

These three cross-cutting enablers have been selected from the SRIA. **They should be carefully considered and incorporated, whenever relevant, to achieve the desired outcomes.**

Additional enablers are present throughout the Priority areas, such as the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI), as well as the Earth and Ocean Observation data and services (Copernicus, and the Copernicus Marine Service), and Destination Earth and Digital Twins (DT).

Furthermore, in line with the objective of the Partnership to maximise impact and avoid fragmentation of efforts, applicants should seek synergies and complementarities with other relevant EU initiatives to ensure that new knowledge, products, or services are taken up in relevant blue sectors, as listed in section 1.1.

2.1.1 Transitioning the blue economy sectors for sustainability and strategic autonomy

This Priority area accelerates the transformation towards sustainability, competitiveness, and strategic autonomy of the blue economy sectors, including energy, food, the underwater domain, and communication, while addressing the resilience and integrity of all associated critical infrastructures. In line with the European Ocean Pact, its core mechanism for ocean observation, Ocean Eye, as well as broader EU objectives such as

the green, digital and just transitions and the Competitiveness Compass, the Priority area promotes technological and systemic R&I that connects environmental protection to economic viability, supports the digital transformation, and the reduction of environmental pressures.

Activities under this Priority area contribute to the just and digital transitions, as well as to the co-existence and multi-use of activities and infrastructures at sea. Maintaining the integrity and resilience of critical infrastructures is essential, while ensuring sustainability, security and safety for both the environment and society remains a fundamental requirement. These efforts aim to strengthen societal and economic resilience, grounded in principles of inclusive social innovation.

The Priority areas also promote the development of tools, methodologies and management approaches to assess and mitigate the impacts of marine interventions. Research and innovation activities are expected to improve the understanding of ecosystem responses to anthropogenic pressures and support ecosystem-based approaches to the sustainable transition of blue economy sectors.

Digital technologies are recognised as key enablers of this transition. In particular, proposals are expected to contribute, where relevant, to the European Digital Twin of the Ocean (EDITO) and are encouraged to explore the use of digital twinning, AI and other data-driven approaches. These technologies can support enhanced marine observation, monitoring, analysis and decision-making, contributing to more efficient operations, improved environmental management and informed regulatory implementation.

The Priority area is structured around three thematic areas:

1. *Marine Infrastructures*
2. *Circularity and Ecosystem-Based Transition*
3. *Digital Transition*

The targeted thematic areas, to be considered in the proposal formulation, are presented hereafter. A project needs to address one or more of the following topics.

2.1.1.1 Marine Infrastructures

Marine Infrastructures focuses on the development of secure, resilient and sustainable infrastructures that underpin Europe’s strategic autonomy. Activities should strengthen the safety, security and integrity of critical marine infrastructures and associated systems, including their capacity to withstand climate and operational pressures. Research and innovation should enhance AI-driven monitoring and risk management capabilities, while enabling the co-existence and multi-use of ocean space and infrastructure. Particular attention should be given to improving the resilience of infrastructure networks and ensuring that their development and operation remain environmentally sustainable and socially acceptable.

In that framework, R&I Projects are particularly expected to address at least one of the following research directions:

- *Innovative approaches to ensure operational safety, security, and risk management within an overall sustainability context. This research direction addresses the protection and resilience of critical blue economy infrastructures (energy, food, underwater domain, marine communications) through continuous, integrated monitoring of their conditions and interactions with the natural environment, leveraging robotic, autonomous and sensor-based systems. It further includes secure, reliable and knowledge-based control and decision-support systems enabling safe remote intervention, as well as comprehensive strategies for preparedness, prevention, response and post-incident environmental remediation, embedded within a long-term sustainability and resilience framework.*
- *Strategic autonomy enabled by local digital twins: Deliver methodologies, tools and approaches that strengthen the European Union’s strategic autonomy in addressing current geopolitical shifts. The research direction focuses on the development and deployment of local digital twins as core components of Europe’s critical digital infrastructure, enhancing autonomous capacities for maritime surveillance, situational awareness and energy security, while maintaining societal and environmental imperatives. By embedding digital twins within operational and governance frameworks, the research direction supports informed, sovereign decision-making and resilience of key maritime and energy systems beyond incremental technical improvements.*
- *Autonomous observation & Artificial Intelligence (AI) analytics for ocean operations: in line with the framework of the Ocean Eye initiative, develop digitally assisted and autonomous ocean observation systems to support the exploration, monitoring and sustainable management of marine environments. This research direction focuses on advancing intelligent robotic and autonomous systems for critical offshore and underwater assets, such as renewable energy infrastructures, aquaculture facilities, deep-sea communication infrastructures), enabling efficient, continuous and high-resolution data collection as complementary and beyond conventional vessels and fixed observatories. It further addresses the integration of Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning techniques to process and analyse large, heterogeneous datasets from multiple sensors and platforms, transforming ocean data into actionable knowledge to support informed decision-making for sustainable blue economy activities.*

2.1.1.2 Circularity and Ecosystem-Based Transition

Circularity and Ecosystem-Based Transition focuses on advancing resource efficiency and circular approaches across blue economy value chains, including improved design, materials use, reuse and recycling of infrastructure components. Research and innovation should support ecosystem-based approaches that reduce environmental pressures and strengthen the understanding and quantification of cumulative impacts from multiple human pressures including cumulative pressures from existing and emerging contaminants of concern in marine environments, including PFAS, microplastics, pesticides, pharmaceutical residues and other persistent pollutants. This includes improving monitoring, assessment and mitigation of marine environmental pressures, as well as enhancing knowledge of ecosystem responses to anthropogenic pressures.

Solutions should contribute to reducing environmental footprints while supporting long-term ecological integrity and economic viability of marine activities.

In that framework, R&I Projects are particularly expected to address at least one of the following research directions:

- *Exploring business models for possible investment mechanisms to facilitate the circular re-use of installations in the maritime domain addressed from a legal, environmental, and economic perspective.*
- *Activities related to pursuing climate neutrality, such as blue carbon ecosystems and other nature-based solutions within coastal and marine ecosystems with a view also to help build new business model for coastal communities, e.g. ecosystem-based services (sustainable tourism, aquaculture and fisheries practices, …). Improving resilience and adaptation to natural disasters, including climate change-driven events, and supporting ecosystem-based adaptation in marine operations, notably offshore.*
- *Increasing natural capital by enhancing marine biodiversity, and contributing to ‘good environmental status’ of the marine environment, through:*
    - *developing and scaling up NbS, including ecosystem restoration approaches, to higher Technology Readiness Levels (TRL), supporting a circular blue economy by regenerating ecosystems (e.g. seagrass restoration, artificial reef deployment, …)*
    - *adopting a holistic, ecosystem-based approach to assess the effects of interventions with attention for cumulative impacts and exploring trade-offs and compatibility between different functions (e.g., fisheries, renewable energy, tourism)*

2.1.1.3 Digital Transition

Digital Transition promotes the co-creation of a just and inclusive digital transition across blue economy sectors. Activities should foster collaboration between researchers, industry, public authorities and civil society (e.g. NGOs) to ensure that innovation processes are inclusive, demand-driven and socially robust. They should advance the uptake of digital technologies, data-driven approaches and interoperable systems to improve marine knowledge generation, decision-making, operational efficiency and environmental monitoring. Where relevant, projects should contribute to strengthening data sharing ecosystems and relevant European ocean digital infrastructures, such as EMODNet, while supporting standardisation, scaling-up of solutions, and the development of new governance, business and financing models enabling sustainable and equitable transitions.

In that framework, R&I Projects are particularly expected to address at least one of the following research directions:

- *Diversification and promotion of social innovation and business models, as well as legal frameworks for ensuring co-existence of sectors and social license to operate, with a focus on empowering coastal communities and smaller actors.*

- *Research and innovation actions aimed at developing technologies, data infrastructures and governance models that ensure equitable access and fair benefit sharing from emerging digital technologies and marine data, including Digital Twins and Artificial Intelligence applications. The topic addresses the advancement of trusted marine data sharing across science, policy, society and the private sector, grounded in the implementation of FAIR (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, Reusable) and CARE (Collective Benefit, Authority to Control, Responsibility, Ethics) Principles. By fostering inclusive, transparent and interoperable data ecosystems, it supports responsible innovation and shared value creation for a sustainable and competitive blue economy.*
- *Socio-economic research on the just transition of blue economy workforces, identifying opportunities for new skills and upskilling in support of a digitalized and circular economy.*

2.1.2 Managing sea-uses by advancing digital and ecosystem-based approaches

This Priority area addresses the need for innovative tools and science-based approaches to achieve sustainable, ecosystem-based planning and management of sea uses. Aligned with the objectives of the EU Ocean Pact and the EU Water Resilience Strategy, the upcoming Ocean and Water Research and Innovation Strategy, and the EU strategies on coastal communities and islands, will contribute to strengthening the interlinkages between Maritime Spatial Planning (MSP), the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD), the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP), the Vision for Fisheries and Aquaculture towards 2040, the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030, and the Nature Restoration Regulation (NRR), with a particular focus on the regional dimension.

The overarching goal of this Priority area is to support science-based decision-making that integrates the current environmental status, the legacy of human impacts, climate change trends, and future scenarios, while accounting for the multitude of pressures arising from the use of marine space and resources. To achieve this, research and innovation efforts will focus on a source-to-sea approach, ecosystem-based management and Maritime Spatial Planning, aiming to enhance cross-border cooperation in the management, protection and restoration of marine space and marine protected areas, develop innovative decision-making tools that combine data from various sectors, such as decision support systems (e.g., WISE Marine, WISE Freshwater, EMODnet and others), as well as generate knowledge on key areas, including Good Environmental Status (GES).
The implementation of ecosystem-based MSP is currently hindered by challenges such as the lack of standardised procedures and indicators, fragmented governance with weak cross-border coordination, and significant data and knowledge gaps, particularly regarding ecosystem functioning, cumulative impacts, and socio-ecological linkages. Through targeted actions at a sufficient scale, this Priority area has the potential to make a substantial contribution to the implementation of the MSFD, the upcoming Ocean Act proposal, its relationship with nature restoration, as part of the broader objectives of the EU Ocean Pact.

This Priority area is structured around two thematic areas:

1. *Effective management, conservation and restoration*

2. *Innovative Decision Support Tools (DSTs)*

The following targeted research directions, to be explored in the proposal formulation, are presented hereafter. A project needs to address one or more of the following topics.

