

ESIF Policy 2021-2027

ESF+ Programme (2021-2027)
**Fostering the socioeconomic wellbeing of society through
the creation of opportunities for all and investment in
human resources and skills**

Eligibility Guidelines **Call 17 for First Stage Project Proposals**

Priority 2
Fostering Active Inclusion for All



Co-funded by
the European Union

1. Scope of the Eligibility Guidelines

The scope of these Eligibility Guidelines is to provide assistance to prospective Applicants when applying for projects part-financed by the ESF+ Programme 2021-2027 'Fostering the socioeconomic wellbeing of society through the creation of opportunities for all and investment in human resources and skills'.

In Malta, the ESF+ Programme falls under the responsibility of the Managing Authority (MA), the Planning and Priorities Co-ordination Division (PPCD), within the Office of the Prime Minister.

Potential Applicants are encouraged to read through these Eligibility Guidelines and the relevant sections of ESF+ Programme¹ as will be highlighted in the sections below, in order to avoid submitting ineligible applications.

Prospective Applicants are also encouraged to refer to the Indicator Guidance Notes of the relevant priority for better understanding of what is requested with regards to the indicators section.

2. Background information on the ESF+ 2021-2027 programming period

Following consultation among various levels of governance, representatives from interest groups, civil society and local and regional representatives, Malta prepared the "Partnership Agreement" which was later adopted by the European Commission, thus establishing the strategy for the optimal use of European Structural and Investment Funds in the country. This Partnership Agreement provides the overarching strategy which delineates the main areas of intervention envisaged under the European Structural and Investment Funds. The objective of the Programme is to strengthen capacities in sectors falling within the scope of the ESF+ Regulation (EU) No 2021/1057 which is in line with policy objective D, specifically 'A more social Europe implementing the European Pillar of Social rights', namely through the areas of employment, education, health and social sectors, with the objective of improving and adapting to new and emerging needs.

The ESF+ Programme has 5 Priorities which reflect the policy objective set in the Common Provision Regulation No. 2021/1060.

The ESF+ Programme aims to strengthen economic, social and territorial cohesion in the European Union by correcting imbalances between its regions. Specifically, under the 2021-2027 it will focus on investments within several key priority areas, which are:

Employment – improving access to employment and activation measures of all jobseekers, including young people, long-term unemployed and disadvantaged groups on the labour market, and inactive people; and promoting a gender balanced labour market participation, equal working conditions and a better work-life balance.

Inclusion – fostering active inclusion for all and improving employability for disadvantaged groups; promoting socio-economic integration of TCNs; enhancing the equal and timely access to quality, sustainable and affordable services, modernizing social protection systems, improving accessibility, effectiveness and resilience of healthcare systems and long-term care services.

Education – quality and inclusive education and training and enhanced lifelong learning for growth from early childhood education and care through general and vocational education and training, to tertiary

¹ The document can be downloaded from: <https://fondi.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/ESF-Programme.pdf/>

level; and promoting lifelong learning, upskilling and reskilling opportunities for all based on labour markets needs.

Material deprivation – ensuring the sustainable integration of persons suffering from material deprivation to break the cycle of poverty and contribute to the reduction of the number of people facing material deprivation.

Social innovation – fostering active inclusion with a view to creating equal opportunities, non-discrimination and active participation, and improving employability.

Further to the simplified cost options outlined in the National Eligibility Rules, different forms of financing may also be applied in line with Articles 53 – 56 of Regulation (EU) 2021/1060 with respect to the projects selected. In the case of Simplified Cost Options (SCOs) and FNLC, the amounts which will be approved by the MA shall be established in line with the Common Provision Regulation (CPR), the EU Specific Fund Regulations, the applicable Commission guidance, the Programme as well as any specific guidance issued by the Ministry responsible for EU Funds. As part of this proposal the form of financing will be discussed with the applicants. Further information is included under Section 4. The Grant Agreement signed between the Beneficiary and the Managing Authority will set out the method to be applied for determining the eligible costs of the action and the conditions for the payment.

3. Context of the Call

Call 17 under ESF+ Programme is a restricted call for **Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs), Voluntary Organisation (VO's) and Social Partners** to submit projects which total project cost inclusive of VAT cannot exceed €200,000, addressing active inclusion and employability. The following are the relevant priority and policy objectives:

Priority: 2: Fostering Active Inclusion for All

- Specific objective: ESO4.8. Fostering active inclusion with a view to promoting equal opportunities, non-discrimination and active participation, and improving employability, in particular for disadvantaged groups.

