



SMART ERA

SMART ERA

2ND OPEN CALL FOR FOLLOWERS MICRO-PILOTS QUESTIONS ASKED BY APPLICANTS

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A complimentary document that includes a list of common questions asked by Applicants

at: SMARTERA.help@fundingbox.com.

and at [the SMART ERA Community](#).



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Questions related to Eligibility (Legal Entities and Geographical Scope)

I have a question about what type of entity is appropriate for a community activator.

In the Smart ERA OC, can the community activator entity also be an SME consultancy that knows the region's ecosystem very well?

Yes, any kind of legally registered entity could be the Community Activator. Therefore, an SME consultancy that knows the region's ecosystem very well could certainly play that role in the Consortium.

I have a question about the eligibility criteria.

Can an SME based in Türkiye join a consortium as the Technology Provider / Pilot Orchestrator, together with a Community Activator based in an eligible rural Follower Region under EUSALP, EUSBSR, EUSAIR or EUSDR?

The project would be implemented in that eligible region.

Yes, this consortium structure is eligible for the 2nd Open Call for Followers Micro-Pilots, as long as the Smart Innovation Package (SIP) is deployed and validated within the eligible follower region together with the local Community Activator.

We are preparing a proposal involving a Turkish SME and a Turkish NGO, with a pilot implementation in rural areas of Çanakkale Province (Türkiye).

Could you please confirm whether these rural communities would be considered eligible pilot areas under the SMART ERA Open Call?

As stated in the [Guide for Applicants](#), section 3, *Applicants must operate in Rural Regions now belonging to one of the four EU Macro-Regional Strategies (MRS)*. You can also find more information about these macro-regions in the Guide for Applicants Glossary.

Only Rural Regions included in those areas can be considered for funding in this Open Call.

Which types of rural regions would you particularly recommend within the EUSALP macro-region?

You should target "Follower Regions" that face structural socio-economic challenges, such as demographic decline, limited access to services, economic restructuring, or low levels of innovation intensity.

The ideal region should have an emerging or moderately developed innovation ecosystem (with some presence of SMEs, clusters, and public authorities), rather than one that is already highly advanced or entirely non-existent.

SMART ERA 2nd Open Call. Questions asked during the OC.

Importantly, priority is given to rural regions that lack previous experience in participating in multi-actor approach projects.

Must applicants identify their own Community Activator before submitting the proposal, or will SMART ERA support selected Technical Providers in finding or appointing one?

You must identify your own Community Activator before submitting the proposal, as SMART ERA will not appoint one for you.

You have two options for applying: you can apply as a Consortium (one Community Activator and one Pilot Orchestrator), or you can apply as an Individual Applicant if your entity is capable of effectively covering both technical and community engagement roles.

However, keep in mind that Consortia will be prioritized.

I am writing to ask for clarification regarding the eligibility of a consortium in which two partners are legally connected. The specific case concerns an SME and a non-profit organisation, where the SME owns more than 25% of the equity of the non-profit organisation.

Could you kindly confirm whether such a consortium would be eligible under the call?

Based on the criteria outlined in the Guide for Applicants, yes, this consortium structure is eligible for the 2nd Open Call for Followers Micro-Pilots.

A valid consortium must be composed of two distinct entities: one Community Activator and one Pilot Orchestrator (Technical Provider). As long as the organisations are separate legal entities registered in eligible countries, they meet the structural requirements for a consortium application.

I would like to know if the Finnish region of Lapland is eligible for funding since you already have a Finnish region involved, which is not Lapland though.

For this OC, applicants must operate in a rural region belonging to one of the four targeted EU Macro-Regional Strategies. Finland falls under the [EUSBSR \(EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region\)](#), which makes Lapland geographically eligible. The proposed project must not be developed in any of the six original SMART ERA Pilot Regions. While Northern Ostrobothnia is indeed one of our original pilots, there is no rule restricting other regions within the same country from applying. You should ensure that your proposed area in Lapland demonstrates a clear need to strengthen its innovation capacity and faces structural socio-economic challenges, such as demographic decline or limited access to services.



