

NGI SARGASSO GENERAL OPEN CALL. 3rd CUT-OFF DATE

Guidelines for Applicants

OPENING: 15 of March 2024

CLOSING: 15 of May 2024 at 17:00 Brussels time / 10:00AM CST

Project Website <https://ngisargasso.eu>

Open Call platform: cascadefunding.sploro.eu/application/new?program=ngi-sargasso-open-call-3

All the Open Call documents and templates available for download at [link](#)



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Introduction

The purpose of this document “*Guidelines for Applicants*” is to provide clear and concise instructions to applicants submitting proposals for the **third open call of the NGI Sargasso project**. The document contains information that is specific to this deadline, including eligibility criteria, evaluation procedures, and submission requirements, which have been carefully curated to ensure clarity and accuracy. **It is important to note that the information presented in this document may not apply to subsequent calls launched by the NGI Sargasso project.** Therefore, it is essential that all applicants thoroughly read and comprehend this document to ensure that their proposals meet the specific requirements outlined for the third cut-off date.

The Guidelines for Applicants document aims to assist potential applicants. It is provided for information purposes only and is not intended to replace **consultation of the Sub-Grantee Agreement template (Annex 4)**, where it is defined the framework of rights and obligations of the Contracting Parties for the development of the financed project. The Sub-Grantee Agreement will be signed by the NGI Sargasso coordinator, on behalf of the entire consortium, and the beneficiary.

The NGI initiative

The **Next Generation Internet (NGI)** is a European Commission initiative that aims to shape the development and evolution of the Internet into an Internet of Humans. An Internet that responds to people’s fundamental needs, including trust, security, and inclusion, while reflecting the values and the norms all citizens enjoy in Europe¹.

Initial EC investment in NGI research and innovation of more than EUR 250M (2018-2020) has already supported around 1,000 Internet researchers and innovators involved in many hundreds of projects. The EC announced renewed EU funding for NGI under Horizon Europe. During the 2022-2027 period, the European Commission will designate €80 million to assist the most prominent Internet innovators in the fields of Trust and Data Sovereignty on the Internet, Trustworthy Open Search and Discovery, Internet Architecture and Decentralized Technologies, in addition to promoting enhanced EU-USA and EU-Canada cooperation and collaboration.²

The initiative NGI supports **several projects** that are committed to the NGI vision: to create a new internet infrastructure that is open, secure, and trustworthy, that gives equal opportunities to all, and that is accessible to everyone, everywhere. Some of these projects present open calls for financial support for initiatives aligned with NGI areas of interest. Among

¹ [Next Generation Internet initiative | Shaping Europe's digital future \(europa.eu\)](https://european-council.europa.eu/media/en/press-communications/inline-photos/2019/04/next-generation-internet-initiative-shaping-europe-s-digital-future)

² <https://www.ngi.eu/about/>



them are [NGI Onto Chain](#), [NGI Trublo](#), [NGI Assure](#), [NGI Zero Core](#), [NGI Enrichers](#). These and other initiatives can be found on the [NGI EU portal](#).

About the NGI Sargasso project

NGI Sargasso focuses on strengthening EU cooperation and strategic partnerships with the USA and Canada in the Next Generation Internet. The project has been organized to support all Internet innovators in the areas of trust and Internet data sovereignty, trusted open search and discovery, and Internet Architecture and Decentralized Technologies. With NGI Sargasso, an international ecosystem will be created with the presence of the USA and Canada in order to promote the values of Europe beyond its borders, such as openness, inclusion, transparency, privacy, cooperation, and data protection.

Our mission is to catalyse transatlantic collaboration on the development and experimentation of new ideas, implementation of prototypes, and contribution to standards and open-source communities on technology trends with the potential to reshape tomorrow's Next Generation Internet technologies and services.

Objectives and ambition of NGI Sargasso

NGI Sargasso aims to revolutionize the Next Generation Internet technologies, services, and standards, and contribute to the evolution of the Internet according to a human-centric approach of the internet commons. For the development of NGI Sargasso, it is crucial that the proposals presented start from close collaboration with entities from the USA and/or Canada.

Through 5 open calls, NGI Sargasso aims **to attract more than 300 applications** (accumulated from the five open calls) and **support up to 96 research initiatives**. To do so, the teams count with **4.8M€ for Financial Support to Third Parties distributed into 5 open calls** for 3 years. The distribution of the budget for each open call is as it follows³:

TOTAL BUDGET	Open call #1	Open call #2	Open call #3	Open call #4	Open call #5
4.800.000€	800.000€	800.000€	950.000€	1.050.000€	1.200.000€

³ The budget for each selected project will be allocated based on the length of the projects selected on each of the open calls.

NGI Sargasso Approach

The Approach of NGI Sargasso is clear and precise: to contribute and promote a sustainable open Internet environment through a transatlantic **collaborative ecosystem (EU-USA-Canada)** with the objective of cooperating on emerging topics for the Next Generation Internet. Innovative ideas from Europe are ready to be opened to the world, and that will only be possible through collaboration with the USA and Canada, leaders in internet research and development activities⁴.

NGI has focused its program on improving interoperability, establishing global standards for NGI to be universal and accessible to everyone, promoting innovation and creativity, which can lead to more efficient and sustainable solutions for the current challenges of the Internet. Additionally, efforts focused within the **EU-USA-Canada ecosystem** will help to improve online privacy and security, which is essential to ensuring trust and integrity of online information. These efforts will enable the creation of a more open, inclusive, secure, and sustainable Internet for everyone.

NGI Sargasso knowledge areas.

NGI Sargasso focuses on specific areas of knowledge critical to developing a more **human-centric and sustainable internet**. We believe that the internet should reflect the values and needs of individuals and communities, and that it should be equitable, accessible, and secure for everyone.

To achieve this vision, NGI Sargasso prioritizes the following areas of knowledge:

- ❑ **Trust:** it is focused on improving trust in the online world, by making the internet more secure and protecting users' privacy.
- ❑ **Data sovereignty:** NGI is working towards giving users control over their personal data and ensuring that it is stored and processed in a secure manner.
- ❑ **Digital identity:** to create a digital identity framework that is trustworthy, secure, and interoperable, to make it easier for people to interact with the internet.
- ❑ **Internet architecture and renovation:** to renovate the existing internet architecture to make it more efficient, secure, and scalable, while also preserving existing investments and assets.
- ❑ **Decentralised technologies:** the use of decentralised technologies such as blockchain, to improve the security and privacy of the internet.
- ❑ **Interoperability & Standardization:** the NGI initiative aims to promote interoperability and standardisation, enabling seamless communication and data exchange across platforms and devices. This supports innovation, competition, and user empowerment in the digital economy.

