



# European Lighthouse of AI for Sustainability

## Guidelines for Applicants – 2nd Open Call



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## Document History

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0.1	14.12.2025	First draft	Preparation	Cecilia Zanazzo (UNITN), Michele Gasparoli (UNITN)
1.0	27.02.2026	Final version	Revision and publication	Michele Gasparoli (UNITN), Cecilia Zanazzo (UNITN)

### 1. Basic Info about ELIAS



Motivated by the challenges, risks and opportunities that the wide use of AI brings to the planet, society and individuals, the cardinal objective of ELIAS is to create a Network of Excellence connecting researchers in academia with practitioners in the industry to differentiate Europe as a region where AI research builds towards a sustainable long-term future for our planet, contributes to a cohesive society, and respects individual preferences and rights. In short, ELIAS aims to establish a new pillar for the European AI lighthouse focusing on sustainability.

Our project builds on and expands the highly successful and internationally recognized network of excellence ELLIS (European Laboratory for Learning and Intelligent Systems). It further develops the pillars defined in ELLIS, i.e., research programs, research units, and Ph.D/Postdoc programs, connecting to an ever increasing network of organisations and ELLIS Fellows and Scholars. Our activities support young AI researchers at different stages of their careers and put the basis to the ELIAS alliance (European Leadership in Innovation with AI and Science) enabling the creation of startups and a close collaboration with the industry. The overall vision of ELIAS is summarized in Figure 1, where our six Strategic Objectives (SOs) are defined.

This document summarises the main points of the 2nd Open Call under the ELIAS project, which will be open from February 27th, 2026 at 00:00 CET (Brussels Time) with a deadline on May, 31st 2026 at midnight.

### **Where can you find key information regarding this Open Call?**

- ELIAS website for general information about the program,
- If you have any technical problem or doubt when filling in the online Application Form, tell us directly at [elias-coordination@unitn.it](mailto:elias-coordination@unitn.it)
- Application website, where you can find all documents:  
<https://www.f6s.com/elias-second-open-call/apply>

## **2. What do we offer?**

ELIAS will select 4 SMEs/start ups that will enter the 6-month program and receive:

- Up to € 60.000 (lump sum) to develop novel AI-based applications in one of ELIAS focus areas
- Visibility through ELIAS online channels and events, and dissemination in the ELLIS community.

## **3. What are we looking for?**

ELIAS is looking for projects based on AI applications that engage with the network in the categories "Methodology", "Software/Tools", "Benchmarks" relevant but not limited to the use cases of ELIAS (see list below) in the scope of AI for Sustainability. ELIAS is focused on 3



research spheres but applications are not limited to them as long as the proposals will address high-impact societal and economic challenges using machine learning.

Use Cases:

- AI for Building Optimization
- AI for Monitoring the Virtual Infrastructure
- Responsible, User-centric Advertising
- Mitigating misinformed migrant perception in EU
- AI for Forecasting of Vegetation State
- Materials Discovery
- Personalized co-piloting systems

#### 4. Eligibility Criteria

We are looking for SMEs<sup>1</sup>, NGOs and startups. ELIAS is launching this second open call to select a total of 4 SMEs/startups that engage with the network in the categories “methodology”, “software/tools”, “benchmarks” relevant to the 7 use cases in ELIAS addressing sustainable AI. At minimum, the projects need to reach TRL 5 and show a validation of technology in an industrial relevant environment of one of the use cases. Applicants will be able and are encouraged to offer their own contributions in order to reach even higher TRL levels up to duration of 6 months.