We have a question concerning Community Activator eligibility. Our potential Community Activator partner operates in the EUSALP region, but its headquarters are located in Vienna, Austria.

Could you please clarify whether the Community Activator's headquarters must be located in an EUSALP rural area, or whether active operations in the rural area would be sufficient to meet the eligibility criteria?

Yes, your potential Community Activator partner is eligible. The headquarters do not need to be physically located within the specific rural area, provided they actively operate there and meet the core criteria.

Entities must be legally registered in a Member State of the European Union or an Associated Country to Horizon Europe. Since Austria is an EU Member State, having headquarters in Vienna perfectly fulfills this legal registration requirement. The GfA stipulates that applicants must "operate in Rural Regions belonging to one of the four EU Macro-Regional Strategies," which includes EUSALP. The primary requirement for a Community Activator is that they possess "strong ties to the local community in one of the follower Regions".

In Section 3.1 of the Guide for Applicants, the Community Activator is described as an entity with strong ties to the local community, including "Local Public Administrations". Could you please confirm whether a Municipality can participate as Community Activator, provided it operates in an eligible rural region within one of the targeted Macro-Regional Strategies?

The Guide for Applicants explicitly states that the Community Activator role is open to "any kind of entities, like local Public Administrations, Universities, NGOs or associations with strong ties to the local community in one of the follower Regions". Since a municipality is a local Public Administration, it fits this requirement

Your consortium structure will be eligible as long as your municipality possesses genuine ties to the community, operates within an eligible rural region belonging to one of the four targeted EU Macro-Regional Strategies (EUSALP, EUSBSR, EUSAIR, or EUSDR), and partners with an eligible Technical Provider acting as the Pilot Orchestrator.

Section 3.1 of the Guide for Applicants states that "Projects to be developed in Rural Regions that do not have previous experience of participating in projects applying a multi-actor approach will be given priority during the selection process."

The rural region we are working on is part of a Local Action Group and of a Green Community. Both are permanent, institutional multi-stakeholder partnerships (bringing together public bodies, businesses, and civil society for territorial development), rather than time-bound "projects" in the sense typically implied by an EU call for proposals.

Could you clarify whether membership in this kind of permanent multi-actor partnership counts as "previous experience in projects applying a multi-actor approach" for the purposes of this priority criterion, or whether the criterion refers specifically to participation in EU-funded (or similar) multi-actor projects with a defined start/end date?



SMART ERA 2nd Open Call. Questions asked during the OC.

No, membership in a permanent institutional partnership like a LAG/GAL or a Green Community does not count as "previous experience in projects applying a multi-actor approach" for the purposes of this priority criterion. The criterion refers specifically to prior participation in time-bound, funded projects (such as specific Horizon 2020, Horizon Europe, or Interreg projects)

I would like to request a clarification regarding the eligibility requirements for the role of Pilot Orchestrator.

The Guide for Applicants states that the Pilot Orchestrator must be "an SME or Technical Provider responsible for technical execution and deploying the SIP."

Could you please clarify whether a sole proprietor/self-employed professional with a VAT number, who is legally registered and provides the required technical expertise, is eligible to participate in this role? Or is the Pilot Orchestrator role restricted to incorporated SMEs only?

For the purposes of Horizon Europe, a "legal entity" is understood as follows:

'Legal entity' means a natural person or an entity created and recognised by law as a legal person. It must have legal personality and, acting on its own account and in its own name, be able to exercise rights and be subject to obligations.

Specifically regarding Italy: A freelance professional with a VAT number (persona fisica con partita IVA) is considered an "individual legal entity" and is therefore eligible to participate; and Companies and organizations with separate legal personality (such as an SRL, cooperative, foundation, association, etc.) are also eligible to participate.

