Economic Inclusion and Justice
for Women of the Western Balkans

EWI Regional Innovation Fund

Frequently Asked Questions

Compiled from written questions submitted by 20 September and the Info Session held on 22 September 2026.

A. ELIGIBILITY & TEAM COMPOSITION

Q1. Is proof of registration required already at the Expression of Interest stage? Can an unregistered team apply if it registers before contracting?
A: The applicant must be a formally registered entity by the application deadline. An unregistered team cannot apply with the intention of completing registration only after selection.

Q2. Is a registered home-based craft activity, taxed under a lump-sum regime, an eligible applicant structure?
A: Yes, provided it is legally registered in one of the four countries and meets the other eligibility requirements of the Call. The specific taxation regime does not in itself determine eligibility.

Q3. Do team members need to be formally employed by the applicant organisation, or can the team include external collaborators, independent professionals, or subcontracted experts?
A: Team members do not need to be permanently employed by the applicant organisation. In addition to permanent staff, the team may include individuals engaged on a part-time, temporary or contractual basis, such as through a service contract or other legally recognised form of engagement, in accordance with the applicable legislation of the relevant country.
All team members must be formally appointed by the applicant's legally authorised representative and clearly identified as members of the team who will be substantively involved in the development and implementation of the innovation.
External experts or consultants engaged for specific, one-off assignments or for expertise not covered by the core team are treated differently. Such experts cannot be pre-selected or designated in advance as part of the team. Their engagement must follow the applicable CARE procurement and selection procedures and be conducted through a transparent and competitive process.

Q4. Can men be part of the team?
A: Yes. Men may be part of the team; however, the eligibility requirement is that the team must be led by a woman and have a majority of women among its members. The proposed team should reflect the people who are substantively involved in developing and implementing the innovation, while respecting this requirement.

Q5. If our legal or tax status limits our ability to receive the grant directly, can we apply through or later contract via a partnership with another eligible entity?
A: The entity that submits the application must be the entity that implements the project and, if selected, signs the contract. Changing the applicant or contracting entity after selection is not a standard arrangement. If you anticipate that your legal or tax status may prevent you from receiving or managing the funds directly, this should be resolved before submission.

Q6. If the innovation will be manufactured or produced by a separate entity (e.g. a partner factory), who should apply, us or them?
A: The formal applicant should be the eligible registered entity that is responsible for developing and implementing the innovation and that will assume contractual responsibility for the grant.
A separate manufacturer, producer or technical partner may participate in implementation where relevant, but this does not automatically make that entity the appropriate applicant. Where several organisations are involved, their respective roles should be clearly described, with one eligible entity identified as the formal applicant and contractual party.

Q7. Can an eligible applicant subcontract specialised services to a company based outside the four EWI countries (e.g. in another EU country)?
A: Yes, this may be possible where the required specialised expertise is not reasonably available within the eligible EWI countries and the need for such external expertise is clearly justified.
However, a specific external company or expert should not be pre-selected or guaranteed in the application. Any such engagement must follow the applicable competitive procurement procedure, ensuring transparency, equal treatment, competition and value for money. The Call does not specify a fixed maximum percentage or amount for subcontracting.

Q8. If we are already receiving funding through another CARE/EWI programme or activity, are we still eligible to apply?
A: Yes, receiving support through another CARE/EWI programme or activity does not automatically make an applicant ineligible to apply to the EWI Innovation Fund. However, the same costs, activities or outputs cannot be financed twice.
Applicants should therefore clearly distinguish the proposed Innovation Fund activities and budget from any activities already financed through other CARE/EWI or donor support, and disclose any relevant existing funding arrangements where applicable.

Q9. Can an already-registered, operating business apply if the proposed innovation is a methodology or process developed within that existing business, rather than a new start-up?
A: Yes. An already-registered and operating business may apply; the innovation does not need to be established as a new start-up or separate legal entity.

The proposed innovation may be a methodology, process, service, platform, business model or other solution developed within the existing business, provided that it represents a clearly identifiable and already validated innovation that contributes to women's economic inclusion.

What is important is to distinguish the proposed innovation from the applicant's regular business operations. The application should clearly explain what already exists, what has been validated, what is innovative about the proposed solution, and what further development, testing, implementation or scaling would be supported through the EWI Innovation Fund.

The Fund is therefore not intended to finance routine business operations or general business expansion, but it may support the further development and scaling of an innovative solution originating within an existing business.