2.1.2.1 Effective management, conservation, restoration and pollution reduction

Effective management, conservation and restoration of marine ecosystems require a sound understanding of ecosystem health, cumulative human-induced pollutions and pressures, and provided ecosystem services. This thematic area supports research and innovation to improve ecosystem assessment, monitoring and restoration, including the development of indicators, mapping tools, ecosystem-based management approaches and the identification of ecologically high-value areas. In that framework, the R&I projects are expected to cover at least one of the following research directions:

- *Research focused on status and ecosystem service assessment and mapping, and how it can improve the management of marine resources in the frame of MSP, through development of monitoring programmes and methods to assess ecological status of marine areas (including of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs)), notably of protected species and habitats therein, and evaluate management effectiveness (including for individual MPAs and regional MPA networks). Digitalization of monitoring processes enables more efficient and accurate data collection and analysis.*
- *Development of approaches, e.g. using natural capital accounting or simulation tools such as spatially-based scenarios (and their co-creation and evaluation) can help predict ecosystem responses and optimize management strategies, for the integrated assessment of ecosystem services to provide more information on the links between the ecosystem and the social-economic system to support the implementation of ecosystem-based management of human activities and marine policies, as in particular MSP.*
- *Research focussed on pressures and their impact, through improving data coverage of physical and chemical human pressures affecting seafloor integrity, and of benthic habitats, e.g. by performing intelligent seafloor sampling surveys, to assess the status of these habitats and evaluate the effectiveness of restoration measures. Artificial intelligence can be applied to analyse complex datasets and identify patterns in human pressures and ecosystem changes. Research should also focus on cumulative impact assessment to understand the combined effects of different pressures on ecological components.*
- *Research focused on developing reduction targets for anthropogenic pressures, by quantifying sources of cumulative pollution, including nutrients, hazardous substances and litter sources (e.g. discarded fishing gear), that lead to inputs to the sea, especially in highly anthropized land-ocean interface ecosystems. This includes also assessing the efficiency of measures and evaluating environmental impact to inform evidence-based decision-making. Sources are both land-based (agriculture, urban and industrial wastewater, ports) and sea-based (shipping, offshore energy production, aquaculture, fishing vessels, shipwrecks, unexploded ordnances). With regard to sea-based cumulative sources of pollution/introduction of energy, underwater noise and electromagnetic fields are also of concern. For underwater noise, the EU threshold values still need to be specified regarding the target species and relevant habitats to be considered.*

- *Research focused on assessing the effectiveness of measures, notably NbS, for identifying areas and developing methods to restore habitat-forming species such as seagrass beds or macrophyte stands and reefs. This includes the development and improvement of methods for the restoration, along with improving the understanding of the co-benefits and wider synergistic effects of habitat restoration efforts, such as enhanced biodiversity, coastal protection, and, among other ecosystem services, the carbon sequestration capacity of blue carbon ecosystems. This aims to support effective measures to improve biodiversity and NbS for tackling climate change and its impacts.*

2.1.2.2 Innovative Decision Support Tools (DSTs)

Maritime Spatial Planning (MSP) is recognised as an essential tool to prevent conflicts between policy priorities, improve policy coherence and support ecosystem-based management of marine areas. This thematic area supports research and innovation to strengthen ecosystem-based management and decision-making through the development of innovative Decision Support Tools (DSTs), including data integration, scenario analysis and modelling approaches. Activities should contribute to more transparent, adaptive and evidence-based management, while supporting stakeholder engagement and the implementation of marine policies.

In that framework, the R&I projects are expected to cover at least one of the following research directions:

- *Development and improvement of (Artificial Intelligence based) Decision Support Tools that can perform qualitative and quantitative analyses to support implementation of the ecosystem-based management of human activities.*
- *Development of new digital and simulation-based methodologies to be included in DSTs to improve quantitative estimates of environmental, social, and economic benefits of MSP in present and future scenarios, considering climate change, at a transnational scale.*
- *Identifying environmental and socio-economic trends and drivers, including environmental disasters and preparedness to marine hazards, and building scenarios at sea basin and sub-sea basin scale for informed adaptive planning and management, including deployment of nature-based solutions.*
- *Development of case studies and demonstrators of the concrete added value of the developed DSTs for specific sector planning demands, with a focus on coastal areas and land-sea interactions (e.g., offshore renewable energies, aquaculture, fisheries, maritime transport, coastal and maritime tourism, commercial ports, co-existence of these uses).). Case studies and demonstrators could identify and test for example:*
    - *solutions to improve the coexistence of specific marine use (e.g. fisheries, maritime transport or Offshore Renewable Energy) and reduce impacts on ecosystems within MSP processes at the national and transboundary level.*
    - *better embedding protected areas (including those strictly protected and other Area-Based Management Tools (e.g. managed fishing areas, managed transport*

areas, areas for maritime surveillance, etc.) into MSP, through dedicated zoning and management measures.

- *Using nature-based solutions or nature inclusive design of flood plains, salt marshes, estuaries, coastal and marine structures such as harbours, breakwaters, offshore platforms, etc., and assessing how they should be integrated within MSP.*
- *Contributing to overcoming technical and non-technical barriers in co-using available advanced DSTs in institutional MSP processes to make them interoperable, trusted and adoptable inside real planning administrations as well as in different administrative sectors.*

2.1.3 Promoting sustainable blue bioresources through innovation in production and harvesting

This Priority area addresses research and innovation needs to support a just transition toward the sustainable production and utilisation of blue bioresources. The goal is to minimise environmental impacts while meeting the growing demand for healthy, affordable, and traceable blue food, feed and bio-based products. A holistic, value-chain approach, from production, including capture fisheries and aquaculture, to seafood processing and valorisation, is essential to achieve this transformation.

To bring Europe's fish stocks back to healthy and sustainable levels, targeted fisheries and harvesting practices must be prioritised, including improved management of overfished stocks, optimised fishing technologies to reduce bycatch and discards, and increased utilisation of underutilised species such as zooplankton, invertebrates, macroalgae, and invasive species. An ecosystem-based management (EBM) approach, tailored to local conditions while adhering to EU legislation, is essential to mitigate adverse impacts on sensitive species and vulnerable habitats. The sustainability of emerging fisheries, such as mesopelagic fisheries, must also be assessed and integrated into EBM frameworks from the outset. The research produced will help understand how fisheries policy aligns and interacts with other policy domains (e.g. MSP, MSFD, WFD, NRR, regional policy) and the key social, economic and regulatory drivers of change (including measures associated with EU Nature Restoration Law) in commercial fisheries, to inform coherent and effective policy and planning.

Digital tools, including remote electronic monitoring systems, mobile catch reporting applications, ecosystem modelling, and artificial intelligence, offer opportunities to optimise both small- and large-scale fishing operations while enabling data-driven sustainable management practices and ensuring full traceability of seafood. However, these advancements must also account for the cumulative effects of habitat degradation, pollution, warming, deoxygenation, acidification, water stratification, and changing ocean currents, which are altering ecosystem composition, increasing the frequency of toxic algal blooms, and driving shifts in species migration and phenology.

In parallel, aquaculture production must evolve to meet rising consumer demand for blue food and innovative bioproducts, while enhancing social, economic, and environmental sustainability and advancing toward carbon neutrality. This requires targeted technological

advancements and diversified production solutions, adapted to regional and local conditions across Europe. Approaches such as regenerative aquaculture, including the protection of natural spawning and nursery habitats, integrated multitrophic aquaculture (IMTA), near and offshore production (including multi-use platforms), closed systems, and land-based recirculating aquaculture systems (RAS) present viable pathways for culturing both established and new species.

This Priority area is structured around three thematic areas:

1. *Fisheries and harvesting,*
2. *Aquaculture,*
3. *Circular blue bioeconomy.*

The thematic areas above aim to enable the transformation of marine sectors by promoting sustainable fisheries through ecosystem-based and digital innovations, advancing resilient and efficient aquaculture systems, and transitioning to a circular blue bioeconomy.

The following targeted thematic areas, to be considered in the proposal formulation, are presented hereafter. A project needs to address one or more of the following topics:

2.1.3.1 Fisheries and Harvesting

Fisheries and Harvesting focus on innovative, sustainable and ecosystem-based approaches to improve fisheries and marine resources operations. As such, activities should consider the environmental pressures, including fossil fuel dependence and their emissions and the ecological footprint of fishing practices, aligning with the upcoming Roadmap on energy transition, which will be part of the Vision 2040 for fisheries and aquaculture. They should address the technological and operational gaps especially in small scale fisheries, as well as scientific and knowledge gaps that can hinder progress. Indeed, the evaluation of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) calls for a strengthened science-based approach to ensure marine ecosystem preservation and protection, economic viability (notably via sustainable fishing quotas), and climate change adaptation. Building also on previous results , such as results from EU projects, those supported by EMFAF, Interreg, projects from the Mission Restore our Ocean and Waters, as well as results obtained under other relevant EU partnerships (we invite you to consult the ETP database: Best practices - Maritime Forum - European Commission) , projects are encouraged to explore digital tools that could enable data collection and analysis. The activities under this thematic area should aim to create adaptive approaches to fisheries management.

In that framework, the R&I projects are expected to cover at least one of the following research directions:

- *Development and co-creation with industry of integrated innovation approaches to enhance vessel operations and practices, including technologies (e.g. positioning, environmental monitoring, route and fuel optimisation, and catch logistics) to improve efficiency, transparency, and reduce fossil fuel use; exploring new fishing techniques,*

emerging resources (including seaweed and invasive species) for small-scale fisheries, and supporting fishers in this transition through more selective and lower-impact gear development.

- *Research to improve the understanding of species’ roles in trophic webs and their growth potential. The goal being to translate this knowledge into concrete, ecosystem-based management solutions and policy options aligned with managers’ needs, including application to migratory fish stocks that spend different parts of their life cycle across multiple jurisdictions. In this sense, R&I is also needed to assess cumulative impacts on ecosystems, fisheries and aquaculture, identify vulnerable species and critical habitats, and develop adaptive management and restoration measures, such as improving connectivity and creating and protecting climate refugia for (vulnerable) fish species.*
- *Research to support the application of ecosystem-based management approaches, notably, through the development and integration of innovative digital monitoring tools, enabling well-informed and timely decision-making and enhancing sustainable management outcomes.*
- *Research to understand the impacts of climate change and human activities (including pollution) on commercial fisheries, fish stocks and other species with commercial potential. This for example includes research to improve our understanding of and predictive capabilities related to how climate change is altering fish migration patterns through changes in water temperature, oxygen levels, river flow, salinity and ocean currents. Key needs include improved long-term monitoring, better tagging and tracking technologies, integrated models linking climate, habitats and species behaviour, and stronger data sharing across regions and river and sea basins.*

2.1.3.2 Aquaculture

Aquaculture, here, focuses on the sustainable growth across Europe while addressing key challenges in environmental resilience, innovation (including digital tools), and policy alignment. Efforts under this area should concentrate on developing climate resilient systems, addressing the technological and operational gaps (notably through AI), and mitigating food safety risks. Additionally, feed sustainability, digitalisation and socio-economic barriers are to be explored as they can pose obstacles for SMEs. In this sense, a holistic approach is essential to advance sustainability, efficiency and resilience in aquaculture.