Applicants, at the moment of applying, must be officially registered legal entities established in:

- Member States (MS) of the European Union (EU), including their overseas departments
- The Horizon Europe Associated Countries
- The EU Associated Countries participate in Horizon Europe under the same conditions as the EU Member States. A list with all eligible associated Countries can be found here:
  - [list-3rd-country-participation\\_horizon-euratom\\_en.pdf](#)

<sup>1</sup> An SME will be considered as such if it complies with the European Commission’s Recommendation 2003/361/EC. As a summary, the criteria defining an SME are An SME will be considered as such if it complies with the European Commission’s Recommendation 2003/361/EC. As a summary, the criteria defining an SME are: • Headcount in Annual Work Unit (AWU) less than 250; • Annual turnover less or equal to €50 million OR annual balance sheet total less or equal to €43 million. Note that the figures of partners and linked enterprises should also be considered as stated in the SME user guide. For detailed information check EU recommendation: [https://ec.europa.eu/growth/smes/business-friendly-environment/sme-definition\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/growth/smes/business-friendly-environment/sme-definition_en)



- Legal entities established in any other country or region cannot receive funding in this open Call.

Applications involving or coming from persons or organizations who are partners in the ELIAS consortium or who are formally linked to partners of the ELIAS consortium will not be accepted. For the purposes of this call for proposals, “organizations formally linked to the partners” of the ELIAS consortium are understood according to the definition of affiliated entities and third parties with a legal link to a beneficiary described within the Horizon Europe Annotated Model Grant Agreement – Art. 12 – CONFLICT OF INTEREST.

## **ETHICAL ISSUES**

ELIAS ensures to respect the European Ethics Guidelines Trustworthy AI, with the guarantee that AI systems are not only ethical and socially robust, but also operate harmoniously throughout their entire lifecycle, promoting trust in new AI technologies.

For more information on Ethics Guidelines Trustworthy AI please consult the documentation provided by the European Commission: Ethics Guidelines for AI (<https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/ethics-guidelines-trustworthy-ai>)

All applicants have to include in their proposal a self ethical assessment to identify the ethical risk related to their project. Please use the Ethics Guidelines for Trustworthy AI for self-assessment and write a paragraph answering the ethical questions related to the proposed project.

The ELIAS consortium may check during the evaluation of a proposal if this declaration is in line with the contents of the proposal itself and reserves itself the right to contact the companies for clarification and eventually take necessary steps depending on the ethical issues.

## **4.1 Selection**

The selection will be handled by an open and transparent platform that allows for conflict management in order to implement a fair, trustworthy and effective process. The selection of candidates for the ELIAS 2nd Open Call follows a rigorous, two-stage evaluation framework:

- Phase 1: Internal Evaluation – An initial assessment conducted by the consortium to ensure alignment with the program’s core objectives and technical requirements.
- Phase 2: External Evaluation – Following the internal review, the top 30 ranked candidates will advance to the second stage of evaluation. This phase will be conducted by independent external experts.



Selection Criterion: The transition to the second phase is contingent upon both the ranking and the Use Case (UC) diversity criterion, ensuring a balanced and comprehensive representation across the various thematic areas of the project. After the formal check, legal validation, and ethical review, a FSTP agreement will be signed based on which the funding will be granted. The agreement will include obligations on both sides to report and monitor in order to ensure success of the project and mitigation of risks.

## 4.2 How to apply?

When applying to ELIAS open call, please also note that:

- Your project should have a clear European Dimension meaning that you are proposing European Centric Solutions which will benefit the European society and economy.
- We will evaluate only proposals submitted through the online form available at <https://www.f6s.com/elias-second-open-call/apply> within the deadline Sunday, May 31st, 2026 midnight (Brussels Time). Upon receipt of each proposal, the system will send you a confirmation of your submission.
- You have to verify the completeness of the form, as it won't be possible to add any further information after the deadline. However, you will still be able to modify the form after the proposal until the deadline.
- You can submit only one proposal to this ELIAS Open Call. If more than one proposal is identified, only the most recent (counting back from deadline) will be evaluated.
- Your proposal must be written in English in all mandatory parts in order to be eligible. Only parts written in English will be evaluated.
- All mandatory sections of your proposal must be completed. The data provided should be actual, true, complete and should allow assessment of the proposal. Additional material, not specifically requested in the online application form, will not be considered for the evaluation. We will check the information provided in your application during the external evaluation and Sub Grant Agreement (SGA) preparation phases.
- We will take into consideration the existence of a potential conflict of interest between you and one or more of ELIAS project's Consortium partners. Consortium partners, their affiliated entities, employees and permanent collaborators cannot take part in the ELIAS Open Call. All cases of potential conflict of interest will be assessed case by case.
- Your proposal should address at least one of the focus areas listed in Section 3 or the proposal should present the groundbreaking and quality solution in terms of Machine Learning.