Applicants should refer to the relevant section in the Programme, where the rationale for the below list of potential interventions is explained:

- Support services and life skills for social housing beneficiaries
- Active Ageing Projects
- Functional Family Therapy (FFT)
- After-Care Services
- Investing in youth rehabilitation
- Projects supporting persons with disabilities/vulnerable groups
- Supporting the active role of voluntary organisations

Through the above interventions, the Applicant should subsequently identify the expected result/s as well as the relevant output and result indicators which will be achieved through the project, as set out in the Programme:

- Increase social integration for disadvantaged groups
- Strengthen the employability of persons at risk of poverty and persons with a disability
- Reduce child poverty

Moreover, with regards to Environmental Sustainability and the Do No Significant Harm (DNSH) assessment relating to ESO4.8, the list of potential interventions when assessed at Programme level were considered to have negligible effect in view of the nature of activities foreseen.

4. The Application Process

In order to continue to improve the application process and to further simplify the access to European Funds, the Managing Authority is implementing a two-stage approach to determine the form of financing that may be applied in line with Articles 53 – 56 of the Common Provisions Regulation (EU) 2021/1060 with respect to the projects submitted under this Call.

Stage 1 - Submission of the first stage project proposal.

Stage 2 - Submission of the full application including supplementary documentation.

The first stage consists of a submission of the project proposal, through sfd.gov.mt by not later than **Monday 22th June 2026**.

Submitting a proposal is considered as a formal statement by the applicant organisation that all the details in the proposal are factually correct.

Timetable

<u>Call Process</u>	<u>Timeframes</u>
Launch of First stage Proposal/Application	17/05/2026
Information Session	28/05/2026
Deadline for Submission of First stage Proposal	22/06/2026
Meetings with Applicants	20/07/2026
Launch of Second stage Application	21/07/2026
Deadline for Submission of Second stage Application	11/08/2026

Stage 1 - Submission of the first stage project proposal.

The project proposal is to be filled in by potential eligible applicants. This will include critical information as to what the proposal entails including but not limited to:

- General details on the applicant organisation and partners
- The applicable specific objective and expected results
- The targeted cohorts and the related indicators

- Financial plan
- The activities being proposed and the project plan.

Following the submission of this proposal, the budget will be assessed, and the form of financing as outlined in Articles 53 – 56 of the Common Provisions Regulation (EU) 2021/1060 will be discussed with the applicant. Meetings with applicants will be held between **23/06/2026** and **20/07/2026**.

Subsequently applicants will be requested to submit the full application in stage 2 of the application process as described below.

Stage 2- Submission of a full application including supplementary documentation.

The second stage will be restricted to the applicants that have submitted a project proposal under step 1. These applicants will be informed once the second stage application process is open in order to submit the detailed project application form. The Project Selection Committee will then evaluate these submissions in line with the eligibility and selection criteria, indicated below:

Project Eligibility and Selection Criteria

Projects submitted will be evaluated by the Project Selection Committee (PSC) according to the eligibility and selection criteria (refer to table below) which have been approved by the Monitoring Committee in line with Article 40 of the Common Provision Regulation (EU) 2021/1060. These criteria aim at ensuring that the projects being selected are within the Priority parameters and can concretely contribute to the achievements of the objectives and results of the Programme. For a project to be considered for funding or to be placed on the reserve list, a project must pass all the Eligibility Criteria and must also obtain a minimum of 50% of the total marks allocated to the Selection Criteria.

Table 1: The table below offers a screenshot of the eligibility and selection criteria that will be used by the PSC when assessing the project during the second stage:

- **Eligibility criteria** are the essential criteria that all projects must meet in order to be admissible for a further qualitative assessment. Such eligibility criteria are assessed through a technical assessment and consist in a gateway assessment which ensures that all applications have reached a minimum standard. Projects which do not comply with the gateway eligibility criteria will not proceed to full appraisal and scoring.
- **Selection criteria** are designed to assess the fit and contribution of project proposals with the Programme strategy, its target groups and its objectives. These criteria are divided in two groups: those that rely on a quantitative assessment and those that require a qualitative assessment. The evaluation will combine both data (quantitative and qualitative) in order to have a comprehensive understanding of the proposal.