We are considering applying to the SMART ERA 2nd Open Call and would like to clarify one eligibility question.

Our project would be implemented by FEDETCAS (Federación para el Desarrollo Territorial de la Provincia de Castellón, Spain) together with a technology SME.

Could you please confirm whether rural municipalities in the Province of Castellón (Spain) are eligible under the requirement that projects must operate in regions belonging to one of the four EU Macro-Regional Strategies?

No, rural municipalities in the Province of Castellón (Spain) are not eligible to host the micro-pilot project.

The core geographical requirement of this Open Call is that proposed micro-pilots must operate in a rural region belonging to one of four specific EU Macro-Regional Strategies: the Alpine Region (EUSALP), the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR), the Adriatic-Ionian Region (EUSAIR), or the Danube Region (EUSDR). Spain does not fall within any of these four targeted macro-regions. You can find links to this information in the [Application Site](#) and the Guide for Applicants.

Can a Polish SME apply as the pilot orchestrator together with a rural municipality or community activator from another eligible European country or region?

Yes, this consortium structure is eligible. To receive funding under this call, participating entities must be legally registered in an EU Member State or a Horizon Europe Associated Country. You can partner with a Community Activator (such as a local public administration, NGO, or association) located in another eligible country, provided that the actual pilot operates in a rural follower region belonging to one of the four eligible EU Macro-Regional Strategies.



Is the community activator required to be a formal consortium member at the time of submission?

The Community Activator must agree to be a consortium member at the time of submission. If you choose to apply under the Consortium format, the online Application Form requires you to provide the official legal name, VAT number, registration date, and country of registration for both the Community Activator and the Pilot Orchestrator at the moment of submission. If selected, both partners must undergo a formal eligibility check and jointly sign the Subgrant Agreement (SGA) to officially enter the Support Programme.

Can a Portugal-registered sole trader / self-employed individual qualify as the SME or technology provider, or must the applicant be an incorporated company?

Yes, a legally registered sole trader or self-employed individual in Portugal can qualify as the Pilot Orchestrator (technology provider). The call rules rely on the official EU definition of an SME, which encompasses sole proprietorships and self-employed individuals regularly engaged in economic activity. Since Portugal is an EU Member State, any legally registered entity from Portugal is eligible to participate.

In a consortium application, may the technology provider be established in Portugal while the Community Activator and pilot activities are located in a rural follower region covered by EUSALP, EUSBSR, EUSAIR or EUSDR?

Yes, this international structure is eligible. The Pilot Orchestrator (technology provider) can be established in Portugal, while the Community Activator and the pilot activities are located in a rural follower region belonging to one of the four eligible Macro-Regional Strategies (EUSALP, EUSBSR, EUSAIR, or EUSDR). There is no requirement in the Guide for Applicants (GfA) stating that both consortium members must be legally registered in the exact same region or country. The critical requirement is that the Community Activator must have strong ties to the local community in the target Follower Region and the Pilot Orchestrator must technically deploy and adapt the solution in that same rural follower region.

Does the requirement that applicants “operate in rural regions” apply to every consortium member, or primarily to the Community Activator and the location of the micro-pilot?

The requirement to “operate in rural regions” does not apply to the registration address of the technology provider; it primarily applies to the location of the micro-pilot and the Community Activator. The physical micro-pilot project must be implemented within an eligible rural follower region and the Community Activator must be an entity with strong local ties to that community.

We are wondering whether the municipality of Savogna (<https://maps.app.goo.gl/uB1DvtdDC6YemwxB7>) falls within the Šmarje–Padna area ?

The municipality of Savogna does not fall within the Šmarje–Padna pilot region.

The existing Šmarje–Padna pilot region is located in the Slovenian Istria region, specifically covering the village of Šmarje (in the Municipality of Koper, Slovenia) and the village of Padna (in the Municipality of Piran, Slovenia). Savogna is a separate Italian municipality in the Province of Udine (Friuli Venezia Giulia), it is outside the excluded pilot area.

