

Flash project

Comparing Innovative Practices Regarding Ethical and Sustainable Approaches within Food Systems – Elaboration of a methodology and socio-economic evaluation criteria (CIPRESA)

Information file for applicants

Submission deadline proposals
26/09/2025 @ 17h00

INTRODUCTION

This document provides specific information for research teams interested in submitting a research proposal in response to a Flash project call in the frame of the "Science4Policy (S4P) programme".

FLASH PROJECTS

FLASH projects are short-term projects with **a maximum duration of 12 months**. The Flash projects are designed to deliver a rapid response to a pressing policy demand for which scientific evidence is requested from the academic community. A call for a Flash project is issued by BELSPO whenever requested by a Federal public administration and its Minister in charge.

Flash projects are not intended to produce new knowledge but use sound existing knowledge to generate scientific grounded evidence for policy action.

CONTENT OF THE STUDY

Objective of the project:

1. Background

This project is submitted in the context of the CIPRESA platform, which has the goal to prepare for the possible set-up of a science policy interface tasked with advising the political level on policy actions to strive for sustainable agri-food systems, especially via innovative solutions (such as alternative food production practices and technology, usage of AI in processing, gene editing, sustainable consumption patterns...). The members of the platform are part of both

federal as regional ministries and public institutes, and it is the ambition to increase its membership with representatives of academia in the short term.

The goal for this project is to set up a comparative sustainability assessment to form the basis of a high-level sustainability analysis, building upon existing frameworks and literature, and to select measurable criteria most suitable for a sustainability analysis in our national context, with a particular focus on the socio-economic dimension of sustainability. The output of the analysis should be a high-level overview of the different risks and benefits of the innovation under discussion and its alternatives, based on existing literature and data. Follow up studies to this first scan could be then considered but are not within the scope of the CIPRESA platform at this stage.

To demonstrate the methodology, a to be identified case study should be elaborated based on the methodology and criteria selected.

2. Research domain: Social geography, bioeconomics, agronomy, environmental studies, social studies, sustainable food systems

3. Keywords (5 maximum): Food systems, sustainability analysis, value chains, socio-economic sustainability, One Health

4. Specific research questions

The proposal will address the following research questions:

1) Based on frameworks and literature available, what would be an appropriate comparative sustainability assessment of predetermined innovative practices and their alternatives within the food system, considering the whole value chain and with a particular focus on the socio-economic dimension?

2) Based on frameworks and literature available, which criteria would be promising to evaluate the socio-economic sustainability of different innovative practices within the food system, paying attention to them being measurable and relevant for our scope?

5. Duration and schedule

The project will last **a maximum of 8 months**. **Deliverable 1** is expected no later than 4 months after the start of the project. **Deliverable 2** is expected no later than 7 months after the start of the project (negotiable). **Deliverable 3** should come no later than 8 months after the start of the project.

6. Deliverables

Deliverable 1: Methodology

This deliverable is focused on the elaboration of a comparative sustainability assessment requested by the political level. Key for this assessment is for it to be science-based and realistic in its approach, focusing on existing data, literature and expertise in a food system context and keeping the time investment and knowhow needed for its execution within reasonable levels.

Concretely, the comparative sustainability assessment would start from an innovative practice in a food system context (e.g. AI in value chain traceability, cultivation of gene edited crops, cultured meat, circular food waste management...). After this, the following steps would apply:

- Step 1: The identification of alternative practices with a comparable aim;
- Step 2: The selection of sustainability criteria in relation to the practices selected in step 1 (see also Deliverable 2);
- Step 3: The application of the selected criteria to each of the selected practices, based on existing literature and expert knowledge.

Based on a first analysis by members to the CIPRESA Platform, two approaches have been identified for further consideration to inspire the elaboration of the above-mentioned steps:

ACRE (2007) – Managing the Footprint of Agriculture: Towards a Comparative Assessment of Risks and Benefits for Novel Agricultural Systems

This study is rather old, but its origins – moving from a discussion on the sustainability of GMOs to a broader discussion on the sustainability of food as a whole – are very similar to those of the CIPRESA platform, which makes it an interesting example of how a methodology could be elaborated. Additionally, the narrative of the study is well balanced, which is beneficial given the heated societal debate around sustainable food policy in the recent past. The level of detail of the output presented in the article is also in line with our expectations, although additional data assessment, if possible, would be of added value.