⁴ <https://www.cse.wustl.edu/~jain/cis788-99/ftp/testbeds/index.html>



- **New Internet Commons:** the creation of a new Internet Commons, a shared digital space where everyone can participate in the creation and exchange of digital content and services.

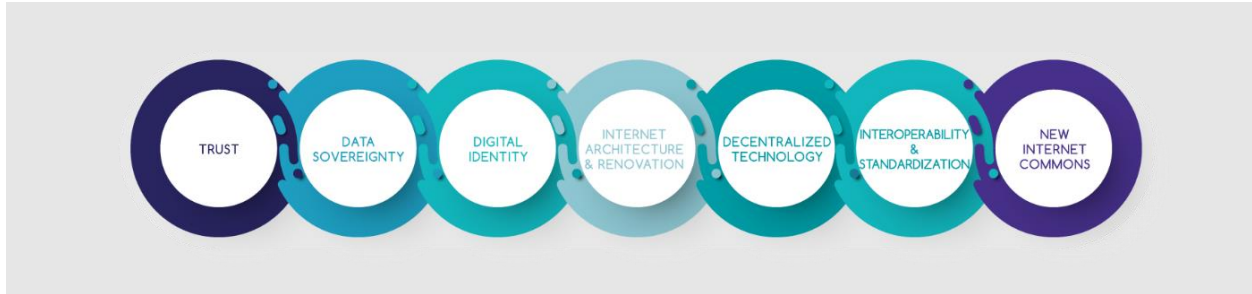


FIGURE 1. NGI SARGASSO KNOWLEDGE AREAS

NGI Sargasso technology domains

Proposals submitted to the NGI Sargasso Open Call#3 could use some of the following base technologies to address the challenges in the above areas of knowledge: Artificial Intelligence, Blockchain and DLTs (Distributed Ledger Technology) , Data, Cybersecurity, 6G and novel networks, IoT (Internet of Things), Open-source hardware and software, novel software architectures, etc.



FIGURE 2. NGI SARGASSO TECHNOLOGY DOMAINS

The proposals are not limited to the use of the technologies mentioned above.

The selected projects are expected to have a clear development component, going further than theoretical approaches or just mere studies.

NGI Sargasso Challenges

NGI Sargasso has identified a set of **challenges** for this third cut-off date after conducting a series of interviews and surveys to dozens of experts in Europe, Canada, and the USA. There are 9 concrete challenges and an open one. Proposals should be directed towards one of those (including the open challenge for NGI).

No.	Description
CH1	<p>Sustainable Digital Infrastructure Across Continents Addressing environmental issues in digital networks, systems and infrastructure has emerged as a priority in both Europe, Canada and the USA, as increased complexity in systems may require additional resources. Sustainable maintenance, repair, and life-cycle management of digital technologies is included in this challenge. <i>Knowledge Areas: Internet Architecture and Renovation, Energy Efficiency</i></p>
CH2	<p>Harmonized Cross-Atlantic Digital Governance The need for a unified techno/legal framework for digital services across the Atlantic is gaining attention in both the EU, Canada, and the USA. This includes the development of efficient networks, interconnections, and consistent regulation of data and cloud services to facilitate cross-border data exchanges and services. <i>Knowledge Areas: Internet Architecture and Renovation, Trust, Data Sovereignty</i></p>
CH3	<p>Inclusive Public Digital Spaces for Global Community Engagement Inclusive and accessible public digital spaces are becoming a priority in Europe, the US, and Canada. The challenge is to facilitate meaningful community engagement via these public platforms and ensure that all individuals, regardless of their language or abilities, have access. <i>Knowledge Areas: Digital Identity, Trust, New Internet Commons</i></p>
CH4	<p>Enhanced Data Security and Privacy in Transcontinental Perspective The improvement of data security measures and stronger protections for personal data are a shared concern in Europe and North America. A focus is on respecting individual's data sovereignty and privacy. <i>Knowledge Areas: Trust, Data Sovereignty, Digital Identity</i></p>
CH5	<p>Interoperability and Standardisation Across Borders Seamless interaction between systems and devices is essential for interconnected digital environments. Europe, the US, and Canada have a joint interest in establishing widely accepted technological standards and protocols. <i>Knowledge Areas: Interoperability & Standardisation</i></p>
CH6	<p>Global Implementation of Decentralised Technologies As the world becomes more digitally connected, the implementation of decentralised technologies has become a crucial issue in Europe, Canada, and the USA. These technologies offer a more distributed and resilient framework for digital services and require shared standards and protocols to ensure interoperability. <i>Knowledge Area: Decentralised Technologies, Interoperability & Standardisation</i></p>

No.	Description
CH7	<p>Next-Gen Cybersecurity and Generative AI Cybersecurity stands as a cornerstone of the Next Generation Internet (NGI). However, cyber threats are continuously evolving and becoming increasingly sophisticated. The recent advancements in Generative AI capabilities offer new threats and new opportunities in the area of cybersecurity. This challenge delves into the intersection of advanced cybersecurity and Generative Artificial Intelligence to tackle this ever-shifting landscape. <i>Knowledge Areas: Trust, Decentralized Technology, Internet Architecture and Renovation, New Internet Common</i></p>
CH8	<p>Next Generation Space Based Internet This challenge addresses issues regarding the integration of space-based networks to terrestrial networks such as: techniques to provide reliable high data rate internet connectivity to areas without or with minimal supporting terrestrial infrastructure; optimized transport protocols for satellite communications; integration of satellite communications and 5G/6G mobile technologies in a truly hybrid satellite/5G/6G network. <i>Knowledge Area: Internet architecture and renovation, Interoperability & Standardization</i></p>
CH9	<p>Redefining intelligence in a hyperconnected world In their hyperconnected world, where billions are online and data sensors abound, they must seize the opportunity presented by AI advancements to reshape how they confront modern challenges like sustainable cities and climate change. It's time for them to demonstrate that the synergy between human users, data sensors, and AI agents is the solution to today's societal challenges, all while safeguarding human rights. <i>Knowledge Area: Trust, New Internet Commons, Internet Architecture and Renovation, Decentralised Technologies</i></p>
CH10	<p>Open Challenge Open for any project that addresses an emerging issue related to the specified areas of knowledge. This challenge encourages innovative solutions in the fields of Trust, Data Sovereignty, Digital Identity, Internet Architecture and Renovation, Decentralised Technologies, Interoperability & Standardisation, and New Internet Commons across Europe, USA, and Canada. <i>Knowledge Area: Trust, Data Sovereignty, Digital Identity, Internet Architecture and Renovation, Decentralised Technologies, Interoperability & Standardisation, New Internet Commons</i></p>

TABLE 1. CHALLENGES FOR NGI SARGASSO 3RD OPEN CALL.



