

HANDBOOK

D 2.3

Handbook for designing seed- funding schemes

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PREMIERE –
PREPARING MULTI-ACTOR PROJECTS
IN A CO-CREATIVE WAY

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ACRONYMS

AKIS	Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System
D	PREMIERE Deliverable
EC	European Commission
EU	European Union
EIP-AGRI	European Innovation Partnership for Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability
HEU	Horizon Europe Research and Innovation Framework Programme
IIA	Interactive Innovation Approach
MA	Multi Actor
MAA	Multi Actor Approach
NCP	National Contact Points
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
R&I	Research and Innovation
SME	Small and medium enterprise
WP	PREMIERE work package

1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This handbook provides practical guidance for policymakers, programme designers, and implementing organisations on how to design and deliver seed-funding schemes that support newcomer participation in Horizon Europe.

Newcomer organisations such as NGOs, small or private advisory bodies, sectoral organisations, and SMEs often face structural barriers to participation in EU research and innovation programmes. These include limited financial resources, lack of experience in proposal development, and restricted access to established networks and consortia. Seed-funding schemes aim to address these challenges by providing targeted, early-stage support and guidance for partner search, consortium building, and proposal preparation.

The guidance presented in this handbook is based on the implementation and assessment of the PREMIERE Seed-Funding Initiative. It draws on practical experience as well as feedback collected from beneficiaries through questionnaires, interviews, and interactive support activities.

The findings demonstrate that seed-funding schemes are most effective when designed as integrated support mechanisms. Financial contributions alone are not sufficient. They should be combined with mentoring, guidance, and networking opportunities. In particular, the facilitation of access to consortia and supporting participation in brokerage and matchmaking activities are critical success factors.

In addition, the effectiveness of such schemes depends on simple and accessible administrative procedures, flexible funding conditions, and timely implementation aligned with Horizon Europe Calls. Differentiated support may also be needed for organisations aiming to take on coordination roles, given the higher resource demands involved. Overall, seed-funding schemes can significantly lower entry barriers and enable a more diverse range of actors to participate in Horizon Europe (HEU). By strengthening the capacity of newcomers to engage in proposal development and consortium activities, these schemes contribute to more inclusive, practice-oriented, and impactful research and innovation collaborations.

2 INTRODUCTION

This handbook is intended for policymakers, programme designers, and organisations implementing support schemes who aim to strengthen participation in Horizon Europe or similar international Calls applying participatory transdisciplinary concepts such as the Multi-Actor Approach (MAA). It provides practical guidance on designing and implementing seed-funding schemes that support organisations in engaging in proposal development and inter- and transdisciplinary consortia.

The focus is on ‘newcomer’ organisations such as sectoral organisations, NGOs, advisory bodies, small enterprises, consumer groups and other practice-oriented actors, which often face barriers to entering Horizon Europe research and innovation projects. These barriers include limited experience with proposal development, restricted access to proposal networks, and insufficient resources for early-stage engagement.

The guidance presented in this handbook is based on the PREMIERE Seed-Funding initiative, which piloted a support scheme providing small grants for consortium building and proposal preparation when the Horizon Cluster 6 Work Programme 2025 and the Soil Mission 2025 was open for applications. The recommendations build on practical implementation experience and insights gathered through monitoring activities, including interviews, questionnaires, and group sessions with beneficiaries. This PREMIERE task (T2.3) is part of the policy-oriented work package WP2 ‘Governance’.

This handbook is designed as a concise, practice-oriented resource. It focuses on key design and implementation considerations, while more detailed descriptions of the Call implementation and beneficiary feedback are provided in the accompanying report (Parts 2 and 3).

3 KEY FACTS

Type: Practical handbook / guidance document

Prepared for: European Commission

Prepared by: PREMIERE - preparing multi-actor projects in a co-creative way

Publication context: Horizon Europe project Deliverable report

Scope: Design and implementation of seed-funding schemes supporting newcomer participation in HEU proposals, particularly those applying the mandatory Multi-Actor Approach (MAA).

The handbook is designed for a diverse group of interested stakeholders in charge for the enabling environment of newcomer applicants from practice aiming to strengthen the participation in collaborative research and/or innovation projects.