Q10 Should official proof of registration of the applicant organisation/legal entity be translated in English or it is fine as the one att.?

A: Scan of the original official proof of registration is acceptable and does not need to be translated into English.

Q11. Is a woman-led team eligible if its founder is a BiH citizen but the organisation is registered in the Netherlands?

A: No. Eligibility is linked to the applicant legal entity, not only to the nationality of the founder or team members. The formal applicant must be a registered entity from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia or Serbia and must be able to assume responsibility for implementation and contracting.

The fact that the founder is a BiH citizen would therefore not make an organisation registered in the Netherlands eligible as the formal applicant.

Q12. If not, would it be eligible to apply together with a registered organisation in BiH, with that organisation as the lead applicant and me as a team member or partner?

A: Yes. An eligible organisation registered in Bosnia and Herzegovina may act as the formal applicant and project holder, provided that it assumes the legal, financial, administrative and contractual responsibility for implementation.

You may be included as a team member or collaborating partner, provided that your role and contribution to the development and implementation of the innovation are clearly described. The proposed team must still meet the eligibility requirements of being led by a woman and having a majority of women among its members.

It should also be clear that the BiH organisation is a genuine implementing partner, rather than a nominal partner or pass-through entity for an otherwise Netherlands-based application.

Q13. Can validation results from the Netherlands count as evidence of validation, if the proposal is to adapt and pilot the solution in BiH?

A: Yes. Validation evidence from the Netherlands may be used to demonstrate that the underlying solution has already been tested and has practical value.
However, because the proposed innovation would be adapted and implemented in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the applicant should also demonstrate that the problem, target group needs and relevance of the solution have been considered in the BiH context. The Call requires evidence that assumptions have been tested through interaction with users, customers, institutions or other relevant actors and that feedback on the solution has been collected.
The Dutch validation can therefore provide a strong foundation, while further context-specific validation, adaptation and piloting in BiH may form part of the proposed EWI-supported implementation.

B. VALIDATION OF THE INNOVATION

Q14. What counts as sufficient evidence of validation at the Expression of Interest stage?
A: Structured interviews with potential beneficiaries or stakeholders, focus groups, feedback on the proposed solution itself, and/or a small initial pilot may all be appropriate evidence, provided they show that the proposed solution (not only the underlying problem) has been tested to some extent with real users and refined based on findings. A consolidated validation report together with a small selection of the strongest supporting letters or evidence is an appropriate way to present this; full transcripts or every letter received are not required.

Q15. Do we need a working prototype or a completed pilot before applying?
A: No. The Fund does not require the innovation to be fully tested or evaluated before application. More rigorous testing, including quantitative pre/post evaluation, validated instruments, statistical analysis, or further piloting, can be part of the funded implementation phase, as long as the initial concept and approach have already been tested with users and refined based on their feedback before submission.

Q16. Can an already-implemented programme (e.g. an educational programme already delivered, with participant feedback) count as a validated innovation?
A: Yes, potentially, but provided the application demonstrates the elements described in Section 3 of the Call: a clearly identified problem and target users, some degree of testing or implementation of the solution itself, and feedback that has been used to further develop it. The application should also clearly explain the innovative character of the programme and its contribution to women's economic inclusion.

Q17. Would an existing, commercially validated model (already tested with real paying customers and generating market demand) meet the "validated innovation" requirement if the specific women-focused extension of that model has not yet been piloted?

A: Potentially yes, but the commercial validation of the existing model alone would not automatically validate the new women-focused extension.
The applicant should demonstrate that the proposed women-focused adaptation has also undergone some degree of practical validation with the intended users or relevant stakeholders. This does not necessarily require a full pilot before application; validation may include structured interviews, focus groups, user testing, feedback on the proposed methodology or service, or a small-scale test.
The key is to show that the women-focused extension is not only a conceptual idea, but that its relevance and usability have already been tested to some extent. Further piloting, refinement and more rigorous validation may then form part of the activities supported through the EWI Innovation Fund.

Q18. Can a proprietary, practitioner-developed methodology (not a patented technology or physical product) qualify as an innovation? What minimum standard of evidence is required and would independently verified results be needed, or is the applicant's own documentation system acceptable?
A: Yes. An innovation does not need to be a patented technology or physical product. A proprietary methodology, process, service model or other practitioner-developed solution may qualify, provided it is clearly defined, practically validated and contributes to women's economic inclusion. The Call explicitly recognises an initial model or methodology as a valid form of developed solution.
The applicant should provide credible evidence that the methodology has been used or tested in practice, including interaction with intended users, feedback on its relevance and usability, and evidence that further implementation is realistic.
Independent external verification is not stated as a mandatory requirement in the Call. The applicant's own monitoring and documentation may therefore be used, provided the evidence is clear, consistent and sufficiently verifiable. Where available, additional supporting evidence such as testimonials, user feedback, client records, evaluation results, references or other third-party documentation would strengthen the validation case.

