



# Handbook on selection of operations

Towards simplification - Analysis of selection of operations  
Taking stock of practices in the EU Member States

by Andrea Ciffolilli and Giorgia Pichini (Ismeri Europa),  
with support from Maja Hranilovic (Ecorys) and  
Lorraine Mazur (Ramboll)  
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Unit E.1 — Administrative Capacity Building and Solidarity Instruments  
*Contact: Stefan Appel*

*E-mail: REGIO-E1-ADMINISTRATIVE-CAPACITY@ec.europa.eu*

*European Commission  
B-1049 Brussels*

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## Abstract

This handbook provides examples of good practices for the selection of operations financed by the European Structural and Investment (ESI) Funds in EU Member States, particularly the ERDF, the ESF, and the Cohesion Fund. It is aimed primarily at authorities responsible for managing the funds, namely managing authorities (MAs) and intermediate bodies (IBs), but it may also be relevant to other authorities and practitioners that are involved or interested in selecting operations.

The handbook highlights the most common challenges that can be encountered during the operation-selection process, and the challenges that emerged in the context of EU cohesion policy in 2014-2020. For each of these challenges, the handbook provides some possible solutions.

The handbook is structured around the main steps of the selection process, from preparing the intervention to appraising proposals, to signing contracts. For each step of the selection process, the handbook provides: (i) an overview of the step; (ii) a description of the key challenges encountered in the selection process; (iii) some examples of good practices used to address those challenges; and (iv) a list of guiding questions, which can be considered by the authorities when carrying out the specific step. The handbook also contains a synthesis of other cross-cutting lessons relevant to the selection of operations.

The handbook is one of the outputs of the European Commission project 'Towards simplification – Analysis of selection of operations – Taking stock of practices in the EU Member States'. This project aimed to take stock of – and disseminate information on – the practices and procedures that authorities responsible for managing cohesion policy have used when selecting operations in the 2014-2020 programming period.

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## Glossary and abbreviations

**Table 1. Main concepts in the selection of operations**

<b>Operation</b>	A project, contract, action, or group of projects selected by the MAs of the programmes concerned, or under their responsibility, that contributes to the objectives of a priority or priorities (CPR 2014-2020, Art. 2).
<b>Beneficiary</b>	A public or private body, or a natural person, responsible for initiating or both initiating and implementing operations (CPR 2014-2020, Art. 2)
<b>Selection of operation process</b>	Operational steps and interrelated activities undertaken by (or on behalf of) a managing authority to allocate ESI Funds to a beneficiary. See paragraph 2.2 for more information on the main steps in the selection process.
<b>Call for proposals (CFPs)</b>	An invitation by the MA (or on its behalf), addressed to clearly identified categories of applicants, to propose operations as part of a specific operational programme. A call-for-proposals document indicates all the thematic, financial and administrative conditions for applicants, operations, the selection process, and the award process.
<b>General selection criteria</b>	These criteria apply to the entire operational programme, one (or more) thematic objectives (or priority axes) and NOT only to a specific call. The Monitoring Committee usually adopts general selection criteria at the beginning of the programming period.
<b>Specific selection criteria</b>	These criteria apply to a specific call or to a specific action or group of actions.
<b>Eligibility criteria</b>	These criteria determine the conditions for the applicants and operations to be eligible for a grant of ESI Funds under the respective call (or direct award). Usually, eligibility criteria are assessed with a binary 'yes/no' decision.
<b>Quality criteria</b>	These criteria are used to assess the quality of the application, the application's potential contribution to the objectives of the calls for proposals, and the economic convenience of the action. Scoring methods are used to assess quality. The weight in the final score may vary according to the rules set out in the call for proposal.
<b>Priority criteria</b>	These are criteria to assess whether the application falls under priority areas identified in the call for proposal. Usually, additional scores are given to applications that meet priority criteria. The two most common types of priority criteria are: (a) priority criteria that are incorporated in a scoring system of quality criteria giving a better score for applications that meet the priority criteria; and (b) priority criteria that can be used in addition to quality criteria when a choice needs to be made between applications with identical scores.

**Table 2. Abbreviations**

<b>CFP</b>	Call for proposals
<b>TO</b>	Thematic objective
<b>MA</b>	Managing authority
<b>IB</b>	Intermediate body
<b>ESI Funds</b>	European Structural and Investment Funds
<b>ERDF</b>	European Regional Development Fund
<b>ESF</b>	European Social Fund
<b>MC</b>	Monitoring Committee
<b>OP</b>	Operational programme
<b>CPR 2014-2020</b>	Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 laying down common provisions on the ERDF, the ESF, the Cohesion Fund, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund and laying down general provisions on the ERDF, the ESF, the Cohesion Fund and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund and repealing Council Regulation (EC) No 1083/2006
<b>CPR 2021-2027</b>	Regulation (EU) 2021/1060 of the European Parliament and of the Council laying down common provisions on the ERDF, the ESF Plus, the Cohesion Fund, the Just Transition Fund and the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund and financial rules for those and the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Internal Security Fund and the Instrument for Financial Support for Border Management and Visa Policy

## 1. Introduction: how to use this handbook

### 1.1. Who is this handbook for?

This handbook is aimed primarily at authorities responsible for managing the ERDF, ESF, and Cohesion Fund in EU Member States. In particular, it is aimed at the staff of management authorities (MAs) and intermediate bodies (IBs), as well as other relevant authorities and practitioners that are involved or interested in selecting operations.

This handbook of practices is aimed mainly at authorities responsible for managing the European Structural and Investment (ESI) Funds in EU Member States, particularly the ERDF, ESF and Cohesion Fund. Relevant authorities include primarily MAs and IBs.

Other authorities, committees (e.g. the monitoring committee), and practitioners involved in the selection process may also find this handbook helpful. It may be of particular interest to people involved to some extent in: (i) preparing an intervention; (ii) drawing up the selection criteria; (iii) drafting the documents in a call for proposals (CFP); (iv) launching the CFP; (v) appraising proposals and selecting projects; (vi) informing applicants on outcomes; (vii) managing complaints; and (viii) signing the contracts.

### 1.2. What is the purpose of this handbook?

This handbook provides examples of good practices for the effective selection of operations. It also shows the most common challenges faced in the selection process that have emerged in EU cohesion policy. For each of these challenges, the handbook provides some possible solutions.

This handbook of practices is one of the outputs of the European Commission project 'Towards simplification – Analysis of selection of operations – Taking stock of practices in the EU Member States'. This assignment aimed at taking stock of – and disseminating information on – the practices and procedures used by authorities to select operations in the programming period 2014–2020. These authorities are responsible for the management of the ERDF, ESF, and the Cohesion Fund in EU Member States. The specific objective of the handbook is to provide examples of good practices for the selection of operations (including examples of effective selection criteria).

The handbook is based on existing literature and information collected with the support of national experts both at the operational programme (OP) level and the CFP level. Data have been collected from 29 OPs and for 87 calls, i.e. three calls for each of the OPs. The data were collected through four main data-gathering tools: (i) desk research on the implementation of the OPs and selected calls as detailed in an Excel checklist agreed with the Commission; (ii) questionnaires circulated among MAs and IBs to collect additional information; (iii) workshops organised with MAs/IBs; and (iv) focus groups (or surveys of beneficiaries) organised by national experts to collect additional information and specific assessments on several items of the checklists.

### 1.3. Structure of the handbook

This handbook of practices is structured around the main steps in selecting operations. These steps cover the whole selection process, from the preparation of the intervention to the selection of proposals to the signature of contracts. The selection steps are explained in detail in paragraph 2.2.

The handbook is organised into five sections. After this brief introduction (Section 1), an overview of the operation-selection process is provided in Section 2. Section 3 of the handbook provides information on good practices identified. Good practices are organised according to the main steps of the selection process (sub-sections 3.1-3.7). For each step in the selection process, the handbook provides: (i) an overview of the step; (ii) a description of the key challenges encountered in the selection process; (iii) some examples of good practices used to address those challenges; and (iv) a list of guiding questions that can be considered by the authorities when carrying out the specific step. Finally, a synthesis of other cross-cutting lessons relevant to the selection of operations is summarised in Section 4. Relevant references are listed in Section 5.

## 2. Overview of the process for selecting operations

### 2.1. Types of selection procedure













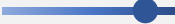
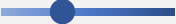
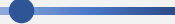



The selection of operations is carried out using either competitive or non-competitive procedures. The latter are usually called ‘direct award procedures’, although the most common competitive procedures are competitive calls with open-ended selection and competitive calls with closed-ended selection. The selection process for competitive calls may be organised in one stage or two stages. In a two-stage process, there is firstly a call for expressions of interest, and then applicants who have successfully passed the first stage are invited to submit a full application. The following table sets out the key features of each typology in greater detail.

**Table 3. Types of selection procedures**

<b>Competitive open-ended calls</b>	The CFP does not have a deadline for submitting applications. Applications are assessed on a rolling basis, and the CFP is closed when the available budget is fully allocated.
<b>Competitive closed-ended calls</b>	The CFP has a deadline for submitting applications. Applicants can submit applications within the time-frame indicated in the CFP, and the assessment of the applications starts after the end of this period.
<b>Direct award procedures</b>	This is a non-competitive procedure. In this case, a grant is awarded without open publication of a CFP due to the specific nature of the operation and/or beneficiary.

The three main types of selection procedures differ in their average duration, the effort required to process them, the staff required to process them, and the relative focus on eligibility criteria, quality criteria, and priority criteria. These differences are explained by the different nature of these types of selection procedure.

**Figure 1. Key differences among types of selection procedures**

Key features	Competitive closed-ended calls	Competitive open-ended calls	Direct award procedures
<b>Length of the selection process</b>			
<b>Required effort</b>			
<b>Required staff numbers</b>			
<b>Number of selection criteria</b>			
<b>Type of criteria on which the selection is based</b>	Eligibility  Quality	Eligibility  Quality	Eligibility  Quality
<b>Level of competitiveness</b>			

Direct awards follow a non-competitive procedure, which usually focuses on a limited number of applicants and mostly aims at assessing whether the proposed project meets the required standards without attributing it any score. It is therefore not surprising that this is the quickest procedure, the procedure that requires the least effort, and the procedure that requires the fewest workers to process. Nevertheless, competitive procedures have number of important advantages

that make it possible to focus on: (i) the quality of the project proposals; (ii) getting the best value for money; and (iii) ensuring transparency. The table below explains the main factors underlying the choice of a specific type of selection procedure.

**Table 4. Factors underlying the choice of a specific type of selection procedure**

Competitive closed-ended calls	Competitive open-ended calls	Direct award procedures
<p>This type of call could be preferred if there:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• is a need to encourage competition among potential beneficiaries and project ideas</li> <li>• is a strong focus on project quality (for example on innovation)</li> <li>• is significant focus on value for money</li> <li>• are support areas for which there are several possible beneficiaries and actions</li> </ul>	<p>This type of call could be preferred if there:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• is a limited number of potential beneficiaries in the targeted industry/market/territory</li> <li>• are projects characterised by a relatively high degree of standardisation</li> <li>• are projects expected to satisfy minimum requirements and/or thresholds in terms of quality and eligibility</li> </ul>	<p>This type of call could be preferred if there:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• is an absence of competition in a specific industry/market (e.g. there is a <i>de jure</i> or <i>de facto</i> monopoly)</li> <li>• are projects that, due to their nature, can be carried out only by specific entities (e.g. implementation of strategies, specific functions &amp; responsibilities, etc.)</li> <li>• is an urgent need to intervene</li> </ul>

## 2.2. Main steps of selection procedures






















The following steps of the selection process are covered in this handbook. The following table details the key activities that each step entails.

**Table 5. Main steps of the selection of operations**

	Key activities to be carried out under each step
<b>Preparation of the intervention</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Setting policy objectives and timing the intervention</li> <li>▪ Carrying out a market analysis to appraise both the demand for support and the absorption capacity of the potential beneficiaries or target groups</li> <li>▪ Identifying the most appropriate grant-award procedure and the date to launch the CFP</li> </ul>
<b>Deciding on the selection criteria</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Deciding on the eligibility criteria</li> <li>▪ Deciding on the quality and priority criteria</li> <li>▪ Approving the selection criteria by the monitoring committee (or ensuring the coherence of the selection criteria with the criteria previously approved)</li> <li>▪ Deciding on the methodology and criteria used to select operations</li> </ul>
<b>Drafting CFP documents</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Drafting the CFP documents indicating all thematic, financial, and administrative conditions for: (i) applicants; (ii) operations; (iii) the selection process; and (iv) the award process</li> <li>▪ Validating CFP documents with the MA (if applicable)</li> </ul>
<b>Launch of the CFP and submission of applications</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Publishing CFP documents according to national rules for publication</li> <li>▪ Launching a communication campaign, providing information, drawing up Q&amp;As, arranging information sessions for the potential applicants, setting up a helpdesk, etc.</li> <li>▪ Collecting applications using the IT platform</li> <li>▪ Closing the call (if applicable)</li> <li>▪ Running administrative-compliance checks and preparing data necessary for the next steps in the appraisal process</li> </ul>
<b>Appraisal and selection of proposals</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Setting up the selection committee/panel by recruiting internal experts, external experts, or both, etc. (this process can be organised ahead of time)</li> <li>▪ Verifying the eligibility of the applications and taking decisions for this stage</li> <li>▪ Assessing the applications according to the quality and priority criteria previously decided</li> <li>▪ Proposing a final ranking of the applications</li> </ul>
<b>Informing applicants and complaint management</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Verifying the proposed ranking of applications and making grant-award/grant-refusal decisions</li> <li>▪ Informing applicants about award decisions or about the rejection of their application</li> <li>▪ Managing complaints or legal claims and managing the impact of these complaints or legal claims on contact signature (reserve some funding for this contingency, and decide whether or not to put the contracting process on hold until complaints are assessed, etc.)</li> </ul>
<b>Contract signature</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Preparing to grant the award decision or to grant the contract(s)</li> <li>▪ Signing the contract(s)</li> <li>▪ Publishing results on signed contracts</li> </ul>

As shown below, the seven steps of the selection procedure differ in average duration, effort involved, and staff numbers required.

**Figure 2. Key differences between the selection steps in terms of length, effort and staff numbers required**

Steps of selection process	Length	Required effort	Required staff numbers
Preparation of the intervention			
Deciding on the selection criteria			
Drafting CFP documents			
Launch of the CFP and submission of applications			
Appraisal and selection of proposals			
Informing applicants and complaint management			
Contract signature			

The following chapter of the handbook provides suggestions on how to overcome the most common issues faced by authorities during each of these steps. This chapter also provides some examples of good practices that could help to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of the selection process.