Primary users include:

- Policy makers and programme designers, who may use the handbook to explore different approaches to establishing seed-funding schemes.
- Public authorities and research support organisations, seeking practical guidance on structuring funding instruments, organising calls, and providing complementary support for proposal preparation.

Secondary users include:

- Network organisations and intermediaries (incl. National Contact Points, NCPs), facilitating connections between potential partners and supporting multi-actor collaboration.
- Public and private consultancy and advisory organisations, supporting applicants or managing Innovation Support Services (ISS).
- Umbrella organisations and associations, representing stakeholder groups interested in improving access to Horizon Europe programmes.

4 PURPOSE AND SCOPE

This handbook offers recommendations and guidance for decision- and policymakers, programme designers, and funding providing organisations on the development of seed-funding schemes. The aim is to lower the entry barriers for the newcomers, increase the quality of the proposals and improve the outcomes by reaching a higher number of successful Horizon Europe applicants.

It focuses specifically on funding mechanisms that enable participation for non-coordinating partners in proposal preparation and consortium building such as partner search and collaboration development rather than on funding for project implementation.

The handbook links key barriers and challenges faced by newcomers with practical, tested solutions providing guidelines on designing schemes that balance user needs with implementation realities, including potential risks and constraints.

5 POLICY AND PRACTICAL CONTEXT

Supporting a diverse range of actors is a central objective of EU-funded Research and Innovation (R&I). The MAA was first introduced in 2014 to operationalise the ‘Interactive Innovation Approach’ (IIA) within the Horizon 2020 R&I Framework Programme. Since then, its integration has grown significantly. Beyond Cluster 6, the MAA now serves as an eligibility condition for selected topics under the Soil Mission, the Circular Bio-based Europe Joint Undertaking, and the PRIMA-Mediterranean framework.

The MAA is deeply embedded in the policy frameworks of the European Innovation Partnership (EIP-AGRI) and Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems (AKIS). Seed-funding initiatives act as a catalyst to help Member States and organisations meet the governance goals of:

- **The European Green Deal** and the **Farm to Fork Strategy**.
- **The CAP cross-cutting objective** of modernising the sector by fostering knowledge sharing and digitalisation.
- **The Biodiversity Strategy** by ensuring that local practitioners are involved in the co-design of environmental solutions.

Despite the clear policy mandate for applicant diversity, **‘harder to reach’ actors** face barriers that prevent them from joining international consortia. Smaller organisations often lack the dedicated budget to justify the high costs and risks associated with the preparatory phase of a proposal writing.

Seed-funding has emerged as a practical instrument to address these challenges

- by providing small grants for consortium building and proposal preparation.
- by funding activities like partner searches, travel to brokerage events, and concept development.

Seed-funding reduces entry barriers and the financial risk of failure for first-time participants. Beyond the immediate proposal, these schemes enable diverse stakeholders to gain the knowledge, skills and confidence needed for participation and long-term engagement in the European research ecosystem.

In summary, the policy context for seed-funding is rooted in the transition from symbolic inclusion to meaningful co-creation from practice actors, in particular from small and newcomer organisations and often also from countries underrepresented in EU-funded R&I projects. As the MAA becomes the standard for Cluster 6, Soil Missions and other Call Topics, seed-funding serves as a critical bridge between policy ambitions and the practical involvement of practitioners on the ground.

6 FROM EVIDENCE TO POLICY DESIGN: DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE SEED-FUNDING SCHEMES FOR HEU MULTI-ACTOR NEWCOMERS

Research and practical experience show that newcomers in HEU R&I often lack the knowledge, resources, networks and experience required to engage in proposal development processes.¹ Preparing a Horizon Europe proposal requires time, coordination with partners and familiarity with complex procedures². For many organisations, especially smaller ones, the costs and risks associated with these activities can be difficult to handle without dedicated support. Seed-funding schemes are practical instrument to address these challenges, which have been offered for other support schemes for a long time. By providing small grants for consortium building and proposal preparation, seed-funding initiatives can help organisations invest the time and resources necessary to engage in HEU applications. When combined with networking opportunities, mentoring and guidance, such schemes can significantly improve the chances of newcomers participating in international project consortia. For the development of this handbook, a multi-stage process took place to identify barriers and explore evidence-based solutions.