In that framework, the R&I projects are expected to cover at least one of the following research directions:

- *Develop alternative solutions to produce established and new species, integrating advanced approaches such as integrated multitrophic and regenerative aquaculture (IMTA), nature-based solutions (NbS), circular bioeconomy principles, and hybrid offshore–onshore platforms, including the strategic use of seaweed and other low-input species to enhance resource efficiency, environmental performance and climate resilience.*
- *Develop biologically, technically, and economically feasible system opportunities for fish, shellfish, seaweed, and other low trophic species by using AI tools. These systems include:*

- *onshore recirculation aquaculture systems and,*
- *innovative near shore systems for low trophic aquaculture, IMTA, and regenerative aquaculture.*

- *Understand challenges and opportunities associated with aquaculture, including potential threats for food safety such as cumulative pollution, harmful algal blooms, bioaccumulation and biomagnification of xenobiotics; production of sustainable and healthy feed, cost/benefits for longer distance offshore production.*
- *Develop innovative alternative solutions to produce established and new species, including IMTA, regenerative aquaculture, new systems associated with other economic offshore activities, closed or land-based systems.*
- *Development / adaptation of low impact aquaculture to work as a NbS towards environmental challenges and climate changes.*
- *Develop targeted, high-value, and sustainable feed value chains, focusing on developing alternatives to fishmeal, and fish oil by promoting novel feed ingredients including algae, insect protein, microbial and circular feed ingredients and their production, processing and integration, to ensure balanced feeds that enhance fish and stock quality, health and welfare while strengthening food security.*
- *Identify the socio-economic challenges of integrating aquaculture into the existing sea-based economy, or the socio-economic consequences of replacing existing activities. Provide evidence for policy development to mitigate the ‘crowding out’ effects related to challenges accessing investment funding, skilled labour markets, and the licensing and regulatory barriers faced by potential small and medium-sized aquaculture start-ups*
- *Develop Digital Twins for a holistic approach including design, build and operation phases.*

2.1.3.3 Circular blue bioeconomy

Bioeconomy, under the present call, focuses on utilising the entire biomass from aquaculture and fisheries to transition to a circular blue bioeconomy. Activities should consider advancing marine bio-based by-products by working on overcoming sensory challenges to boost consumer acceptance, leveraging digitalization for traceability, and innovating technologies to preserve nutritional value. For a circular blue bioeconomy to be achieved, projects should foster innovation, efficiency, and resilience across sectors, while considering that new solutions are also needed for existing challenges.

Within this framework, proposed Research & Innovation activities must ensure alignment with existing efforts, avoiding duplication of work already undertaken or underway under Horizon Europe Cluster 6, the Circular Biobased Europe Joint Undertaking (CBE JU), or ongoing projects of the Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership. Projects could instead identify synergies and complementary pathways with past and ongoing projects funded by the initiatives mentioned above. More specifically, the R&I projects are expected to cover at least one of the following research directions:

- *Address technology challenges to overcome sensory and cultural drawbacks to increase consumer acceptance for new products.*

- *Support through research and innovation in digitalisation the traceability of bio-based products from marine bioresources.*
- *Enable technological advancements to help preserve the nutritional value of harvested or fished species.*
- *Accelerate R&I on bio-based products, covering the development of new high-value applications from by-products and side streams, including pathways towards commercialisation, as well as supporting evidence for regulatory development to enable their sustainable use in the circular blue bioeconomy.*
- *Assess costs and benefits of new products compared with existing alternatives, to understand their economic viability.*

2.1.4 Building resilience in coastal communities with infrastructure and businesses

This Priority area tackles the risks and opportunities for European coastal communities, businesses and infrastructures in the context of climate change, marine environmental degradation, technological advances, and of cyclical economic and political shocks. The goal is to deliver knowledge to inform policy and planning interventions which can generate increased resilience for coastal communities, particularly those in rural and peripheral coastal areas (not including cargo/industrial ports) where there is often an over-reliance on coastal and maritime tourism or another narrow economic base. This will require interdisciplinary research to enable a just and efficient transition to low-impact, sustainable coastal economy, fostering resilience and delivering a diversity of economic opportunities and thriving coastal communities.

«*Coastal communities are the driving human force behind a sustainable and competitive blue economy on the road to regenerative practices and play a crucial role in providing Europeans with healthy and sustainable food, clean and affordable marine renewable energy and in connecting Europe to the rest of the world.*» (The European Ocean Pact).

Coastal economic activities, notably referring to tourism, aquaculture and small-scale fisheries, thus highly contribute to the sustainable development and competitiveness of the EU as a whole. For instance, coastal tourism is the largest sector of the EU Blue Economy in terms of GVA (€82 billion) and employment (2.56 million people in the EU), in 2022 (EU Blue Economy Report 2025), with 95 million people living in 70,000 km of EU coastline (EU Strategy on Resilience, prosperous and liveable coastal communities, 2026).

However, there are significant challenges and opportunities for coastal businesses to achieve a transition from its currently unsustainable model and to manage exposure to environmental, economic and social risks. As stated in The European Ocean Pact, coastal areas are *“at the highest risk of climate change, facing rising sea levels, extreme weather events, coastal erosion, flooding, salt intrusion and the depletion of biodiversity, including fish stocks»*. To boost and support coastal communities that urgently must implement adaptation strategies and planning, the Commission adopted the EU Strategy on Resilient, Prosperous and Liveable Coastal Communities in June 2026, aiming to develop and deploy new sustainable coastal business models, support business diversification,

promote regenerative and restoration activities, early warning systems, climate adaptation plans etc.

The Priority area is structured around two thematic areas:

1. *Small-scale businesses*
2. *Coastal infrastructures*

The goal of this Priority area is to support interdisciplinary research across natural sciences, social sciences and humanities, and technology, as well as innovation to enable a just and efficient transition to low-impact, regenerative and sustainable coastal businesses, that increases also the resilience, adaptation and preparedness of the communities in which these businesses are embedded.

The following targeted research questions, to be explored in the proposal formulation, are presented hereafter. A project needs to address one or more of the following topics:

2.1.4.1 Small-scale businesses

Small scale coastal businesses in the blue economy operate in a continually evolving socio-economic context where seasonality, limited access to a high skilled and flexible work force, and low productivity and ‘innovation’ is commonplace. These businesses are also highly dependent on the quality of the marine and coastal environment and are in the front line of climate and weather impacts. An improved understanding of the challenges for existing small-scale business and the barriers for ‘start-up’ business to locate in coastal regions needs to be investigated. Also relevant is to understand how social innovation can support the identification, investment in and sustain small scale coastal business. Policy interventions to encourage more diverse and at the same time sustainable business ecosystems require a strong evidence base to be more effective in supporting planning and product development. Local, national and EU public policy requires the development of multi-level strategies to foster resilience in small scale coastal communities and businesses and support diversification of coastal and marine-based enterprises.

In that framework, the R&I projects are expected to cover at least one of the following research directions:

- *Explore the risks and challenges, the costs and benefits faced by coastal businesses as a result of climate change impacts, marine environmental degradation and ongoing socio-economic transitions. This includes assessing the effects of extreme weather events, ocean warming, sea-level rise, biodiversity loss, and changing environmental conditions on livelihoods, as well as understanding the social, cultural, and economic disruptions affecting key sectors such as tourism and culturally significant traditional industries. Research should explore the transition towards more diverse, low-impact, and regenerative coastal economies, identifying pathways that enhance community resilience, well-being, and sustainable development.*

- *Assess the impacts of diverse coastal activities on marine and coastal environments in particular considering a source-to-sea approach, to evaluate ecosystem health and the interdependencies with establishing resilient business environments.*
- *Explore digital technologies and tools to support the management of long-term and seasonal migration flows which contribute to socio-political tensions.*
- *Explore how social innovation can support the diversification of coastal and marine-based enterprises while strengthening their resilience and preparedness against natural and human-induced shocks. Identify strategies that foster sustainable coastal business development and social innovation.*
- *Examine approaches to enable meaningful community participation and stakeholder participation for significant policy and planning initiatives in coastal settings including deployment of NbS.*
- *Improve understanding of financing instruments and incentives for innovation, including social innovation, that support job creation in coastal communities.*

2.1.4.2 Coastal infrastructures

Coastal businesses (e.g. small-scale fisheries, aquaculture and marine tourism) rely in large part on built infrastructures such as small harbours, piers, coastal protection, marinas, accommodation, restaurants, desalination plants, sustainable energy production, and other related infrastructures. These infrastructures are by the nature of their location, highly exposed to the impacts of climate change (e.g. sea-level rise), geological hazards, coastal erosion and extreme weather events. Understanding the risk to existing infrastructures and advancing innovative approaches including NbS like creating salt marshes and mudflats that e.g. act as natural buffer against waves and storm surges, to improve design and adaptation of coastal structures is a key component underpinning sectoral resilience.

To further foster development, this thematic is in line with the New European Bauhaus (NEB). Indeed, both can have a positive impact on coastal infrastructure by helping communities create resilient infrastructure, improve living conditions, and strive for inclusivity (e.g. in sustainable tourism).

In that framework, the R&I projects are expected to cover at least one of the following research directions:

- *Assess the risks posed to coastal infrastructure by climate change impacts and marine environmental degradation to develop strategies to enhance resilience through the protection, adaptation, or redesign of built structures, including the use of Nature-based Solutions. Research should explore how advanced technologies can be integrated into coastal infrastructure to monitor environmental conditions, provide early warning of hazards, support long-term observation of coastal change, and help reduce risks to the safety, security, and sustainability of coastal communities and businesses. This includes engaging local communities and stakeholders in the co-design and implementation of resilience strategies to ensure social acceptance, and liveability of coastal areas.*
- *Enable the use of coastal infrastructure to be diversified by working with existing and emerging maritime sectors. The objective is to foster an integrated “business ecosystem”*

approach where sectors work together to drive economic growth, innovation and sustainability.

- *Mapping accurately specific public policies around water provisions, desalinisation and marine based infrastructures management.*
- *Access the diversity of the demand per region of the necessary infrastructures (stable or mobile ones) and feedback to policy makers in approaching coastal development for local economic activities.*
- *Investigate options for a coastal economy ‘industrial strategy’ to identify effective policy interventions to encourage both private and public investment or subsidies to accelerate sustainable business start-up and relocation to coastal regions, particularly by ensuring that coastal regions have the necessary infrastructures to support the relocation and growth of sustainable businesses, such as harbours, sustainable desalination plants and energy installations.*
- *Compare regulatory frameworks across different European regions to stimulate and support coastal infrastructures; identify and better understand the successful ‘enabling regulations’ that minimise system frictions, costs and participation.*

2.2 Requirements

Proposals submitted under this call must carefully consider the elements as listed below.