Q19. During the mentorship programme, are teams at the "solution model developed" stage expected to further build and test a prototype or MVP?
A: Not necessarily. The four-week Mentorship and Accelerator Programme is intended to help selected teams further strengthen and prepare their innovations for the final funding stage. Depending on the needs and maturity of each innovation, this may include further validation, user and market analysis, refinement of the business or operational model, implementation and financial planning, sustainability, scaling, partnerships, results measurement and pitch preparation.

Prototype or MVP development may therefore be addressed during the mentorship where relevant, but it is not a standard requirement for every team to complete a fully developed or fully tested prototype/MVP during the four-week programme. More substantial prototyping, piloting or testing may form part of the subsequent implementation phase for innovations selected for funding.

C. BUDGET & ELIGIBLE COSTS

Q20. What is the guiding principle for what counts as an eligible cost?
A: The main guiding principle is the direct link of the cost to the development, testing, implementation or scaling of the innovation. The Fund is intended to finance innovation-specific costs, not the applicant's regular organisational or routine business operating costs.
Any cost should therefore be necessary, reasonable and clearly justified in relation to the proposed innovation, supported by appropriate documentation, and incurred in line with CARE procurement procedures and applicable law.
Applicants should not adjust their concept or budget in anticipation of specific categories being eligible or not; describe your innovation and its real needs and build the indicative budget around that.

Q21. Which costs are not eligible?
A: Costs that are not directly linked to the development, testing, implementation or scaling of the proposed innovation would generally not be considered eligible. This includes regular organisational overheads and routine business operating costs that the applicant would incur regardless of the innovation.
Costs may also be considered ineligible if they are not adequately justified, are not supported by appropriate documentation, do not comply with CARE procurement procedures, or are not in line with applicable legal requirements.
The key question is therefore: Would this cost still exist if the innovation were not being developed or implemented? If yes, it is likely to be considered a routine operating cost rather than an innovation-specific cost.

Q22. Is workshop/experience space rental (including off-season), shared equipment/tools/materials, a small modular structure, business/liability insurance, or a website/booking system eligible?
A: These may be eligible where directly necessary for developing and implementing the innovation: see the general principle above and the operational-costs and equipment answers

below. There is no separate list of automatically approved or excluded individual items; each is assessed against whether it is genuinely required for this specific innovation.

Q23. Are payments/fees to women directly involved in production (e.g. weaving, embroidery), or the cost of a project/innovation coordinator, eligible?
A: May be eligable, where directly linked to developing, testing, or implementing the innovation and clearly justified in the budget.

Q24. Are bookkeeping/accounting costs and bank transaction fees eligible?
A: Only where directly attributable to implementing the supported innovation, not the organisation's general accounting for its overall operations.

Q25. Are office and operational costs (rent, electricity, water, internet, phone, office supplies) eligible, and is there a maximum percentage or cap?
A: There is no fixed, predefined percentage cap. A proportional share may be eligable if it is directly linked to the innovation and clearly justified and documented.

Q26. Is necessary equipment for prototyping, testing, or pilot implementation (e.g. drying, grinding, storage, or other specialised equipment) an eligible cost, and is there a cap?
A: The same principle applies as for operational costs above: equipment essential for testing and validating the innovation may be eligible if justified and documented, with no fixed predefined percentage cap. This will also be confirmed as part of the budget agreed before contract signing.

Q27. Is there a maximum percentage or amount of the grant that may go toward subcontracting or external services?
A: No fixed maximum is specified in the Call.

Q28. Are marketing, branding and promotion costs or regional cooperation/networking activities such as experience exchange or joint presentations with organisations in other countries eligible?
A: These may be eligible if directly linked to developing, testing, improving, scaling or promoting the specific innovation in the application. Promotion of existing products/services, or support for an organisation's ongoing operations without a clearly defined and validated innovative element, is not the purpose of this Call.