¹ Task 2.3. report, 3.3 Insights from Beneficiary Feedback on Seed-Funding Support Model (<https://zenodo.org/uploads/19355039>)

² The PREMIERE Pathway Cartoons present this process in short stories highlighting the complexities of multi-actor proposal preparation. <https://premiere-multiactor.eu/academy/cartoons/>

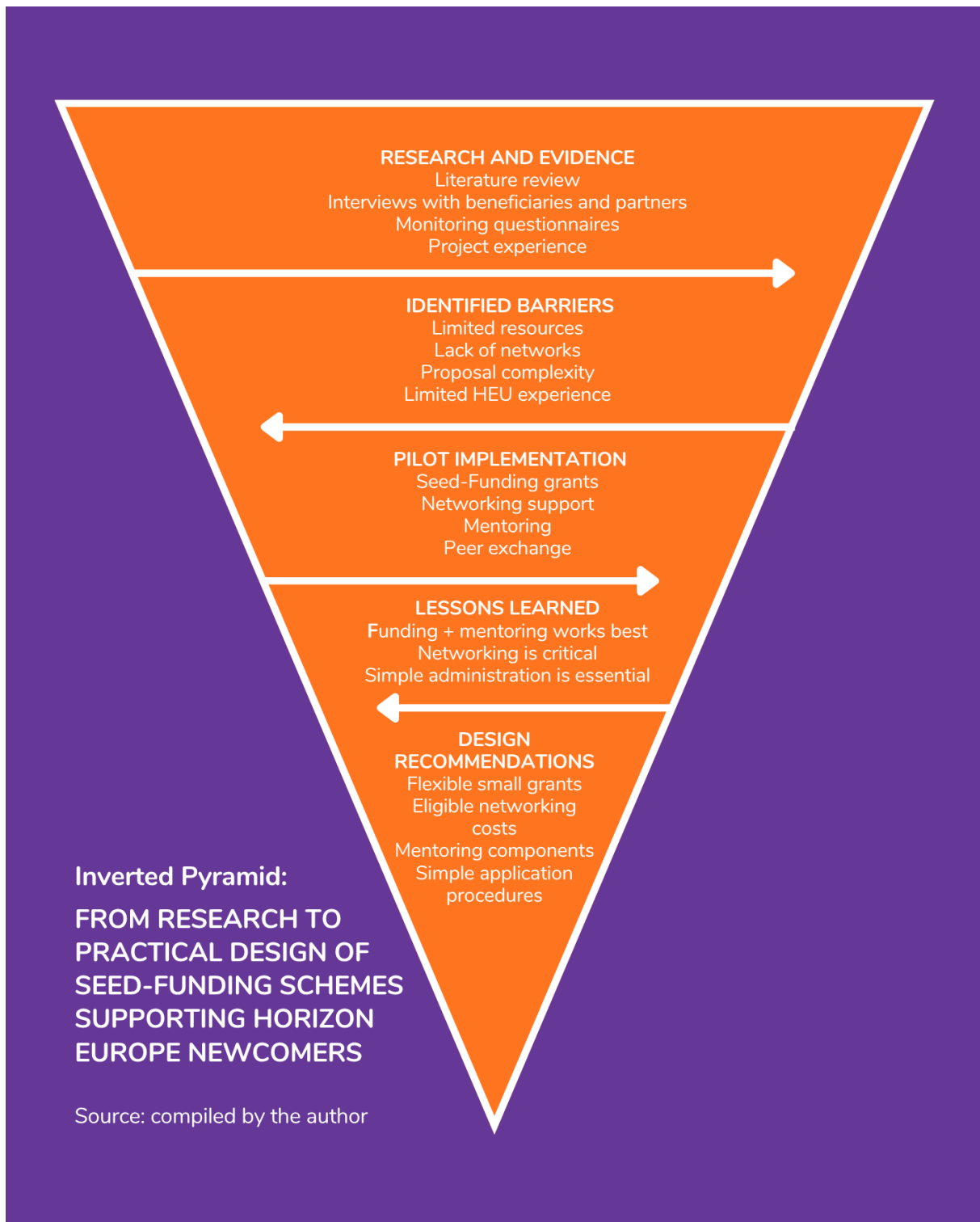


Figure 1. From research to practical design of seed-funding schemes supporting HEU newcomers