2.2.1 Impact-driven and Theory of Change

The ambition of the Partnership is to support impact-driven R&I projects and to create significant societal and environmental impacts, in line with the overarching objectives of the UN Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (2021-2030). For this reason, **it is requested from the applicants to include an Impact plan in their proposal**. The Impact Plan describes how the project is expected to contribute to the long-term impacts targeted by the call and how the consortium will maximise these contributions throughout the project. Applicants are encouraged to develop their Impact Plan using a Theory of Change approach. The Impact Plan should address, where appropriate, the following aspects:

- *the potential for impact beyond the academic world, such as in societal, technical, environmental, economic, policy-making, or behavioural realms.*
- *how quadruple-helix stakeholders can be involved in, and/or benefit from, the design and achievements of the R&I project.*
- *to what extent the project addresses the uptake of research findings and innovative outputs into decision-making processes and policymaking.*
- *how approaches for achieving impact are integrated into the R&I design and conducted by the consortium.*

The quality of the Impact plan will be considered in the evaluation of the proposals. In particular, the clarity and credibility of the Impact Pathway will be assessed, as well as the quadruple-helix ambition, i.e. if the Impact plan includes clear activities and an effort to liaise with the different stakeholders. See the Section 4.8.3 for a complete sight of the

evaluation criteria and sub-criteria related to impact. For additional information on how to use a Theory of change, please refer to the Annex A “Theory of Change”.

2.2.2 Open Science and FAIR principles

The Partnership strongly supports Open Science and FAIR (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, Reusable) principles, including the open sharing of research data. A sustainable transformation of the blue economy depends on wide and timely access to high-quality data across marine and maritime disciplines and human activities. Improved access and long-term sustainability of marine data are essential for delivering impact, informing decision-making processes, and enabling good governance. To this end, it is required from applicants to make sure that marine environmental data collected and produced adhere to established EU data standards, such as those used by the European Marine Observation and Data Network, EMODnet. Submitting this data to EU public data services ensures its integration into EU public data service collections, including products used by EU agencies, e.g. EEA for Marine Message reports, Regional Sea Conventions, Research and Innovation, the Blue Economy, and more. In addition, EMODnet serves as the in situ data component of the European Digital Twin Ocean. Any data shared with an integrated into EMODnet will be made available on the EDITO data lake and this further increases the visibility, access, uptake and impact of project data (see Annex F).

2.2.3 Connectivity and synergies

Multi-stakeholder engagement & Inter- and trans-transdisciplinary
Under this call, the direct involvement of stakeholders from all relevant scientific disciplines to favour inter- and multi-disciplinary approaches, industry partners, society, and policy stakeholders, is required in the proposal. Each consortium should have at least one partner from the quadruple-helix and a description of how their proposal meets this ambition. Stakeholder engagement will be positively evaluated as a means of enhancing innovation, policy, and societal relevance and ultimately, and increasing the impact of the projects.

Citizen Participation and Ocean Literacy
Transitioning to a sustainable blue economy requires that those working in or entering blue economy sectors have the knowledge and skills to make informed and responsible decisions that balance economic development with ocean health. Promoting ocean literacy through the lens of the SBEP aims to ensure that researchers, industry professionals, entrepreneurs, policymakers and students understand their role in the sustainable blue economy.

Recognised as a cross-cutting enabler in the SBEP’s SRIA, ocean literacy plays a crucial role for bridging research and innovation and practical implementation, with tangible societal benefits. Engaging key stakeholders through effective communication and participatory approaches strengthens the uptake of sustainable solutions and ensures that findings resonate beyond the scientific community.

To maximise the impact of funded projects, applicants are strongly encouraged to integrate ocean literacy and citizen participation activities to communicate around the importance of their activities and involving relevant stakeholders. Such projects will benefit from stronger societal impact and enhanced visibility. Applicants are encouraged to include activities such as:

- *Public and industry-focused outreach campaigns to promote sustainable practices and engage sector-specific stakeholders (e.g., workshops, social media engagement, storytelling initiatives);*
- *Citizen science initiatives, where researchers, policymakers and industry actors collaborate to improve e.g., data collection and monitoring;*
- *Educational programmes targeting students and emerging professionals in relevant blue economy sectors;*
- *Partnerships with industry, NGOs, local authorities, and media to ensure research findings inform blue economy policies and business models.*

To support applicants in integrating these elements, the Partnership has developed an Ocean Literacy toolkit, offering insights and resources on ocean literacy and public engagement in the blue economy. Other tools and initiatives may also be found here: https://maritime-forum.ec.europa.eu/theme/ocean-literacy-and-blue-skills/ocean-literacy_en.

Links to EU policies and other EU initiatives

Applications should describe how they relate to the different EU policies described in the context and objectives of the Joint Call, as listed in section 1.1. The Partnership develops a cross-sectoral and transdisciplinary approach; it is thus expected that projects will connect and complement these other EU initiatives. Applicants should interact and collaborate with projects from other EU Partnerships and funding programmes (e.g. Horizon Europe Cluster 6 and others), and to EU initiatives and organisations related to ocean observations and marine research, data management (e.g. European Global Ocean Observation System -EuroGOOS-, the EU digital ocean data services Copernicus Marine Service and the European Marine Observation and Data Network –EMODnet- which together power the European Digital Twin Ocean, and other EU data services e.g., WISE Marine, etc.).

Involvement in other Partnership’s activities

Applicants are expected to get involved in the relevant Partnership activities: training, communication and dissemination (symposium, conferences, etc.) and must foresee the costs in their budget (see further details in 5.3). Notably, the Partnership aims to build Portfolios of projects which address similar thematic, and/or in the same regional area, regardless of the source of funding, in order to create synergies, foster networking and increase cooperation between ongoing projects and to enhance the collective impacts and accelerate the co-design of marine solutions and innovations to reach carbon neutrality.

2.2.4 Human Capacity Enhancement

Enhancing human capacity in the sustainable blue economy is essential for driving its long-term success. Human capacity enhancement participates in strengthening the skills, abilities and resources needed to adapt and thrive in specific sectors and to address challenges, and is identified as a cross-cutting enabler supporting the transition to a sustainable blue economy in the Partnership’s Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda. In the scope of the Partnership’s activities, human capacity enhancement can create sustainable employment opportunities through training, reskilling and upskilling of people in emerging blue economy sectors and align higher-education curricula with blue economy needs and goals. More broadly, it contributes to fostering interdisciplinary collaboration and promoting knowledge exchange that will not only benefit individual projects but also ensure that research outcomes translate into impact.

To maximise the effectiveness of funded projects, **applicants are strongly encouraged to integrate human capacity-enhancing activities into their proposals.** Applications should describe planned human capacity enhancement activities, outline the facilities and resources involved, and identify relevant partners. Examples of such activities include:

- *Staff exchanges and mobility schemes between academia, industry and policy institutions to foster cross-sectoral knowledge transfer;*
- *Targeted activities for underrepresented groups and regions, ensuring equitable participation across sea basins;*
- *Knowledge transfer activities to maximise the impact of project results;*
- *Partnerships with industry, NGOs and policymakers to facilitate real-world application of research results and promote career development.*
- *Direct engagement in ocean literacy events to enhance public involvement in marine research and conservation.*
- *Organise sector-specific trainings for students, researchers, decision-makers, and marine authorities.*
- *Host webinars, hands-on workshops, and continued education schemes using project results.*

2.2.5 Geographical reach

As an HE instrument, the Partnership’s geographical reach spans EU and adjacent waters in the regional sea basins bordering the EU, namely the Atlantic and Arctic Ocean, Baltic Sea, Black Sea, Mediterranean Sea, and North Sea.

To bridge the sea-basins, enhance regional connectivity, and increase the R&I impacts, the proposals are strongly recommended to consider a minimum of two EU sea basins which are: the Atlantic Ocean, Baltic Sea, Black Sea, Mediterranean Sea, and North Sea, and to assess the project proposal’s impact and potential replication/scalability on various sea basins. Proposals can target European regional seas such as Adriatic Sea, Aegean Sea, the Arctic, Barents Sea, Celtic Sea, etc. but they must be from a minimum of 2 different EU Sea basins.

2.2.6 EU taxonomy compliance

As this partnership falls under Horizon Europe Programme, all proposals must be aligned accordingly with the EU Taxonomy[1]. Research and Innovation (R&I) produces the technologies and solutions of tomorrow and will therefore play an important role to help economic actors reach or go beyond the standards and thresholds set in the EU Taxonomy and help keeping the Taxonomy criteria up to date and consistent with the European Green Deal objectives. The EU Taxonomy sets performance thresholds (referred to as ‘technical screening criteria’) for economic activities that:

- *Make a substantial contribution to at least one of six environmental objectives*
- *Do no significant harm (DNSH) to the other five objectives, and;*
- *Meet minimum social safeguards such as the OECD Guidelines on Multinational Enterprises and the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.*

3.0 FUNDING

3.1 Participating countries

A total of 34 PFOs from 29 countries (21 Member-States, 7 Associated Countries and 1 Third Country) have agreed to launch the fourth Joint Call for R&I proposals. The list of countries is as follows: Belgium, Brazil, Bulgaria, Croatia, Denmark, Estonia, Faroe Islands, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Montenegro, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, The Netherlands, Tunisia, Turkiye, Ukraine.

The following PFOs will participate financially in the Joint Transnational Call 2026 of the SBEP Partnership with the committed budget:

Table 1: Provisional funding commitment for the fourth call

Country	PFOs Acronym	PA1	PA2	PA3	PA4	Indicative budget in euros
Belgium	BELSPO	-	x	-	-	350 000 €
Belgium	F.R.S. - FNRS	x	x	x	x	300 000 €
Belgium	FWO	x	x	x	x	700 000 €
Brazil	CONFAP	x	x	x	x	1 712 050 €

1 The EU Taxonomy Regulation adopted in June 2020 is a tool that will help investors, industry and researchers to navigate the transition to a sustainable economy by providing a science-based classification system to determine whether an economic activity is environmentally sustainable.