Relevant dates



FIGURE 3. LIFECYCLE OF A FUNDED PROPOSAL

Applications

- ❑ Opening: **15.03.2024**
- ❑ Deadline for submission: **15.05.2024, 17:00h Brussels time/10:00 CST.**

Evaluation

- ❑ Evaluation period: Indicatively period to evaluate potential applicants. **16.05.2024 to 21.06.2024**
- ❑ Interviews: only the applicants who passed the evaluation stage will be interviewed. From **24.06.2024 to 28.06.2024**, applicants must choose one interview time slot on the available dates: **01.07.2024 to 05.07.2024 and 08.07.2024 to 12.07.2024**, between **15:00 PM and 19:00 PM Brussels time/8:00 AM and 12:00 PM Brussels time.**
- ❑ Results: The publication of the evaluation's final results will be on **15.07.2024**, marking the beginning of the contract signing process and the inclusion of successful candidates into the OnCampus program. There will not be any prior disclosure of information about the evaluation process before that date.
- ❑ Legal validation: starting from **16.07.2024 to 28.07.24**. Legal validation is applied exclusively to successful applicants and involves the submission of various documents to ensure compliance with the requirements of the NGI Sargasso program.
- ❑ Sub-grant agreement preparation: Starting from **29.07.2024** successful applicants will begin preparation for the Sub-grant agreement signature until **05.09.2024**.



OnCampus program

The OnCampus program, which is implemented by [Mobile World Capital Barcelona](#), offers business guidance, individualized assistance, entry to a wide-ranging network of important stakeholders, expert insights, and marketing prospects.

- ❑ Onboarding: Starting from **05.09.2024**, the selected teams will commence identifying the most suitable range of services for their training during the OnCampus program.
- ❑ The official start of the programme is the date of the Onboarding session, and the deadline for each stage will follow the calendar from the onboarding date.

Rules and conditions

Eligible countries

Only European applicants legally established/resident in any of the following countries (hereafter collectively identified as the “Eligible Countries”) are eligible for funding:

- ❑ The Member States (MS) of the European Union (EU), including their outermost regions;
 - In the case of **Hungary**, although it is an MS of the EU, according to Council Implementing Decision 2022/2506, no legal commitments should be entered into with any public interest trust established based on the Hungarian Law IX of 2021 or with any entity maintained by said public interest trust.
- ❑ The Overseas Countries and Territories (OCT) linked to the Member States⁵;
- ❑ Horizon Europe associated countries at the time the NGI Sargasso grant entered into force (January 1, 2023), which are: Albania, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Faroe Islands, Georgia, Iceland, Israel, Kosovo, Moldova, Montenegro North Macedonia, Norway, Serbia, Tunisia, Türkiye, and Ukraine. The ones not included in this list, are not eligible.

Eligible beneficiaries

The European eligible entities by NGI Sargasso open call should be legally identified under the following categories of organisations:

- ❑ **Universities, RTOs and research centres:** academic and research institutions with a focus on developing novel knowledge areas and technologies aligned with the focus of NGI Sargasso.
 - It's important to note that within a department, multiple research groups exist, and while different groups from the same department can apply, it's crucial that individuals are not concurrently members of multiple research groups to ensure equitable allocation of resources and dedication to their respective research endeavours.

⁵ Entities from Overseas Countries and Territories (OCT) are eligible for funding under the same conditions as entities from the Member States to which the OCT in question is linked.



- ❑ **NGOs and foundations:** non-profit organizations and foundations that work under the NGI areas of knowledge and technologies.
- ❑ **SMEs and startups:** small and medium-sized enterprises and startups that focus on developing innovative solutions related to NGI Sargasso's areas of focus.

Single applications with an USA and/or Canadian collaborator

Applications are done in consortia. The consortia may be set up by two or three entities: one entity from the eligible countries for funding entity with a USA and/or Canadian collaborator. European consortia are not eligible, the applicant must be a single entity. In either case, the applicant must be from an eligible country (see section [Eligible countries](#) section).

- ❑ **Two-entity consortium:** must be formed by one entity from the eligible countries for funding (applicant) and one entity from the USA or Canada.
- ❑ **Three-entity consortium:** must be formed by one entity from the eligible countries for funding (applicant), one USA and one Canadian entity. In no case will consortia whose counterparts are both from the USA or both from Canada be accepted.

EU beneficiaries will be requested to clearly identify their USA or Canadian partner in their application by means of a **Letter of Support** ([see Annex 2](#)). It is important to note that the letter of support must be **signed by the representative** of the USA and/or Canadian partner's organisation, must also **bear the organisation's stamp**, and must be **submitted in PDF format**.

In principle, any type of entity based in Canada, or in the USA can be a partner in this initiative. The only restriction is that the USA or Canadian partner cannot be a related or associated partner of the European beneficiary. Entities belonging to the same group (i.e. the parent company and its subsidiaries) cannot be considered as a valid "consortium".

Legal definition for beneficiaries

From a legal perspective, beneficiaries should be identified as established legal entities in any of the eligible countries in the call.

In the case of companies only SMEs, following the [European Commission definition](#) are eligible.

Natural persons, mid-caps or large industries or corporations are not eligible for the purpose of the call.

Maturity levels of the sub-granted projects

NGI Sargasso encourages and supports projects that focus on the creation, improvement, and enhancement of open-source technologies. These projects involve activities related to generating, expanding, or significantly improving the current state-of-the-art of projects within specific knowledge areas or technologies as defined earlier.