### 3. Good practices in selecting the operations, step by step

#### 3.1. Preparation of the intervention

##### 3.1.1. Overview of the step

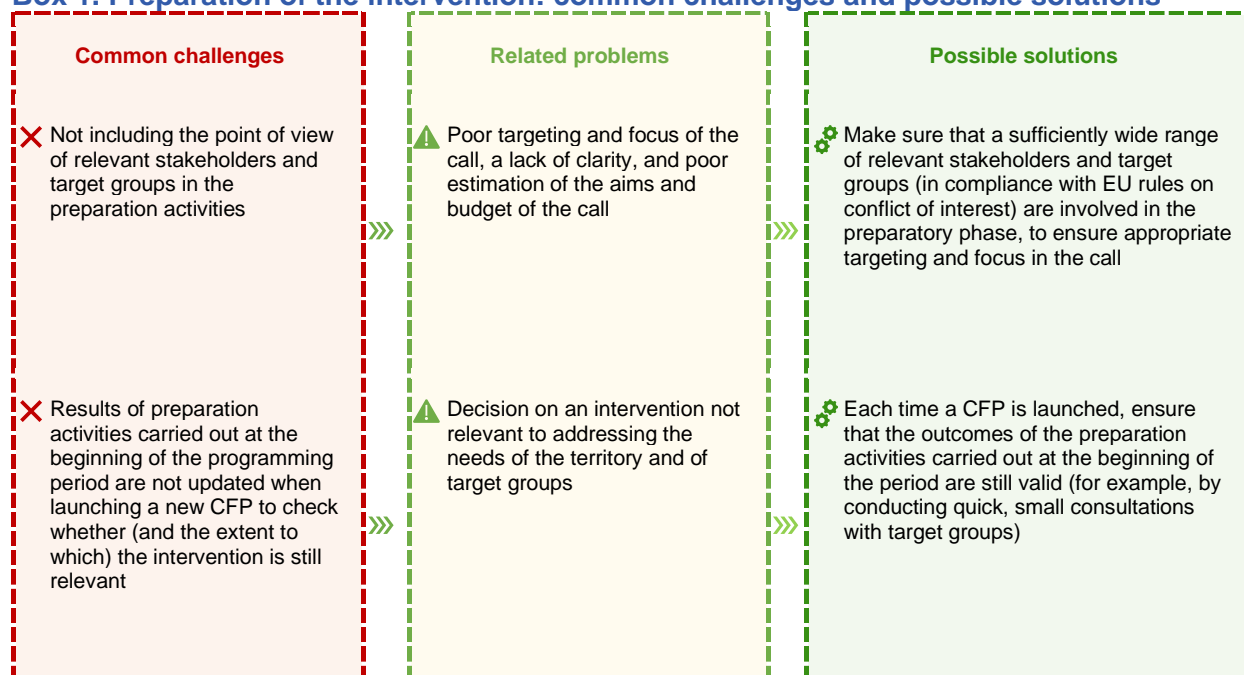
When does this step take place?	Who is involved?	Aims	Main activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>At the beginning of the programming period</li> <li>Before the launch of the CFP</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>MA/IBs</li> <li>Stakeholders</li> <li>Potential applicants</li> <li>External experts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify or fine-tune the needs of the territory and of the potential beneficiaries and target groups</li> <li>Decide on the objectives of the intervention</li> <li>Decide on the timing of the intervention</li> <li>Choose the most suitable selection procedure</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Needs analysis, market research, feasibility studies</li> <li>Consultations, dialogues with partners/academia etc.</li> <li>Identification of potential beneficiaries and target groups, and identification of the features of the actions to be supported</li> </ul>

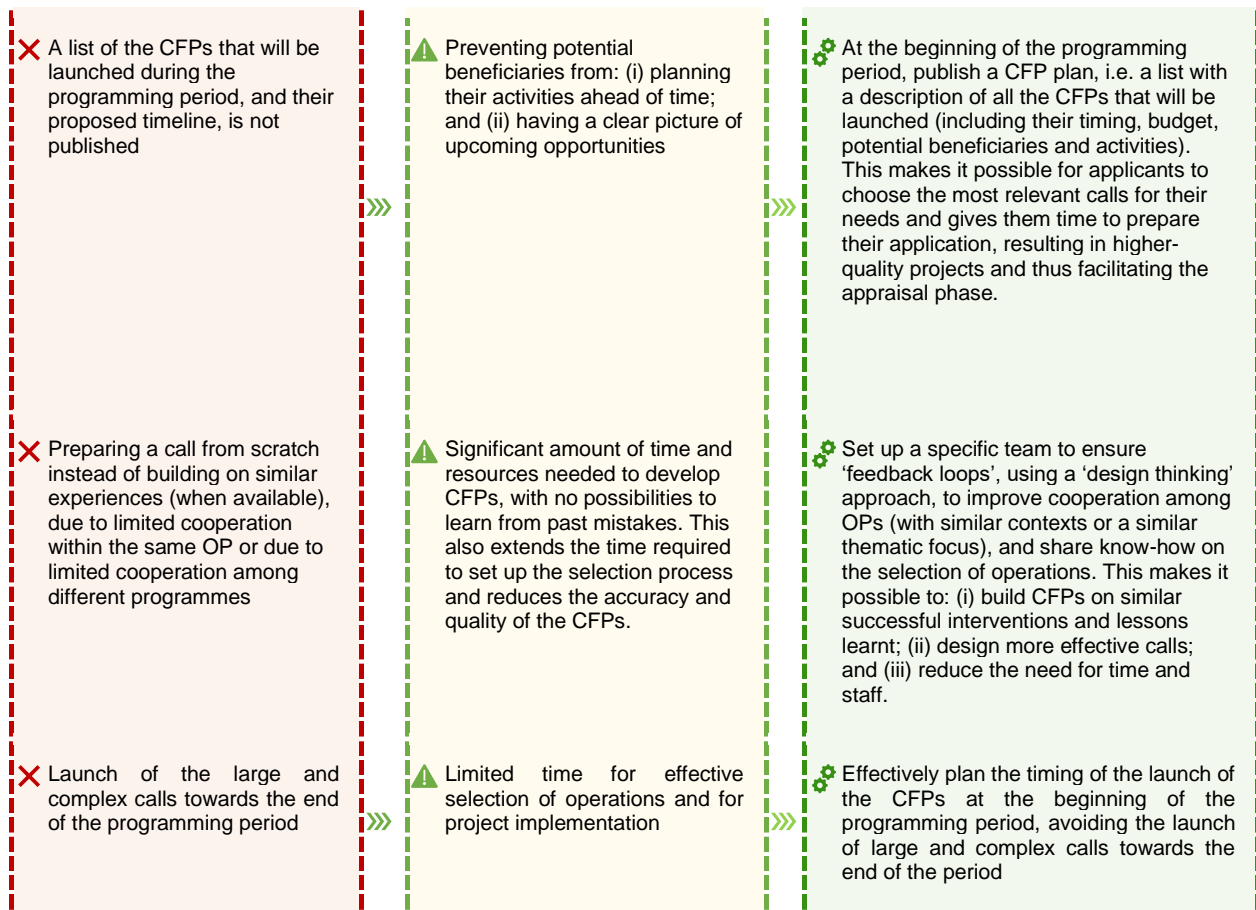
##### 3.1.2. Key challenges in this step of the selection process

For this step in the selection of operations, the most important factors that determine whether the process will be effective are: (i) a good needs assessment; (ii) market research or consultations; and (iii) any other effort to accurately focus/target the intervention.

The box below summarises common challenges identified by the MAs/IBs, the possible problems caused by these challenges, and some suggestions as to possible solutions, and in particular suggestions on how to avoid the problems and better prepare the intervention.



#### Box 1. Preparation of the intervention: common challenges and possible solutions












### 3.1.3. Good practices in this step of the selection of operations

The following boxes describe good practices that can be taken as examples when preparing interventions. These practices were identified through interviews with authorities and beneficiaries.


	<p><b>Practice 1: Learning from past calls and ensuring market relevance</b></p>
	<p><b>Context</b></p> <p>'OP Alpine Space 2014-2020'. This OP used exclusively competitive calls with an open-ended application period covering multiple thematic objectives (TOs). CFPs are quite standardised.</p>
	<p><b>Description</b></p> <p>The Alpine Space OP launches standardised calls following the same procedures and covering similar themes. The MA planned the timing of the launch of the CFPs very carefully, ensuring that there was enough time between the end of one CFP and the launch of the following one. This approach makes it possible to achieve two objectives, as set out in the bullet points below.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Firstly, this approach makes it possible to: (i) carefully assess the functioning of concluded selection processes; (ii) learn from these processes; (iii) identify the gaps in the concluded processes; (iv) assess what worked and what did not; and (v) draw up new strategies for how to overcome the challenges encountered. Thanks to this, the MA is able to revise the next intervention to take into account the lessons learnt and thus improve the selection process.</li> <li>• Secondly, this approach makes it possible to carry out ad hoc market research or needs analyses to assess the relevance of the intervention before starting. To do this, the MA relied on several instruments:</li> </ul>

<p>(i) a gap analysis with the support of external experts; (ii) consultation with beneficiaries (events, fora); and (iii) consultation with programme bodies, etc. This ensures that the objective of the CFP to be launched is still relevant. It also meaningfully addresses the needs of both the territory and potential beneficiaries/target groups.</p>	
	<p><b>Expected benefits</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ The intervention is well-targeted, addresses the territories' needs, and effectively contributes to the objectives of the programme. This results in greater clarity of the CFP documents and selection criteria. And this in turn leads to better quality in the applications received and a more effective selection process.</li> <li>✓ The selection process is constantly improved from the launch of one call to the other, by systematically embedding lessons learnt from all previous calls.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Possible drawbacks</b></p> <p><b>Low likelihood</b></p> <p>Evaluating or assessing past interventions and running preparatory activities before the launch of each call might be time-consuming, especially when the OP needs to implement many CFPs. However, considering the importance of the preparation phase and its influence on the quality of the selection process, the MA could carry out this revision using simple internal methods, such as getting feedback from evaluators, internally assessing the issues of the scope of the call, etc.</p> 	
	<p><b>Transferability</b></p> <p><b>Very high</b></p> <p>All OPs can easily replicate this practice. Revising the intervention before its launch and embedding lessons learnt from previous initiatives is highly valuable for similar calls that are repeated or standardised. Nonetheless, this is also helpful when preparing calls that are new and different, as some general key lessons can be learnt in relation to the administrative procedures or other common parts of the calls financed by an OP.</p>

 <p><b>Practice 2: Using participatory approaches for continuous improvements to the selection process</b></p>	
	<p><b>Context</b></p> <p>'Environment OP' (Czechia) is a national OP with a thematic focus on environmental and climate-change issues (TO4, TO5 and TO6).</p>
<p><b>Description</b></p> <p>Several OPs evaluate previous interventions only during the initial and final stages of the programming period. However, the Czech 'Environment OP' found a way to keep open a communication channel with relevant stakeholders throughout the whole programming period. Doing this made it possible to revise existing practices when needed and ensure constant improvement of the selection process. To achieve this, the MA set up a platform where all relevant stakeholders (representatives of applicants, MAs, IBs, NGOs, companies, universities, etc.) can discuss various aspects of the selection of operations, such as methodological procedures, good practices, experiences with the IT and monitoring systems, etc. This helps the authority to gather useful information on how to constantly improve the selection of operations.</p> 	
	<p><b>Expected benefits</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Encouraging the participation of different stakeholders in the preparation activities for the selection process makes it possible for the authorities to consider the views and needs of all the players involved in the selection of operations with regard to methodological, operational, and administrative aspects. Moreover, it makes it possible to consider territorial needs and improve the targeting of the calls.</li> <li>✓ Setting up an open channel for discussion among stakeholders throughout the entire programming period makes it possible for the MA to receive continuous feedback and inputs on improving the selection process. This avoids extensive ad hoc research activities, and therefore saves time and resources in the future.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Possible drawbacks</b></p> <p><b>Low likelihood</b></p> <p>It would certainly decrease administrative burden to set up an open platform where different stakeholders can freely and, to some extent, independently: (i) discuss critical aspects and issues encountered during the selection process; and (ii) give suggestions on how to improve the selection process. Of course, this would require initial investment which would nevertheless pay off during the programming period.</p> 	

	<p><b>Transferability</b></p> <p><b>Very high</b></p> <p>This participatory practice could be adopted by any OP that is not facing specific constraints, as they might not be affected by the number or the nature of the CFPs launched during the programming period. Nonetheless, the existence of an already developed IT infrastructure – or the availability of appropriate IT skills in the MA team – might significantly facilitate the development and implementation of the described solutions.</p>
	<p><b>Practice 3: Practical training and a network of practitioners to strengthen capacity to design interventions</b></p>
	<p><b>Context</b></p> <p>'Cohesion Policy Funding OP' (Estonia). This Estonian OP is a national programme covering a large number of very diverse interventions.</p>
<p><b>Description</b></p> <p>To facilitate the design of interventions for the 2021-2027 programming period, the MA in Estonia organised a practical training and development programme on how to design aid measures. The MA worked with the Ministry of Finance to organise this programme. The programme was targeted at officials responsible for designing interventions. These officials had the opportunity to participate in the programme as part of teams of 6-7 people each (consisting of colleagues, partners and final beneficiaries) and to benefit from the support of thematic experts from the MA and/or the Ministry of Finance. Several activities were carried out as part of the training programme: (i) practical training sessions; (ii) teamwork activities; (iii) homework assignments; and (iv) online seminars during which the participants presented the designed interventions and had the chance to discuss them with peers. The practical training sessions focused on different techniques to properly identify the needs of the territory and stakeholders, and how to design effective measures to respond to those needs. The presented techniques included: a theory of co-creation methods; tools for identifying stakeholders and problems; a 'map' of the user-journey; ways to measure the effectiveness of the measure; and a flowchart detailing the steps in grant procedures.</p>	
	<p><b>Expected benefits</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Thanks to the training programme: (i) one fifth of the measures covering the new funding period have been designed at the very beginning of the programme implementation; (ii) a portfolio of tips and tools for the design and content of the measures has been developed; and (iii) a network of practitioners was created.</li> <li>✓ The acquired skills contributed to the creation of better-targeted interventions. They also improved participants' understanding of the country's needs and encouraged the design of more 'applicant-friendly' CFPs, potentially making it more attractive to apply for European funds. All of this will improve efficiency and the effectiveness of the selection process.</li> <li>✓ The network of practitioners for the design of aid measures is a key initiative for facilitating the transfer of knowledge across different stakeholders and MA officials. This network fosters a participatory approach to intervention design, which can promote systematic improvements in the design of the CFPs.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Possible drawbacks</b></p> <p><b>Low likelihood</b></p> <p>It is not easy to organise and implement an effective training programme targeting several different stakeholders. If not well designed and managed, these kinds of initiatives could result in excessively theoretical discussions with a low level of applicability. It is therefore of the utmost importance that the training is aimed at delivering tangible outputs (such as the design of measures), as in the Estonian example.</p>	
	<p><b>Transferability</b></p> <p><b>Very high</b></p> <p>This good practice could be adopted by all OPs without particular constraints.</p>

### 3.1.4. Guiding questions to consider when carrying out this step of the selection process

Step	Guiding questions	
 <b>Preparation of the intervention</b>	•Are the needs of the territory and of target groups correctly identified?	✓
	•Are the views of the relevant stakeholders and target groups taken into account?	✓
	•What objectives are pursued with this CFP? What kind of instruments, procedures etc. are suitable for achieving these objectives?	✓
	•If the intervention was prepared at the beginning of the programming period, are the objectives and needs identified still relevant later on in the programming period?	✓
	•Has the timing of the launch of the CFP and the selection process been adequately planned?	✓
	•Are there lessons learnt from previous interventions that can be taken into account in the preparation of the intervention?	✓
	•Are there similar interventions that can be used as a reference model?	✓
	•Does the personnel have the necessary knowledge and skills for the task?	✓

## 3.2. Deciding on the selection criteria

### 3.2.1. Overview of the step

When does this step take place?	Who is involved?	Aims	Main activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>At the beginning of the programming period</li> <li>Before the launch of the CFP</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>MAs/IBs</li> <li>Monitoring committee</li> <li>Key stakeholders, potential beneficiaries, and sectoral/thematic committees (if any)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Decide on the eligibility, quality and priority criteria</li> <li>Decide on the methodology for evaluating these criteria</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Decide on the criteria and their methodology</li> <li>Internal/public consultations</li> <li>Approval of the criteria</li> </ul>

### 3.2.2. Key challenges in this step of the selection process

The most important aspects that determine whether or not this step in the selection of operations is effective include the appropriateness and clarity of the selection criteria.