Bulgaria	MES	x	x	x	x	250 000 €
Croatia	HRZZ	x	x	x	x	400 000 €
Denmark	IFD	x	x	x	x	2 600 000 €
Estonia	ETAg	x	-	-	x	300 000 €
Estonia	REM	x	-	-	x	100 000 €
Faroe Islands	RCFI	x	x	x	x	135 000 €
France	ANR	x	x	x	x	1 500 000 €
Georgia	SRNSFG	x	x	x	x	10 000 €
Germany	BMFTR/PtJ	x	x	x	x	1 500 000 €
Greece	GSRI	x	x	x	x	1 000 000 €
Ireland	MI	x	x	x	x	900 000 €
Ireland	RI	-	x	x	x	600 000 €
Italy	MUR	x	x	x	x	3 000 000 €
Latvia	LZP	x	x	x	x	600 000 €
Lithuania	LMT	x	x	x	x	300 000 €
Malta	XM	x	x	x	x	500 000 €
Montenegro	MESI	x	x	x	x	100 000 €
Norway	RCN	x	x	x*	x*	3 000 000 €
Poland	NCBR	x	x	x	x	1 000 000 €
Portugal	FCT	x	x	x	x	1 000 000 €
Romania	ANC	x	x	x	x	1 000 000 €
Slovakia	SCSTI	x	x	x	x	800 000 €
Slovenia	MIZM	x	x	x	x	600 000 €
Spain	AEI	x	x	x	x	1 300 000 €
Spain	CDTI, E.P.E.	x	x	x	x	400 000 €
Sweden	SNSA	-	x	-	x	725 000 €
The Netherlands	NWO Min IenW Min LVVN	x	x	x	x	1 400 000 €
Tunisia	MESRS	x	x	x	x	500 000 €
Turkiye	TÜBİTAK	x	x	x	x	500 000 €
Ukraine	MESU	x	x	-	x	400 000 €
Total PFOs						**29,482,050 Euro**

- *The PFOs agreed to allocate a financial support from EU top-up for Ukraine participation in the 4th SBEP JTC 2026 Call.*
- *x* Not all subthematics are funded*

3.2 Financial commitment

A total estimated budget of 39,222,560 EUR has been provisionally allocated for this Joint Transnational Call, combining the provisional funding commitments by PFOs (Table 1) and the contribution from the European Union (EU). These funds will be used for R&I activities carried out by researchers, institutions, and companies according to the funding rules and legal frameworks of their respective PFOs (Annex B).

Partners applying in a consortium cannot request more than the maximum amount stated by the PFO from which they seek funding in Annex B of the national/regional regulations to this Call Announcement.

3.3 Funding decision

The choice of transnational projects to be recommended for funding will be taken by the Call Steering Committee (CSC) strictly following the proposal scores and ranking lists established by the International Evaluation Committee (IEC) in step 2, budgetary and ethical clearance considerations. Final funding and granting decisions are made by the respective PFOs.

4.0 PROCEDURES, ELIGIBILITY, AND SELECTION CRITERIA

4.1 Call process

The Joint Call will be advertised online from the following web pages:

- Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership Website:

https://www.bluepartnership.eu/funding-opportunities

- PFOs web pages and on the EC Funding & Tenders portal.

To get started, the proposal Coordinator must create an account on the Online Submission Tool, the EPSS at https://proposals.etag.ee/sustainable-blue, create a proposal, invite partners and self-funded partners to join the consortium.

The application process consists of two consecutive steps:

STEP 1

The Consortium Coordinator must submit a pre-proposal on behalf of the consortium, providing key data on the proposed project. The deadline for the submission of the pre-proposal is **16/11/2026, 15:00 CET** (local time in Brussels, Copenhagen, Paris). Submission of pre-proposals is mandatory; it is not possible to enter the procedure at a later stage.

STEP 2

The Consortium Coordinator must submit a full proposal (upon invitation) on behalf of the consortium. The deadline for full proposal submission is **14/06/2027, 15:00 CEST** (local time in Brussels, Copenhagen, Paris). Deadline to be confirmed after Step 1.

4.2 Call timeline

Table 2: Fourth call timeline

Step 1: Pre-proposal submission, eligibility, evaluation, and selection	
July 20th, 2026	Pre-announcement
September 14th, 2026	Official launch – Call Publication Submission platform and partner tool opening
September 29th, 2026	International webinar for the applicants Link
November 16th, 2026 (15:00 CET)	Deadline for submission (pre-proposals)

November 16th 2026 to mid-March 2027	Step 1: eligibility checks (JCS, and National Contact Points (NCPs), evaluation by the IEC, selection by the CSC
Mid-March 2027	Communication of the results of the pre-proposal eligibility check and evaluation outcomes to project Coordinators. Invitation to submit full-proposals.
Mid-March to Early April 2027	Period for the redress procedure
Early April to mid-April 2027	Evaluation of the redress requests and communication of decisions to applicants
Step 2: Full proposal submission, eligibility, evaluation, and selection	
June 14th, 2027 (15:00 CEST)	Deadline for submission (full proposals)
June 14th, 2027 to end of October 2027	Step 2: eligibility checks (JCS, and NCPs), evaluation by the IEC, selection by the CSC
End-October 2027	Communication of the results of the full proposal eligibility check and evaluation outcomes to project Coordinators.
Early-November to Mid-November 2027	Period for the redress procedure
Mid-November to End-November 2027	Evaluation of the redress requests and communication of decisions to applicants
National/regional grant negotiations for the projects recommended for funding	
December 2027 to June 2028	Projects’ start
Dec 2030/Jan 2031 to June 2031	Projects’ end (at month 36)

4.3 Confidentiality and conflict of interests

The Partnership PFOs are committed to avoiding any Conflict of Interest (COIs) and safeguarding good scientific practice. A Code of Conduct related to COIs, confidentiality and non-disclosure is defined and applies to the CSC, the independent observer, the IEC members, the representative(s) from the DCU IOC/UNESCO, and the Ethics Experts. An important aspect of this code is the avoidance of any conflicts between personal interests and the interests of the applicants. The CSC and related National Contact Points (NCPs), the independent observer, and the IEC will perform their work impartially and take all measures to prevent any situation where the impartial and objective implementation of the

work is compromised for reasons involving economic interest, political or national affinity, family or emotional ties or any other shared interest (COI).

The following situations will automatically be considered as a COI:

- *Being involved in (the preparation of) any pre- and/or full proposal;*
- *Having submitted a proposal as a principal investigator (PI) or a team member, under the call;*
- *Being director, trustee or partner or in any way involved in the management of an applicant;*
- *Being employed or contracted by one of the applicants;*
- *Having close professional proximity, e.g., being a member of the same scientific institution with a hierarchical or department relation or impending change of the IEC member to the institution of the applicant in a position with a hierarchical or department relation or vice versa;*
- *Having close family ties (spouse, domestic or non-domestic partner, child, sibling, parent etc.) or other close personal relationships with the applicants of the proposal;*
- *Having (or have had during the last five years) a close scientific collaboration with an applicant of the proposal;*
- *Having (or have had) a relationship of scientific rivalry or professional hostility with an applicant of the proposal;*
- *Having (or have had), a mentor/mentee relationship with a principal investigator of the proposal;*
- *Having a current or prior (past 5 years) activity in advisory bodies of the applicant’s institution, e.g., scientific advisory boards;*
- *Having direct or indirect benefit if any proposal submitted is accepted or rejected;*
- *Having personal economic interests in the funding decision. Other situations preventing the IEC members or reviewers from participating in the evaluation impartially could be considered a COI and should be reported as such by the IEC members.*

Applicants included in a (pre-)proposal submitted to this call (including all the team members) must not serve as IEC members.

At the implementation level, the Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership Consortium partners that might apply to the co-funded calls are completely excluded from the work of call preparation, selection and project follow-up and monitoring. All related information is kept non-accessible to these Consortium members. In that way, the possibility for research units belonging to these organisations to participate in the Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership calls for proposals is safeguarded. To ensure complete transparency and inform the recipients of calls, the Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership Consortium partners that may apply to the co-funded calls are explicitly listed in Annex C, emphasizing their absolute extraneousness to the process of preparing the calls both in terms of defining the Priority areas of the call and the procedures for evaluating and selecting

project proposals. Concrete measures to avoid potential Conflicts of Interest or unequal treatment of applicants are ensured.

4.4 Publishable information

A list of the projects recommended for funding will be published at the end of the call process on the Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership Website and on the Ocean Decade website and the Ocean Decade Network (upon DCU (IOC/Unesco) endorsement). Therefore, applicants should be aware that the following information from the proposals may be published by the SBEP, IOC/UNESCO and the PFO for promotional purposes: (1) Project Title and Project Acronym, (2) Publishable abstract, (3) Duration of the project, (4) Total costs and total funding of the research project, (5) Organisation name and country of each partner, (6) Name of the Project Coordinator.

Each of the funding organisations will subsequently handle projects partners recommended for funding. Projects recommended for funding will be governed by the confidentiality rules in the national law of the funding organisations.

4.5 Privacy policy

By applying, the Consortium Coordinator, partners and self-funded partners agree to the use, share (for specific purposes: e.g., evaluation, for the future nomination of experts, Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership-specific communication) and the storage of projects-related information according to the Privacy Policy and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). The Online Submission Tool presents further information on the Privacy Policy (https://proposals.etag.ee/sustainable-blue).

4.6 Eligibility criteria

When applying to this call, the applicants must be aware that their (pre-) proposals must meet both (i) general eligibility criteria, summarized in Table 2, and (ii) national/regional eligibility criteria (Annex B).

A (pre-)proposal that does not fulfil all the general eligibility criteria will be declined without any further review.

Each partner involved in the project will be funded by its national/regional funding organisations. The consortium must therefore also comply with all the relevant national/regional eligibility rules (Annex B). It is particularly important to note that some funding organisations may require the submission of national documents in addition to the international (pre-)proposal. Besides, national/regional funding bodies may not fund all types of organisations.

Please note:

- If the partner acting as the consortium coordinator is not eligible, the whole proposal will be considered ineligible and will not be evaluated;

- If any other partner (not applicable to the coordinator) is declared ineligible:

- *The ineligible partner could participate in the consortium as a self-funded partner; and/or*
- *The other partners could engage themselves to cover the tasks of the ineligible partner; and/or*
- *The ineligible partner could be replaced by another partner that will request funds from a PFO with an undersubscription ratio. The list of the PFOs with an undersubscription ratio will be provided to coordinators invited to submit a full proposal at the end of the first step selection process.*
- *The ineligible partner cannot be replaced by a self-funded partner.*

At Step 2, if the consortium coordinator and/or any other partner is declared ineligible for funding by a PFO, the whole proposal will be considered ineligible and will not be evaluated.

Any change in the consortium composition must conform to the general eligibility criteria defined in 4.6.1 and be validated by the relevant funding organisations.

Before applying, every partner should verify their corresponding national/regional regulations and check their eligibility with their National Contact Points (NCPs). The Consortium Coordinator should verify that all partners of the consortium verified their eligibility. NCPs will provide support about national/regional rules and requirements (Annex B).

(Pre-)proposals that fulfil all requirements i.e., general eligibility criteria and all relevant national/regional eligibility criteria, will enter the evaluation process described in 4.8. The JCS on behalf of the CSC, will communicate the results of the eligibility check and the decisions taken to the coordinator of each consortium.

The case of beneficiaries of Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership’ participating in R&I call for proposals:

Research teams of some beneficiaries of the Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership may participate in this co-funded call; the list of the beneficiaries of the SBEP allowed to participate in the projects’ consortia is indicated in Annex C. For those beneficiaries, firewall measures have been foreseen to mitigate the risk of, perception of, or de facto conflict of interest or unequal treatment of applicants, including clear segregation of duties. All other beneficiaries of the Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership may not apply for funding under the co-funded call for proposals.