- We don't accept entities that are under liquidation or are an enterprise under difficulty according to the Commission Regulation No 651/2014, art. 2.18, or that are excluded from the possibility of obtaining EU funding under the provisions of both national and EU law, or by a decision of both national or EU authority.
  
- Your project should be based on your original work or your right to use the IPR must be clear. Going forward, any foreseen developments must be free from any third party rights, or those third-party rights must be clearly stated. After the deadline, all applicants will be requested to fill in an ethics self-assessment form provided by ELIAS. Applicants should complete the form within 1 month after the open call deadline (31 June 2026). Additional information about the ethics assessment can be found in the Frequently Asked Question Document.
  
- For the formalization of the selection, the following specific documents must be prepared, finalized and signed:
  - Document 1: Open Call project (including the budget)
  - Document 2: Type of organization declaration
  - Document 3: Specific obligations of Grant Agreement
  - Document 4: Background IP
  
- Signature Protocols: To ensure legal validity, all documents must be executed using one of the following two methods:
  - Certified Electronic Signature: A valid digital signature.
  - Olographic (Wet) Signature: A physical signature accompanied by a high-quality scan or copy of the signatory's official ID card.

## 5. How will we evaluate your proposal?

Our evaluation process is transparent, fair and equal to all our participants. We will evaluate your project in 5 phases as shown below:

	RP2	RP3											
	Feb 26	Mar 26	Apr 26	may 26	June 26	Jul 26	aug 26	sep 26	oct 26	Nov 26	dec 26	Jan 27	Feb 27
	M30	M31	M32	M33	M34	M35	M36	M37	M38	M39	M40	M41	M42
Cascade 1													
Cascade 2													
Cascade 3													
Cascade 4													
Cascade 5	Publication	Proposal preparation			Selection	Implementation						Evaluation approval and payment	
Cascade 6													
Cascade 7													
Cascade 8													

The call will be announced in M30 with 3 months time to prepare and submit proposals. Selection criteria are as follows:

i) Eligibility criteria:

- (1) Type of activity (see above)
- (2) Type of applicant (see above)
- (3) Proposal is prepared in English language
- (4) Submission via the announced submission system
- (5) Proposal submitted by the set deadline
- (6) No conflict of interest.

## 5.2 Eligibility Check

The eligibility check will be done on all proposals submitted before the deadline. All criteria are listed in Section 5 of this document. The projects that do not comply with those criteria will be excluded and marked as ineligible and do not access the selection phase. We will inform you about the results of the eligibility check.

## 5.3 External Evaluation

In the selection phase all projects will be evaluated by external and independent evaluators (at least 2) with wide expertise in the thematic of the call. Your project will be evaluated within the following awarding criteria:

- **EXCELLENCE:**



- a) Ambition: Proposal goes beyond the state-of-the-art and leverages the results and expertise of ELIAS.
- b) Innovation: Level of innovation within the market.
- c) Technical soundness and feasibility: Is the overall approach appropriate, technical correct

**- IMPACT and SCOPE:**

- a) Scope: How is the proposal addressing challenges that hamper deployment of sustainable AI.
- b) Market opportunity & competition: How is the proposal increasing the competitiveness of the company also in comparison to the competition.

**- IMPLEMENTATION:**

- a) Team: Capability of the application and its team to manage, perform and succeed with the project.
- b) Resources: Sufficient resources (requested and owned) to perform the project.

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

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 = Excellent – proposal successfully addresses all relevant aspects of the criterion. Any shortcomings are minor.

Each evaluator will score the application assigning a score from 0 to 5 for each criterion . The threshold for individual criteria will be 3. The overall threshold, applying to the sum of the three individual scores, will be 10.