The box below summarises common challenges identified by the MA/IBs, the possible problems that can be generated by these challenges and some suggestions on how to avoid these problems and improve the decision as to what the selection criteria will be.

#### Box 2. Deciding on the selection criteria: common challenges and possible solutions

Common challenges	Possible problems	Possible solutions
<p>✗ Selection criteria are not well balanced: they are either too strict or too broad</p>	<p>⚠ Excessively strict criteria could lead suitable applicants to refrain from applying, while excessively broad criteria might attract many unsuitable applicants, negatively affecting the proposal-appraisal step</p>	<p>⚙ Allow for targeted stakeholder consultation on the selection criteria, to ensure that the criteria reflect the objectives of the call and the needs of the target groups</p>
<p>✗ There are either too many or too few selection criteria</p>	<p>⚠ An excessive number of selection criteria creates a significant burden and leads to longer selection processes, more complaints, and more legal appeals. On the other hand, an insufficient number of criteria might make the selection process less effective, as the criteria may be not sufficient to verify whether the projects are of the required quality and aligned to the objectives of the call.</p>	<p>⚙ Carry out a consultation with a sample of potential beneficiaries and stakeholders to test the criteria before the launch of the call and at the same time properly managing conflict of interest<sup>1</sup></p>
<p>✗ Difficulties in converting EU and national legislation into clear and operational criteria</p>	<p>⚠ Selection criteria might be vague and difficult to comply with and assess</p>	<p>⚙ Involve experts in deciding on the selection criteria, and make the criteria specific to the context of the call<sup>1</sup></p>
<p>✗ The assessment and scoring system are not explained in sufficient detail, and are</p>	<p>⚠ Applicants cannot pre-assess their own project and calculate an expected score which might</p>	<p>⚙ Clearly explain in the CFP documents the score associated with each</p>

<sup>1</sup> In line with Commission Notice Guidance on the avoidance and management of conflicts of interest under the Financial Regulation 2021/C 121/01 [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv%3AOJ.C\\_.2021.121.01.0001.01.ENG](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv%3AOJ.C_.2021.121.01.0001.01.ENG)

<p>therefore not transparent enough</p> <p>✗ Criteria are complex and difficult to understand and assess</p>	<p>discourage them from applying (especially if the project applications require a significant effort to prepare the technical documentation), or there might be many complaints from unsuccessful applicants</p> <p>⚠ Applicants might lack the capacity to calculate the criteria, and thus refrain from applying. The applicants may need to ask the authority several methodological questions during the submission phase, increasing the burden on the authority. With complex criteria, both applicants and evaluators may make more mistakes in the application and during the evaluation. This could prolong the evaluation time and increase clarification requests and complaints.</p>	<p>criterion and that criterion's relative weight. It is also important to provide detailed guidelines on how the criteria will be assessed.</p> <p>⚙ Selection criteria must be simple, clear and easily quantifiable. Provide a clear methodology on how the criteria will be quantified and assessed. Consultations with stakeholders and experts during the drawing up/validation of criteria could facilitate this<sup>1</sup>.</p>
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### 3.2.3. Good practices in this step of the selection of operations

The following boxes describe good practices that can be taken as examples when deciding on selection criteria. These practices were identified through interviews with authorities and beneficiaries.

	<b>Practice 1: Involving experts in the design and assessment of selection criteria</b>
	<p><b>Context</b></p> <p>'Regional OP for Mazowieckie Voivodeship 2014-2020' (Poland); 'Operational Programme for the Implementation of the EU Cohesion Policy 2014-2020' (Slovenia). These OPs cover many TOs, and draw up criteria for very different interventions.</p>
<b>Description</b>	

To be able to draw up clear and effective criteria for a wide range of interventions, the Polish OP involved experts in drawing up selection criteria. At the beginning of the programming period, the MA decided on some preliminary criteria which were discussed in thematic working groups together with thematic experts. Due to their knowledge and experience, the participation of experts in the working groups makes it possible to refine and verify the proposed criteria in order to improve effectiveness and make the criteria more relevant. Later on, the criteria are approved by the monitoring committee.

During the programme's implementation, before the launch of each call, the MA/IB organise meetings in which potential beneficiaries can discuss with the experts the selection criteria, the rationale behind the criteria, and how the criteria should be interpreted. This prevents ambiguities and arbitrary assessments and makes the criteria clearer to applicants.

Another good practice is provided by the Slovenian OP. In this case, the public officials evaluating the applications during the appraisal stage also contribute to developing the call-specific selection criteria. This reduces ambiguities and misunderstandings which may arise when criteria are assessed and interpreted by people who have not participated in designing the criteria.



#### Expected benefits



- ✓ Criteria decided on with the support of thematic experts are more likely to be effective and relevant.
- ✓ Organising meetings between experts and the stakeholders who participated in drawing up the criteria on the one side, and potential beneficiaries on the other side, helps to clarify the rationale for criteria. This leads to higher-quality proposals, and more effective selection processes.
- ✓ Involving the evaluators in the design stage of the criteria could reduce mistakes, ambiguities and complaints. It could also simplify and speed up the appraisal phase.

#### Possible drawbacks

##### Low likelihood

The involvement of experts in the design of criteria (e.g. by setting up thematic working groups) could cause additional complexities and delays in the preparation step, mainly when the OP covers a wide range of thematic areas. However, the possible extra time needed to prepare the call could be compensated by less time being spent subsequently on the evaluation and complaint-management steps. This is because the criteria would be well understood and correctly applied by the applicants and the evaluators. Furthermore, this could lead to the drawing up of more effective criteria and selection processes.



#### Transferability



##### Very high

These participatory practices (e.g. thematic working groups aimed at involving experts in drawing up criteria as in the Polish case, and making sure that the same officials participate in both drawing up criteria and assessing applications as in the Slovenian OP) could be adopted by any OP, without specific constraints.



#### Practice 2: Thematic committees, proposed by the monitoring committee, to help design the call and identify selection criteria



#### Context

'Estonia OP for Cohesion Policy Funding 2014-2020' (Estonia). This OP covers several TOs. Due to the diversity of intervention areas, technical and sectoral expertise was necessary to identify relevant criteria.

#### Description

To draw up clear and effective criteria for a wide range of interventions, thematic committees have been set up in the Estonian OP.

Following a proposal by the monitoring committee, the MA set up thematic committees composed of diverse groups of public-sector representatives (officials from MAs, IBs, relevant ministries, and the national association of local municipalities), civil-society organisations, NGOs (e.g. human rights organisations), the private sector, other types of stakeholder groups, think tanks, research institutions, political parties, etc. Individual experts may also be invited to participate as observers.





At the beginning of the programming period, the thematic committees are asked to provide support in their respective field of expertise as well as in call-specific selection criteria and procedures. During the programming period, these committees are also asked to give their opinion on major amendments to the CFP documents and selection criteria.

#### Expected benefits



- ✓ Consultations with sectoral committees at the beginning of the programming period make it possible to collect expert input which may help in drawing up selection criteria. This may also focus attention on sectoral specificities that are relevant for the design of the different calls.
- ✓ Criteria drawn up with the support of sectoral committees are more likely to be effective and relevant, potentially improving the quality and effectiveness of the selected projects.
- ✓ The inputs from sectoral organisations seem helpful to ensure that all the sector-specific legal and administrative issues are taken into consideration when developing the criteria and drafting a call.

#### Possible drawbacks

##### Low likelihood

The involvement of thematic committees in drawing up criteria could cause additional complexities and delays in preparing the call, especially if the committees are diverse and supposed to include a broad range of participants. However, any possible extra time needed to prepare the call could be compensated by more effective criteria and more effective project selection. Committees involving a limited number of carefully selected stakeholders/experts should be preferred over large, diverse, or inexperienced committees.



#### Transferability



##### High transferability

At the stage of designing a call and drawing up the selection criteria, these participatory practices could be adopted in principle in the context of any OP, without specific constraints.

### 3.2.4. Examples of selection criteria

Selection criteria can be general or specific. General criteria apply to the entire OP, or to one or more TOs (or priorities) and not only to a specific call. The monitoring committee usually adopts general selection criteria at the beginning of the programming period. Specific criteria apply to a specific call or a specific action or group of actions.

It is also worth distinguishing between the eligibility criteria, the quality criteria, and the priority criteria. Eligibility criteria determine the conditions for the applicants and operations to be eligible for the ESI Funds grant under the respective call. Usually, eligibility criteria are assessed on a yes/no or binary basis, i.e. the application is either eligible or not eligible. In general, eligibility criteria refer mostly to: compliance with EU and national legislation; the inclusion of horizontal principles; and the coherence of the criteria with the objectives of the OP or the intervention.

Quality criteria are used to assess the quality of the application, the extent to which the application contributes to the objectives of the CFPs, and the economic convenience of the application. Scoring methods are used to assess quality. Quality criteria may be diverse as they usually refer to specific features of an intervention. Nevertheless, it is still possible to identify some frequently used criteria such as: project feasibility; project relevance; the economic and social impact of the project on the beneficiary/territory/market; value for money; etc.

Priority criteria assess whether the application falls under the priority areas identified in the CFP. Usually, additional scores are given to applications fulfilling priority criteria. The two most common types of priority criteria are: (i) priority criteria that are incorporated into the scoring system of quality criteria, giving a better score to applications fulfilling priority criteria; and (ii) priority criteria that can be used in addition to quality criteria when a choice needs to be made between applications with identical quality scores.

This section includes an example of a list of specific selection criteria used by some calls financed under: (i) TO1 - Strengthening research, technological development and innovation; (ii) TO3 - Enhancing the competitiveness of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs); and (iii) TO4 - Supporting the shift towards a low-carbon economy in all sectors. Please note that this is a 'real life' example with possible strengths and weaknesses.

The calls covered in this paragraph have been chosen based on whether: (i) according to the authorities and the applicants, selection criteria did not create an additional burden during the evaluation; and (ii) the selection criteria were considered clear by the relevant stakeholders at the same time.

**Example of specific selection criteria:**

**TO1 - Strengthening research, technological development, and innovation**



**Call 1: RESTART 2016-2020: Research in Enterprises (CY)**

This call sought to promote research activities to strengthen the competitiveness of Cypriot businesses and contribute to the development of the country's economy, through the creation or the improvement of high added value products/services/production processes. The call was mainly targeted at research organisations (public and private) and enterprises.

**Specific quality criteria used to appraise the call**

**Excellence (weight 20%)**

- Overall quality of project goals
- Degree of innovation and originality of the project in relation to existing knowledge and practice at an international level
- Completeness, reliability, and feasibility of the proposed idea to develop the new or substantially improved existing product/service/production method
- Comparison of the new or substantially improved existing product/service/production method that will be created as a result of the proposed project with existing solutions, and highlighting how existing or future market needs and opportunities will be met
- Relevance of the proposed categories of research activities (industrial research, experimental development) to the objectives of the project and the programme

**Added value and benefits (weight 40%)**

- Scientific, technological, economic, and social impacts, and measures to maximise these impacts. These impacts could be in many areas. For example, they could be related to improvements of existing products/services/production methods which, in turn, might lead to job creation, new opportunities to exploit intellectual property, etc.
- Effectiveness of the proposed actions to exploit the results (including the management of intellectual property rights) and to maximise their dissemination
- Completeness, quality, and feasibility of the business plan. At the very least, this must include a description of: (a) the market; (b) the level of competition; (c) the market-penetration strategy (which should include an analysis of the risks and alternatives associated with the this process); (d) the competitive advantage of the new or substantially improved existing product/service/production method in relation to the existing or future competition; and (e) the basic financial forecasts in relation to the development and future exploitation of the new or substantially improved existing product/service/production method.

**Implementation (weight 40%)**

- Completeness and appropriateness of: (i) the content of the work packages; (ii) the breakdown of individual activities; (iii) the schedule; and (iv) the budget
- Effectiveness of the proposed methodology in implementing the deliverables
- Completeness, quality, and capacity of the collaboration network for executing the project (at the level of organisations and/or individuals) and implementing the proposed objectives
- Appropriateness and sufficiency of the proposed coordination and management activities, including identifying and addressing potential risks
- Completeness and reliability of the risk-management plan (contingency plan) in the context of the implementation of the project



**Call 2: Applied research in smart-specialisation growth areas, III round (EE)**

This call aimed to support cooperation among research institutions and companies in Estonia. It targeted SMEs and large companies working in cooperation with research institutions. The table below shows the list of quality criteria used in this CFP.

**Specific quality criteria used to appraise the call**

**The impact of the project on achieving the objectives of the measure (weight 30%)**

- The project should contribute to the cooperation of public research institutions and companies. The support is aimed at applied research or product development carried out in the interest of a company operating in Estonia. The support should help to increase the motivation and readiness of Estonian public research institutions to carry out applied research and product-development projects necessary for business in growth areas. The grant helps promote knowledge transfer between companies and Estonian public institutions.
- The area supported within the project should match the growth areas of smart specialisation.

**Economic impact and efficiency of the project (weight 30%)**

- Compatibility of applicant and partners' needs; the relevance of the business plan
- Ability of the applicant and partners to implement the business plan
- Justification of the project budget

**Feasibility of the project (weight 30%)**

- Quality and methodology of the implementation plan
- The level and experience of those conducting the research group
- Feasibility of carrying out the activities, and assessment as to whether the schedule to achieve the goal is realistic

**Impact of the project on cross-cutting themes (weight 10%)**

- Ability to positively influence the developments of both the sector and the Estonian economy as a whole
- Connection with: regional development; environmental protection; the development of civil society; ensuring gender equality and equal opportunities; unified state governance; and promotion of the information society (if appropriate to the content of the application).

**Example of specific selection criteria:  
TO3 - Enhancing the competitiveness of SMEs**



**Call 1: Transition to a green and circular economy in SMEs (DK)**

This call sought to: (i) support Danish SMEs in the transition to green and circular business models; and (ii) strengthen Danish companies' sustainability, competitiveness and revenues

**Specific quality criteria used to appraise the call**

**Extent to which the project is focused on companies' needs and helps to improve resource efficiency (weight 30%)**

- The applicant must describe how the project meets the needs of business
- The demands of business must preferably be substantiated with concrete data, studies and analyses, e.g. from trade associations
- The project application will also be assessed on whether it has: (i) a clear and coherent impact chain; and (ii) good and well-founded indicators and target figures
- The application must explain how the project will lead to improved resource efficiency in the participating companies and/or their value chains

**Project coherence (weight 25%)**

- The project must support the principles of coherence and transparency in business-promotion efforts, i.e. the project must be coordinated with – and build on – good existing efforts (financed by the Regional Fund or other sources)
- There must be no inappropriate overlap with existing or planned efforts. The advertising material must contain an overview of ongoing green and circular projects which have previously received support from the Regional Fund, the regional business development funds, and selected national initiatives.
- The applicant must also describe how they will ensure that the effort is nationwide and that variations in business needs across the country are addressed.