Eligibility Criteria		Selection criteria		
Criterion	Assessment	Criterion	Marks (max)	Sub-criteria
Submission of a complete project application as published in the call	Yes/No	Capacity of the organisation	10	Adequate overall expertise within the Applicant organisation and project partners
				Past experience in EU/similar projects
Applicant organization is an eligible Applicant as outlined in the call	Yes/No	Contribution of the project to the Relevant Development Needs	10	Evidence of real demand for the project (qualitative and quantitative evidence) to address a gap as identified in the relevant Priority within the Programme and how it will contribute to the need of the Programme (evidence showing to what extent this need will be addressed through the activities proposed)
				To what extent is the project contributing to the National and EU policies and consistent with corresponding enabling conditions
Applicant is not in an exclusion situation in accordance with Art 136(1) and Art 141(1) of 2018/1046 Financial Regulation and CPR Art 73(2)(i)	Yes/No	Potential of the project to contribute to the achievement of the Expected Results	10	Evidence of how the project will contribute to the achievement of the Expected Results as identified in the relevant Priority in the Programme
				If partners are involved, evidence of how they will contribute to the achievement of the Expected Results
				The ability of the project to mobilise complementary funding/actions to achieve the Expected Results
				Innovative solutions proposed in this project to achieve the Expected Results

Eligibility Criteria		Selection criteria		
Criterion	Assessment	Criterion	Marks (max)	Sub-criteria
Applicant organisation has remit to implement the project within its mandate	Yes/No	Contribution towards indicators	10	The selection of all relevant indicators as applicable for the project
				Adequate description of the selected indicators in the project proposal including an explanation of the method of quantification and verification of targets
				Assessment of whether there are any unrealistic indicator targets which are not achievable
				The contribution of the proposed indicators towards achieving Programme targets as outlined in the call
Project to be implemented within the eligible territory or for its direct benefit	Yes/No	Readiness	15	Risk associated with the timeline of the project as proposed by the Applicant
				Readiness, assessed on the basis of tenders, CBA/FFS/FS, Planning Authority permits, recruitment procedures and other relevant documentation pertaining to training, scholarships amongst others, depending on the nature of the published call and the nature of the proposal
				Other risks
Proof of co-financing (where applicable)	Yes/No	Project Sustainability	10	Magnitude of post operating costs against total project costs
				The Applicant organisation's financial stability

Eligibility Criteria		Selection criteria		
Criterion	Assessment	Criterion	Marks (max)	Sub-criteria
				Added Value of the project and complementarity with other projects
Selection of a relevant Specific Objective as published in the call	Yes/No	Partnership	5	The added value of the involved partner/s in achieving the expected results
				Clear evidence of the mutual benefit of the proposed partnership
				Partnership between organisations of a different nature
Selection of at least one output indicator and one result indicator linked to a relevant Specific Objective as published in the call	Yes/No	Horizontal principles - Equal opportunities and non-discrimination	10	Effective measures addressing equality between men and women
				Effective measures addressing equal opportunities for all
				Effective measures ensuring the principle of non-discrimination

Eligibility Criteria		Selection criteria		
Criterion	Assessment	Criterion	Marks (max)	Sub-criteria
Status of operation is either ongoing or not yet started unless otherwise allowed by the specific applicable regulations	Yes/No	Horizontal principles – Sustainable Development	10	Effective measures that contribute towards economic growth
				Effective measures that contribute towards social cohesion
				Effective measures that contribute towards environmental sustainability
		Quality of application form	10	General presentation and overall coherence between different sections of the proposal
				Proposed budget is in line with the proposed activities, demonstrating sound financial management and the absence of 'Double Funding'
				Adequate description and purpose of each activity being proposed including a work plan/Gantt chart with regards to the implementation of these activities
				Proposal identifies communication strategies/actions showing how the use of EU Funds will be effectively publicised and communicated with the relevant target groups of the proposed project and the general public

5. Eligibility Criteria

As explained above, a project must fulfill the following criteria to be eligible for further assessment by the Project Selection Committee (PSC):

a) Submission of a complete project application as published in the call

The Applicant must present a complete application form, filled in with all relevant details and documentation using the system made available by the MA, unless otherwise stipulated by the MA. No outline applications or incomplete applications shall be considered. Submission of project proposals must be made within the time-limit set for receipt of applications.