This open call for proposals emphasizes cross-border collaboration with the USA and/or Canada oriented towards the development of novel technologies under open-source licensing. It is important to note that **NGI Sargasso does not provide support for projects involving the creation of proprietary developments protected under copyright.**

It's important to understand that **this open call is not intended to finance well-mature and market-ready developments. NGI Sargasso focuses on projects that are still in earlier stages of development**, prioritizing innovation, and advancements rather than solely market readiness.

Financial Support

NGI Sargasso will only provide financial support to European entities for projects submitted to this open call.

The total budget available for this third call is €950.000. Apart from the grant amount, NGI Sargasso also provides mentoring, coaching, and networking opportunities to help applicants achieve their project goals through the OnCampus Programme.

The grant is disbursed over the course of the NGI Sargasso project, following a "flat rate" approach. This means that the funding is distributed gradually, subject to meeting specific outcomes and milestones, rather than administrative justifications of time and/or expenses.

The program offers three types of grants based on the project's duration:

- 3-month experiment: up to €50.000.
- 6-month experiment: up to €75.000.
- 9-month experiment: up to €100.000.

For this third NGI Sargasso Open Call, the number of each type of project to be funded has been fixed. The distribution is as follows:

	3-month project	6-month project	9-month project
Number of the projects funded by length*	2	2	7

* The number of projects per length will depend on the received applications. Projects will be selected until extinction of the budget.

Subcontracting

Regarding "subcontracting," it is important to note that within the context of NGI Sargasso, **subcontracting is strictly prohibited for core/essential tasks.** This signifies that the primary responsibilities associated with the project must be undertaken and carried out by the team members described in the proposal. It is essential to maintain a clear understanding that the

core tasks should not be delegated to external entities or subcontractors. The team should possess the necessary expertise and capacity to fulfil these crucial obligations to ensure the successful execution of the project.

Indicative distributions of the funds

Payments will be disbursed in various stages depending on the project's duration, contingent upon meeting designated milestones or KPIs and delivering specific outputs.

For 3-month projects: 2 payments

For 6-month projects: 3 payments

For 9-month projects: 4 payments

PROJECT DURATION	MONTH 1	MONTH 3	MONTH 6	MONTH 9
OUTPUT	Coaching Plan & KPIs definition	Final Review		
3-MONTH PROJECT	30%	70%	-	-
OUTPUT	Coaching Plan & KPIs definition	Mid-Review	Final Review	
6-MONTH PROJECT	20%	30%	50%	-
OUTPUT	Coaching Plan & KPIs definition	Mid-Review	Mid-Review	Final Review
9-MONTH PROJECT	10%	30%	30%	30%

TABLE 2. PAYMENT MILESTONES

For a more detailed payment schedule please check our [Frequently Asked Questions](#) document online.

Origin of the funds

Once an applicant has been selected for funding, they will be required to sign a dedicated Sub-Grantee Funding Agreement with the NGI Sargasso consortium. It is important to note that the funds attached to the Sub-Grantee Funding Agreement come directly from the funds of the Horizon Europe Project NGI Sargasso, which has been funded by the European Commission. Therefore, the funds remain the property of the EU until the payment of the balance, which is managed by the project partners in NGI Sargasso via European Commission Horizon Europe Grant Agreement Number 101092887.

The Sub-Grantee Funding Agreement represents a significant commitment from both the NGI Sargasso program and the sub-grantees who will receive funding. The relationship between sub-grantees and the European Commission through the NGI Sargasso program carries a **set of obligations for the sub-grantees** with the European Commission. These obligations will be



outlined in the Sub-Grantee Agreement, which the selected applicants will need to review and agree to. It is the responsibility of the sub-grantees to ensure that they fulfil these obligations, and the NGI Sargasso consortium partners will provide guidance and support as needed.

All selected applicants should carefully review the terms of the agreement and ensure that they are able to meet their obligations in order to receive the funding and successfully carry out their project.

Allocation of funds per project

The financing provided for each sub-granted project is determined through a lump sum scheme, taking into account the requirements specified in the call text and the duration of the project. In NGI Sargasso, the funding granted to each project depends on its duration. Projects with a duration of 3 months can receive up to €50.000, while those of 6 months can receive up to €75.000 and projects with a duration of 9 months can receive up to €100.000.

The **maximum amount of funding** that can be granted **to a single organization** (SMEs, Startups, NGOs, laboratories, and foundations) for all NGI Sargasso calls combined cannot exceed **€150.000**. For **large RTOs and RPOs**, with several distinct laboratories or research units, the **maximum amount of funding is up to €500,000** between all NGI Sargasso open calls. This is only applicable in the case where several groups from the same large organisation may wish to apply to one or more calls.

For this third call, the total budget available is €950,000. If sufficient projects are not financed until the available budget is exhausted, the remaining budget will be allocated to future calls.

Language

English is the only official language for the NGI Sargasso project. Submissions done in any other language will not be eligible and will not be evaluated. English is also the only official language during the whole execution of the NGI Sargasso program. This means that all the communication and materials will be in English, and all documents and deliverables will only be accepted if in English during the whole process.

Documents Format

Unless otherwise stated in specific questions of the application form ([see Annex 1](#)), any document requested in any of the phases must be submitted electronically in **PDF format without restrictions for printing**.



Multiple submissions

Applicants submitting proposals for the NGI Sargasso project should note that **multiple submissions by the same legal entity are allowed in the same or different calls, only if the scope of the proposals are different.**

However, it is important to bear in mind that while multiple submissions by the same legal entity are permitted, the maximum amount of funding that can be granted to a single organization for all NGI Sargasso calls combined cannot exceed €150,000, except for large RTOs or RPOs, whose maximum budget for the five open calls is €500,000. Unsuccessful applications are of course invited to resubmit it after corrections for the next cut-off date.

Absence of conflict of interest

Applicants must not have any actual or potential conflicts of interest during the NGI Sargasso selection process or the entire project duration. Any situations that could potentially influence the impartiality of the individuals taking part in the selection process, or during the project implementation, are considered conflicts of interest. These can include financial interests, personal relationships, or any other factors that could affect the applicant's ability to remain impartial. All cases of conflict of interest will be assessed on a case-by-case basis by the relevant NGI Sargasso selection committee and consortium partners. **If an applicant is found to have a conflict of interest, this could result in the application being disqualified.**

It is important to note that **NGI Sargasso consortium partners, their affiliated entities, employees, and permanent co-operators are not allowed to submit a proposal and therefore to receive any financial support through the open calls**, as this would violate the European Commission's regulations.