**Strong partnership (weight 20%)**

- The project must be implemented in a strong partnership. Applicants must describe their own qualifications and skills (and those of their project partners) within the green and circular transition.
- The application will gain points if the project actively involves relevant industry organisations, because organisations can both gather relevant knowledge about market needs and act as ambassadors for the effort. The participation of the special/relevant public actors who can contribute to the green and circular transition in private companies (e.g. municipal waste and supply companies) will also have a positive impact on the project's score.

**Digital and user-friendly project (weight 15%)**

- The application will gain points if the project contributes to the digital transformation of Danish business life, e.g. by making use of digital tools for diagnostics, benchmarking, etc.
- The project is also positively scored if the project is presented in a clear and user-friendly way for business

**Continuity of the project after the end of funding (weight 10%)**

- Emphasis will be placed on how the applicant will ensure that the project's results and experiences are anchored and continued when public co-financing ends



**Call 2: Incentive Scheme 'Productive InNovation' (PT)**

This call sought to support investment in innovative activities and the development of goods and services in SMEs and large companies in Portugal

**Specific quality criteria used to appraise the call**

**Project quality (weight 30%)**

•Project coherence and rationality. This sub-criterion assesses the quality of the project and its importance in the company's strategy. It means that projects with the greatest impact on business diversification (entry into new markets or customer segments) will be scored highly. In this sense, the project is scored according to the consistency of the investment plan with the strategy presented.

•Degree of innovation. This is assessed as the degree of technological (product and process), marketing (distribution, promotion, packaging, branding) and organisational innovation in the project. The degree of innovation is also evaluated according to the scope of innovation in the market according to a simple ranking: higher scores are given to innovations introduced at the international level (global markets); medium scores are given to innovation targeted at the national market; and lower scores are given if the innovations are only introduced at the company level.

**Impact of the project on the company's competitiveness (weight 20%)**

- Impact of the project on increasing exports by the company
- Impact of the project on increasing the company's production efficiency and its ability to generate added value in each unit produced

**Contribution of the project to the economy (weight 20%)**

- Contribution of the project to the objectives of the OP and of the 'Portugal 2020' strategy
- Degree of creation of high-skilled employment. This sub-criterion intends to value projects that create more high-skilled employment. It applies if at least one additional worker is employed (measured between the post- and pre-project years)
- SMEs' contribution to the smart-specialisation strategy.
- If the project positively affects social challenges (social inclusion, jobs, human capital) an extra 0.5 points are added to the project's score

**Contribution of the project to regional convergence (weight 30%)**

- Impact of the project on regional development
- Impact on regional strategy for smart specialisation
- Creation of jobs in the local labour market

**Example of specific selection criteria**

**TO4 - Supporting the shift towards a low-carbon economy in all sectors**



**Call: Eco-innovation+ (LT)**

Support investments in tangible assets related to eco-innovation to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions and mitigate the effects of climate change

**Specific quality criteria used to appraise the call**

**Share of the applicant's private investments in eco-innovations (with respect to long-term tangible assets) (weight 45%)**

The share of the applicant's private investments in the project's long-term tangible assets (measured as a percentage) is calculated according to a specific formula explained in the annex to the CFP documents. More points are given to those projects in which the share of the applicant's private investments in technological eco-innovations (i.e. in the creation of long-term tangible fixed assets) are higher (in percentage terms) compared with the other submitted projects.

**The products planned to be manufactured as part of the project have at least one ecological design feature (weight 25%)**

This criterion is applied when the project plans to produce goods, and it is evaluated on the basis of whether at least one of the following conditions is met:

- efficient use of raw materials in the production;
- efficient use of energy;
- limited or no use of harmful substances;
- the product can be recycled after its expiration date.

If, during the project, it is planned to produce an updated product that already meets one or more of the above-mentioned characteristics of an ecologically designed product, the product must satisfy at least one additional characteristic.

The projects will be ranked according to the characteristics of the planned products. More points will be awarded to projects that implement a greater number of eco-design features in the planned products. If several products are planned for production in the project, the cumulative amount of properties in all the planned products is calculated. If the project plans to update an existing product, only the updated product's additional features are counted.

**After the implementation of the project, the negative impact of economic activity on the environment decreases (air and water pollution decreases, less waste is generated) (weight 25%)**

This criterion is evaluated taking into account the following three aspects:

- a decrease in air pollution thanks to the project;
- a decrease in water pollution thanks to the project;
- a reduction in the amount of waste generated thanks to the project.


The biggest change in reducing negative impacts on the environment is awarded 5 points. These changes are measured according to each part of the criterion separately (air pollution, water pollution, reduced waste).

More points (arithmetic average of the received evaluations according to separate parts of this criterion) are given to those projects for which the forecasts at 3 years after the end of the implementation of the project activities show the greatest decreases in negative impact on the environment compared to the situation before the project was implemented. Formulas on how to compute these forecasts are provided by the authority in the annex to the CFP documents.

**The eco-innovations implemented in the project meet the thematic priorities of the smart-specialisation strategy (weight 5%)**

Priority is given to those projects in which technological eco-innovations that meet at least one thematic priority set out in the smart-specialisation strategy are expected to be implemented. If a project produces innovations matching the priorities in the smart-specialisation strategy, 5 points will be awarded. If a project produces innovations that do not match any of the priorities in the smart-specialisation strategy, 0 points will be given.

### 3.2.5. Guiding questions to consider when carrying out this step of the selection process

Step	Guiding questions	
 <p><b>Drawing up the selection criteria</b></p>	• Can eligibility criteria, quality criteria, and priority criteria be clearly distinguished?	✓
	• Are the criteria coherent with the objectives of the call and suitable for effectively selecting projects that contribute to these objectives?	✓
	• Are the criteria clearly set out, easy to quantify and assess?	✓
	• Is the methodology for assessing the criteria clear, and is it also provided to the applicants? Is the scoring of each criterion and its relative weight on the total score clearly set out?	✓
	• Are the criteria of a reasonable number?	✓
	• Do the criteria add excessive burden to the evaluators and applicants? If yes, could those criteria be replaced with simpler criteria?	✓
	• How do relevant stakeholders perceive these criteria?	✓

	• Are future evaluators involved in drawing up the criteria?	✓
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### 3.3. Drafting CFP documents

#### 3.3.1. Overview of the step

When does this step take place?	Who is involved?	Aim	Main activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Before the launch of the CFP</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>MA/IBs</li> <li>Consultation with stakeholders and target groups</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Draft the call documents, deciding on all the main aspects and conditions for funding</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Drafting of CFP documents</li> <li>Drafting templates, guidelines and supporting material</li> <li>Consultations on the draft</li> <li>Validation of the documents</li> </ul>

#### 3.3.2. Key challenges in this step of the selection process

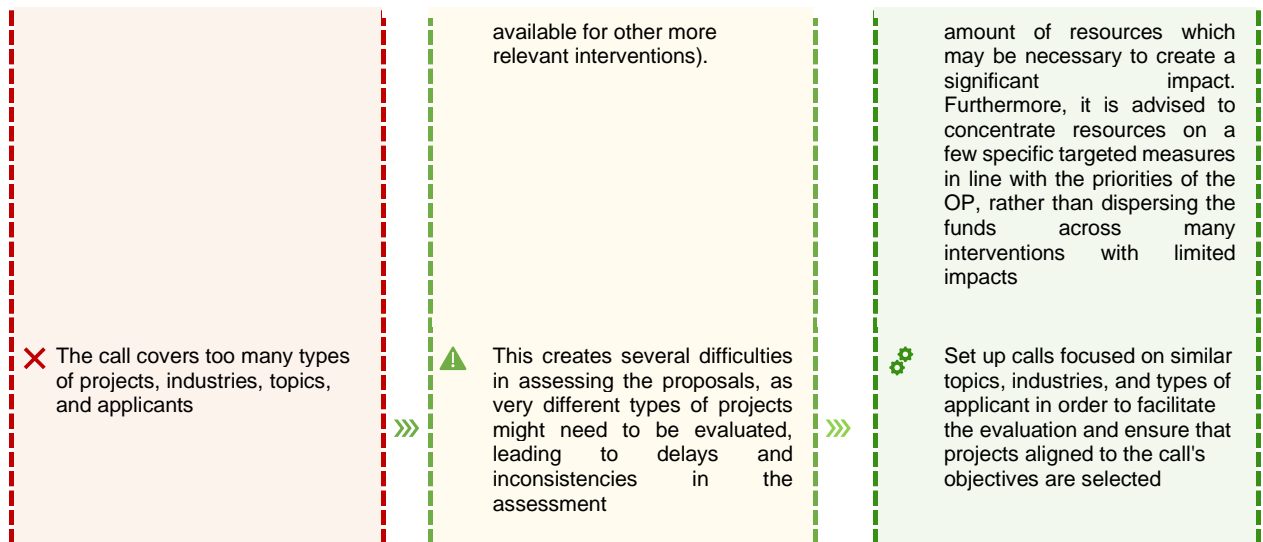
The most important aspects that determine whether or not this step of the selection of operations is effective include: (i) ensuring that the call has a proper focus (e.g. that it is well-targeted, and that the budget is sufficiently well planned with respect to the territory's need); (ii) using standardised formats/templates; and (iii) relying on consultations with stakeholders and potential beneficiaries/target groups.

The box below summarises common challenges identified by the MA/IBs, the possible problems that can be caused by these challenges, and some suggestions on how to avoid these problems and improve the drafting of the CFP documents.

#### Box 3. Drafting call documents: common challenges and possible solutions

Common challenges	Possible problems	Possible solutions
<p>✗ The CFP documents are unclear and incomplete (e.g. the budget available for the call is not clearly stated; the call's objectives and target groups are not clear; financing conditions are not sufficiently well described; deadlines are not clearly indicated; the text is overly complex, etc.)</p>	<p>⚠ A lack of sufficient interest by the applicants due to high uncertainty as to the requirements for the applications. Complex and unclear application forms can lead to inconsistent presentation of the project by applicants reducing the quality of the applications. Furthermore, the applicants may need to request more clarifications during the application phase, increasing the burden for the authority.</p>	<p>⚙ Launching consultations on the CFP documents with the target groups before the launch of the call, and integrating the received feedback, may make it possible to increase the clarity and user-friendliness of the call documents. Furthermore, providing as much as possible standardised templates with detailed guidance on how to fill them in facilitates the application process and makes it possible to more easily compare applications. Last but not least, it is suggested to refrain from using bureaucratic jargon but instead to use clear and simple language in the CFP documents.</p>
<p>✗ The budget of the call is not appropriate for the needs: it is either too high or too low</p>	<p>⚠ If the budget is insufficient, a number of relevant projects cannot be financed, and this reduces the effectiveness of the intervention. On the other hand, a budget which is too high leads to financing unworthy projects with limited impact (thus reducing the funds</p>	<p>⚙ An optimal call budget is the financial amount which guarantees that the projects financed will respond to the territory's needs and have a significant impact. To ensure this, it is advised to determine the budget on the basis of a thorough analysis of needs and to estimate the minimum</p>





### 3.3.3. Good practices in this step of the selection of operations

The following boxes describe good practices that can be taken as examples when drafting CFP documents. These practices were identified through interviews with authorities and beneficiaries.

	<b>Practice 1: Use of standardised templates and sharing of examples of successful applications</b>
	<b>Context</b> 'Border, Midland and Western Regional Operational Programme 2014-2020' (Ireland); mainly open-ended competitive calls have been used in the context of this programme.
<b>Description</b>	<p>The Irish MA developed a set of useful tools that make it easier to understand the CFP documents and fill in the applications. Standardised templates (for reports, CVs, budget templates, etc.) are used, accompanied by guidance notes explaining how to fill in the different parts of the application documents. Furthermore, the MA provides successful proposals that can be taken as examples of how to fill in the application forms and also as a reference for the expected quality. These examples of successful proposals are intended to show the applicants what is expected in terms of the focus, quality, and level of detail of their proposals. As part of the package of guidance material shared with the applicants, the MA also includes examples of successful projects funded under previous interventions of a similar nature in order to show the benefits that the funding could bring, making the intervention more appealing to potential beneficiaries and target groups.</p>
	<b>Expected benefits</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ High clarity of the documents and guiding notes might reduce the number of clarifications requested by the applicants during the submission phase. It may also help to minimise mistakes in filling in the application forms, reducing the administrative burden during both the submission and the evaluation phase.</li> <li>✓ Providing examples of successful applications and successful projects may help to increase the attractiveness of the intervention and motivate applicants to submit quality proposals.</li> </ul>
<b>Possible drawbacks</b>  <b>Low likelihood</b>	<p>There is no specific downside associated with this practice. Obviously, it requires some time and effort to develop templates, and to identify and share examples of successful applications etc. However, this effort is likely to be more than compensated for by the benefits that the authorities can achieve later on in the selection process.</p>



**Transferability****Very high**

This practice of providing supporting tools to applicants is easily transferable in any OP. If a call is new and the MA does not have a completed application form to share as an example of a successful proposal, it can provide a 'mock' proposal as a guide and to clarify what is expected from the applicant.

**Practice 2: Participatory approach in designing the CFP documents****Context**

'EU Structural Funds Investments Operational Programme ERDF/ESF/CF (Lithuania)'; 'Operational Programme Investments in Growth and Employment (Austria)'. Both OPs cover the entire national territory and are characterised by good selection rates.

**Description**

Following a participatory approach is important to ensure that the calls are relevant with respect to territorial needs, and that the documents accompanying the calls are clear and understandable for the applicants.

In the Austrian OP, workshops were organised to engage the target group and receive feedback on the CFP documents before the launch of the calls. Individual meetings are an alternative to broader meetings and workshops when the target group is relatively small. However, they are more time-intensive and resource-intensive. The solutions adopted by the Austrian OP help ensure that the calls are aligned with the applicants' needs.



In Lithuania, the draft CFPs and the selection criteria were discussed with potential applicants, socioeconomic partners, and the bodies involved in the selection process. The draft calls were then revised on the basis of this feedback. Public consultations took place throughout the preparation period and were carried out using different tools (e.g. meetings, telephone calls, email correspondence, and written inquiries).

**Expected benefits**

- ✓ The involvement of the potential applicants and relevant stakeholders during the drafting of CFP documents makes the call more relevant to the needs of potential beneficiaries and target groups, and may attract more applicants.
- ✓ Discussing the CFP documents with potential applicants makes it possible to produce clearer documents. When clarity is checked before publishing a call, the need for subsequent clarifications significantly falls during the submission phase, thus reducing the administrative burden for the authority.


**Possible drawbacks****Low likelihood**

Participatory approaches in drafting the CFPs might lengthen the process, especially if many CFPs are planned. Nonetheless, more relevant and clearer documents could reduce the administrative burden on the MA during the submission and evaluation steps and increase the quality of the applications.

**Transferability****Very high**

Any MA can easily replicate the practice of using a participatory approach in the design of a CFP.

