***Guidelines for the evaluation and selection procedure of project proposals for the Ministry of Regional Affairs and Agriculture***

## OBJECTIVE

This document establishes guidelines for evaluating and selecting project proposals commissioned by the Ministry of Regional Affairs and Agriculture.

## DESCRIPTION OF THE ACTIVITIES

## 1. GENERAL TERMS

1.1. Project proposals shall be submitted electronically through the Estonian Research Information System (from now on referred to as ETIS) within the deadline specified in the call for proposals. Estonian Research Council (from now on referred to as ETAG) will process proposals.

1.2. Before evaluating a project proposal, ETAG checks the eligibility of both the project team (from now on referred to as the applicant) and the project proposal against the conditions set out in the Terms of Reference (from now on referred to as TOR).

1.3 If there are any inaccuracies in the project proposal (failure to submit mandatory supporting documents, failure to specify other technical aspects), ETAG will immediately inform the applicant, allowing up to 5 working days for the deficiencies to be corrected. If the deficiencies are not corrected within this time limit, ETAG reserves the right to terminate the examination of the project proposal and to declare the project proposal non-compliant. Compliant project proposals from applicants found to be compliant will be referred to ETAG for evaluation.

1.4 In the case of a non-conformity of an applicant and/or a project proposal, ETAG will not proceed with the substantive evaluation of the project proposal.

1.5. Based on the evaluation results, a decision will be made to accept a project proposal.

## 2. EVALUATION

2.1. A panel of experts, including independent experts, will evaluate project proposals.

2.2 ETAG will ensure the technical servicing of the evaluation panel and the independent experts, i.e. preparing the necessary materials for the evaluation, concluding contracts and confidentiality declarations with the members of the evaluation panel and the experts, convening and recording the meetings.

2.3. The documentation generated and received in the evaluation framework shall be kept at ETAG per the rules of procedure established by ETAG.

2.4 Only eligible project proposals will be admitted to the evaluation.

2.5 The working format of the evaluation committee is a meeting.

2.6. The evaluation committee will include experts, representative(s) of the Ministry of Regional Affairs and Agriculture and a representative of ETAG.

2.7. A chairperson will be appointed to chair the evaluation panel meetings. In the absence of the chairperson of the evaluation panel, the meeting will be chaired by a nominated alternate.

2.8. The quorum of the evaluation committee will be constituted if at least 60 % of the members attend the meeting. Decisions (including the final scores for the sub-criteria of the project proposals) shall be taken by consensus, if possible, but if this is not possible, by a simple majority vote. In the event of a tie, the tie will be resolved by drawing lots.

2.9. Evaluation committee meetings will occur physically or via video. The submission of a written opinion or any other written procedure may not replace attendance at a meeting.

2.10. The ETAG staff member(s) shall attend the evaluation panel meeting to provide information and explanations and as a minute-taker. The representative(s) of ETAG shall not have the right to vote in the evaluation committee.

2.11. ETAG will select independent experts to review the project proposal. The independent expert must be a recognised expert in their field from Estonia or another country. The independent experts shall complete a review form in ETIS for each project proposal they review. Experts sign a declaration of independence and confidentiality to avoid conflict of interest and confirm confidentiality.

2.12. All members of the evaluation panel will read all project proposals.

2.13. The head of the evaluation panel will appoint a rapporteur for each proposal, who will be responsible for summarising the experts' reviews for the evaluation panel. The final assessment in ETIS is formalised and approved by the ETAG representative participating in the evaluation panel.

2.14. Project proposals will be assessed against five criteria:

● The methodology, scientific quality and justification of the proposed project.

The scientific merit and justification of the project,

● The scientific quality of the previous research, the previous research track record of the project team leaders and principal investigators

● Capacity of the project team to carry out the project

● Justification and feasibility of the budget and timetable

● Risk mitigation plan.

2.15 Experts are required to submit their reviews in ETIS as agreed between the ETAG representative and the expert. Scores must be given to the nearest 1 point for each criterion. Justification must be provided for the assessments.

2.16. After hearing the rapporteur's overall evaluation and the individual evaluations of the other panel members, the evaluation panel will decide at its meeting on the scores for the criteria of the study proposal. The criterion score is not an arithmetic average of the scores given by the panel members but a consensus decision of the panel members. Without consensus, a simple majority will make decisions, and a tiebreaker will be drawn if there is a tie.

2.17. The evaluation committee, after hearing the rapporteur, discussing, scoring and evaluating, makes the following proposals to the ETAG:

1) not to fund project proposals that do not exceed the threshold,

2) to fund the project proposal with the highest overall score,

3) impose additional conditions for funding.

2.18 The ETAG will take meeting minutes, which will be signed by the head of the evaluation committee and the rapporteur.

## 3. DECISION ON FUNDING

3.1. The ETAG will calculate the overall score based on the weightings of the criteria in Annex 1.

3.2. The threshold for the aggregate score of an application is 3.5 points.

3.3. A final ranking of the project proposals exceeding the threshold will be established based on the rankings calculated from the composite score.