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Since Savogna is located in Friuli Venezia Giulia, it falls directly within the geographical scope of the EU Strategy for the Alpine Region (EUSALP).

Are entities from Serbia eligible to apply ?

Yes, Serbian entities are fully eligible to apply, and rural regions in Serbia are eligible to host a Follower Micro-Pilot under the SMART ERA 2nd Open Call.

Serbia is officially listed as an Associated Country

To host a micro-pilot, the target territory must be a rural region belonging to one of the four targeted EU Macro-Regional Strategies. Serbia falls directly within the geographical scope of two of these strategies:

- EUSDR (EU Strategy for the Danube Region)
- EUSAIR (EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region)

Since Serbia falls within these two Macro-Strategies, you should choose which one aligns best with your proposal, considering the priorities of each Macro-Strategy.



SMART ERA 2nd Open Call. Questions asked during the OC.

Questions related to TRL

Technical Solutions, at the moment of applying, must have an Initial Technological Readiness Level (TRL) of at least 4 and achieve a Final TRL of at least 6. Does this mean the technical solution we are to provide should already have a TRL4 or is this the initial level of the pilot projects as such?

The solution that you should adapt to the requirements of the Open Call should have, at the moment of applying, a TRL level of at least 4.

In our project, we refer to

https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/horizon/wp-call/2021-2022/wp-13-general-annexes_horizon-2021-2022_en.pdf

(page 10) for a full description of TRLs.

TRL 4 — Technology validated in a lab

TRL 6 — Technology demonstrated in a relevant environment

The guide establishes a minimum starting level of TRL 4 and an expected final level of TRL 6. Will proposals starting at TRL 5 or above receive additional points during pre-scoring?

Yes, higher starting and expected final TRLs are rewarded during the pre-scoring phase (check criteria in the GfA).

The Guide requires an Initial TRL of at least 4 at the moment of application. Could you please clarify how applicants are expected to evidence or verify the declared Initial TRL 4, and whether any specific supporting documentation, certification or validation report is required at application stage?

You are not required to upload any formal TRL certifications, official validation reports, or external technical audits at the application stage.

In the "Excellence" section of the online Application Form, you will simply select the multiple-choice option corresponding to "TRL 4 - technology validated in lab" (or higher, up to TRL 7). You also confirm the truth and accuracy of this data by ticking the Declaration of Honour boxes at the end of the form.

You must describe the technical maturity of your existing software codebase within the qualitative sections of the form. Specifically, use the "Soundness of the approach" section to clearly articulate how your core technological components have already been built, tested, and validated in a laboratory or simulated environment



Could a location-aware tourism and community-discovery platform qualify as a Smart Innovation Package if its prototype is currently at approximately TRL 4 and the pilot is designed to reach TRL 6?

Yes, this concept is eligible and fits the requirements.

The call strictly requires proposed technologies to start at an initial TRL of at least 4 (technology validated in lab) at the time of application and achieve a final TRL of at least 6 (technology demonstrated in a relevant environment) by the end of the 12-month program. Tourism is one of the six key sectors explicitly targeted by the SMART ERA co-design methodology. To qualify as a complete Smart Innovation Package (SIP), you must ensure that your tourism platform is integrated with the other three mandatory ingredients.



Questions related to Open Source

What exactly is expected to be “open source”? Is it our complete solution, or only the data obtained from it?

Projects selected through the SMART ERA Open Call are, where applicable, encouraged to use Open-Source AI models and/or apps with free or reusable licenses that are aligned with SMART ERA principles. You should define in your proposal which parts of your Solution are Open Source. Also, where applicable, beneficiaries of the SMART ERA Open Call are encouraged to provide the output data as free of charge, to be published in the open data portals.

What exactly do you mean by “open source”? Do you require data sharing, or are there specific AI models considered non-compliant with SMART ERA principles?