### 3.3.4. Guiding questions to consider when carrying out this step of the selection process

Step	Guiding questions	
 <b>Draft CFP documents</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Were relevant stakeholders and experts involved in drafting/validating the CFP documents to ensure their clarity and consistency?</li> </ul>	✓
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do the CFP documents include supporting documents that make it easier for applicants to fill in and submit the application? For example, do they include supporting documents such as: supporting templates, guidelines on how to fill in the application form, methodological guidelines on the criteria, and examples of successful applications?</li> </ul>	✓
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are the CFP documents clear and written in simple language, avoiding bureaucratic jargon which may cause ambiguous interpretations?</li> </ul>	✓
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are all the main parts of the call included in the documents and clearly presented (budget, criteria, objectives, requirements, timing etc.)?</li> </ul>	✓

## 3.4. Launch of CFPs and submission of applications

### 3.4.1. Overview of the step

When does this step take place?	Who is involved?	Aim	Main activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>From the publication of the CFP to the deadline for submitting applications</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>MA/IBs</li> <li>Potential and actual applicants</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Publish and advertise the call</li> <li>Collect applications</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Dissemination campaigns</li> <li>Support applicants in preparing and submitting applications</li> <li>Ensure that there are IT tools for the submission of applications</li> </ul>

### 3.4.2. Key challenges in this step of the selection process




The most important aspects that determine whether or not this step of the selection of operations is effective include whether support is provided to potential applicants and whether the MA/IB provides adequate IT tools for submitting applications.

In this step, the use of IT tools is of key importance, not only because it may make it easier to submit proposals but also because it helps with: (i) the interoperability of other systems that have external databases and registers; and (ii) IT tools used in other steps of the selection process. Indeed, the interconnection among all these systems makes it possible to fully seize the benefits of digitalisation.

The box below summarises common challenges identified by the MA/IBs, the possible problems that can be caused by these challenges, and some suggestions on how to avoid these problems and improve the process.





#### Box 4. Call launch and submission of applications: common challenges and possible solutions



Common challenges	Possible problems	Possible solutions
<p>✗ The time allowed for the submission of the applications is too short or inadequate, considering the complexity of the call and the context (e.g. multiple calls published at the same time, during holiday seasons, etc.)</p>	<p>⚠ This might reduce the call's appeal to potential applicants, as they may realise that they would not be able to finalise the application in time. Moreover, it may lead to lower-quality applications, as the applicants do not have enough time to prepare.</p>	<p>⚙ Improved planning for launching the calls, allowing enough time for the submission of proposals, especially for complex calls. Conduct a test to check how much time is necessary to submit an application and adjust the deadlines accordingly.</p>
<p>✗ Insufficient attention given to promoting the call and insufficient communication activities</p>	<p>⚠ Target groups are not fully aware of either the funding opportunities or the call's requirements, thus leading to insufficient interest in the call and therefore not enough applications</p>	<p>⚙ Organising information campaigns in advance and throughout the launch of the call. Use a variety of dissemination and support methods to reach potential applicants.</p>
<p>✗ Lack of targeted support to applicants</p>	<p>⚠ This could lead to the submission of lower-quality applications containing mistakes, thus increasing the</p>	<p>⚙ Ensure targeted and –where possible –individual, support to applicants during the submission of applications. If needed, also provide</p>





 <p>IT tools used do not ensure a smooth process for submitting applications</p>	<p>burden for the evaluators and delaying the selection process</p>  <p>Burdensome processes for submitting the application and supporting documents for the applicant, leading to more errors, missing documents, etc.</p> <p>Increased workload for authorities and reduced efficiency of the selection process</p>	<p>feedback on the content of the application to ensure higher-quality proposals in future and save time during the evaluation phase. Targeted and individual support might also have a positive impact on the number of clarification requests and on the number of complaints.</p>  <p>Digitalisation of the entire selection process could bring substantial benefits in terms of fewer errors, greater transparency, improved communication, and faster evaluation</p>
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## 3.4.3. Good practices in this step of the selection of operations

The following boxes describe good practices that can be taken as examples when launching the call and during the submission of proposals. These practices were identified through interviews with authorities and beneficiaries.

	<p><b>Practice 1: Providing individual support to applicants</b></p>
	<p><b>Context</b></p> <p>'Estonia OP for Cohesion Policy Funding 2014-2020' (Estonia); 'Operational Programme ERDF in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern 2014-2021' (Germany); 'Operational Programme Investments in Growth and Employment' (Austria).</p>
<p><b>Description</b></p>	<p>The IB provided individual support to applicants during the application phase. In the Estonian OP, this service was provided by phone and email exchanges, especially for complex state aid measures (e.g. helping the applicants understand regulations and how to apply them to the specific project). Furthermore, for some calls for which sufficient technical skills were unavailable within the IB, the authority asked sectoral experts to provide individual support to the applicants. This happened especially for the calls aimed at improving regional competitiveness, which covered a broad range of specific interventions, from tourism to sustainable mobility (e.g. building cycling and pedestrian paths). For the calls under the smart-specialisation strategy, the applicants' common needs were identified, and they received training on how to prepare business plans.</p> <p>Significant support to applicants was also provided in the German OP. A systematic dialogue between the IB and the applicants was encouraged by the IB and practical guidance and feedback on both the draft application and how to collect the required documents was provided. This led to a significant reduction in ineligible applications. Some applicants declined to submit full applications after receiving feedback and realising they could not meet the minimum criteria.</p> <p>The Austrian OP case also highlights how important it is to establish a continuous dialogue with the applicants. Appointing one person to be responsible for following each project proposal from start to finish has proven to be a good practice, especially with open-ended calls and lengthy evaluation processes, where it is important to oversee the entire process and appropriately guide the applicant.</p> 
	<p><b>Expected benefits</b></p> <p>✓ Individual support may improve the quality of the submitted project proposals, and reduce the number of mistakes and ineligible applications. Furthermore, individual support tends to translate into greater applicant satisfaction with the work of the MA/IBs. All this may lead to fewer complaints and legal</p>

<p>✓</p>	<p>appeals, simplifying and speeding up the appraisal and complaint-management steps (which in turn can help to significantly reduce the duration of the overall selection process). Individual support, which can be also provided by involving sectoral experts, helps to improve the quality of applications. This is likely to lead to better-quality projects.</p>
<p><b>Possible drawbacks</b></p>	<p><b>Medium-Low</b></p> <p>Providing individual support makes it possible to: (i) save time during the evaluation and complaint-management phases; and (ii) ensure higher-quality projects. Despite the benefits of this practice, it could also be a burdensome and costly process for the authorities when applied to calls that attract many applicants. Nonetheless, in these cases, the authority, before launching the calls, could already identify (e.g. through consulting on the draft CFP documents) the common needs of the applicants who are drafting applications. For example, in the above-mentioned Estonian OP, the authorities understood well in advance that designing a business plan could be challenging for applicants. The authorities therefore organised ad hoc training on how to design a business plan. When support can be collective rather than individual (e.g. training sessions focused on specific topics and available on the authority website), this may reduce costs significantly, especially in calls that receive many applications.</p> <p>It is important to note that the principle of equal treatment should be properly managed while designing and providing individual support, i.e. all applicants should be entitled to the same types of services.</p> 
	<p><b>Transferability</b></p> <p><b>High</b></p> <p>Most of the time, the provision of individual support can be easily replicated for: (i) calls targeting a limited number of applicants; and (ii) open-ended procedures that require a less concentrated effort because the submission of applications is usually spread over a longer time period.</p>

	<p><b>Practice 2: Dissemination of call opportunities through a variety of methods (e.g. info-days with thematic experts, social media, etc.)</b></p>
	<p><b>Context</b></p> <p>'Operational Programme Innovation and Competitiveness 2014-2020' (Bulgaria); 'Programme on Innovation and Sustainable Growth in Businesses Denmark 2014-2020' (Denmark); 'Interreg Alpine Space Operational Programme' (Alpine Space OP). The first two OPs covered the entire national territory (Denmark and Bulgaria), while the Alpine Space OP co-finances and supports cooperation projects across the borders of seven Alpine countries (Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Liechtenstein, Slovenia and Switzerland).</p>
<p><b>Description</b></p> <p>The programme authorities are expected to disseminate the call opportunities widely across the respective regions to ensure a good level of competition and reach as many potential beneficiaries as possible. A call can be advertised through various tools and media, blending written communication, social media, and the organisation of dedicated events.</p> <p>In Bulgaria, the MA organised state-wide information campaigns before launching the CFPs. They also held info-days to allow potential applicants to get information and ask questions about the rules of participation, eligible activities, etc. The Bulgarian experience showed that experts with knowledge on specific challenging topics (e.g. state aid, energy-efficiency measures) should also participate in such events to clarify possible problems as early as possible.</p> <p>Similarly, for Alpine Space, info-days were organised in the launch phase in each region, in the national language, and with the support of a representative of the Joint Secretariat (MA) to increase the accessibility of the calls to local stakeholders.</p> <p>A complementary communication strategy was undertaken by the Danish OP in which, before publishing the call, the MA launched a comprehensive campaign on social media (e.g. through LinkedIn posts). Press releases and newsletters were also used to reach as many interested stakeholders as possible.</p>	
	<p><b>Expected benefits</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ The first direct benefit of disseminating the call opportunities through a variety of tools is the possibility of attracting and mobilising many applicants, making it easier to effectively select projects that are in line with the call's objectives</li> <li>✓ The effort to advertise the calls at an early stage can also contribute to clarifying the call's scope and requirements, and result in better-quality applications</li> </ul>

**Possible drawbacks****Low**

Excessively broad and untargeted advertising could result in many applications also coming from applicants outside the target group. The authorities should draw up an appropriate communications strategy to reach the right target groups using the relevant media and communication channels, depending on the nature and content of each call.

**Transferability****Very high**

The described practices can be relatively easily transferred to other contexts.


**Practice 3: User-friendly IT tools, interoperable with registers & databases, making possible some automation in the submission process**
**Context**

'OP Crete' (Greece) is a regional OP that makes use of a centralised information system to support the selection of operations and implement the OP. The 'OP Norte' (Portugal) is also a regional OP with a centralised information system characterised by high interoperability.

**Description**

The IT system used by the OP Crete is considered intuitive, easy to navigate, and user-friendly by applicants. It also provides several automatic functions. For example, it automatically detects possible errors when applications are being filled in. In addition, some parts are automatically pre-filled by the system: (i) on the basis of information already included in previous steps of the proposal submission; (ii) on the basis of information already available in other datasets/registers; or (iii) on the basis of automatic calculations. The system also automatically generates alerts to notify users which parts of their application still need to be filled in. A helpdesk function is in place and applicants can submit questions to the MA or the IT team, who usually respond promptly to those requests. The Portuguese IT system (Balcão2020) is used to electronically exchange information between ESI Fund authorities and beneficiaries and is interoperable with a broad range of national/regional systems and registers. This makes it possible to pre-fill information in forms based on the data contained in other documents/repositories. This in turn facilitates the work of the authorities (e.g. in verifying the information provided), which results in: (i) less time spent on managing the projects; and (ii) a reduced risk of fraud.

**Expected benefits**

- ✓ The IT-system functionalities (such as the automatic error detection and the automatic calculation) ensure a smoother and more timely evaluation of project proposals as they prevent problems arising from incorrect or missing information.
- ✓ Other functionalities, such as the automatic pre-filling and user-friendliness, make it possible for applicants to save time in submitting their applications. Furthermore, these functionalities also reduce the time needed for the authority to validate this information.
- ✓ The system can ensure that there is a well-organised repository of all the sent documents and facilitates communication between the authority and the applicants.


**Possible drawbacks****Low likelihood**

Using a user-friendly information system to support the submission of applications can bring substantial benefits both to the MA and to applicants. However, it is important that such systems are designed and implemented following a 'user-centred' approach, meaning that the tools must be developed starting from the users' needs. If this is not the case, the risk is that unfriendly applications could be developed that could add complexity to the submission of applications rather than simplifying it.

**Transferability****High**

This practice can be extended to all OPs. However, the initial development of the tool could be burdensome for the authorities that do not yet have a well-developed IT infrastructure with well-developed services. Furthermore, once launched, it could require some time for applicants and staff of the authority to learn to use the system. Therefore, a sufficient degree of support and guiding material must be provided to all users.

### 3.4.4. Guiding questions to consider when carrying out this step of the selection process

Step	Guiding questions	
 <b>Launch of CFP and submission of applications</b>	• Is enough time allowed for submitting the application?	✓
	• Is the information campaign well suited to effectively reach the target group (e.g. have suitable communication channels and tools been used)?	✓
	• Does the authority provide effective support to applicants? Are user-friendly communication channels used to facilitate the exchange of information between the authority and the applicants?	✓
	• Is the CFP presented in an attractive and clear way during information events?	✓
	• What kinds of individual support could be provided to applicants?	✓
	• Is the IT tool for submitting applications user-friendly and reliable during times of high usage (e.g. close to the deadline for submitting applications)?	✓
	• Is the IT tool interoperable with other internal IT tools used for selecting operations and other external databases and registers?	✓
	• Is quick and focused IT technical support provided to the authority and applicants?	✓

## 3.5. Appraisal and selection of proposals

### 3.5.1. Overview of the step







When does this step take place?	Who is involved?	Aim	Main activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>From the deadline of the submission of applications until the final selection decision is taken</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>MA/IBs</li> <li>Experts and evaluators</li> <li>Applicants (for clarifications)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Assess the applications</li> <li>Select the projects</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Assessment of eligibility, quality and priority criteria</li> <li>Ask for clarifications</li> <li>Select the best project proposals</li> </ul>