b) Applicant organisation is an eligible Applicant as outlined in the call

The Applicant organisation should be one of the eligible Applicants² as outlined in the relevant call. Supporting documentation related to the legal status of the Applicant, as required in the call would need to be provided by the Applicant.

c) Applicant is not in an exclusion situation in accordance with Art 136 (1) and Art 141 (1) of 2018/1046 Financial Regulation and CPR Art 73(2)(i)

The Applicant should sign a declaration confirming that they or any person involved in the project are not in an exclusion situation in accordance with the Financial Regulation and Common Provisions Regulation.

d) Applicant organisation has remit to implement the project within its mandate

Applicants must be publicly mandated or authorised to implement the project by virtue of the applicable law establishing the organisation or by the respective Statute, in the case of NGOs. The parameters and the objectives of the project must fall within the remit and mandate of the Applicant. Supporting documentation as required in the call would need to be provided.

e) Project to be implemented within the eligible territory or for its direct benefit

The eligible territory for the Programme is the whole territory of the Republic of Malta. All or part of an operation may be implemented outside of a Member State, including outside the Union, provided that the operation contributes to the objectives of the programme and provides direct benefits to the targeted territory of Malta.

² In the case of NGOs and VOs, the Managing Authority (MA) on behalf of the Project Selection Committee may request additional information vis-à-vis their position from the Commissioner for Voluntary Organisations in terms of their enrolment and compliance.

f) Proof of co-financing (where applicable)

In cases where Government is not co-financing the project from the national budget, Applicants must submit, together with the application form, evidence of co-financing such as:

- a. A set of audited accounts showing the Applicant's ability to co-finance the project; or
- b. A declaration by the Mayor, Executive/Head and Treasurer/Financial Controller of the organisation, stating that the Applicant organisation commits to its co- financing obligations and to the financing of any ineligible costs; or
- c. Any other form of evidence/documentation such as bank statements and /or future cash flow projections of the Applicant which show that the entity will be financially able to implement the project.

Should funds be provided by a third party, the Applicant should provide supporting documentation (if applicable).

It is important to note that co-financing in kind is NOT eligible.

g) Selection of a relevant Specific Objective as published in the call

Only proposals that selected the relevant Specific Objective/s as published in the call will be considered.

h) Selection of at least one output indicator and one result indicator linked to a relevant Specific Objective as published in the call

The project must have at least one output and at least one result indicator in the relevant Priority and under the Specific Objective as published in the call.

i) Status of operation is either ongoing or not yet started unless otherwise allowed by the specific applicable regulations

Unless otherwise allowed by the specific applicable regulations, operations shall not be considered eligible for support by the Funds where they have been physically completed or fully implemented before the application for funding under the programme is submitted, irrespective of whether all related payments have been made.

6. Selection Criteria

The selection criteria that will be adopted by the PSC during the second stage application process are being listed below for information purposes:

a) Capacity of the organisation (10 marks)

The Applicant organisation will be assessed on its adequate overall expertise to implement the project, including that of the project partners, as applicable. Past experience in EU and/or similar projects will also be assessed.

b) Contribution of the project to the relevant Development Needs (10 marks)

The Applicant should demonstrate evidence of real demand for the project (qualitative and quantitative evidence) to address a gap as identified in the relevant Priority within the Programme and how it will contribute to the need of the Programme and relevant specific objective and are attributed to a type of intervention. Evidence should be provided as to what extent this need will be addressed through the activities proposed. The Applicant should also demonstrate to what extent will the project be contributing to the National and EU Policies, as well as the underlying relevant strategies of the programme including the applicable ESF Secondary Theme. Moreover, should ensure consistency with the corresponding enabling condition strategies.

c) Potential of the project to contribute to the achievement of the Expected Results (10 marks)

The Applicant should demonstrate that through its implementation, the project will contribute to the achievement of the Expected Results as identified in the relevant Priority and specific objective in the Programme. The proposed project should also indicate whether any partners will be involved and explain their contribution to the achievement of the Expected Results. The ability of the proposed project to mobilise complementary funding/actions to achieve the Expected Result/s will also be assessed. Projects will also be assessed as to whether innovative solutions are being proposed to achieve the Expected Results.