Open source means that the source-code should be published into , for example, GitHub. Data sharing is a must.



Other questions received

If it would be possible to schedule a call with you (and/or other project partners) to better understand the specific needs of the call.

In order to keep the fairness of the process, no meeting will be done with applicants. Once the selection process is over, Beneficiaries will have the support of the Project Partners.

Does the second Open Call prioritise any specific thematic areas or technologies, or are applicants free to propose any solution that responds to the needs of the selected rural region? Same for the challenges, are they completely free?

The thematic areas and challenges are completely free, provided they directly address the specific vulnerabilities of your chosen rural region and align with the goals of the EUSALP Macro-Regional Strategy.

The call supports a wide variety of fields, including social services, health, energy, mobility, climate adaptation, biodiversity, education, and access to culture.

However, regardless of the challenge, your solution must be structured as a Smart Innovation Package (SIP), which means it must integrate at least one technological solution, one non-technological ingredient, one policy ingredient, and one business ingredient.

Is the call looking primarily for groundbreaking technological innovation, or can it also support the digitalisation and substantial improvement of existing rural processes and services?

The call does not strictly require groundbreaking technological innovation built from scratch. It strongly supports upgrading, customizing, and integrating existing solutions into your proposed SIP.

SMART ERA is based on the philosophy that standalone technological solutions often fail in rural areas; therefore, the priority is to demonstrate how your digital tools synergize with governance, business, and social models to achieve a collective impact that substantially improves rural well-being.

The application requests applicants to upload the Draft of the SIP in PDF. Could you please confirm whether this refers to the PDF generated through the Co-design Tool using the "Print Report" option?

The "Smart Innovation Package (SIP) Draft" required for the application corresponds to the PDF "SIP report" generated by the external SMART ERA co-design online tool. Once you structure your initial ideas in the tool, use the export/print report option and upload that PDF to your application form. Nevertheless, the use of this tool is highly recommendable but not mandatory, you can also draft your SIP in another way that you consider more suitable.



When preparing the SIP through the Co-design Tool, should applicants design the SIP to cover the entire duration of the proposed micro-pilot, or should it represent only the initial concept to be further refined during the project implementation?

When preparing your SIP for the application, it should represent your initial concept. A core objective of the Follower Micro-Pilots and the 12-month Support Programme is to replicate the SMART ERA methodology by actively engaging with local residents to identify regional needs and co-design the new SIPs.

Therefore, while your draft must outline the foundational ideas for the four mandatory ingredients (at least one technological solution, one non-technological ingredient, one policy ingredient, and one business ingredient), this initial concept is expected to be further refined and validated in collaboration with local stakeholders during the project's implementation.

We would like to clarify how to answer the following question in the application form:

"Does the Rural Region where you intend to develop your project have previous experience of participating in projects applying a multi-actor approach?"

The FAQ updated on 27.07.2026 states that membership in a permanent institutional partnership such as a LAG or a Green Community does not count, and that the criterion refers specifically to prior participation in time-bound, funded projects such as Horizon 2020, Horizon Europe or Interreg projects.

Two situations apply to our target region, and we are not certain whether either falls within the scope of the criterion:

1. A completed project co-financed by the European Social Fund under the Human Capital Operational Programme 2014-2020, implemented by two NGOs in partnership, which established a home care service for elderly residents in the commune.
2. An ongoing project co-financed by ESF+ under the national Inclusion and Social Dignity Programme 2021-2027, under which that home care service is currently delivered.

Both are time-bound and EU-funded. However, both are social service delivery operations under structural funds rather than research and innovation projects built around a co-creation methodology with heterogeneous actors.

Could you confirm whether ESF or ESF+ operational programme projects of this type should be counted as "previous experience of participating in projects applying a multi-actor approach" for the purposes of this criterion?

No, the ESF and ESF+ operational programme projects you described should not be counted as "previous experience of participating in projects applying a multi-actor approach." You can answer "No" to this question on your application form.