### 3.5.2. Key challenges in this step of the selection process

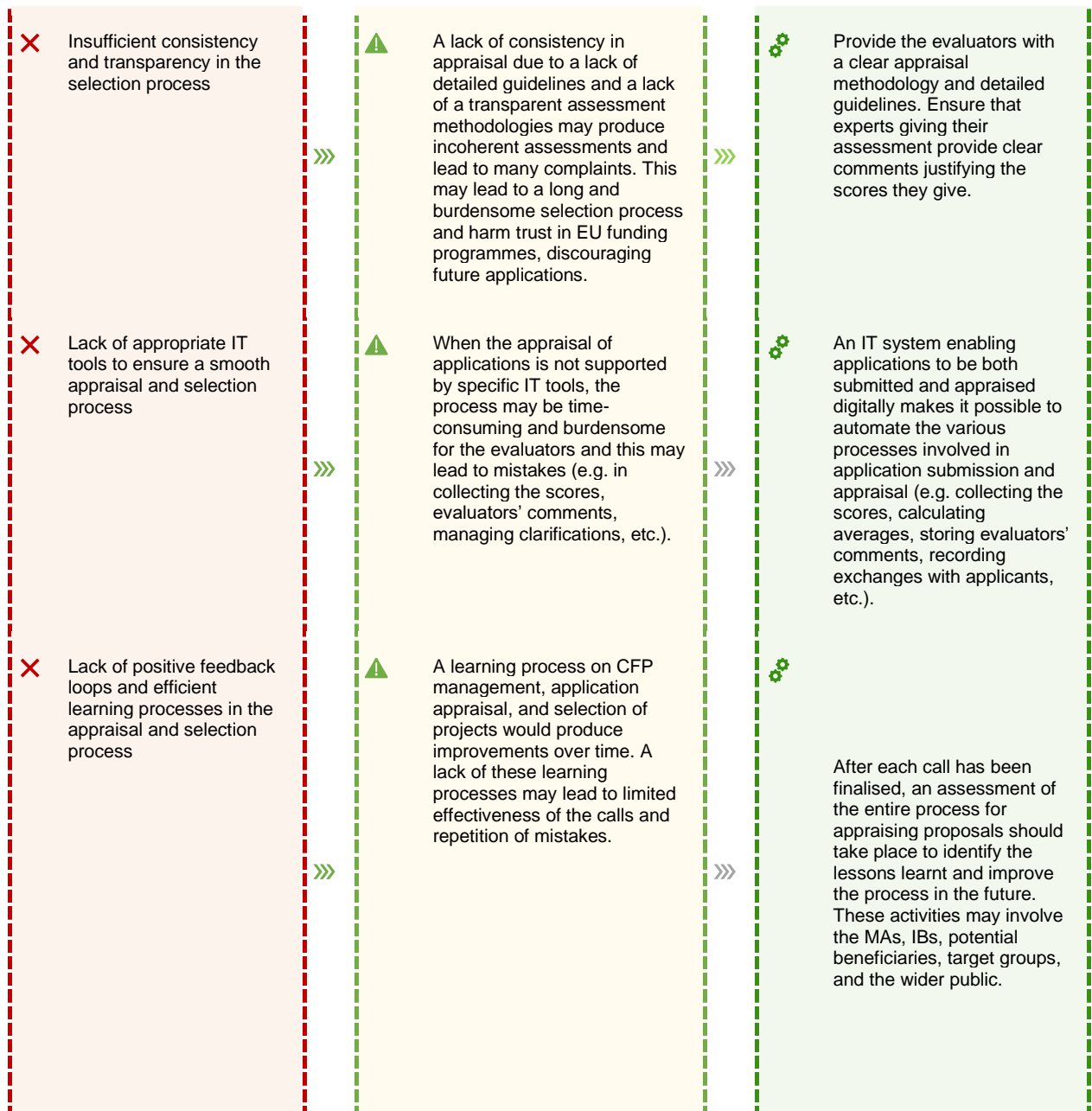
The most important aspects that determine whether or not this step in the selection of operations is effective include: (i) getting experts on board ahead of time and managing them well; (ii) organising the activities of the evaluation committee appropriately (e.g. ensuring that a clear methodology and training are provided and that meetings are organised to make sure that evaluators work consistently); (iii) using IT tools to help evaluators; and (iv) making the necessary clarifications to applicants during the appraisal phase, especially for complex projects.

The box below summarises common challenges identified by the MA/IBs, the possible problems that can be caused by these challenges and some suggestions on how to avoid these problems and improve the appraisal and selection of proposals.

#### Box 5. Appraisal and selection of proposals: common challenges and possible solutions

Common challenges	Possible problems	Possible solutions
 Inadequate number and/or late recruitment of external evaluators (e.g. after the submission deadline)	 A long evaluation process is costly for both the authority and the applicants. It might also reduce interest in applying among some potential applicants. In some cases, a project may lose its relevance (e.g. if an innovation idea becomes obsolete etc.).	 Ensure ahead of time that there are enough evaluators (including external ones, if needed) to work on project appraisal. Assess various options to quickly recruit the additional evaluators needed – e.g. framework contracts, short-term contracts, interinstitutional exchanges with other IBs, etc.
 Evaluators lack specific knowledge	 Limited knowledge of certain topics (e.g. sector-specific knowledge, state aid knowledge, knowledge of cost-benefit analysis, etc.) leads to delays and inconsistencies in the appraisal process. In turn, this could also possibly increase the number of complaints.	 Ensure the evaluation committee is well balanced, including by having a good balance of external and internal experts to take care of various aspects of the evaluation (e.g. technical and legal aspects). Organise an initial meeting of the evaluation committee to agree on the evaluation methodology and ensure a consistent approach.







### 3.5.3. Good practices in this step of the selection of operations

The following boxes describe good practices that can be taken as examples when evaluating and selecting proposals. These practices were identified through interviews with authorities and beneficiaries.

	<b>Practice 1: External evaluators recruited on the basis of contracts</b>
	<b>Context</b> The 'OP Zuid 2014-2020' (the Netherlands) programme is focused on a limited number of priorities: improving the innovation capacity of SMEs, and the transition to the low-carbon economy. An experienced and flexible pool of experts was involved in the appraisal and selection process.
	<b>Description</b> The strategic choice of the OP Zuid, over several programming periods, was to focus on a limited number of priorities: (i) R&D and innovation; and (ii) other economic transitions towards climate neutrality. For a number of years, OP Zuid has concentrated its focus on these thematic priorities, and this has made it possible to identify and consolidate a pool of internal and external sectoral experts. Therefore, experts have acquired in-depth knowledge of the programmes and administrative procedures in relation to the selection of projects financed by the OP. External experts are often engaged through a contract (directly by the institutions or by a recruitment agency). In addition, a long-standing team of internal officials with thematic skills ensures continuity and consistency in the implementation processes.
	<b>Expected benefits</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Quick mobilisation of the experts via available contracts</li> <li>✓ The mix of internal and external experts ensures continuity and consistency in the selection process</li> </ul>
	<b>Possible drawbacks</b>  <b>Low likelihood</b> Using <i>framework-like</i> contracts has clear advantages in terms of the almost immediate availability of a large number of experts. Nevertheless, the authorities need to be fully aware of the entire range of expertise needed for a whole implementation period to ensure the right expertise is available. If a specific sector or topic is covered in the submitted project proposals that was not previously envisaged (this could happen especially in emerging R&D sectors), there might not be enough expertise available even among the external experts that are part of the contract. Furthermore, the sectoral or technical experts might not always be aware of the public-policy objectives behind the call. Hence, they might need dedicated training to ensure a consistent evaluation approach.
	<b>Transferability</b>  <b>Medium - high</b> The practice of involving a mix of internal and external experts, and of hiring the latter by means of flexible framework contracts, can be easily applied to other OPs.

	<b>Practice 2: IT tools that make it possible to automatically appraise projects</b>
	<b>Context</b> The 'Competitiveness and sustainable development OP' (Cyprus) is a national OP with centralised information systems which support the appraisal of projects through automated functionalities.

**Description**

This practice is aimed at simplifying and accelerating the appraisal phase and consists of automating, to the extent possible, the assessment of the selection criteria. In the Cypriot OP, an automated evaluation of some of the quality criteria was carried out for some calls. The system automatically calculates the score for each of the criteria on the basis of the information included in the relevant fields of the electronic application form. Then, based on the relative weight of each criterion, the total score of each application is calculated, and a first ranking of projects is generated. The IB checks the eligibility only for the applications that reached the minimum required score. The remaining quality criteria (i.e. those that are not calculated automatically) are assessed by the evaluation committee only for the applications that passed the eligibility check and reached the minimum (automatically determined) score. Once all the scores are given, the system automatically generates a final ranking of applications.

**Expected benefits**

- ✓ Automatic assessment of the selection criteria makes it possible to reduce the burden on the evaluation committee, speeding up the evaluation process
- ✓ Usually, eligibility criteria are checked before the quality criteria, even when there are many applications. Checking eligibility only for the applications that passed the automatically computed minimum quality score also makes it possible to reduce the effort and time needed to check the eligibility criteria, especially when there are many applications.

**Possible drawbacks****Medium-low likelihood**

For the automatic appraisal of applications to function correctly, it is imperative that complete and correct data be entered in the standardised application form. Incorrect and incomplete information may lead to wrong scores and to complaints which may eventually offset the benefits (reduced time and effort) of automation. Therefore, it is important that the system for submitting applications promptly flags missing fields and blocks incomplete applications. Furthermore, it is of primary importance that the fields in the applications and the required information are clear to applicants (e.g. providing a detailed description and examples of requested data). It is also suggested to test the scoring system before the launch of the call and, once the actual evaluation has been carried out, to double-check that the automatically computed scores are correct across a sample of randomly selected applications.

**Transferability****Medium-high**

Any OP can replicate this practice. Nonetheless, automatic appraisal may require the development of IT systems characterised by improved interoperability, both internally (between the system for submitting applications and the system for appraising them) and externally (with external databases/registers). A considerable initial investment in terms of time and effort may also be needed to set up the tool. However, after this initial investment, the automation of the appraisal will bring substantial benefits by: (i) cutting the time needed to evaluate applications; (ii) reducing the effort needed to evaluate the applications; and (iii) reducing the number of mistakes in the evaluation process. The evaluation process is considered the most complex and time-consuming step of the process of selecting operations, and it requires a lot of staff.

**Practice 3: Training external experts to ensure efficiency and transparency****Context**

In the 'OP Competitiveness and Cohesion 2024-2020' (Croatia), the calls supporting IT investments in SMEs and financing for R&D rely almost exclusively on external experts from different sectors. To ensure that these experts understand the appraisal process and consistently apply the selection criteria, training is organised for them by experienced evaluators within the IB.

**Description**

In the calls related to R&D and IT support, the Croatian authorities have opted to contract a pool of external experts with strong sectoral and technical expertise to support the selection process (i.e. assessing quality criteria). Nevertheless, these experts often do not have evaluation experience and are not always fully aware of the public-policy objectives to which the call is contributing. Therefore, a training session is organised by the IB before the official appraisal starts. The training session is led by an experienced evaluator (or more than one) within the IB and typically has the following agenda:



- explanation of the public policy and strategic objectives of the call;
- overview of the project-selection process and the role of the external evaluators;
- rules of engagement and contractual obligations (especially in relation to independence, conflict of interest, confidentiality issues, deadlines for finalising the appraisals, and relations with the IB's evaluation committee);

- detailed explanation – with examples from previous evaluations – of: (i) the selection criteria (quality criteria); (ii) the scoring grid; and (iii) related guiding points/questions;
- setting up a communication channel and a Q&A platform if problems are encountered during the assessment of the project applications.

The training session is held for every individual call.

#### Expected benefits



- ✓ Understanding the wider policy context makes it possible for the evaluators to better apply quality-selection criteria
- ✓ The mix of internal and external experts ensures consistency in the selection process and continuous learning based on previous experiences
- ✓ MA/IB staff can learn a lot from the experience of the technical experts, which can lead to the future improvement of the CFP and related selection criteria
- ✓ Training on how to apply quality criteria significantly improves consistency and transparency in the selection process – it also reduces complaints
- ✓ Training on how to apply quality criteria also contributes to the overall capacity-building of the evaluation community

#### Possible drawbacks

##### Low likelihood

Organising training for external experts might be time-consuming for the MA/IB staff in the short run. However, there are economies of scale in the medium run. One of the reasons for this is that the training material can be adapted and reused. Therefore, the extra effort in the short term contributes to increasing capacity significantly in the medium and longer term.



#### Transferability



##### High

This practice can be transferred to any OP. The training can be organised in-person or online, recorded, and made available to the experts for reference. Furthermore, if new experts are employed during the selection process (when there is a need to replace someone or to cover new topics), the training can be easily provided without additional effort from the MA/IB staff, but by simply using the recorded material.



#### Practice 4: Exchange of experts between institutions



#### Context

This practice is used in the 'EU Structural Funds Investments OP', a national programme of Lithuania. The selection of operations is carried out by several IBs.

#### Description

To ensure the timely recruitment of external experts to be involved in the appraisal of applications, the Lithuanian IBs in charge of the selection process mobilise experts from specialised agencies and/or ministries. When strategic documents which describe a policy measure are produced (usually 3-4 months before the actual launch of a call), the possible need for experts with specific technical expertise is made explicit, and the IB in charge of the selection process contacts the relevant agency/ministry/other IB which could have experts with the required skills. An agreement or memorandum is then signed which specifies all the conditions of the exchange (e.g. the tasks of the experts, the number of projects to be assessed, the documents to be used). Usually, the experts evaluate only the technical parts of the applications, leaving the appraisal of administrative and general aspects to the IB's officials in charge of the selection process. The experts carry out their duty as part of their day-to-day job and not as an additional task. Therefore, the IB does not usually need to compensate the expert's institution (agency/ministry/other IB) for the work. This practice is used in particular for the calls under TO 1.



#### Expected benefits



- ✓ The agreement with other agencies/ministries/IBs makes it possible to save a substantial amount of time which would otherwise need to be allocated to selecting and recruiting external experts, thus avoiding delays
- ✓ This practice also makes it possible to save money, as the experts usually carry out the duty as part of their day-to-day work tasks
- ✓ This practice makes it possible to quickly and effectively retrieve high-level expertise which might not be available within IB offices, ensuring higher-quality project evaluation

#### Possible drawbacks


**Low likelihood**

No particular drawbacks are associated with this practice. Sometimes, the experts' assessments can diverge from applicants' expectations. In these cases, authorities may need to plan strategies to 'triangulate' the conclusions of the project evaluation (i.e. cross-check information and data) and settle disputes (e.g. by hiring additional experts).

**Transferability****High**

Potentially, this practice can be transferred to any OP if relevant institutions or other administrations are willing to sign agreements on the exchange of experts.