4.6.1 General eligibility criteria

The general eligibility criteria are described in Table 3. (Pre-)proposals that do not meet all these criteria will be considered ineligible and thus will not be considered for funding.

Table 3: General eligibility criteria

Scope	(Pre-)proposals must address one main Priority area. It is not compulsory to address all sub-themes within the Priority area.
Consortium composition	Each consortium must be composed of eligible partners from at least three different countries participating in the call and requesting financial support from at least three different PFO participating in this call. In addition to the abovementioned condition, the projects must involve at least two independent legal entities from two different EU Member States or Horizon Europe Associated Countries eligible for EU funding for this call for (pre-)proposal (*as recipients of the financial support, at the time of the closing of the call by June 14th, 2027, 3PM CEST). **Specific requirements regarding self-funded partners, *i.e.* partners that do not require funding:** – *Self-funded partners must demonstrate the willingness to self-fund their activities or show evidence that other partners are willing to fund their activities;* – *A letter of intent/commitment must be submitted with the full proposal at Step 2;* – *A self-funded partner cannot act as the consortium coordinator;* – *Self-funded partners are not counted for the minimum requirement of eligible partners and countries.*
Consortium coordinator	In each (pre-)proposal, one entity must act as the consortium coordinator; – *The consortium coordinator must be eligible for funding by a funding organisation of this call;*

	– *The consortium coordinator has the responsibility for submitting the (pre-)proposal;* – *The PI of the entity acting as consortium coordinator must be employed by an eligible organisation in one of the countries participating in the call according to the terms and conditions of the participating funding organisation from which he/she applies for support;* – *A person can act as consortium coordinator only in one proposal.*
Requested funding	Partners from the same country cannot request more than 60% of the total funding requested by a proposal.
Duration	The projects must be 36 months; The start date and end date of the researcher groups within the consortium must be aligned as far as possible.
(Pre-) proposals submission	A two-step process will apply, with a mandatory submission of pre-proposals at the Step 1 and submission of full proposals upon invitation to Step 2. (Pre-) proposals must: - *be written in English* - *be submitted electronically with the Electronic Proposal Submission System (EPSS) before the set deadlines at https://proposals.etag.ee/sustainable-blue* - *Instructions for electronic submission will be available on the Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership website at https://www.bluepartnership.eu/funding-opportunities in September 2026.* - *be complete, respect page limits and the number/type of attachments allowed, including CV templates that are in line with sound principles for research assessment according to the (pre-)proposals forms (Annexes D and E) and information provided in the EPSS.*

4.6.2 National/Regional Eligibility Criteria

In addition to the general eligibility criteria, each project partner must ensure that its contribution to the overall project conforms to:

- *Where applicable, the relevance of the (pre-)proposal to the Priority areas funded by national/regional PFOs;*
- *Compliance with national/regional funding eligibility criteria and regulations as reported in the Annex B. The table in Annex B describes important restrictions related to each national/regional regulation;*
- *Compliance with limits to budget requests;*
- *Where requested by the national funding organisation, submission of additional national documents by national rules.*

4.6.3 Recommendations for the applicants

All partners within a consortium should take into consideration the following recommendations for setting up their project (pre-)proposals:

Scope

- *(Pre-)proposals should go beyond the state of the art by providing high-quality R&I and, when appropriate, make use of innovative technologies, approaches, and concepts to do so;*
- *(Pre-) proposals should be scientifically excellent and relevant to policies framed under Blue Economy and consider ongoing research activities funded by other EU Partnerships, EU Missions, instruments, programmes, or projects. Cooperation with these activities is of high importance to avoid redundancy, favour complementarity and increase synergies;*
- *(Pre-)proposals should contribute to cross-cutting themes such as the open data policy, development of capacity-building activities and ocean literacy activities, promote the inclusion of young people in the activities and knowledge transfer, follow partnership communication guidelines using a common visual identity, to promote equal opportunities for participation of women and men in the research consortia and comply with EC ethics self-assessment principles;*

- *(Pre-) proposals are strongly encouraged to cover a broad geographic scale. Projects are strongly recommended to cover at least two EU sea basins among the Atlantic Ocean, Baltic Sea, Black Sea, Mediterranean Sea, and North Sea, to assess the project proposal’s impact and potential replication/scalability on various sea basins*

Consortium composition:

- *All (pre-)proposals are encouraged to consider geographical balance and implementation in appropriate geographic settings and according to the objectives of the proposal, including in low- and middle-income countries/regions, and underperforming countries;*
- *Self-funded participation of legal entities from countries (and/or regions) participating in the call, is welcome;*
- *Project partners that are not eligible for funding may participate as self-funded if they have their separate source of funding;*
- *It is strongly encouraged to involve stakeholders from the quadruple-helix (i.e., small, and medium enterprises (SMEs), industries, authorities, public administrations, associations, as well as civil society organisations) as partners or self-funded partners. The modalities of participation of stakeholders are defined in the national/regional eligibility criteria. Stakeholder engagement in the research projects will enhance innovation, policy, and societal relevance and ultimately the impact of the projects;*
- *All proposals should integrate the gender dimension of R&I activities; See the Horizon Europe Guidance on Gender Equality Plans.*
- *Every partner in a (pre-)proposal, including a self-funded partner, needs a Participant Identification Code (PIC) from the EC to be included in the submission. The applicants*

must check their PIC or ask for the creation of a PIC well in advance of the submission[2]*. The same request applies to subcontractors.*

Budget:

- *There is no specific limit to the total budget for proposals; The requested total budget of proposals is only limited by the number of eligible partners and by the budget of each partner. Please consider the national regulations of each research funding organisation about the specific budget limitations and the general eligibility criteria, the section on Requesting Funding.*

Data management:

It is requested to produce a preliminary Data management plan (DMP) is the proposal. The DMP will be requested in the first six month of the projects and regularly updated during the project. The guide in Annex F “Open access and FAIR data” presents the core requirements for the establishment of the preliminary DMP at both stages (pre- and full-proposals) and for the DMP of selected projects.

4.6.4 Ethical issues

The evaluation criteria of this call for (pre-)proposals include the evaluation of compliance with relevant ethical requirements. **Applicants should always describe any relevant ethical aspects in their project plans.** If a research permit or a statement by an ethics committee is required for the implementation of the project, applicants should provide information on the permits or permit proposals.

Researchers are required to adhere to the principles of good scientific practice and to follow the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity by ALLEA (All European

[2] 9-digit number serving as a unique identifier for organisations (legal entities) participating in EU funding programmes/procurements. If needed, one can apply for a temporary PIC at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/how-to participate/participant-register. A search tool for organisations and their PICs is available at https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/how-to-participate/participant-register-search.

Academies) and the Global Code of Conduct for Research in Resource-Poor Settings. **Projects must comply with the "Do no significant harm principle".**

Any proposal which seems to contravene fundamental ethical principles will not be selected and will be excluded from the selection procedure by the IEC, or by the Ethics experts. Judgment of the significance of ethical issues will be made by using the criteria published by the European Commission in its guidelines on ‘How to Complete your Ethics Self-Assessment’. Where activities undertaken in non-EU countries raise ethical issues, the applicants must ensure that the research conducted outside the EU is legal in at least one EU Member State.

4.7 Submission procedure

A two-step procedure will apply to this Joint Transnational Call; at Step1 the submission of pre-proposals is mandatory, and at Step 2, applicants must submit full proposals upon invitation.

(Pre-)proposals must be submitted electronically using the Electronic Proposal Submission System (EPSS): https://proposals.etag.ee/sustainable-blue.

Instructions for electronic submission will be available on the Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership website at https://www.bluepartnership.eu/funding-opportunities, in September 2026.

For any technical questions regarding the submission procedure using the EPSS, please contact the SBEP EPSS technical helpdesk: epss.sbep@g.etag.ee.

Please note that:

- *The online system may experience high traffic volumes in the last hours before the submission deadline and it is therefore highly recommended to submit the final version of the pre/full proposal well in advance of the deadline to avoid any last-minute technical problems;*
- *The submission system will close at 15:00 CET (local time in Brussels, Copenhagen, Paris) of the deadline date set for Step 1 and at 15:00 CEST (local time in Brussels, Copenhagen, Paris) of the deadline date set for Step 2. Please note that the JCS can only ensure responses to email support requests up to noon;*
- *Requests for extensions of the deadline due to last-minute technical problems will not be considered. Any proposals not correctly submitted at this moment will be declared ineligible;*
- *All complete proposals will be submitted automatically when the platform closes, to avoid a situation where an applicant does not have time to click on the submit button. In this situation, the proposal will be evaluated as it stands;*

- *Some partners of the consortia may also be required to submit an application to their respective national/regional funding organisations. Please consult the national/regional regulations (Annex B) and contact the designated NCPs, for further information about the procedures to follow.*

4.7.1 Step 1: submission of a Pre-Proposal (mandatory step)

Applicants must submit pre-proposals in Step 1 as it is not possible to enter the procedure at a later stage. Applicants must also submit any national documentation required by each participating funding organization according to national rules.

A pre-proposal eligibility check will be carried out both at the international level (by the JCS, based on the general eligibility rules) and at the national/regional level (by the NCPs) according to the funding organisations’ rules. The eligible pre-proposals will be sent to the scientific evaluation.

Submission on the EPSS:

- *The consortium coordinator (PI) creates an account on the EPSS (https://proposals.etag.ee/sustainable-blue);*
- *The consortium coordinator can enter, edit, and save the electronic forms, add partners and self-funded partners to the consortium, upload the project description (5 pages), the required budget for each partner and submit the proposal. Partners can enter and edit their own data only. Each partner and self-funded partner must connect itself to the EPSS before the submission deadline, to validate its participation with the project consortium;*
- *All information must be written in English. The proposal is a self-contained document. Links and hyperlinks are not allowed;*
- *Information entered or uploaded on the platform can be updated until the submission deadline;*
- *It is very important to note that the information given in the pre-proposals is binding. It is not possible to change the content of the project between step 1 and step 2.*

If applicants have successfully passed the Step 1 (eligibility checks and evaluation), they will be invited to submit a full proposal at Step 2.

4.7.2 Step 2: submission of a Full Proposal (only for invited applicants)

Only invited applicants can submit full proposals: information (in English) on the project consortia, **a 16-page description of the project** and the required budget for each partner must be submitted on the EPSS. All rules described in Step 1 also applies to Step 2.