Ethical Issues

NGI Sargasso strictly adheres to the fundamental ethical principles outlined in the "European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity." To ensure compliance, all applicants are required to acknowledge and accept our privacy policy and declaration of honour (ethics) during the submission process. This acknowledgment confirms that, by submitting the form, they accept the terms described in the provided text. No additional documents need to be uploaded; applicants are solely required to read and agree to the terms outlined when submitting the form.

During the evaluation process, **the NGI Sargasso consortium may verify whether the self-assessment declaration aligns with the contents of the application.** In cases where clarification is needed, the consortium reserves the right to contact the beneficiaries. If an applicant indicates that their application may have ethical issues, an ethics review will be conducted. Applications that fail to adequately address ethical concerns or privacy aspects will be rejected.



All applicants must thoroughly review and assess their applications for any potential ethical issues before submission. **Failure to comply with the ethical guidelines outlined in the "European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity" could lead to disqualification of the application.** Therefore, it is of utmost importance that all applicants take the necessary steps to ensure that their proposals meet the highest ethical standards.

Data Protection

NGI Sargasso requires access to Personal and Entity Data in order to process and evaluate applications. As open call coordinator, SPLORO will act as the Data Controller for all data submitted through the Sploro platform for this purpose. To ensure the safety and security of this data, the Sploro platform has been designed and operates under strict compliance with The General Data Protection Regulation (EU) 2016/679 (GDPR). Therefore, all applicants are required to accept the Sploro Platform terms to ensure full coverage. For more information regarding the data privacy policy and security measures implemented by Sploro, please refer to their website at <https://sploro.eu>.

Proposal submission process

Overall process

The submission will be done through the official [online submission platform](#), which is directly linked to the NGI Sargasso website. Only applications received directly through the online submission platform will be considered eligible.

We will provide applicants with an editable template of the application form ([see Annex 1](#)) to let them prepare the application offline before introducing the information in the form available at the Sploro platform. Sending this form template in any other format and via e-mail or any other means will automatically disqualify the submission.

If the applicant discovers an error in a submitted application or aims to improve the application, and provided the call deadline has not passed, the applicant may submit a new version. For this purpose, the applicant must contact the NGI Sargasso open call managers (helpdesk@ngisargasso.eu) to re-open the application. Applicants will be able to modify all questions of the application form as many times as needed until the deadline. Please be aware that once opened, the applicants should send the form again, or it will not be evaluated. Once resubmitted, only the last version received before the call deadline will be considered in the evaluation. Please note that to reopen a proposal, candidates are required to complete the resubmission process before the set deadline. When a proposal is reopened, it is reverted to draft status, necessitating a new submission. Failure to resubmit will result in the proposal not being evaluated.



Resubmission requests will be answered up to two hours before the deadline. The helpdesk cannot guarantee a timely response during the last two hours of the open call. Consider this when writing your proposals.

NGI Sargasso offers a dedicated support channel available for applicants at helpdesk@ngisargasso.eu. Requests will receive a response within 2 working days of their submission. While all possible effort will be made to respond in a timely manner, the teams should plan their submissions, accordingly, allowing enough time before the deadline (i.e., at least 2 working days prior) if they expect an answer. Lack of the receipt of an answer to an enquiry shall not constitute grounds for extension or re-evaluation of a submission.

Please note that any email received outside the designated support channel will not be taken into account. It is imperative that all requests or inquiries related to the submission system or the call itself are directed through the official support channel. Requests or inquiries about the submission system or the call itself, received AFTER two days before the closure time of the call will neither be considered nor answered. Lack of receipt of an answer to an inquiry shall not constitute grounds for an extension or re-evaluation of a proposal.

Documents to be submitted

- ❑ **Application form:** an online form divided in different sections:
 - 1) Overall organisation profile
 - 2) Alignment
 - Background problem that will be solved
 - Team behind the project
 - Collaborative entities profile in USA and/or Canada
 - Challenge rationale and description
 - 3) Excellence
 - Objectives and the solution proposed.
 - Why the proposal is innovative.
 - Appropriateness of the solution to sort the problem presented.
 - 4) Impact
 - How core technologies are enhanced.
 - Scale-up and exploitation potential of the solution.
 - Foreseen activities in dissemination and communication.
- ❑ Support letter ([see Annex 2](#)) from the USA and/or Canada entity. NGI Sargasso stipulates that the Letter of Support (LoS) must be formally endorsed with both a signature and an official stamp by the USA and/or Canada counterpart.
- ❑ The Gantt chart of the project in PDF format.

Applicants must strictly adhere to the form provided by NGI Sargasso consortium via Sploro platform, which defines sections and the overall length. Evaluators will be instructed not to consider extra material in the evaluation.



Application preparation

For the successful submission, applicants are strongly advised to follow these steps:

- ❑ Check the guidelines for applicants to determine if your organisation is eligible for the program.
- ❑ Applicants are required to apply online and answer all mandatory questions (with no exception) at: <https://cascadefunding.sploro.eu>. Moreover, applicants must submit all the requested documents established in the call. The lack of any of the documents or the different format will negatively affect the eligibility of the applicant for the evaluation process. In addition, note that certain documents - which will be required for each applicant selected for the program and signing a sub-grantee agreement - may take time to acquire. It is highly advisable that you read the Section: *Sub-grantee agreement preparation* and take into consideration the time needed to obtain these documents.
- ❑ Be concrete and concise. Open questions have character limitations. Please examine all the open call documents and attend the various online events promoted by the NGI Sargasso program in order to be prepared. Please, mark your calendars for our upcoming InfoDays: Matchmaking sessions for the 3rd Call, scheduled for:
 - **1st InfoDay: 26.03.2024 – 16:00 Brussels time.**
 - **2nd InfoDay: 17.04.2024 – 16:00 Brussels time.**
- ❑ Only the submission within the Open Call duration will be accepted. There will not be any deadline extensions unless there is a Force Majeure situation (i.e., a major problem with the platform caused by the NGI Sargasso consortium and not by the applicants, making the system unavailable for a long period). - It is strongly advised not to wait until the last minute.