### 3.5.4. Guiding questions to consider when carrying out this step of the selection process

Step	Guiding questions	
 <b>Appraisal and selection of the applications</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is there a need to recruit external experts capable of providing specific technical and legal skills?</li> </ul>	✓
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is the composition of the evaluation committee appropriate (in terms of the number of people and their expertise) considering the number of applications received and the nature of the call?</li> </ul>	✓
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does the evaluation committee (including external evaluators) receive guidelines or training on how to appraise applications before starting the appraisal? If they do, are these guidelines clear? Is the training useful for evaluators?</li> </ul>	✓
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is there a realistic workplan with realistic deadlines for the different stages of the appraisal and selection process?</li> </ul>	✓
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are the tasks of the evaluation committee efficiently distributed among the evaluators?</li> </ul>	✓
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is there an effective channel for communication with applicants to easily and quickly resolve clarification requests? Is this (or could it be) linked to the e-Cohesion system?</li> </ul>	✓
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are there appropriate IT tools to support project appraisal and selection?</li> </ul>	✓
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are some parts of the evaluation automated? If not, could they be automated?</li> </ul>	✓
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does the evaluation committee keep a detailed and ordered track record of the score of each application with detailed reasons for assigning a specific score? This will facilitate the resolution of complaints and the provision of feedback to unsuccessful applicants.</li> </ul>	✓

## 3.6. Managing complaints and informing applicants of the outcome

### 3.6.1. Overview of the step

When does this step take place?	Who is involved?	Aim	Main activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>From the publication of the results of the evaluation process until the decision on possible complaints</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>MA/IBs</li> <li>Applicants</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Inform applicants of the outcome of the appraisal</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Inform applicants of selection decision</li> <li>Manage complaints and appeals Re-assess the applications due to complaints and legal appeals (if required)</li> </ul>

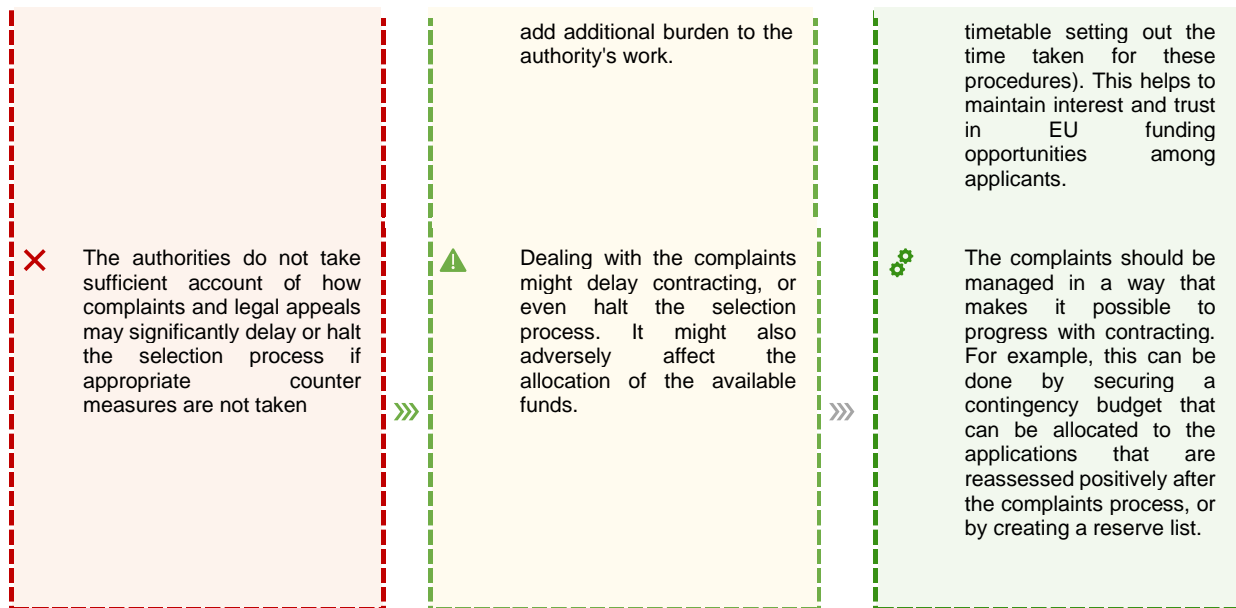
### 3.6.2. Key challenges in this step of the selection process

The most important aspects which determine whether this step of the selection of operations is effective include: (i) the provision of detailed feedback; and (ii) complaint management (in some cases, complaints cause the entire process to halt, and it is important that this does not happen and that the process moves on to the next step).

The box below summarises common challenges identified by the MA/IBs, the possible problems that can be caused by these challenges and some suggestions on how to avoid these problems and improve the process of both informing applicants on the selection outcome and managing complaints.

#### Box 6. Informing applicants and managing complaints: common challenges and possible solutions

Common challenges	Possible problems	Possible solutions
<p>✗ Lack of details on the reasons for rejecting projects</p>	<p>⚠ This lack of transparency may encourage the applicants to ask for additional explanations and increase their propensity to file complaints or legal appeals. All this causes delays in the selection process.</p>	<p>⚙ Provide information on the score assigned to each criterion and provide brief feedback, possibly individually to each applicant. This helps the applicant to understand the outcome of the selection and the reasons for rejection. It also helps to improve trust among applicants that their applications are being dealt with fairly. The feedback is a useful information for applicants' future applications, which encourages their participation in future selection procedures.</p>
<p>✗ Clear information is not provided on the procedures for legal appeals and complaints</p>	<p>⚠ Applicants might be confused and ask questions about timing or about what procedure to follow. This can</p>	<p>⚙ Openly inform all the unsuccessful applicants about the complaint and appeal possibilities (also providing a provisional</p>



### 3.6.3. Good practices in this step of the selection of operations


The following boxes describe good practices that can be taken as examples when informing applicants on the outcome of the evaluation and when managing complaints. These practices were identified through interviews with authorities and beneficiaries.

	<b>Practice 1: Providing detailed feedback and suggestions to unsuccessful applications</b>
	<b>Context</b>  The 'Innovation and sustainable growth in business' OP (Denmark) is a national programme focused on: (i) SMEs' competitiveness; (ii) research and innovation; and (iii) the low-carbon economy.
	<b>Description</b>  The Danish OP provides accurate and individual feedback to the unsuccessful applicants on why they were not selected. As soon as the final funding decision is taken, applicants are notified by phone of the outcome of the selection process. Ten days after the decision, a ranking of applications is published, and applicants receive a formal email.  For unsuccessful applicants, this email includes the reasons for rejection as well as a detailed list of the weaknesses in the application and suggestions on how the applicant could improve the proposal to increase their chances of succeeding in future CFPs.
	<b>Expected benefits</b>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Providing suggestions on how to improve their application to unsuccessful applicants may reduce complaints and improve the quality of future applications (especially if similar measures are planned in the future)</li> <li>✓ Providing detailed and reasoned feedback increases the transparency of the selection process</li> </ul>
	<b>Possible drawbacks</b>  <b>Low Likelihood</b>  Providing detailed and individual feedback to each applicant may seem burdensome for the CFPs that receive a large number of applications. Nonetheless, if comments and recommendations are written down by the evaluators during the evaluation stage, this practice can be optimised and efficiently carried out as it is part of the proposal-appraisal step.

	<p><b>Transferability</b></p> <p><b>High</b></p> <p>This practice can be easily transferred to any OP. However, it must be adequately planned, for example by asking evaluators to collect and note down their feedback from the very beginning of the process, including during the proposal-appraisal step.</p>
	<p><b>Practice 2: Efficiently managing the complaints process prevents delays to the contracting phase</b></p>
	<p><b>Context</b></p> <p>Under the 'OP Competitiveness and Cohesion 2024-2020' (Croatia), complaints on the appraisal and scoring of the applications (managed by the IBs) are submitted directly to the MA. The guidelines for applicants provide clear instructions on when/how to submit the complaint and on the minimum details needed in the complaint letter.</p>
	<p><b>Description</b></p> <p>The applicants are informed of the status of their application after each phase of the appraisal and can either ask for additional clarifications or formally submit an appeal. If the applicant feels that the appraisal of the application was unfair, they can submit a complaint to the MA. The reasons for complaints could relate to a breach in the procedure described in the guidelines for applicants, such as: (i) not applying the scoring as presented in the call documents; or (ii) not upholding the principles of equal treatment, transparency, proportionality, protection of personal data, confidentiality, and preventing conflicts of interest in the appraisal process. The MA then sets up a complaints commission that advises the head of the MA on their decision. If an applicant is not satisfied with the complaints commission's decision he/she has a right to a legal appeal to the administrative court in charge.</p> <p>The MA informs the IB on the value of the funding requested in the applications for which the legal appeals are filed, so that an appropriate amount of contingency funds (so-called buffer funds) can be reserved. If complaints are accepted, the applications are sent back to the IB for re-assessment, and contingency funds can be used if there are changes in the selection decisions.</p> 
	<p><b>Expected benefits</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ With a 'buffer' of funds, the appraisal process can continue regardless of the complaints submitted, thus preventing any delays to the contracting procedure for the 'clear cases'</li> <li>✓ The complaint-assessment process is carried out by the MA (and not by the IB that did the appraisal) and this ensures impartiality in the process</li> </ul>
	<p><b>Possible drawbacks</b></p> <p><b>Medium likelihood</b></p> <p>It is important to separate the tasks of the appraisal team from those of the team which deals with complaints to avoid biased decisions and ensure fair treatment for all applicants. In the Croatian case, this was made possible by a clear separation of tasks between the MA and the IBs, both of which had teams of external experts to support their work. Therefore, the necessary capacity to deal with the complaints in a timely manner was ensured. In an alternative scenario (e.g. if there was an unclear separation of tasks), managing the complaints would bring additional administrative burden to the call managers, and would also raise challenges when seeking to avoid any conflict of interest. All of this could result in delays to the final appraisal and contracting decisions.</p> <p>'Buffer' funds are part of the overall budget of the CFP; they are not extra funds available from the OP or other sources. In fact, the complaints temporarily reduce the total budget of the call available for the other applications, and may delay the completion of the award procedure and contracting.</p> 
	<p><b>Transferability</b></p> <p><b>High</b></p> <p>This good practice can, in principle, be transferred to any OP, if there is a delegation of tasks. The practice of using a 'buffer' of funds can be easily transferred to any OP.</p>



### 3.6.4. Guiding questions to consider when carrying out this step of the selection process

Step	Guiding questions	
 <b>Informing applicants and complaints management</b>		✓
	• Are the published selection results clearly presented, transparent and easily accessible?	✓
	• Is feedback on the reasons for rejection provided to unsuccessful applicants?	✓
	• Is the right to complain and file a legal appeal explained to unsuccessful applicants?	✓
	• Are the procedures for complaints and for handling legal appeals clear and do they function well?	✓
	• Would the existing complaint-management procedures result in delays to – or blockages in – the contracting phase? If so, would it be possible to avoid this, for example by putting aside a reserve (financial buffer)?	✓

## 3.7. Contract signature

### 3.7.1. Overview of the step

When does this step take place?	Who is involved?	Aim	Main activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>From the time when successful applicants are notified until the moment when contracts are signed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>MA/IBs</li> <li>Applicants</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Preparation and signature of the contract</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Preparation of the contracts</li> <li>Final checks on the required documents</li> <li>Adjusting contractual aspects (budget, project scope, etc.), when applicable</li> <li>Signature of the contracts</li> </ul>

### 3.7.2. Key challenges in this step of the selection process

The most important factors which determine whether or not this step of the selection of operations is effective include: (i) making sure that applicants understand the funding conditions (e.g. on public procurement, reporting etc.) to prevent future irregularities; (ii) making sure that the required paperwork is clear; (iii) ensuring standardisation of all processes and documentation, which makes contracting easier; and (iv) using IT tools (e.g. contracts that may be generated automatically).




The box below summarises common challenges identified by the MA/IBs, the possible problems that can be caused by these challenges and some suggestions on how to avoid these problems and improve the contract-signature phase.

#### Box 7. Contract signature: common challenges and possible solutions





Common challenges	Possible problems	Possible solutions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✗ Limited digitalisation: e.g. digital submission of supporting documents is not possible; there is no automation in the contract preparation process; no e-signature is possible</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⚠ Delays in contract preparation and signature caused by the need to submit supporting documents in paper, and the need to be physically present to sign contracts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⚙️ Ensure that contract preparation is digitalised as much as possible, and that all related activities (such as submission of supporting documents and signatures) can be carried out digitally (e.g. using embedded e-signature features)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✗ Lack of clarity in contractual obligations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⚠ Limited understanding of contractual obligations may lead to irregularities in implementing the project. Unclear clauses may also generate reluctance to sign the contracts.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⚙️ Prepare contract templates and make them available to applicants (e.g. together with CFP documents)</li> <li>Offer training to beneficiaries on contract management and project implementation</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✗ The degree of standardisation of contracts is very limited</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⚠ More time is needed to draft each contract, increasing the burden for both the administration and the beneficiary. The lack of standardisation also makes it impossible to automatically generate contracts and pre-fill them with information taken from the application.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⚙️ Standardise the contracts as much as possible and develop IT functionalities which make it possible to automatically pre-fill the contract with information from the application</li> </ul>

### 3.7.3. Good practices in this step of the selection of operations


The following boxes describe good practices that can be taken as examples when preparing and signing contracts. These practices were identified through interviews with authorities and beneficiaries.

	<b>Practice 1: Use of IT tools for contract preparation and signature</b>
	<b>Context</b> The 'OP Competitiveness and Cohesion 2024-2020' (Croatia) is characterised by a fully digital application process. This process covers: (i) communication between the IB and the applicants; (ii) the appraisal of proposals; (iii) contract signature; and (iv) the implementation of the contract.
	<b>Description</b> In the Croatian OP, the application process is fully digitalised. Scanned signatures are allowed for all supporting documents, and digital signatures are allowed for contracts. In addition to digitalising the application process, another functionality that significantly reduces time and mistakes is the automatic filling-in of contracts with information already available in the application (e.g. on the budget, the final co-financing rate, the implementation period, indicators, responsible persons, etc.). This helps to improve the efficiency of contract preparation and signature considerably. 
	<b>Expected benefits</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Digitalisation of the contract-signature phase reduces time and costs related to this step of the selection process</li> <li>✓ Automatic retrieval of information from the application and/or other sources reduces the risk of mistakes and also reduces the time needed to prepare and sign the contracts</li> </ul>
	<b>Possible drawbacks</b> <b>Low likelihood</b> There are no significant drawbacks associated with these practices. The digitalisation and automation of the contracting phase considerably reduces the effort and time needed to carry out this step, both for the authority and the beneficiaries. Nonetheless, if the tools are not user-friendly, or if applicants and staff are unable to use the tools, this could represent an additional burden for both authorities and beneficiaries. Therefore, it is essential to both build an intuitive IT system based on user needs and provide continuous technical guidance and support to users. 
	<b>Transferability</b> <b>Medium-high</b> Any OP can replicate this practice. However, the development of these IT features could be burdensome for authorities that do not already have well developed IT infrastructure and services. In contrast, it could be comparatively easier for those authorities who do already have well developed IT infrastructure and services.

	<b>Practice 2: Training successful applicants on contract management</b>
	<b>Context</b> 'Regional OP for Mazowieckie Voivodeship 2014-2020' (Poland) and 'OP Competitiveness and Cohesion 2014-2020' (Croatia). These two OPs offer a training service to successful applicants on contract management to both avoid possible problems during project implementation and reduce the risks of financial corrections.

<b>Description</b>	<p>In both projects, the guidelines for applicants give detailed explanations of: (i) the application process; (ii) the application package; (iii) the selection criteria; and (iv) the rules for contracting and contract implementation. The CFP documents in the Croatian OP already include the contract template to ensure that applicants are fully familiar with future contractual obligations. Furthermore, upon the signature of 10 or more contracts under the same call, a workshop is organised by the IB for the beneficiaries where the call managers explain in detail the contract-management requirements and the reporting requirements. During this workshop, beneficiaries have the chance to ask specific questions and even exchange experiences from previous grants if applicable.</p>	
<b>Expected benefits</b>	<div data-bbox="229 488 317 575"></div> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Beneficiaries are fully aware of the contractual obligations</li><li>✓ Beneficiaries meet the future project managers with whom they will regularly communicate during the implementation of the contract</li><li>✓ On a case-by-case basis, workshops are recorded and made available to the beneficiaries for future reference (this also ensures that the beneficiaries who were unable to participate in the workshop are able to benefit from additional guidance)</li></ul>	
<b>Possible drawbacks</b>	<div data-bbox="193 689 343 723"><b>Low likelihood</b></div> <p>Additional resources are needed to prepare and implement this training. However the achieved benefits exceed those costs considerably.</p>	
<div data-bbox="236 848 311 945"></div>	<div data-bbox="368 844 531 869"><b>Transferability</b></div> <div data-bbox="368 884 480 913"><b>Very high</b></div> <p>These practices can be easily transferred to other contexts.</p>	

### 3.7.4. Guiding questions to consider when carrying out this step of the selection process

Step	Guiding questions	
 <b>Contract signature</b>	<p>•Does the application package contain all the necessary information for the preparation of the contract?</p>	✓
	<p>•Could supporting documents be retrieved automatically by the MA/IB from the public registries to lessen the burden for the applicants?</p>	✓
	<p>•What specific IT tools can be used to ensure efficiency in the preparation and signature of the contract? Is e-signature available?</p>	✓
	<p>•Are there enough staff available to support the preparation of the contract?</p>	✓
	<p>•Is there enough information provided to the applicants on the procedures and rules of the contract implementation?</p>	✓

## 4. Other cross-cutting lessons

### 4.1. Human resources

Ensuring there are enough skilled workers is one of the most significant factors of success when selecting operations. Therefore, staff levels need to be effectively and efficiently planned and managed throughout the selection process, i.e. from the preparation of the intervention until the contract signature.