7 KEY DESIGN PRINCIPLES FOR SEED-FUNDING SCHEMES

Based on the experience of the PREMIERE Seed-Funding Initiative and the evidence presented in the accompanying report, the following principles are suggested for the design of new or additional seed-funding schemes aimed at supporting newcomer participation in HEU project proposals.³

Principle 1: Target genuine newcomers.

Schemes need to prioritise organisations with relevant expertise such as practical, sector-specific, or user-oriented knowledge related to the HEU Call Topics. To avoid the funding of experts, it will help to focus on those with limited or no previous participation in Horizon 2020 or HEU projects.

Principle 2: Keep the funding accessible and proportionate.

Seed-funding grants can be small but sufficient to support early-stage proposal preparation activities such as partner search, networking and coordination meetings undertaken by team members of the small and less-experienced grass-root organisations.

Principle 3: Allow flexible use of funds.

Eligible costs should include work time for personnel, travel, networking activities and participation in brokerage events that facilitate consortium building.

Principle 4: Combine financial support with guidance.

Financial support alone is insufficient to increase the number of newcomer applicants. Complementary activities such as mentoring, access to basic and insider information events, training workshops and peer exchange can significantly increase the effectiveness of the scheme.

Principle 5: Align the timing with the publication of the Calls.

Seed-funding schemes should be launched early enough to allow beneficiaries sufficient time to identify partners and prepare proposals before groups have formed already and submission deadlines come closer. This, in turn, requires forward planning and close coordination between the organisations

³ Task 2.3. report, ch. 1.2. Analysis of Seed-Funding models
(<https://zenodo.org/uploads/19355039>)

implementing the seed-funding support scheme and the schedule of the European Commission. It is crucial to ensure relevant information is shared at least 6 or 9 months before the submission deadline. Without such anticipation, the time available may already be too limited for the partner search, meaningful consortium building and proposal preparation.

Principle 6: Keep administrative procedures simple.

Application, evaluation and reporting procedures should remain proportionate to the small size of the grant. Otherwise, small organisations and newcomers are discouraged and stay away from the support scheme.

Principle 7: Ensure transparent and credible selection.

Clear evaluation criteria and independent assessment processes increase trust in the scheme. Clear guidelines of the European Commission and its services could help Member States or private organisations to design and implementation such seed-funding programmes. Moreover, such guidance could contribute to transparency, consistency, and credibility across national schemes.