The final score will be calculated as an average of the individual assessments provided by the Evaluators. If scores on a project show significant divergence between the two evaluators, a third evaluator will be involved to provide an additional independent assessment of the proposal.



Ties will be solved using the following criteria, in order:

- Impact score,
- Implementation score,
- Excellence score,
- Gender balance: proposals with a higher % of women in the project team go first,
- Environment and low carbon economy contribution
- Social Impact
- Date of submission: earlier submitted proposals go first.

A 'Ranking List' will be elaborated. In the event that a Use Case lacks representation within the primary selection, the ranking will be adjusted to include the first eligible candidate from the following Use Case, ensuring that each UC is adequately reflected in the final results.

If not all the funding available in the call is allocated, any remaining FSTP budget will be considered for a potential extra solution funded in this call.

#### **5.4 Sub Grant Agreement Preparation and Signature**

Before the conclusion of the Sub Grant Agreement (hereinafter "Agreement") with the ELIAS Consortium, we will ask you to provide documents regarding your formal status in order to check the eligibility to the call. Please do it within the deadlines that will be communicated to you.

Please note: If you fail to deliver the requested documents on time, without clear and reasonable justification, we will exclude you from the further formal assessment and you will be replaced with the applicant from the ranked in the selection list.

#### **5.5 Support and Payment Arrangements**

The selected grantees will receive a fixed lump sum of up to €60,000. Please note that the awarded grant is subject to mandatory contract registration in accordance with Italian law. The costs associated with this registration will be deducted from the total grant amount. Consequently, the final payment received by the Sub-grantee will be net of these administrative and fiscal expenses.

The lump sum is a simplified method of settling expenses in projects financed from Horizon Europe funds. It means that you are not required to present strictly defined accounting documents to prove the cost incurred, but the grantee is obliged to demonstrate the implementation of the project in line with the milestones set for it.

The lump sum does not release the grantee from the obligation to collect documentation to confirm the costs under fiscal regulation.



The implementation period will last up to 6 months.

The payment will be released after the validation of the Final Report by the Open Call Selection Committee.

Final Report will include:

- Description of the results achieved by your team (max. 5 pages),
- A short summary of the project, which will be published on the ELIAS website,
- Video demonstrating results of your project (max. 5 minutes), which will be published on the ELIAS website,
- Any materials, results or any other deliverables that were the subject of the proposal's objectives must be handed over to the ELIAS consortium.

The Final Report has to be submitted within one month after the project is finished.

You will demonstrate the results of your project during an event organised by ELIAS, where all participants will present the results of their projects, followed by a Q&A session with the Elias Consortium.

## 6. Complaints

If, after receiving the results of one of the evaluation phases (when foreseen), you consider that a mistake has been made, you can send us your complaint.

To do so please send us your complaint in English by email to xxx including the following information:

- your contact details (including email address),
- the subject of the complaint,
- information and evidence regarding the alleged breach.

Any matters not covered by this Guidelines will be governed by Belgium law and rules related to the Horizon Europe and EU grants.

Please take into account that we make our best effort to keep all provided data confidential; however, for the avoidance of doubt, you are solely responsible to indicate your confidential information as such.

All the details related to results, intellectual property rights, background and ownership of results will be defined by the subgrant agreement.

For the selected grantees, the Agreement will include the set of obligations towards the European Commission (for example: promoting the project and giving visibility to the EU



funding, maintaining confidentiality, understanding potential controls by the EC/ECA and OLAF) and the ELIAS Consortium.

The Elias Consortium might cancel the call at any time, change its provisions or extend it. In such a case we will inform all applicants about the change. Signature of the agreement is an initial condition to establish any obligations among applicants and any Consortium partners (with respect to the obligation of confidentiality of the application).

### **Disclaimer**

We reserve the right to make changes during the course of work to the content, methods, or timelines outlined, should this become necessary due to organizational, regulatory, or technical requirements.

Additionally, any updates or amendments to the call for proposals will be promptly published and made available through official channels to ensure maximum transparency and communication.