Applicants should note the important following information:

- *Information on the core data (including Partners details, funding requested, PFO to which financial request is made, cannot be changed in full proposals, unless explicitly requested by evaluators, by a PFO or by the CSC. They, however, must comply with the general rules of the call and the rules of the relevant PFO. Any request for changes must be addressed by email to the JCS and the NCPs and will be reviewed by all PFOs involved in the proposal. The change(s) will have to be declared on the EPSS.*
- *In addition, as indicated in Step 1, the information given in the pre-proposals is binding. No major changes regarding the proposals’ content will be allowed by the CSC between the pre-proposals and full proposals;* ***Minor changes may be possible to improve your proposal if the objectives remain unchanged.*** *Applicants must explicitly indicate in their full proposal and into the EPSS the changes made as compared to the pre-proposals;*
- ***Minor changes to the budget*** *must be allowed by the relevant PFO; there is no need to inform the JCS. The change(s) will have to be declared on the EPSS.*
- *Regarding changes in the composition of the consortium i.e. changes (addition, removal or replacement) of Partners and Self-funded Partners (as institutions):* ***no change will be allowed, except in case of force majeure, or if explicitly requested by the CSC*** *for the particular cases of i) ineligibility of a partner and/or ii) invitation to add a partner that will request funds to an undersubscribed PFO; the list of the undersubscribed PFO will be provided to coordinators invited to submit a full proposal at the end of the first step selection process.*
- *No change in the PI of the project Coordinator will be allowed, except in case of force majeure.*
- *In terms of process, the request for the change must be submitted to the JCS, at least one week before the deadline set for the submission of full proposals, it will be discussed on a case-by-case basis by the CSC. Any change in the composition of the consortium must comply with the general eligibility rules of the call, and the national/regional regulations of the relevant PFOs. The eligibility of the new Partners*

must be verified with the relevant PFOs before submitting the proposal. The change(s) will have to be declared on the EPSS.

Please indicate the acronym of your project when contacting the JCS and/or your NCP.

4.8 Evaluation of proposals

A two-step evaluation procedure will apply at both Step 1 (for the pre-proposals evaluation) and Step 2 (for the full proposal evaluation).

4.8.1 The International Evaluation Committee (IEC)

The CSC will establish an International Evaluation Committee (IEC). The composition of evaluation committees will consider the gender and geographical balance.

The IEC will comprise international scientific experts from the relevant research areas covered in this call. The IEC composition should allow covering, as far as possible, the range of Priority areas of the present call. Proposals will be accessible to the CSC, the IEC members, the independent observer, the representative(s) of DCU(IOC/UNESCO) as observer(s), and the ethic experts (see 4.8.4. Ethic clearance).

All collected data will be handled in accordance with the GDPR, see also section 4.5.

IEC members, Independent observer, DCU representative(s) (observer(s), Ethics experts will have to sign a confidentiality, non-disclosure and conflict of interest policy and will have to declare all their potential conflicts of interest with submitted pre-proposals at Step 1 and with submitted full proposals at Step 2. The JCS will also check that no conflict of interest exists concerning the proposals evaluated.

IEC members and Ethic experts cannot be applicants in the joint call and cannot evaluate proposals with which they declared a conflict of interest, to ensure a fair evaluation process and equal treatment of applicants. The IEC will be headed by a Chair and a Vice-Chair. The Chair and the Vice-Chair will be regular members of the IEC with the added duties of moderating the IEC meeting and conveying the results of the discussions to the CSC. The Chair and Vice-Chair of the IEC will be selected from a country not represented within the CSC to avoid as much as possible conflicts of interest. Members take part in the IEC as independent experts and do not represent any organisation, nor can they send any replacements. This means that their work on this Committee does not represent any organisation or nation. The same applies to Ethic Experts. An independent observer is invited to the IEC meeting to assess the conformity of the general procedure with the EU regulation.

All eligible proposals will be subject to a scientific evaluation by IEC members, one of the IEC members will be nominated as a rapporteur. They must assess the proposal and prepare individual written evaluation reports, in advance of the IEC meeting. Details about the assessment criteria and scoring of proposals are detailed in 4.8.3.

During the IEC meeting, the evaluation results for each proposal will be presented by the evaluators. The IEC will discuss the proposals, agree on the final individual score for each criterion and the overall score for each proposal and establish a ranking of proposals based exclusively on the set of criteria defined.

The decisions of the IEC should be taken collectively, preferably by consensus or by a simple majority of the panel members in case consensus cannot be reached. The IEC will produce a final Evaluation Summary Report for each proposal, which will be transmitted to the applicants (without scores).

4.8.2 Evaluation procedures

Step 1 (pre-proposals)

1. Eligibility checks

Pre-proposals will be checked for eligibility at both the international level by the JCS (see criteria defined in 4.6.1) and at the national/regional level by the relevant funding organisations according to their national/regional criteria (see national/regional regulations; Annex B).

2. Scientific Evaluation

The eligible pre-proposals will be evaluated by a minimum of two independent evaluators of the IEC, and as far as possible, by three independent evaluators of the IEC who will be assigned by matching expert profiles with the need for pre-proposals evaluation. One of the IEC members will be nominated as a Rapporteur.

The evaluation of each pre-proposal will be based on the following criteria:

- **Excellence (Threshold: 3/5)**
- **Impact (Threshold: 3/5*)***

During the IEC meeting, the evaluators will present the evaluation results of each pre-proposal. The IEC will discuss pre-proposals and agree on the final scores for each criterion.

The final score will be calculated by summing up the calculated average scores of the two criteria given by the IEC members for each criterion.

A ranking list of pre-proposals will be produced, including only pre-proposals that meet the minimum threshold, i.e., 3 out of 5 in each criterion.

3. Decision

This Step 1 aims to identify the best proposals to proceed to step 2 and to ensure a balance between requested and available funds at the national level.

The ranked eligible pre-proposals will be sent to the CSC and be divided into 3 groups, according to their scores: Group A (highest evaluation scores), Group B (medium evaluation scores), and Group C (under the threshold scores). All pre-proposals in Group A will be invited to Step 2. Among the pre-proposals in Group B, proposals will be selected for step 2, considering the ranking list, the representativeness of all PFOs, and the funding ratio limits. Group C will be dismissed for their low ranking and unavailability of funding.

Consortium coordinators will be informed of the outcomes by the Joint call secretariat and, if appropriate, invited to submit a full proposal on the EPSS as well as any national documentation required by each PFO according to national rules.

Step 2 (full proposals)

1. Eligibility checks

After the submission deadline for full proposals, the submitted full proposals will be checked (by the JCS, and NCPs) to ensure that they meet the eligibility criteria. Full proposals not meeting the formal conditions will be rejected without further review.

2. Scientific evaluation

All eligible full proposals will be subject to a scientific evaluation by at least three independent reviewers of the IEC who will be assigned by matching expert’s profiles with the need for full proposals evaluation. One of the IEC members will be nominated as a rapporteur.

The evaluation of each full proposal will be based on the following criteria:

- **Excellence (Threshold: 3/5)**
- **Impact (Threshold: 3/5)**
- **Quality and efficiency of implementation (Threshold: 3/5)**

During the IEC meeting, the evaluators will present the evaluation results of each proposal. The IEC will discuss full proposals and agree on the final scores for each criterion.

The final scores will be calculated by summing up the calculated average scores of the three criteria given by the IEC members for each criterion.

The threshold on the final score is 10/15: no project with a lower score will be funded.

On the basis of the evaluation results and the final scores, the IEC panel will establish four final ranking lists, i.e. one per Priority area, including only full proposals that meet the

minimum threshold, i.e., 3 out of 5 in each criterion, and threshold on the final score i.e., 10 out of 15. The ranking lists will strictly follow the final scores of each full proposal as agreed by the IEC panel.

3. Decision

The final ranking lists will be forwarded to the CSC, which will meet to decide on the projects to be recommended for funding by PFOs.

For the selection decision, the CSC will strictly follow the order of the ranking lists from the IEC and the funding availability, in accordance with the Horizon Europe regulations and restrictions for co-funded calls and partnerships. The aim is to maximise the number of highly ranked proposals that can be funded while ensuring a balance between the Priority areas.

The allocation of financial contributions by each PFO shall follow the ranking lists and comply with national eligibility rules. While not all PFOs may be able to fund proposals under each Priority area, the funding decision shall respect the final ranking lists and scores given by the IEC panel.

When prioritising proposals, including in cases of equal scores or to achieve a balanced portfolio between the four Priority areas, the CSC may apply the principles listed below. The CSC can decide how to use these principles providing that they are used uniformly for all proposals:

- *Maximizing the total number of projects funded and thus optimizing the amount of EU financial support to the Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership call.*
- *Maximizing the number of countries/regions involved in the projects funded;*
- *Ensuring a balance between sea-basins involved in the projects funded;*
- *Assuring a good balance between different Priority areas of the call;*
- *Assuring a gender balance in the research activities;*
- *Promoting the allocation of the EU financial support pro rata, based on the actual contributions of the PFOs involved in the proposals.*

4.8.3 Ethic clearance

The full-proposals recommended for funding by the CSC will be subject to a final ethical clearance by ethics experts, for alignment with ethical norms and regulation[9].

Upon demand by the ethics experts, additional documents and tasks may be requested to the concerned consortium. The Ethics experts may suggest additional conditions that will have to be fulfilled during the project implementation.

Only those proposals approved by both the scientific evaluation and ethical clearance will be considered by the CSC for the final decision on projects to be recommended for funding.

Official letters on eligibility and evaluation results will be sent to Consortium coordinators. Evaluation Summary Reports will be provided to the Coordinators. The Coordinators are responsible for forwarding all of the information to the proposal partners/self-funded partners. Following receipt of the outcome letter, the negotiation for the grants of successful projects will start with each concerned PFO.

4.8.4 Evaluation criteria and scoring system

The evaluation criteria (and sub-criteria) used by the IEC are those used for Horizon Europe proposals (see Award criteria of the HE Work programme), and described below.

Note that Projects must comply with ethical principles (including the highest standards of research integrity) and applicable EU, international and national law. Applicants must have completed the ethics self-assessment as part of their application at Stage 2. For more information, see How to complete your ethics self-assessment. Applicants must also comply with the EU taxonomy.

Excellence (threshold: 3 out of 5)

- ***Clarity and pertinence of the project’s objectives, and the extent to which the proposed work is ambitious and goes beyond the state of the art.***
- ***Soundness of the proposed: overall* methodology,*** *including the underlying concepts, models, assumptions, inter-disciplinary approaches, appropriate consideration of the gender dimension in research and innovation content, and the quality of open science practices, including sharing and management of research outputs and engagement of citizens, civil society and end-users where appropriate.*

** Including all aspects mentioned in the first stage proposal template, which also include the integration of the gender dimension in research and innovation content as well as open science practices.*

Please note, only the aspects in bold are considered for the evaluation of first-stage applications.