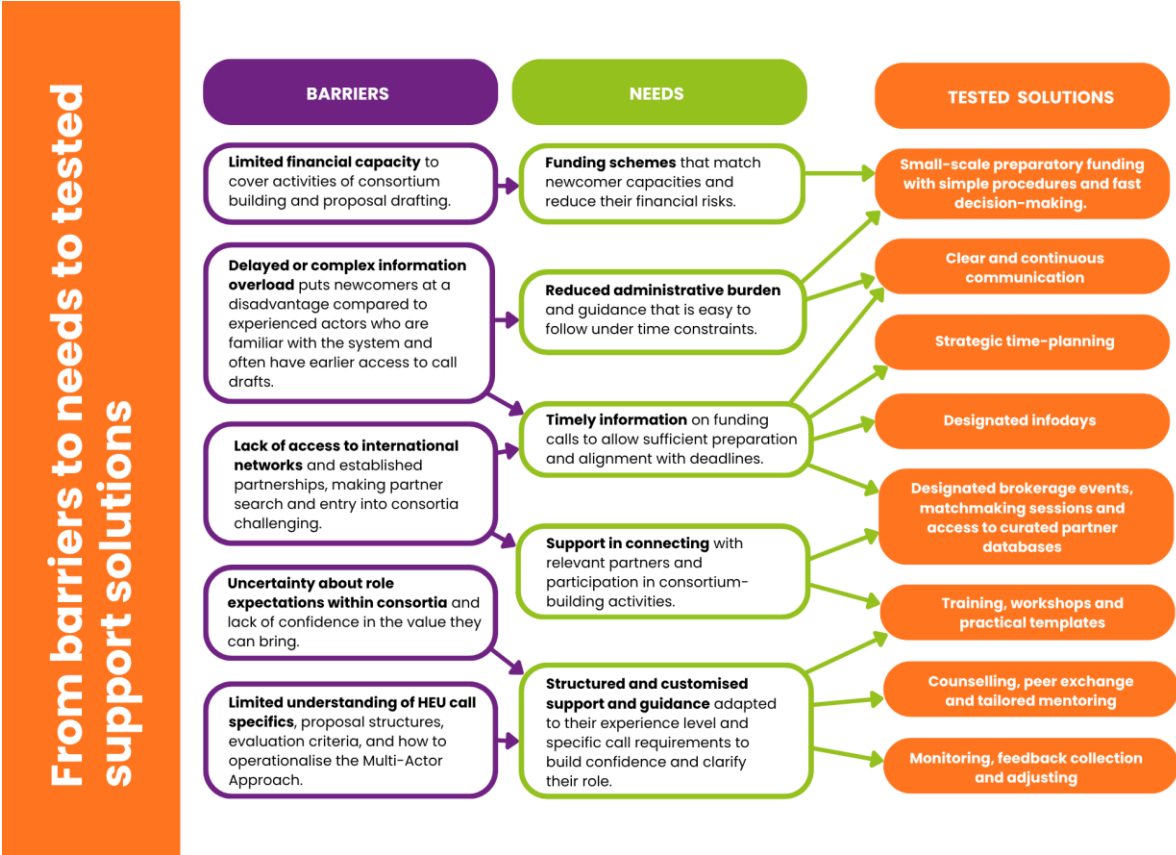


Figure 2: From barriers to needs to tested support solutions

8 STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE FOR DESIGNING A SEED-FUNDING SCHEME FOR IMPLEMENTERS

The following section provides a practical overview of how public or private organisations can step-by-step design and implement a seed-funding scheme to support newcomer participation in HEU project proposals.

Step 1 – Define the objective and target group

Clearly define the purpose of the scheme and the type of organisations it aims to support.

This step is critical to ensure focus and coherence throughout the design process. Seed-funding programmes typically aim to support organisations with relevant R&I expertise but limited experience in Horizon Europe, particularly those that could strengthen multi-actor consortia.

Examples:

- Support for first-time applicants to join HEU consortia
- Strengthen the participation of practice-oriented actors (e.g. NGOs, advisory services, local authorities)
- Increase national/regional success rates in specific thematic R&I areas

Step 2 – Define the scope and eligible activities

Determine and clearly define what types of activities the funding will cover, and which type of costs are eligible; ensure alignment with the overall objective of the funding scheme.

Seed-funding eligible activities should focus on early-stage proposal development and consortium building. Useful eligible activities include partner search efforts such as networking and the participation in brokerage events, as well as proposal development activities and coordination meetings.

Examples of eligible activities⁴:

- Partner search and matchmaking
- Participation in brokerage events and networking meetings
- Reimbursement of travel costs for the participation in events/meetings
- Proposal writing and coordination tasks

⁴ Task 2.3. report, ch. 3.2. Result of the Final Questionnaire on Activities (<https://zenodo.org/uploads/19355039>)

- Internal capacity building related to proposal preparation

Alternative options:

- Narrow scope by e.g. excluding costs for travel and brokerage events
- Broader scope by e.g. including coaching or expert support services

Step 3 – Define the funding model

Set the funding amount and the payment conditions.

Seed-funding schemes usually provide relatively small grants designed to cover early-stage proposal preparation costs. However, the funding model should balance simplicity for applicants with accountability for funders. For example, payments may be made in instalments and linked to clear milestones or evidence of progress such as participation in consortium-building activities or submission of draft proposal contributions or reimbursement of expenses based on expense documents.