Analysis of different practices in the Member States reveals several inspiring solutions, used in both the call-preparation and project-selection phases. A brief overview of these practices is provided below.

#### **Call-preparation phase**

This phase is usually handled by the internal staff of the MA or IB. Regular interinstitutional and inter-sectoral cooperation is one of the most important factors for acquiring the appropriate expertise. Such cooperation can lead to good understanding of: (i) the target groups' actual needs; (ii) the challenges related to the funding opportunities; (iii) the specificities of the sector(s); and (iv) the relevant legal framework. This is a precondition for deciding on effective selection criteria and the clear intervention logic of the call. Furthermore, through inter-sectoral cooperation, many of the cross-cutting principles (e.g. equal opportunities, gender equality, non-discrimination, and sustainable development<sup>2</sup>), can be further clarified and customised to fit the context of the specific call.

When preparing the call, many of the MAs (IBs) are keen to involve highly experienced staff in call management. By doing this, the MAs can ensure that the lessons learnt from the past (in previous calls) are taken into consideration and that all the simplification opportunities in the selection process are seized, without compromising the focus and objective of the call.

A plan to efficiently recruit evaluators should be developed during the call-preparation phase. Advance thought needs to be given to the possibility of contracting experts to serve as evaluators. For example, the MA (or a coordinating body) might opt for a framework contract to ensure the necessary expertise needed to appraise the proposals. The framework contract could ensure the availability of evaluators with different sectoral and technical profiles to cover the topics and sectors of the planned calls. In addition, it has been proven that the possibility of exchanging experienced external and internal evaluators among the different institutions can be very beneficial for the efficiency and effectiveness of the selection process.

#### **Project selection phase**

During the proposal-appraisal phase, it is important to discuss the assessment methodology and agree on a consistent approach among the members of the evaluation committee. Several evaluators should assess the same application to ensure a fair evaluation, and their assessment (e.g. a given score) should be substantiated with comments and justifications.

Furthermore, addressing specific issues during the selection process often requires highly specialised expertise in areas such as law, ownership issues, state aid, and public procurement. It is important to ensure that this expertise is also available in a timely manner to support the evaluation committee.

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<sup>2</sup> As stipulated in Article 9 of the Common Provisions Regulation, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32021R1060>.

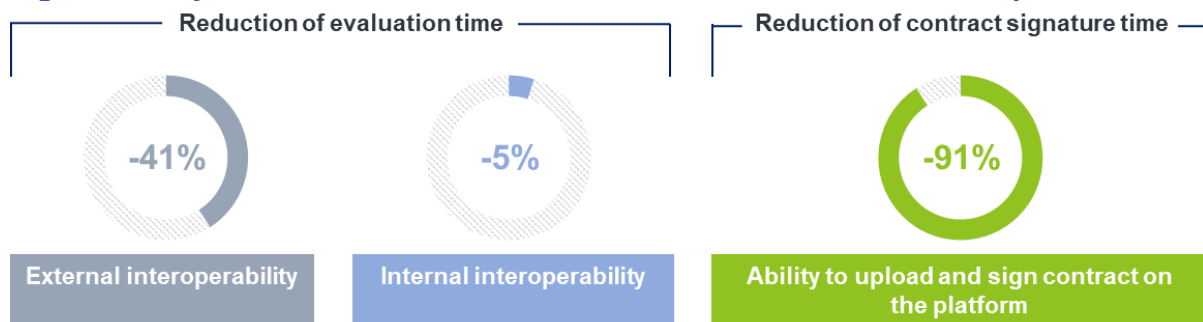
## 4.2. Use of IT tools

IT tools play a central role in making the selection of operations more efficient. To maximise efficiency gains, the entire process should be digitalised and automated, and each step of the selection process should be linked to the next step without ‘breaking’ the information flow throughout the process.

According to the data collected in the study ‘Analysis of selection of operations – Taking stock of practices in the EU Member States’<sup>3</sup>, digitalisation could make it possible to reduce the time spent during the evaluation phase by 46% and reduce the time spent during the contract-signature phase by up to 91%, as these two phases are the most burdensome parts of the selection process.

An important role is played by external interoperability (i.e. by a high degree of interoperability with external databases/registers). For the calls in the study referred to in the previous paragraph, this external interoperability made it possible to reduce the time spent on the appraisal step by 41% compared with the calls that could not benefit from interoperability or that could only benefit to a limited extent from it. This functionality makes it possible to check the data and documents available in other registers/databases quickly and easily. External interoperability also makes it possible to pursue the ‘once-only’ principle for filling in forms, which reduces duplications of effort. It means that the information system might pre-fill the applications using data from external databases/registers and already available elsewhere. This results in savings of time and effort for both the applicants and the authorities.

**Figure 3. IT-system functionalities and their effects on the selection of operations**



As shown in the picture above, the greatest efficiency gain generated by using an IT platform has been found in the contract-preparation and contract-signature phases. Some information systems make it possible to automatically generate contracts and directly sign them on the platform through an e-signature functionality. This is an important simplification as it reduces the time and effort needed to: (i) prepare the contracts; (ii) provide official documents; and (iii) sign the contract.

Another aspect to consider is that the use of IT tools could also: (i) facilitate communication between the authorities and the applicants; (ii) provide a repository of all the communications, information, and documents exchanged between the authorities and the applicants; (iii) increase transparency; and (iv) minimise the possibility of missing information and related mistakes. The use of IT tools also benefits activities other than the selection of the operations, such as implementation, monitoring, and audit checks.

The setting up and development of efficient and effective IT tools requires considerable technical and financial resources. However, the benefits in terms of time and effort saved for the authorities

<sup>3</sup>Towards simplification – Analysis of selection of operations – Taking stock of practices in the EU Member States (ISMERI EUROPA, ECORYS, RAMBOLL).

are significant. Furthermore, as shown in an evaluation of systems for the electronic exchange of information between authorities and beneficiaries (i.e. e-Cohesion systems) in 2014-2020<sup>4</sup>, a well-functioning and user-friendly e-cohesion system encourages participation in calls financed by the ESI Funds. In order to build effective IT tools, it is suggested that MAs and IBs: (i) take inspiration from more advanced systems; (ii) engage in dialogue with the authorities using those advanced systems to understand the challenges which may arise and how these challenges can be overcome; and (iii) regularly update the system on the basis of user needs, in order to increase simplification.

### 4.3. Standardisation

The standardisation of the selection process is of the utmost importance to simplify the process and reduce administrative burden. Standardisation facilitates process automation, which speeds up and eases the entire process of selecting operations.

It is suggested that MAs or IBs use standardised application forms and standardised templates whenever possible (including contracts). This makes it possible to easily compare applications and save time for the contract-drafting phase (as standardisation can lead to automatic contract generation), etc.

Because people with different backgrounds are usually involved in the appraisal step, and considering the need to ensure transparency in the evaluations, authorities should ensure that the evaluation procedure is consistent across projects. Therefore, it is important to train evaluators on the context and methodology to be used for the appraisal, partly by providing clear and detailed guidelines as well as standard evaluation templates.

To effectively support the applicants (see also the following paragraph), it is recommended that MAs or IBs provide a clear 'application package', which includes standardised templates and guidelines on how to fill in the applications. It is of the utmost importance that the application package clearly set out the scope of the project, the budget, the targeted beneficiaries, and the contractual conditions. The application package should also include: (i) a clear description of the methodology used to quantify and assess the criteria; (ii) a set of standardised templates and guidelines; and (iii) detailed user manuals on how to use the IT tools to submit applications.

### 4.4. Communication and support to applicants

Effective communication between authorities and applicants is essential to make the selection process more transparent, reduce the number of complaints, and reach all interested applicants.

This may be done in several ways. The use of social networks to promote a CFP has been gaining in importance in recent years and makes it possible to reach a wider audience.

It is important to maintain an open channel for communication with applicants throughout the selection process, from the submission phase until the signature of contracts. In many cases, opening a dialogue with the applicants during the appraisal of the application might ease the work of the evaluators and reduce the risk of misunderstanding that could lead to complaints and legal appeals. The use of tools such as blogs and chat functions could facilitate exchanges and make it possible to keep records of these exchanges.

Providing individual feedback to applicants that were not selected could increase the perception of transparency of the selection process, and encourage applicants to apply for future funding opportunities – hopefully with even better-quality submissions. The authority could inform the

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<sup>4</sup> Evaluation of e-Cohesion in 2014-2020, In-depth case study: Balcão2020 - Portuguese e-Cohesion system (PPMI, ISMERI, RECHENWERK - 2021)

applicant on the detailed scoring they received by email. For CFPs without too many applications, the authority could even provide personalised feedback and suggestions on how to improve.

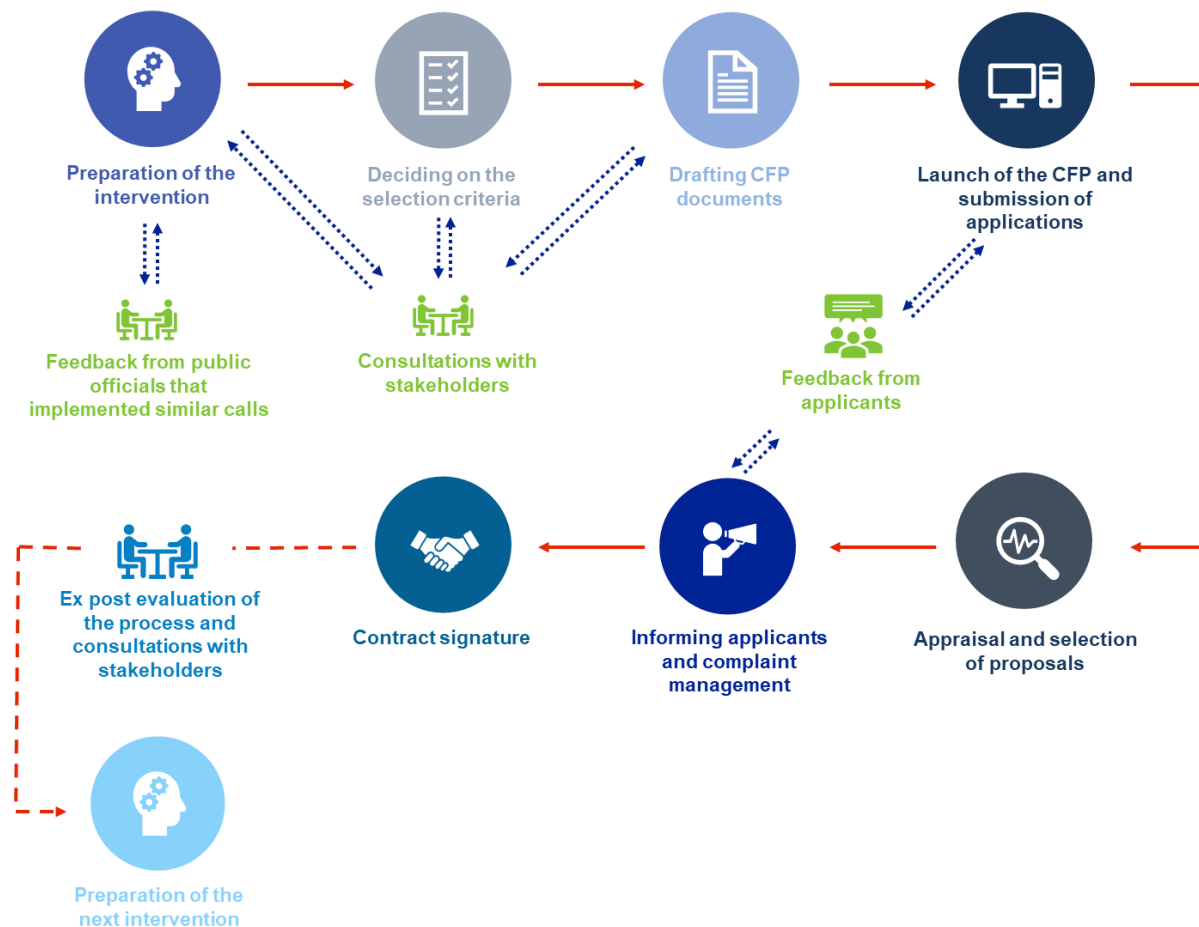
Supporting applicants during the selection process, especially in the submission and contract-signature phases, is particularly relevant. This is because support of this nature can ensure that proposed projects are of higher quality. Such support can also reduce the risk of irregularities during implementation due to misunderstandings over contract obligations.

In addition to the above-mentioned ‘application package’, it is useful to also share examples of good-quality applications in order to guide potential beneficiaries and show them the expected level of project quality.

## 4.5. Feedback loops and lessons learnt

After implementing a CFP, it is good practice to gather feedback and thoroughly reflect on the entire selection process to identify all the challenges, problems, and lessons learnt. This will help to improve the process in future calls. A good practice is to **also involve the beneficiaries** in this process. For example, feedback from beneficiaries and other stakeholders who have participated in the selection process could be collected through a dedicated platform or by other methods of information exchange. In addition to sending their feedback, involved stakeholders could propose solutions to address the main issues encountered during the selection. This could help the authorities to find suitable solutions to recurrent issues and help to improve the selection process.

Figure 4. Feedback loops during the selection process





Feedback should not only be collected at the end of the selection, but throughout the entire process. MAs or IBs are recommended to draw up CFPs based on previous successful interventions as much as possible, partly by taking into consideration the feedback of the public officials who worked on the relevant measures on how to improve the process. This makes it possible to save time when drafting the documents and deciding on the selection criteria. When authorities draw on past experiences, it is important to review the previously launched calls to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the measure's design (its clarity, criteria, focus, and budgeting), partly drawing on the conclusions of policy evaluations. This practice ensures that lessons learnt are taken into account to further improve the selection process, and prevents mistakes from being repeated. At the same time, it should not be forgotten that a new or updated needs assessment is still essential to make sure that a call is still relevant to the context.

If similar interventions have not been financed by the OP, the authority could take inspiration from similar initiatives launched by other OPs (e.g. other regional OPs within the country or OPs from other countries with a similar context or with similar needs). Fostering communication, the exchange of information, and lessons learnt among personnel involved in the design and implementation of similar interventions (within and outside the OP) ensures that the intervention logic is improved. This improvement will be based on the previously launched intervention, and drawing on past experience will prevent mistakes that have previously been identified in other initiatives. This approach helps to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the selection process.

The use of participatory approaches (throughout the entire selection process, but especially in preparing a call, deciding on the selection criteria, and drafting the CFP documents) helps to improve: (i) the intervention logic; (ii) the clarity of the documents themselves; and (iii) the selection criteria. Furthermore, it helps to more accurately target the possible following calls.

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