Concrete expectations regarding this framework would be the integration of new insights in the field of sustainability analysis, reflections on the need to adapt the methodology to the Belgian context opposed to the UK, an increase in scope to cover the full value chain and not only primary production and lastly 'how' the socio-economic dimension can be integrated into the assessment, as this is lacking in the ACRE framework. This is in close relation to Deliverable 2 as well.

OECD Regulatory Impact Assessment

The concept of a Regulatory Impact Assessment (RIA) – a concept introduced by the OECD via a series of publications – is already in use for a while within the Belgian government as one of the final stages of the national legislative process (see link). Food is one of the parameters considered during the analysis, but the evaluation wizard does not go further into depth. However, currently a revision of the RIA is underway at the Belgian level, taking more inspiration from the Sustainable Development Goals in its evaluation process. An update on this process can be given after the attribution of this Flash project by the FPS representative to this process. The reason the OECD RIA was mentioned was because of the appropriate level of detail (if conducted qualitatively) and the fact that it is specifically modelled to evaluate the sustainability of policy decisions (at least in Belgium). The fact that it is an agreed way of working within the federal context could also help with the acceptance by the political level for the methodology. Given that this framework is probably less fitting to be used as a starting point within this deliverable, its scope as a policy analysis tool could provide useful insights to integrate into the methodology.

The output of this study would also be of added value to feed the revisions of RIA, especially on the food topic.

Other literature

If other approaches to assess sustainability on a comparative basis are known to the researchers, which are in line with the holistic and resource-friendly nature of our expectations, they are welcomed.

Additional issues to consider in the offer

Points of attention not yet mentioned above for the set-up of the methodology are the following:

- Within the CIPRESA platform, there was an interest to utilize feedback loops in the methodology as a second stage assessment. This means that after the effects of a certain innovative practice are identified based on the pre-identified sustainability criteria, a (concise) second analysis would be done on how these effects relate to certain key issues. More concretely and as an example, the impact on public health was identified as a holistic issue by the CIPRESA platform opposed to being an individual criterium. Members of the group therefore preferred rather to see how the observed effects could impact public health.

If and how this can be integrated can be further elaborated by mutual agreement.

- It is of importance that the comparative sustainability assessment takes into account effects within Belgium as well potential impact abroad, including third countries.
- Stakeholder consultation is also key in this process, to ensure the selected methodology and associated criteria are supported by the relevant players, with a particular focus on the public sector and academia. A stakeholder event will be organized by FPS early 2025 – aimed at the public sector and academia – to collect additional input for this Flash project and – pending discussions within the CIPRESA platform – other related activities, of which the results might prove useful for this deliverable. Additional stakeholder activities can be identified by mutual agreement over the course of the project.

Deliverable 2: Socio-economic criteria

Sustainability is a broad concept and is usually roughly divided into a societal dimension(s) and a planet dimension (e.g. 3P's, the Doughnut approach...). The most common approach is to look at environmental, social and economic aspects (noting social and economic aspects are not always easy to differentiate or measure). For the sake of clarity, we put forward the current interpretation of socio-economic aspects to sustainability in a food systems context:

“Aspects related to the promotion, access, affordability and cultural acceptance of healthy diets taking into account food safety aspects, animal health and welfare, plant health, responsible business practices and fair employment throughout the value chain and a fair distribution of returns and other impacts across the food system.”

It is key that the sustainability analysis in the context of CIPRESA takes into account all aspects of sustainability to optimally visualise the different trade-offs between certain innovations and their alternatives. However, when formulating criteria to utilize in this analysis, certain domains within sustainability prove more developed for this cause than others. There is a significant body of work on evaluating environmental sustainability in a value chain, also regarding food systems, mainly in the context of Life Cycle Assessment's and comparable processes. At the socio-economic side however, we find it more challenging to find clear criteria to be used in this context.