Key considerations:

- Appropriate grant size for preparatory activities could stay between 1,500 to 10,000 Euros ⁵(e.g. lump sum vs. budget-based)
- Number of beneficiaries supported
- Administrative effort required for both applicants and implementers

Risk reduction approaches:

- Payments in instalments linked to defined milestones
- Partial pre-financing combined with final payment upon fulfilment of all grant conditions
- Use of simplified cost approaches (e.g. lump sums)

Examples:

- 25% pre-financing plus 75% after submission of an interim report
- Fixed lump sum per beneficiary (e.g. for travel plus time investment)
- Milestone-based payments (e.g. participation in brokerage event, draft submission)

⁵ Task 2.3. report, ch. 3.2. Result of the Final Questionnaire on Budget (<https://zenodo.org/uploads/19355039>)

Step 4 – Plan and launch the call

Careful planning to ensure an excellent timing, structure, and dissemination of the call for seed-funding applicants to maximise relevance and uptake.

The call should be aligned with the European Commission’s timelines to ensure beneficiaries can effectively engage in ongoing or upcoming HEU Calls Topics. The use of digital tools, when possible, is encouraged as it can significantly reduce administrative burden, shorten processing times, and enable faster communication with applicants. Given that newcomers often operate under time pressure and may be overwhelmed by complex procedures, simplified digital systems can improve accessibility and participation. Support for technical issues related to submitting applications to the seed funding scheme should be provided. In some cases (e.g. LEADER funding in Estonia), fully digital workflows allow beneficiaries to start activities immediately after approval, without additional contractual steps.

Key elements:

- Timing aligned with relevant Horizon Europe Calls published
- Clear and concise application process for the seed-funding
- Targeted dissemination strategy of the call for applicants

Examples:

- Launching the seed-funding call shortly before major brokerage events
- Dissemination via NCPs, professional networks, knowledge hubs, and umbrella organisations
- Use of webinars or info sessions to explain the seed-funding opportunity

Step 5 – Establish the selection and evaluation process

Define the application procedure, evaluation criteria and assessment process.

The evaluation framework should be designed to assess both the strategic value of the applicant for a HEU consortium, and on the realisation of the proposed preparatory activities. The recruitment of external experts for the evaluation of entries can be difficult. Compensation payments for this work need to be included in the implementation budget of the seed funding scheme.

Key criteria:

- Relevance of expertise to HEU programmes and particular Call Topics
- Estimation of expected success in joining a proposal consortium
- Potential contribution to a proposal writing consortium
- Feasibility of proposed activities (time, resources, skills etc.)

Alternative approaches:

- External evaluators vs. internal selection committees
- Ongoing assessment vs. omnibus assessment vs. non-recurrent assessment

Step 6 – Provide support and monitor implementation

Beyond financial support, implement complementary activities such as mentoring, networking sessions and monitoring activities.

These activities help beneficiaries navigate the proposal development process and keep them on track with their activities while at the same time get feedback for the scheme.

During the monitoring process, it is possible to request content and financial reports, but this creates an additional administrative burden for both the beneficiary and the implementer. This can be a barrier for the applicant and cause costs for the implementer. For that reason, it is good to keep the monitoring activities lean and fit for purpose with grant size.

Examples of support activities:

- Customer service (e-mail/phone/chat robot)
- Mentoring or coaching sessions
- Peer exchange meetings
- Proposal development workshops

Monitoring approaches:

- Short progress updates
- Milestone tracking
- Feedback collection from beneficiaries

Designing a Seed-Funding Scheme

For who? For what? How much? How to? What else?