Proposal Evaluation and Selection Process

Application reception

Submissions will be done ONLY via the [Sploro platform](#), and it will be the unique entry point for all application submissions. Applications submitted by any other means will not be considered nor evaluated. Only the documentation in the right format included in the submission will be considered by evaluators. A full list of applicants will be drafted containing their basic information for statistical purposes and clarity (which will be also shared with the EC for transparency). The application reception will close on **15.05.2023, 17:00 Brussels time (10:00 AM CST)**. There will not be any deadline extensions unless there is a Force Majeure situation, caused by the NGI Sargasso consortium and not by the applicants, which renders the system unavailable.

The deadline for submission is as stated in this Guidelines document. Please note that the system time depends on the user's configured time zone and may or may not coincide with the correct time (this depends on the user, not the platform for submission). Any discrepancies in system time will not be grounds for deadline extension.



Evaluation process

The evaluation process will take place for a maximum of two months from the closure of the call and will be evaluated according to the following categories:

Eligibility criteria

An automatic filtering to discard non-eligible proposals will follow the shortlist below. Eligibility criteria check will verify:

- a) The existence of a legal entity.
- b) Applicants should be registered in an EU Member State or a Horizon Europe associated country in Europe.⁶
- c) All the required fields in the online application form and all documents uploaded are correctly completed.
- d) The European entity must be twinning with a USA and/or Canada counterpart. If the consortium is composed by 3 entities, the applicant must be from the EU, and one must be from USA and another one from Canada.
- e) The alignment with the NGI Sargasso call for proposals and challenges.
- f) The uniqueness of the proposal (proposal not already funded in the NGI Sargasso project and/or any other project to avoid double funding).
- g) Support letter from the USA and/or Canada entity attached. This letter of support must be in PDF and be signed and stamped by the counterpart.
- h) The applicant and the USA and/or Canada counterpart are not linked or associated entities or have any other legally binding relation which qualifies them as a company group.

Applications marked as non-eligible will get a rejection letter including the reasons (a to h) for being declared as non-eligible at the end of the evaluation process. No further feedback on the process will be given.

Experts' remote evaluation

The applications that pass the eligibility check will move to the remote evaluation stage where an external evaluation board with experience in DLT domain, R&D, technology, and business development will review each proposal, scoring them based on 3 different evaluation criteria (**Alignment, Excellence and Impact**).

- 1) Alignment: Applicants must align with:
 - a) Call objectives/ challenges.
 - b) Areas of knowledge
 - c) Technologies

⁶ Please, check the [Eligible countries](#) section.

- 2) Excellence: projects must demonstrate high quality and a clear set of objectives aligned with the NGI Sargasso vision and with the general objectives of the project. The Excellence is evaluated according to the following criteria:
 - a) Clarity and pertinence of the objectives
 - b) Excellence, innovation, and quality of the project.
 - c) Appropriateness of the solution to solve the selected challenge.
 - d) Clear and detailed plan of proposed activities, ensuring that the activities are aligned with the project objectives and developed within realistic timeframes.
 - e) Clear identification of the improvements that will be developed over the current state of technology and their technical feasibility.
 - f) Clear and concise explanation of how the collaboration between the European organization and the USA and/or Canada entity will be structured, considering roles, communication mechanisms, synergies, and mutually identified benefits of the collaboration.

- 3) Impact: Proposals must demonstrate impact on the NGI technologies advancement and its contribution to meeting the overall project objectives. The impact is evaluated according to the following criteria:
 - a) Clarity and specificity of the expected benefits for the organization by participating in NGI Sargasso.
 - b) Explanation of how mutual and sustainable benefits will be ensured.
 - c) Assessment of the relevance and scope of the expected environmental impact.
 - d) Relevance and potential for economic impact of the project.
 - e) Relevance and contribution of the project to desired social improvement or transformation.
 - f) Effectiveness of the proposed experiments to exploit and disseminate the project results and to communicate the project.

Proposals will be evaluated by two external evaluators, one with a technical profile and another one with a business profile. The evaluators will be selected by another call for evaluators. They will be independent of the organisations involved in the consortium and of any third party applying to the open call.

The evaluators will sign a declaration of confidentiality concerning the contents of the proposals they read. The form which they use in the evaluation carries a declaration of freedom from conflict of interest which they agree to by signing them.

All evaluators will receive the evaluation guidelines, templates, and will be duly informed about the timing for an agile process and conflict of interest issues.

The evaluators will score each award criterion on a scale from 0 to 5:

Score	Definition
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0	Proposal fails to address the criterion or cannot be assessed due to missing or incomplete information.
1	Poor – criterion is inadequately addressed or there are serious inherent weaknesses.
2	Fair – proposal broadly addresses the criterion, but there are significant weaknesses
3	Good – proposal addresses the criterion well, but a number of shortcomings are present.
4	Very good- proposal addresses the criterion very well, but a small number of shortcomings are present.
5	The proposal successfully addresses all relevant aspects of the criterion. Any shortcomings are minor.

TABLE 3. CRITERIA SCORE

The total score will be calculated as an average of the score of the 3 different criteria. The threshold for each criterion will be three (3), while the overall score threshold will be ten (10). That means if a proposal receives less than 3 in one criterion or less than 10 overall score, will not be recommended for funding by the independent evaluators and will be automatically rejected.

Normalisation score

For the final grade calculation, there will be two evaluators per proposal, where each one will score differently without knowing the evaluation of their colleague, thus avoiding one evaluator conditioning the other. Therefore, the same evaluation may receive very different scores.

The normalisation process counts with a several steps approach:

- ❑ **External Evaluators Average (EEA) and Overall Average Score (OAS):** each evaluator has evaluated several proposals. We calculate the average score of all applicants and compare it with the average score of each evaluator.
- ❑ Each External Evaluator Average is compared to the Overall Average Score using a simple division (EEA / OAS). As a result, we know the percentage each evaluator represents of the OAS. This has a double meaning:
 - Evaluators under 100% have a negative pattern against the average. Their scores are then increased by a correction factor.
 - Evaluators above 100% have a positive pattern against the average. Their scores are then decreased by a correction factor.
- ❑ **Correction factor:** Based on this formula $1 + (1 - (EEA/OAS))$. This factor is unique for each evaluator.
- ❑ The following step is applying the Correction Factor to each criterion per evaluator. **Alignment x Correction Factor | Excellence x Correction factor | Impact x Correction factor.**

- ❑ Then we calculate the final score of each criterion as the average of each corrected score of the two evaluators on each proposal. (It may be the case that correction brings scores over a 5 in any criteria. In those cases, the score is capped in 5).
- ❑ We add the corrected scores and calculate the total score.
- ❑ Finally, we build the shortlist according from highest to lowest total score.