Q29. What percentage of the grant is paid in advance, and when?
A: The first payment is made in January, based on your projected cash flow for the first six months of implementation. Reporting takes place every three months. A second payment then covers the remaining roughly four months of implementation with 10% of the total grant held back for a final

payment, released once all reporting is complete and all costs are confirmed as eligible (expected by the end of November).

Q30. What is the eligible cost period, i.e. over what period can implementation costs be incurred?
A: 1 January to 31 October of 2027.

Q31. Annex 1 – Budget Summary includes a column for "Contribution by Recipient or other sources". Is a financial contribution from the recipient required, or can CARE fund up to 100% of the eligible implementation budget, within the maximum grant amount?

A: The Call does not establish a mandatory co-financing requirement for applicants. Applicants may therefore request funding for the eligible costs of implementing the innovation, up to the maximum available support of EUR 27,000 per innovation.

The column "Contribution by Recipient or other sources" should be completed where the applicant plans to contribute its own resources or where additional financing from another source is foreseen. Such a contribution is not presented in the Call as a condition for eligibility.

Q32. If the recipient provides existing premises, institutional infrastructure, equipment and/or staff time for implementation of the innovation, can these contributions be recognised under "Contribution by Recipient or other sources"? If so, are there specific requirements regarding their valuation and documentation?
A: Yes, such resources may be presented as in-kind/non-cash contributions where they directly support implementation of the innovation. At the EOI stage, they should be clearly identified and described on an indicative basis.
The Call does not prescribe a specific valuation methodology for in-kind contributions; any detailed requirements would be clarified at the Final Application or contracting stage.

Q33. Annex 1 indicates that staff directly engaged in the innovation may be included as an expense. Can the cost of a coordinator/manager, directly responsible for implementation, coordination and day-to-day operation during the implementation period, be included as an eligible cost? Are there any specific limits applicable to staff costs?
A: Yes. The cost of a coordinator or manager may be eligible where the person is directly engaged in the implementation and coordination of the innovation, and the cost is clearly justified in relation to the proposed activities. This is consistent with the principle presented during the Info Session that eligible costs must have a direct link to the development, testing, implementation or scaling of the innovation.
The cost should be reasonable and proportionate to the actual work performed, properly documented and compliant with applicable national legislation. No fixed percentage or specific

ceiling for staff costs is established in the Call, but the overall budget will be assessed in terms of justification, efficiency and value for money.

D. PROCESS & MENTORSHIP PROGRAMME

Q34. How frequent are the mentorship sessions between 12 October and 8 November?
A: The exact frequency is not fixed, and it depends on the needs of the selected cohort. What is confirmed: joint online workshops (2–3 hours per week), individual mentoring sessions scheduled per team's needs, and periodic check-ins throughout the four weeks. A detailed schedule is shared with selected teams once the cohort is confirmed.

Q35. What is the working language of the programme, including the final pitch and Q&A?
A: English. The mentoring process, the final pitching event, and the Q&A session. As this is a regional initiative across four countries, English ensures equal participation and understanding for everyone involved.

Q36. Must the team member delivering the pitch be a woman?
A: There is no specific requirement that the pitch itself must be delivered by a female team member. The eligibility requirement is that the team as a whole is majority-female and women-led. Teams should strategically choose whoever can present the innovation and the team most effectively.

Q37. Will the EWI Innovation Challenge (pitching event) be held online or in person?
A: The current intention is to organise the EWI Innovation Challenge **in person**. However, depending on operational circumstances, travel possibilities, or other practical considerations, the event may be organised in a **hybrid or fully online format** if necessary. The final format and logistical details will be communicated to the selected finalists in due time.

Q38. What is the benefit of going through mentorship for teams that are ultimately not selected for funding?
A: The Mentorship and Accelerator Programme is designed to provide value to all selected teams, regardless of the final funding decision. Participants will benefit from expert guidance and practical feedback to further develop and strengthen their innovation, including its validation, business or operational model, financial planning, sustainability, scaling strategy, partnerships and implementation approach.
Teams will also benefit from:

- individual and group mentoring with experts;
- peer learning and regional networking with other innovative teams from the four countries;
- strengthening their pitching and presentation skills;

- improving their investment and funding readiness for future opportunities;
- refining their value proposition, implementation plan and growth strategy;
- gaining greater visibility for their innovation;
- participating in the pitching process, where finalists can connect with relevant stakeholders, experts, potential partners and investors;
- developing materials, knowledge and contacts that can support future applications, partnerships or fundraising even if EWI funding is not awarded.

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