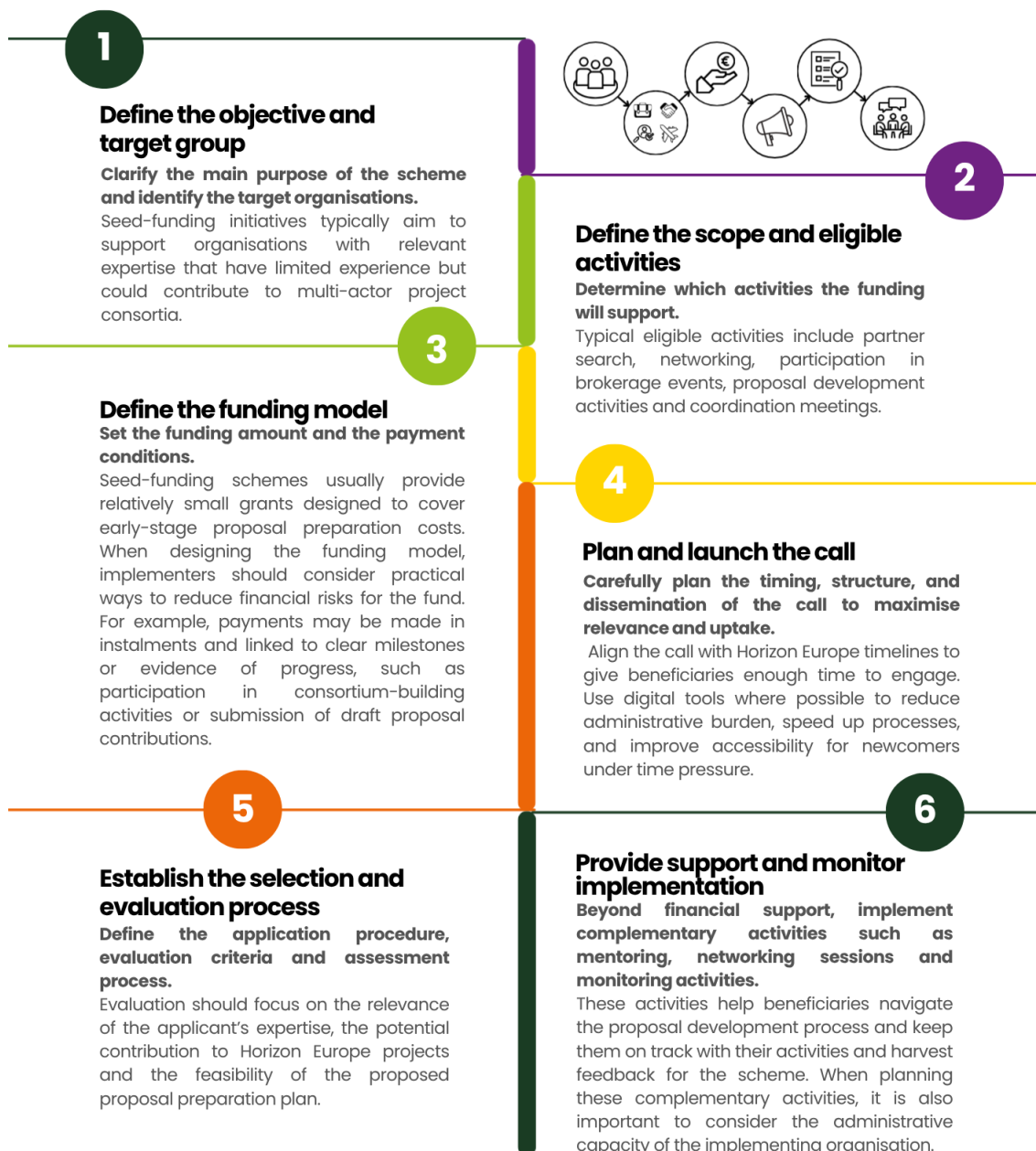


Figure 3: Step 1-6 of the design for a seed-funding scheme

9 COMMON RISKS

The PREMIERE test phase of the seed funding revealed several challenges that should be considered when designing similar support schemes.⁶

Lesson learned 1: Launch the call in time.

If the scheme is launched too close to HEU deadlines, beneficiaries may not have enough time to identify partners and contribute to the proposal. This might affect the overall success of the seed-funding scheme. A rushed preparation typically leads to lower-quality proposals and reduced participation outcomes. The alignment of schedules would require close cooperation with the European Commission and the NCP networks to obtain information about the exact opening of the HEU Calls and the timing of the official brokerage events at the earliest possible opportunity.

Lesson learned 2: Reduce administrative procedures.

Complicated application forms, difficult application submission systems or reporting requirements can discourage smaller organisations from applying.

Lesson learned 3: Limit the support only to proposal writing.

Consortium building and networking are equally important and should be supported through eligible activities. Seed funding beyond the proposal development schedule might be less effective.