Using this method, a more balanced distribution of scores would be guaranteed, and the possibility of biases and distortions would be reduced. At the end of the evaluation process, all proposals will be ranked based on their scores.

Interview stage

The top-ranked projects of the external remote evaluation shall be duly invited to participate in an online interview. Given that the interview will be recorded, utmost consideration shall be accorded to data protection throughout the process. The primary aim of the interview is to gain a comprehensive understanding of the project's concept, the team's skills and competence, and their capacity and willingness to exploit the results. At least 2 external evaluators will carry out the interviews, one with technical profile and another one with more business-oriented profile.

The evaluation of this stage will be simple. The 2 evaluators will determine individually if the proposal they are interviewing should move forward with a yes/no decision. Each yes decision will motivate an extra 1 point in the overall evaluation and a new shortlist list will be populated.

At the end of the evaluation process all proposals will be ranked based on their scores (15 points from remote evaluation + 2 points from interview maximum).

Final Selection

At the end of the evaluation process all proposals will be ranked based on their scores and time duration. The criteria for the ranking of the proposals will be semi-automatic following the rules below:

- ❑ Rule 1: The proposals will be ranked based on their overall score.
- ❑ Rule 2. In case following Rule 1 there are proposals in the same position, priority will be given to proposals having a higher score in the interview.
- ❑ Rule 3: In case following Rule 2 there are proposals in the same position, priority will be given to proposals that have higher score on the Excellence award criterion.
- ❑ Rule 4: In case following Rule 3 there are proposals in the same position, priority will be given to proposals that have higher score on the Impact award criterion.
- ❑ Rule 5: In the event that following Rule 4 there are proposals in the same position, priority will be given to teams that count with a better gender balance (i.e.: 50-50 distribution according to the tables in team member composition).

The NGI Sargasso consortium will then formally approve a list of proposals within the limits of the available funding.

Prior to contracting to the top ranked applicants, the consortium will ask for the approval of the European Commission, and the list of selected projects will be submitted to the European



Commission for final screening. Once validated, the project will communicate the results and every applicant will receive via email: An Evaluation Summary Report (ESR) and a letter informing of the rejection decision or invitation to negotiation and following steps.

At this stage, all applicants will be informed about the evaluation process: non-eligible, under threshold, approved but not selected, selected, and waiting list (3 applicants). Applicants will receive via email: a letter informing them of the decision and the following steps (if applicable) and an Evaluation Summary Report (ESR) in case of successful and evaluated but not successful proposals.

Statistical data about the proposals received will be published. To do that, the basic and anonymized information of the proposals will be used.

Appealing procedure

The NGI Sargasso consortium has established a process that allows applicants to appeal the decision of the consortium in the event their proposal is not selected for funding. If an applicant believes that there has been a deficiency in how their proposal was assessed, which could potentially impact the final funding decision, or if they believe that the results of eligibility checks are incorrect and do not adhere to the Open Call rules, resulting in harm to their interests, the following appeal procedure is available.

- If clear evidence of a deficiency that could influence the ultimate funding decision exists, it is possible that all or part of the proposal will be subject to re-evaluation.
- Complaints must be submitted within **five (calendar) days** from the date of receiving the evaluation results.
- The NGI Sargasso Team will thoroughly investigate complaints to determine if a re-evaluation of the proposal is justified. A decision will be communicated within no more than twenty (calendar) days from the date of receiving the complaint, provided that all required information has been submitted by the complainant. If this timeline cannot be met, the complainant will be informed by email of the delay and given a new decision date.
- In instances where re-evaluation is deemed necessary, the outcome will directly replace the initial score without undergoing normalization or any other adjustment process. This clause is specifically designed to expedite the appeal resolution and prevent delays in the project's timeline.

To maintain the efficiency of the process, each proposal is allowed a single appeal. The decision reached at the end of the appeal process is final, concluding any further discussion regarding the proposal's evaluation.

The opinions by the reviewers are subjective and may not be the same. Our process ensures scores are normalised to adapt to personal bias and averaged to ensure consensus is met with the final score. Applicants may have different opinions about the outcome and opinions of the evaluators. NGI Sargasso open call team will not provide an opinion over the evaluators' opinion and scores unless a factual error is detected.



Validation of the legal entity

Before validating the final list of accepted applicants, we will perform a thorough validation of the legal entities, their status and their signatory(ies). This validation includes the submission of various documents to ensure compliance with the NGI Sargasso programme's requirements. The requested elements for validation that will be requested are:

To validate the identity and the power of attorney of the signatory(ies), NGI Sargasso will ask for the **ID or Passport scanned copy of the signatory(ies)**. On the scanned copy, certain personal information included on the document could be covered if not relevant for the contract signature such as religion, ethnicity and/or personal address. The picture, expiry date, name, surname, number of the document and nationality should be visible without exception. NGI Sargasso will also ask for **the power of attorney** of the person who will sign the Sub-grantee agreement.

For entities that are already validated by the European Commission's Funding and Tenders Portal that count with a registered and validated PIC Number we will request:

- ❑ the PIC Number and a screenshot of the Funding and Tenders portal in which it's evidenced the type of organisation which has been selected as a beneficiary (university, NGO, foundation, SME...)

For those entities without a validated PIC number OR without a validated status (like self-declared SMEs) we will request:

- ❑ **Legal entity form.** The Legal Entity form for [private companies](#), and [public law bodies](#) necessary for the awarding of EU funding. Company Register, Official Journal and so forth, showing the name of the organisation, the legal address and registration number.
- ❑ **VAT Number registration** (if applicable), a copy of a document proving VAT registration (in case the VAT number does not show on the registration extract or its equivalent).