Impact (threshold: 3 out of 5)

- ***Credibility of the pathways to achieve the expected outcomes and impacts specified in the work programme, and the likely scale and significance of the contributions from the project.***
- *Suitability and quality of the measures to maximise expected outcomes and impacts, as set out in the dissemination and exploitation plan, including communication activities.*

Please note, only the aspects in bold are considered for the evaluation of first-stage applications.

Quality and efficiency of the implementation (threshold: 3 out of 5)

- *Quality and effectiveness of the work plan, assessment of risks, and appropriateness of the effort assigned to work packages, and the resources overall.*
- *Capacity and role of each participant, and the extent to which the consortium as a whole brings together the necessary expertise.*

Individual scores will be attributed only to the three main criteria, even though the IEC experts will evaluate all sub-criteria described below in the scoring system.

Each criterion will be scored out of 5 (no half marks allowed) based on the following scoring system. The threshold for each criterion is 3 out of 5. Any project with a lower score for one of the criteria or an overall score lower than 10 at Step 2 will not be considered for funding.

Evaluators will identify strengths and weaknesses (if any) and provide context for their comments based on the application, i.e., evaluators will be asked to score (pre-) proposals as they were submitted, rather than on their potential if certain changes were to be made. When an evaluator identifies substantial shortcomings, he/she must reflect this by awarding a lower score for the criterion concerned. There should be consistency between the numerical scores and written comments.

Scoring system:

- *0 – LIMITED - The (pre-)proposal fails to address the criterion or cannot be assessed due to missing or incomplete information.*
- *1 – POOR - The criterion is inadequately addressed, or there are serious inherent weaknesses.*
- *2 – FAIR - The (pre-)proposal broadly addresses the criterion, but there are significant weaknesses.*
- *3 – GOOD - The (pre-)proposal addresses the criterion well, but several shortcomings are present.*

- *4 – VERY GOOD - The (pre-)proposal addresses the criterion very well, but a small number of shortcomings are present.*
- *5 – EXCELLENT - The (pre-)proposal successfully addresses all relevant aspects of the criterion. Any shortcomings are minor.*

4.8.5 Redress procedure

A mechanism will be established according to Article 30 of the Regulation (EU) 2021/695 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 28 April 2021 to ensure the independent and fair treatment of complaints related to this call. Applicants can challenge the evaluation outcome if they suspect a breach in the application of the evaluation and selection procedures. This redress procedure only covers the procedural aspects of the evaluation and/or eligibility checks, including the national/regional eligibility checks. The redress will not call into question the scientific or technical judgement of appropriately qualified experts of the IEC.

In this case, they shall submit their request for redress to the JCS (sbep.call-secretariat@uefiscdi.ro) via email, up to 14 calendar days after the date of dispatch of the evaluation outcome email by the JCS at the end of each step (first or second step). The (pre-) proposal outcome email containing the results of the evaluation will give information on the redress procedure, which is described below.

Admissibility of request for redress

For a request for redress to be admissible the following conditions must be met:

- *The request for redress must be submitted by the coordinator of the (pre-)proposal to which the request for redress relates*
- *Only one request for redress per (pre-)proposal will be considered*
- *The request for redress must be addressed to the IEC Chair*
- *The request for redress must be submitted via email within the 14 calendar days deadline.*
- *The request for redress must contain the following minimum information:*
    - *The name of the call for (pre-)proposals;*
    - *The (pre-)proposal number;*
    - *The acronym and the title of the (pre-)proposal;*
    - *A description of the alleged shortcomings of the evaluation procedure.*

The request for redress must demonstrate a procedural irregularity, factual error, manifest error of assessment, misuse of powers, or a conflict of interests. Requests for redress that do not meet the above conditions do not deal with the evaluation of a specific (pre-)

proposal or express mere disagreement with the result or the reasoning of the evaluation might be judged as not suitable for redress.

Procedure

Upon receipt of a request for redress, an acknowledgement of receipt will be sent by the JCS within 7 calendar days. The acknowledgement shall report the redress process and the anticipated date by which a decision on the request for redress will be communicated to the coordinator of the (pre-)proposal.

All requests for redress received by the 14 calendar days deadline will be processed together and the decision will be communicated to the coordinator of the (pre-)proposal within 14 calendar days from the deadline for submitting the requests for redress.

The IEC Chair will establish an internal redress committee chaired by the IEC Chair and comprised of the Independent Observer, and one representative of the consortium. The role of the redress committee is to evaluate the requests for redress according to the procedure, ensuring fair and equal treatment of applicants, with the support of the JCS (or the Chair of the CSC) and one representative per research funding organisation concerned by the proposal requesting a redress procedure, if needed. The Committee will provide its opinion on the implementation of the evaluation procedure, based on the available information related to the proposal and its evaluation, and will make a recommendation to the IEC Chair, who is in charge of deciding, except for national eligibility.

A negative national eligibility check of a PFO cannot be overruled by the IEC Chair. Requests for redress on national eligibility decisions will be assessed by the PFO responsible for the national eligibility check, which will justify its decision to the Chair, to prove that national funding rules listed in the call text have been applied correctly.

For Step 1: Only the proposals eligible at national level will be allowed to participate in Step 2

For Step 2: The redress procedure may lead to a re-evaluation of all or part of the proposal by independent experts not involved in the previous evaluation or to the confirmation of the initial evaluation.

A re-evaluation will only be carried out if the request for redress shows that the selection procedure was flawed by a breach which affects the evaluation outcome and the final decision on whether to fund a proposal. This means, for example, that a problem relating to one evaluation criterion will not lead to a re-evaluation if the proposal has failed anyway on another criterion or if even by adding the maximum points for this criterion, the final score remains below the funding threshold.

The score following any re-evaluation will be regarded as definitive. It may be lower than the original score. All requests for redress will be treated in confidence and will not prejudice future applications.

5.0 PROJECT’S IMPLEMENTATION

5.1 Contractual relationships

This partnership call is a collaboration between funding organisations with the aim of establishing transnational research collaboration. The contracts with project partners are the responsibility of the national/regional PFOs. Formal funding decisions are made by the PFOs and funding will be provided according to applicable national/ regional funding regulations. Once the Coordinators have been informed of the evaluation outcome, the partners within the projects recommended for funding will either be contacted by the PFOs or will need to contact the PFOs of their respective countries/regions themselves. This in accordance with the applicable regulations and practices, in order to start the contract negotiation process and accomplish the remaining steps until the project can start.

Because of the fragmented nature of the funding, care will be taken to ensure that the individual contracts are synchronised both in time and content so that the project consortium can deliver transnational outputs as described in the project proposal. The national/regional PFOs must ensure that common SBEP conditions are met (e.g., the common start date of a given project, reporting requirements, etc.). All project partners/self-funded partners within the projects recommended for funding shall start no later than June 2027. Please be aware that applicable European regulations on all aspects of funding must also be respected, e.g., state aid regulations.

For the whole duration of the contract, it is the responsibility of the Project Coordinator to inform the Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership consortium about any changes in the project, i.e., modifications of the work plan, the project consortium, or the contract. The communication should be transmitted through the Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership Monitoring Group.

Any financial issue is under the responsibility of each national/regional PFO involved in the approved project.

5.2 Contractual requirements

In this call for proposals, being co-funded by the European Union, project partners are considered as third parties of PFOs. All project partners commit to the following articles of the Horizon Europe Annotated Grant Agreement and related regulations of Annex 5:

- *Conflicts of interest (Article 12)*
- *Confidentiality and security (Article 13)*
- *Ethics and values (Article 14)*
- *Visibility (Article 17)*
- *Specific rules for carrying out the action (Article 18)*
- *Information obligations (Article 19)*

- *Record-keeping (Article 20)*

Recipients of the grants should include clauses ensuring the rights of the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) and other bodies mentioned in Article 25 (e.g. granting authority, the European Court of Auditors (ECA) as per Articles 22 and 23 of the Grant Agreement) i.e. the right to carry out checks, reviews, audits and investigations on the project partners, and in particular to audit the payments received. If access is denied by the project partners, the costs will be rejected.

5.3 Consortium Agreement

All project partners including self-funded partners are required to sign a Consortium Agreement (CA) before the official project starts or in any case no later than three months after the project starts. The CA should address matters on the management of project activities, finances, IPR and how to avoid and solve disputes which might be detrimental to the completion of the project. It will be the responsibility of the project coordinators to draw up a CA suitable for their own group.

Upon request, the CA must be made available to the national or regional PFOs, together with any other information required by national or regional regulations. Funding organisations might require the CA to release the funds. Support for the preparation of a consortium agreement can be found on the DESCA webpage.

5.4 Project monitoring and reporting

Funded projects will be required to submit via the Project Coordinator a mid-term report and a final report on research and activity progress (submission procedure will be specified at the kick-off of the projects). Some PFOs may request additional specific reports.

The funded projects must be completed within three years and are part of an international research programme (SBEP) for which some joint activities will be organised, in particular:

- *a Kick-Off on-line meeting, at the beginning of the funding period (mid 2028), to explain objectives and expected results;*
- *a mid-term meeting (October 2029), to present and discuss the mid-term reports, preliminary results, and future work;*
- *a final on-line meeting (April 2030), to present and disseminate the project results and main outcomes.*

The coordinators of the funded projects are expected to actively engage in these three joint activities. Accordingly, the cost of attendance at the physical meeting (mid-term meeting) should be foreseen in their proposals´ budget.

The objectives of these joint activities are the monitoring of the projects funded through the SBEP and the provision of networking and future collaboration opportunities. When possible, the meetings will be organised back-to-back with other relevant workshops/events. The coordinators of the funded projects are expected to get involved in other relevant Partnership ‘s activities: training, communication and dissemination (symposium, conferences, portfolio etc.) and must foresee the costs in their budget.

Besides this, on behalf of the consortium, the Project Coordinator will be required to submit two written progress reports (mid-term and final). All consortium partners will have to deliver input for these reports. The Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership will provide a template for this task.

Funding recipients must ensure that all outcomes (publications, etc.) of transnational SBEP projects include a proper acknowledgement of the SBEP. All the publications resulting from funded projects must be published in adherence to the EC Open Science Policy (see Annex F).

Please note, funded project extensions are subject to national regulations following the notification of the follow-up Secretariat.

5.5 Dissemination requirements

Dissemination of project outputs is mandatory and is the responsibility of the funded project partners. Detailed plans for dissemination of the results must be described in the proposals and are considered in the evaluation procedure. This can be organised in the form of various communication routes such as scientific papers, posters, course or training material, web-based tools, stakeholder involvement, workshops, or direct intervention towards end users. Dissemination to national end-users is necessary for all partner countries. A dissemination plan will be requested for the full proposal and should specify how the planned activities will contribute to the impact of the project.

Furthermore, the project partners must acknowledge the transnational funding of the SBEP under Horizon Europe and the individual national/regional funding organisations in any document that is published (in written, oral, or electronic form) within the research project.

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