A first scan of sustainability criteria lists was done based on Alaoui et al 2022 – *An Overview of Sustainability Assessment Frameworks in Agriculture (SAFA)*, as this study really focused on frameworks where both the environmental and the socio-economic aspect of sustainability are present. Based on this, considering the specific CIPRESA context and feedback from stakeholders, the FAO Sustainability Assessment of Food and Agriculture systems was identified as a good basis for further discussion. Additional input from other studies, more recently published or not retained for Alaoui et al 2022, is of course welcomed.

Next to the international context, it is also of importance to integrate what has already been developed in a national context (e.g. within professional associations, public research institutes...).

The goal for this project would be to select the criteria from both international and national sources to utilize in the comparative sustainability assessment identified under Deliverable 1, with special attention to the measurability and appropriateness for the high-level scope of the CIPRESA platform. We do not expect the identified criteria will be relevant for all specific cases the CIPRESA platform will be dealing with but consider the criteria as more of a master list where general applicable criteria might be chosen from on a case-by-case basis. This in line with the step-by-step process described in Deliverable 1.

The exact deliverable is a list of socio-economic criteria, inspired by or taken from SAFA, with a concise set of instructions per criterium on how an evaluation of this criterium would be undertaken, under the assumption the data is available.

Attention for potential impact abroad, including third country impact and stakeholder involvement, as described above, is also relevant for this deliverable.

Deliverable 3: Application of the methodology to a “to be determined” case

The third deliverable is a first application of the comparative sustainability assessment to demonstrate the feasibility of the model and criteria by use of a practical case. This would be especially useful for communication purposes with the political level. This analysis must build upon the conclusion of Deliverable 1 and 2 and work done outside of this Flash project on environmental sustainability criteria.

A further concretization of this deliverable can be done by mutual agreement, for example on the nature of the case.

7. Impact, KPIs and objectives

KPI 1: Approval of the comparative sustainability assessment by the follow-up committee.

KPI 2: Approval of the criteria list by the follow-up committee.

KPI 3: Utilization of the comparative sustainability assessment, via an approval of the output documents by the follow-up committee.

8. Specific conditions and implementation

FPS wishes to meet regularly (monthly meeting) with the research group to whom this project would be attributed to, to discuss the progress to the deliverables and give additional feedback on the direction to take. The exact format of this monthly meeting depends on the agenda and the availabilities at that time.

A follow-up committee will be set up, with bimonthly meetings to discuss the progress of the project and allow the exchange with other administrations outside of the FPS. The exact composition still needs to be identified but will most probably be based on the composition of the CIPRESA platform.

BUDGET

The budget allocated to the project is depending on its duration. This one **shall not exceed 8 months**. A **maximum amount of 10.000€/month** can be allocated for a Flash project.

The eligible costs are:

- Personnel costs: Staff costs include the (full) costs relating to staff recruited under employment contracts and to non-salaried staff (lump sum payment per Person/Month);
- Specific operating costs: This includes the cost of goods and services directly related to the implementation of the project and of which the list is included in the proposal.
- Indirect costs: Lump sum to cover the general operating costs set at 15% of personnel and specific operating costs.

APPLICATION

Flash proposals must be written in English and signed electronically. Proposals (in pdf format) should be sent to flash@belspo.be by mentioning the Flash proposal acronym in the subject line of the e-mail. Applicants are required to meet the conditions set forth in this information documents and to comply with the scope of the call for the Flash project. The template of the application form can be accessed via the BELSPO website, [Documents for promoters | S4Policy | P4Science & S4Policy \(belspo.be\)](#).

The closing date for this Call is **26/09/2025 at 5.00 p.m.**

EVALUATION AND SELECTION

The Flash proposals are evaluated and recommended for funding by a panel of independent foreign experts under the supervision of BELSPO, within 4 weeks after the submission deadline. The evaluation criteria are the adequacy of the budget and human resources, the skill(s) of the scientific team(s) and the methodological approach.

The evaluation form template can be consulted on the website: [Documents for promoters | S4Policy | P4Science & S4Policy \(belspo.be\)](#)

The final decision is taken by the Chairman of the Board of Directors of BELSPO upon the advice of the Inspector of finances, within the available budget.

CONTACT AND QUESTIONS

For any further questions about this call for Flash proposals, please get in touch with the Belspo Flash team via e-mail: flash@belspo.be.