Only SMES

- ❑ **SME declaration (see Annex 3):** form based on the standard templates by the EC in which the consortium can verify the ownership structure and financial figures to verify the size of the company.
- ❑ **Balance accounts and P&L** for the last two closed years
- ❑ In companies with linked or associated entities, additional information (accounts for related companies, group trees, etc.) could be requested.

A legal entity that does not provide the requested data and documents in due time will not be included in NGI Sargasso Program.

Sub-grantee agreement preparation

After the validation of the Legal Entity, a written Sub-grantee agreement ([see Annex 4](#)) will be signed with successful applicants, and the NGI SARGASSO coordinator will request the applicant to fill a FIF:

- ❑ **Sub-grantee funding agreement.** Signed between the Consortium (represented by the coordinator ESF) and the beneficiary.
- ❑ **Financial Identification Form (FIF).** Form identifying the account in which the funds will be transferred signed by the legal representative of the organisation and including a bank statement showing the ownership of the account. The coordinator of the consortium, ESF, will also provide additional security measures to verify the ownership of the account.

All the legal issues are accurately covered by the planned contracts with the sub-granted beneficiaries. The sub-grantee agreement will foresee, among other things, the special clauses derived from Horizon Europe in cascading granting, the payment schedule, and conditions (milestones), general legal text issues of rights and obligations by the NGI Sargasso consortium and each sub-grantee, including IPR. It will also have a set of annexes such as the description of the project, the Financial Identification Form and any other document required by NGI Sargasso consortium to assure the correct execution of the sub-granted projects.

After the official onboarding, the sub-granted projects will also define in the Individual Mentoring Plan their coaching plan and their research, business, and technical milestones linked to a set of KPIs, to which the project will associate the payment at the end of each phase. The project coach would support the assessment of the milestones. The objective of the contract preparation is fulfilling the legal requirements between the NGI Sargasso consortium and every beneficiary of the call.

Beneficiaries' Responsibilities

The selected organisations are indirectly beneficiaries of European Commission funding. As such, they are responsible for the proper use of the funding and ensure that the recipients comply with obligations under Horizon specific requirements. The obligations that are applicable to the recipients include:

Conflict of interest

Beneficiaries must take all measures to prevent any situation where the impartial and objective implementation of the sub-project is compromised for reasons involving economic interest, political or national affinity, family or emotional ties or any other shared interest ('conflict of interests'). They must formally notify to the NGI Sargasso coordinator without delay any situation constituting or likely to lead to a conflict of interest and immediately take all the necessary steps to rectify this situation. The NGI Sargasso coordinator may verify that the measures taken are appropriate and may require additional measures to be taken by a specified deadline. If the sub-contracted consortium member breaches any of its obligations, the sub-contract may be automatically terminated. Moreover, costs may be rejected.

Data protection and confidentiality

During implementation of the sub-project and for four years after the end of the sub-project, the parties must keep confidential any data, documents or other material (in any form) that is identified as confidential at sub-contract signing time ('confidential information').

Promotion of the action and EU Funding visibility

The beneficiary must promote their participation in the NGI Sargasso project and the benefits obtained as a result of participating in the program. They will provide targeted information to multiple audiences (including the media and the public) in a strategic and effective manner and to highlight the financial support of the EC. The NGI Sargasso Communication Team will guide, provide materials and support these communication activities. Unless the European Commission or the NGI Sargasso coordinator requests, or agrees otherwise or unless it is impossible, any communication activity related to the action (including in electronic form, via social media, etc.), any publicity, including at a conference or seminar or any type of information or promotional material (brochure, leaflet, poster, presentation etc.), and any infrastructure, equipment and major results funded by the grant must:

- display the EU emblem;
- display the NGI Sargasso logo.

When displayed in association with a logo, the European emblem should be given appropriate prominence. This obligation to use the European emblem in respect of projects to which the EC contributes implies no right of exclusive use. It is subject to general third-party use restrictions which do not permit the appropriation of the emblem, or of any similar trademark or logo, whether by registration or by any other means. Under these conditions, the Beneficiary is exempted from the obligation to obtain prior permission from the EC to use the emblem. Further detailed information on the EU emblem can be found on the [Europa web page](#). Any publicity made by the beneficiary in respect of the project, in whatever form and on or by whatever medium, must specify that it reflects only the author's views and that the EC or NGI sargasso project is not liable for any use that may be made of the information contained therein. The EC and the NGI Sargasso consortium shall be authorized to publish, in whatever form and on or by whatever medium, the following information:

- the name of the beneficiary;
- contact address of the beneficiary;
- the general purpose of the project;
- the amount of the financial contribution foreseen for the project; after the final payment, and the amount of the financial contribution actually received;
- the geographic location of the activities carried out;
- the list of dissemination activities relating to the foreground;
- the details/references and the abstracts of scientific publications relating to the foreground and, if funded within the sub-project, the published version or the final manuscript accepted for publication;



- ❑ the publishable reports submitted to the NGI Sargasso consortium;
- ❑ any picture or any audio-visual or web material provided to the EC and NGI Sargasso in the framework of the project.

The beneficiary shall ensure that all necessary authorisations for such publication have been obtained and that the publication of the information by the EC and NGI Sargasso does not infringe any rights of third parties. Upon a duly substantiated request by the beneficiary, NGI Sargasso, if such permission is provided by the EC, may agree to forego such publicity if disclosure of the information indicated above would risk compromising the beneficiary's security, academic or commercial interests.

Financial audits and control

The European Commission (EC) will monitor compliance with the financial support conditions outlined in Annex 1 of the NGI Sargasso Grant Agreement by beneficiaries and third parties. The EC may conduct financial audits, which may be conducted by external auditors or by EC services, including the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF). Beneficiaries must make all detailed information and data available to the EC or any authorized representative for audit purposes. The beneficiary must keep all sub-project deliverables and documents for up to five years from the end of the project.

Internal communication

Each of the teams selected to join the program must nominate a primary contact point that will act as a coordinator during the duration of the program.

- ❑ Provide any notice in writing to the NGI Sargasso program coordinator.
- ❑ Notify immediately of any change of persons or contact details to the NGI Sargasso coordinator. The address list shall be accessible to all concerned.

External communication and open data

Each funded organisation will be publicly listed at NGI Sargasso public channels like social networks or website. The funding disbursed by the NGI Sargasso consortium to each of the beneficiaries will be made public under a dataset that will be uploaded into an open a free repository as it is Zenodo.