In the case of equal aggregate scores, the study proposal with the higher score on the first criterion will be funded.

3.5. In the case of equal scores on the first criterion, the proposal with the highest score on the third criterion will be the winner.

3.6. If the third criterion is also equal for both proposals, the winner will be drawn by lot.

## 4. RIGHTS AND OBLIGATIONS OF THE PANEL MEMBERS

4.1 Responsibilities:

● The evaluation panel members must sign a declaration of independence and confidentiality to avoid any conflict of interest and to confirm confidentiality.

The members of the evaluation panel involved in the evaluation must read all study proposals.

● Panel members must inform ETAG as soon as possible after receipt of the study proposals of any circumstances (e.g. conflict of interest) that prevent an independent assessment.

4.2 Rights:

● Panel members can receive remuneration for evaluating study proposals if this is not part of their core work.

● Panel members can ask ETAG for additional information on the study proposals submitted, if necessary.

## 5. DESCRIPTION OF THE EVALUATION CRITERION

5.1. The project proposal will be assessed against the evaluation criteria set out in Annex 1. The weightings of the criteria for evaluating project proposals are based on the table in Annex 1.

5.2. The project proposal will be rated on a scale of 1 (unsatisfactory) to 5 (excellent) for each selection criterion. Within the criteria, scores may be awarded in 1-point increments. The numerical scale scores are as follows:

1) "unsatisfactory" (1).

2) 'satisfactory' (2)

3) 'good' (3)

4) 'very good' (4)

5) "excellent" (5)

5.3. Justification must be given for the ratings.

Annex 1

**Evaluation criteria:**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Criteria** | **Proportion** |
| The methodology, scientific quality and justification of the proposed project | 40% |
| The scientific quality of the prior research, the previous research track record of the project team leaders and principal investigators | 15% |
| Capacity of the project team to carry out the project | 20% |
| Justification and feasibility of the budget and timetable | 15% |
| Risk mitigation plan | 10% |

## Descriptions of ratings

## Evaluation criteria

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **1. Methodology, scientific quality and justification of the proposed project**  **Proportion 40%** | |
| „5“ | The methodology is innovative and modern and is the best way to address the research and development objectives set out in the TOR. The proposed solutions are outstanding, clear, relevant and justified. The methods used to arrive at the solution are warranted, logical, and creative, and they bring added value that the client did not ask for in the TOR. |
| „3“ | The methodology is appropriate to the research and development tasks set out in the TOR. The proposed solutions are relatively reasonable, relevant and justified. The methodological choices are appropriate and justified but not very creative or add value. |
| „1“ | The proposed methodology for the research and development tasks is either very scarce, making it impossible to assess its relevance or inappropriate. It is questionable if the proposed solution can carry out the R&D task. |
| **2. Scientific level of previous research, results of prior research of the team leaders and principal investigators.**  **Proportion 15%** | |
| „5“ | Applicants must include one or more individuals with a research record of international excellence in the fields related to the research. Articles published in highly peer-reviewed journals, with abstracts in the most relevant databases in their field of research. Internationally renowned publishers have published monographs. Applicants include researchers with a track record of repeated collaborations. One or more applicants have a track record of excellence in leading/managing projects, research grants or international funding applications. |
| „3“ | Applicants must include one or more individuals with an internationally visible research record in the areas of research. Articles or monographs published in peer-reviewed journals or by a recognised publisher in the field of research. Applicants include researchers who have not previously collaborated but whose application suggests that they have the potential to do so. Applicants have had previous projects, research grants or international funding. Have some experience in project or research grant management/administration. |
| „1“ | Applicants have a limited body of research in the areas of the study, published in local journals or by local publishers, and are not searchable in databases. The consortium partners have not previously collaborated. The capacity of the partners to collaborate has not been demonstrated. The consortium partners have no previous projects or research grants. |
| **3. Capacity of the project team to carry out the project,**  **Proportion 20%** | |
| „5“ | The project team has all the minimum competencies specified in the TOR and relevant additional competencies. |
| „3“ | The project team has all the minimum competencies as specified in the TOR. |
| „1“ | The competencies in the TOR are not fully met, so there can be no assurance that the work will be of high quality. |
| **4. Justification and feasibility of the budget and timetable.**  **Proportion 15%** | |
| „5“ | The budget and timetable of the project are excellently formulated, realistic, flawlessly optimised and cost-effective, and the activities and timetable are very well able to achieve the objectives set out in the TOR. |
| „3“ | The project budget and timetable are clear and realistic, the budget is optimal, and the activities and timetable are well designed to achieve the objectives set out in the TOR. |
| „1“ | The project budget and timetable are poorly thought out and unrealistic, the budget is unbalanced, and the activities and timetable are unlikely to achieve the objectives set out in the TOR. |
| **5. Risk mitigation plan.**  **Proportion 10%** | |
| „5“ | Risks are mapped and adequately assessed, and a realistic mitigation plan is presented. |
| „3“ | Significant risks are described, and solutions are proposed to mitigate them. |
| „1“ | There is no realistic plan to mitigate the risks. |