In the context of EU research and innovation frameworks (such as Horizon 2020, Horizon Europe, or Interreg), the definition of a "Multi-Actor Approach" (MAA) is a very specific methodology that requires:

Heterogeneous Collaboration: Structured, active cooperation bringing together diverse and complementary types of actors—specifically combining researchers/academia, technology developers/SMEs, public authorities, and civil society/local communities.

Co-Creation of Innovation: Stakeholders must act as active co-creators throughout the project's lifetime to co-design, test, and co-deliver innovative solutions.

The ESF/ESF+ projects you mentioned are operational social services rather than research and innovation (R&I) projects centered around a multi-actor co-creation methodology.



Would an integrated smart infrastructure package covering lighting, energy, water monitoring and community safety be considered eligible as a Smart Innovation Package?

Your proposed integrated smart infrastructure represents a technological solution (the central element of the SIP) and is aligned with the SMART ERA smartness dimensions. However, to be eligible under this Open Call, your project cannot consist only of a technological solution. You must draft a complete Smart Innovation Package (SIP), which strictly requires integrating your technology with three other mandatory, non-technical "ingredients":

One Non-Technological Ingredient: A community engagement, social innovation, or co-design method

One Policy Ingredient: A local governance model or local policy coordination framework

One Business Ingredient: A sustainability and business model showing how the system will maintain itself economically after the project funding ends.

Your application must demonstrate how these four ingredients will interlink to solve a concrete structural challenge in your target rural region.

Would you recommend applying as a two-member consortium or as a single applicant covering both roles?

We strongly recommend applying as a two-member consortium rather than as a single applicant.

Is it necessary to provide proof of the employment relationship between the participating team members and the participating company?

At the Application Stage: No, it is not necessary to upload formal employment contracts, payroll proofs, or similar documents for your team members when submitting your application. In the Application Form under the "Implementation" section, you must describe your team's collective experience and list up to 6 key team members. Additionally, you must tick a self-declaration confirming that you have the legal basis for processing the personal data of the listed team members.

At the Formal Check (SGA Preparation): If your proposal is pre-selected for funding, you will undergo a formal eligibility check before signing the Subgrant Agreement (SGA)

During this stage, the SMART ERA Consortium may ask for "document/s confirming the staff headcount" to verify your organization's formal status, as well as "any other documents in case of doubts raised during the checks". While standard employment contracts for every individual are not routinely required, the consortium reserves the right to request them if there are doubts about the team's capacity or the authenticity of the application.

Is the participating company allowed to include seconded personnel from another company in order to form its project team?

Conflict of Interest Safeguard: The key restriction to keep in mind is that the seconded personnel, employees, or B2B contractors cannot have any financial or personal links with any of the primary SMART ERA Consortium partners.



The Application Form states “Team members (1 mandatory, up to 6)”. Could you please clarify whether the limit of up to 6 people applies only to the key/core team members listed and evaluated in the application, or whether it means that the overall project implementation team cannot exceed 6 people? May additional personnel contribute to the implementation of the project without being listed as key/core team members in the Application Form?

The limit of "up to 6" people applies strictly to the key/core team members whose names, LinkedIn profiles, and/or CVs are individually entered and scored in the online application form. The form itself explicitly refers to these listed individuals as the "core team".

There is no restriction on the total number of people participating in the physical implementation of your follower micro-pilot. Additional personnel, employees, B2B contractors, or seconded staff can contribute to the project without being listed in those 6 individual profile slots.

In the "Team" narrative field, you can summarize your company's overall staff capacity and explain the wider collective experience of your entire organization or consortium.

Does SMART ERA offer any partner-search or matchmaking channel for technology providers seeking an eligible rural Community Activator?

No, SMART ERA does not provide dedicated spaces for partner matchmaking. You can join the official [SMART ERA Discord community](#).