Lesson learned 4: Link seed-funding with additional support.

Without guidance, mentoring or networking opportunities, newcomers may struggle to effectively use the seed-funding.

Lesson learned 5: Prepare a dissemination plan for the seed-funding call.

Relying only on websites or email announcements may not reach the intended target groups. Personal networks and targeted outreach are often more effective. Cooperation with NCPs and advisory networks, or social media communication support the spread of the seed-funding information.

⁶ Task 2.3. report, ch. 3.3. Insights from Beneficiary Interviews, Overall Assessment of the Seed-Funding Model (<https://zenodo.org/uploads/19355039>)

Lesson learned 6: Ensure clarity in eligibility criteria.

Unclear rules about who can apply, what activities are supported and what costs are eligible may create confusion among applicants, increase administrative burden for the implementor, and reduce the quality of applications. Similarly, unclear communication and overly complex application forms or proposal submission systems can discourage applicants and further negatively affect application quality.

Lesson learned 7: Plan sufficient time for the administrative workload and budget for the implementation of the seed-funding scheme.

Even small schemes require careful planning of evaluation, contracting, and monitoring processes. Administrative workload should be considered for both applicants and implementers. A well-designed scheme, supported by appropriate IT solutions providing technical help, can significantly reduce the time required for administrative procedures as well as the overall mental load associated with applying to and managing the scheme.

Seed-Funding Scheme Design CHECKLIST

Strategic Design	Scope and Activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> The funding amount is appropriate to cover proposal preparation needs.<input type="checkbox"/> Payment conditions are simple and transparent.<input type="checkbox"/> Risk mitigation measures are in place (e.g. instalments, milestones).<input type="checkbox"/> The administrative burden is minimised.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> The call is aligned with Horizon Europe timelines.<input type="checkbox"/> The application process is simple and fast.<input type="checkbox"/> A targeted dissemination strategy has been prepared.
Funding Model	Call Planning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> The funding amount is appropriate to cover proposal preparation needs.<input type="checkbox"/> Payment conditions are simple and transparent.<input type="checkbox"/> Risk mitigation measures are in place (e.g. instalments, milestones).<input type="checkbox"/> The administrative burden is minimised.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> The call is aligned with Horizon Europe timelines.<input type="checkbox"/> The application process is simple and fast.<input type="checkbox"/> A targeted dissemination strategy has been prepared.
Selection Process	Support and Monitoring
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Evaluation criteria is clear, relevant and easily accessible to applicants.<input type="checkbox"/> The selection process is transparent and proportionate to the call.<input type="checkbox"/> Evaluators are familiar with Horizon Europe and MAA.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Complementary support measures are included.<input type="checkbox"/> Monitoring activities and usage of beneficiary feedback have been planned.<input type="checkbox"/> The costs and personnel requirements related to support and monitoring activities are covered.

Figure 4: Seed-funding scheme design checklist

10 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Seed-funding schemes can play a critical role in enabling newcomer organisations to participate effectively in HEU project application processes. When designed and implemented well, these schemes help organisations to:

- overcome barriers related to limited financial capacity, time, and experience in proposal preparation.
- engage in consortium building and establish meaningful partnerships.
- submit higher-quality proposals, increasing the likelihood of successful participation in Horizon Europe.

To achieve these results, certain conditions should be met:

- **Accessible and proportionate funding:** Grants should be small but sufficient to cover early-stage proposal development and networking activities.
- **Complementary support:** Financial support should be combined with mentoring, guidance, and peer exchange.
- **Flexible and responsive design:** Eligibility, activities, and procedures should accommodate diverse needs, sectors, and regions.
- **Simple administration:** Application, evaluation, and reporting processes must be user-friendly and not overly burdensome.
- **Early timing:** Calls should be launched early enough to allow beneficiaries sufficient time for partner search and proposal development.

The experience of the PREMIERE seed-funding initiative shows that when these conditions are met, seed-funding schemes can significantly enhance newcomer engagement and contribute to more diverse and effective European research and innovation consortia. Their involvement will contribute to the adoption of the needs-based project results among the users and can contribute to greater stakeholder engagement. The accompanying report provides further evidence and detailed analysis to support these recommendations.

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