d) Contribution towards indicators (10 marks)

The Applicant will be assessed on the selection of all relevant indicators as applicable for the project. An assessment whether the description of the selected indicators is providing an adequate explanation of the method of quantification and verification will be carried out. Moreover, an assessment of whether there are any unrealistic indicator targets which are not achievable will also be carried out. The contribution of the proposed indicators towards achieving Programme targets as outlined in the call will also be assessed.

e) Readiness (15 marks)

In this section, negative marking will be applied based on criteria which hinder the implementation of the proposed project. Assessment will be based on the Applicant's readiness in terms of tenders, CBA/FFS/FS,

Planning Authority permits, recruitment procedures and relevant documentation pertaining to training, scholarships amongst others, depending on the nature of the published call and the nature of the project.

The project will also be assessed on how realistic the proposed timeframe is and the associated risks to the successful implementation of the project. The proposal should also identify other risks such as those associated with capacity, applicable procurement procedures, processing of payments and disbursement, implementation of proposed activities (including logistical risks) and legal risks associated with the proposed project. The Applicant should identify mitigation measures to be put in place to address the identified risks.

The more advanced the project is, the more marks will be awarded. Further to the above, evidence of readiness should be provided. This may include contract references, PA permits, studies, consultations, attainment of approvals etc.

f) Project Sustainability (10 marks)

The project proposal should clearly demonstrate the added value of the project and its complementarity with other projects. Moreover, should present the best relationship between the amount of support, activities to be undertaken and the achievements of objectives. The project will be assessed on the magnitude of post-operating costs against the cost of the project. The Applicant organisation should also demonstrate the organisation's financial stability in line with Art 73 (d) CPR and how the benefits of the project will continue to be delivered after grant support comes to an end.

g) Partnership (5 marks)

Proposals being implemented by two or more project partners and/or by a set of mix of partners will be awarded additional marks. The proposal should identify the added value of involving partners in achieving the expected results, how the partnership can serve as a way to share information, research, knowledge and expertise between the different stakeholders, and identification of the mutual benefit of said partnership.

h) Horizontal principles – Equal opportunities and non-discrimination (10 marks)

The Applicant should provide detailed information beyond the minimum legal obligations in these areas. To this end, the applicant should explain how equality between men and women, equal opportunities, gender mainstreaming and the integration of the gender perspective are taken into account and promoted throughout the project design, implementation, monitoring, reporting and evaluation stages. The Applicant should explain what measures are planned to be carried out to ensure appropriate steps are taken to prevent any form of discrimination based on gender, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation during all project stages. In addition, Applicant should explain how such measures are put in place during the preparation and implementation stages of the project.

i) Horizontal principles – Sustainable Development (10 marks)

The proposal should provide information on how the project contributes towards sustainable development, namely economic growth, social cohesion and environmental sustainability. Applicants should outline their project's contribution to economic growth through the potential contribution towards the local economy/industry, and towards social cohesion through potential skill development as a result of the project and generation of employment. Another dimension is the Environmental Sustainability where assessment will be based on the extent of which the proposed project incorporates mitigation measures in line with the DNSH principles. To this end, applicants should also explain when and as applicable, how projects are addressing climate change mitigation and adaptation; the sustainable use and protection of water and marine resources; pollution prevention and control; protection of restoration of Biodiversity & Ecosystems; and the Circular Economy.

j) Quality of application form (10 marks)

Marks will be awarded on the general presentation and overall coherence across the different sections of the proposal to show the contribution of the activities towards the achievement of the objectives. An assessment will be carried out as to whether the proposed budget is clear, realistic and in line with the proposed activities, demonstrating sound financial management and also demonstrating that no 'double funding' is present in the proposed activities. Applicant should provide an adequate description and purpose of each activity being proposed, highlighting any dependencies / interlinkages between the different activities, and a work plan and/or Gantt chart with regards to the implementation of these activities. The proposal should identify communication strategies and actions showing how the use of EU funds will be effectively publicised and communicated with the relevant target groups of the proposed project and the general public.

7. Support

Further information and generic queries on this call and on the European Structural and Investment Funds 2021-2027 may be obtained from <https://fondi.eu/> or from PPCD's email for Calls for Proposals 2021-2027: fondi.eu@gov.mt.