

POST-COVID: Building an evidence base and lessons learned for future preparedness

Call for research proposals 2023

Information File for applicants

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I CONTEXT

The aim of this programme is to fund scientific projects that aim at a close examination of the long-term impact of the COVID crisis on the Belgian society, with a view to **produce key messages and lessons learned for the federal government**. Applicants will focus their proposals on the themes and sub-themes that are specified and detailed in the call text (see further in this document).

The programme will fund research proposals that comply with the following principles:

I.1 EXCELLENCE

Only scientific proposals that have demonstrated excellence in 1) their scientific approach, 2) their implementation and 3) the exploitation of their results will be considered for funding. An independent scientific evaluation (peer review by foreign scientists) will reveal the proposals that will be eligible for funding according to these criteria.

The programme, intending to draw lessons from the COVID crisis based on scientific evidence, will be open to teams aiming for pure scientific innovation (i.e. proposals that push the boundaries of current academic knowledge - these are known as *beyond the state of the art* projects) but also to teams that, although reproducing studies already carried out elsewhere, produce completely new and important insights for Belgium (these are known as *within the state of the art* projects).

Teams will select the type of project/methodology (beyond/within) and the evaluation will be adapted to take these modalities into account. In both cases, the quality of the objectives, the hypotheses formulated, the methodology used, the data exploited, the expected results, etc. will be examined in detail by the evaluators.

I.2 INTERNATIONAL/EUROPEAN DIMENSION

Proposals must integrate the international and especially European context in their scientific approach, ranging from a simple contextualisation (when comparable results do not exist) to a real one-to-one comparison. Belgian teams may involve foreign partners in the proposals for this purpose, provided that the latter provide their own funding.

I.3 IMPLEMENTATION

The evaluators will comment on the way the scientific teams propose to implement their proposal in practice: quality of the network and complementarity of expertise, work plan and timing, data management plan, ethical approach to research, division of tasks into coherent work packages, required budget, etc. will be examined.

I.4 VALORISATION

In the framework of this programme, the valorisation of projects, both during their execution and at the end of the project, is of particular importance. Each team will have to propose a promotion plan to explain how it will address the non-scientific public (it being understood that each team will ensure that the project is promoted to the scientific public). Particular care must be taken in promoting the project to non-scientific audiences. There can be no question of a simple passive restitution of scientific results, but it is compulsory in this process to engage the stakeholders via co-creation formulas. **An essential stage will consist of translating the scientific results into recommendations for federal decision-making in the most appropriate form, by actively involving the federal actors concerned (co-design) so that the recommendations can be translated into concrete actions, if necessary.**

The valorisation process does not end with the submission of the final proposal report to BELSPO. BELSPO will allocate the necessary means and resources to this fundamental aspect of the proposal. To this end, teams will receive between 1 to 6 months for implementing their impact plan after the scientific part of the project is realised. BELSPO also foresees actions for clustering activities and valorising the results of all projects into an appropriate format for decision-makers and other appropriate stakeholders.

I.5 IN SCOPE

The research to be funded must fit unambiguously into the (sub)themes of the call and aim to provide tangible insights into the knowledge needs expressed in the call text for proposals. The "In scope" character of the proposals is a criterion taken into account in the scientific evaluation. The IN-scope character of a proposal also lies in the fact that **the core of the proposal and its end result must lie within the competences of the federal state**. In the stage of the selection, the programme Committee will ensure that the selected proposal meet the "federal" character of the research (see below).

I.6 PLURI-TRANS-MULTIDISCIPLINARITY

Within the framework of this programme, the intention is to combine or intersect the scientific approaches around the same research object. This implies that only teams that form a trans-multi-disciplinary network are eligible. It also implies that the evaluators will be asked to pay attention to the way these disciplines will work together and build integrated results.

The scientific networks must consist of two different research institutions (federal scientific institutes, universities, colleges, public research centres, non-profit organisations with the pursuit of scientific research stipulated in their statutes).

I.7 DURATION OF THE PROJECTS

The projects will have a duration of 24 to 30 months, plus 1-6 months for the implementation of the impact plan. It should be noted that the contract commitments will be made late in 2023. The teams will receive an additional 3 months, necessary for the operational start-up of their work (hiring of scientific staff, etc.). The end date of the projects can in no case be later than 15 December 2026.

I.8 INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY, OPEN SCIENCE, OPEN DATA, ETHICS

The research contract that will be concluded between the selected teams and BELSPO contains certain dispositions that applicants need to take into consideration when writing their proposals.

- 1) Intellectual Property Rights: The Foreground - the results (including information) produced by the project - shall be the property of the institution carrying out the work generating this foreground, as mentioned in [article 12 of the General Conditions \(Annex II of the contract\)](#). As regards existing information and data, ownership remains the same. Each institution shall ensure that the foreground of which it has ownership, is disseminated as fast as possible and free of charge. The State can however freely use (without licence) the foreground for internal purposes.
- 2) Open access, open data: In accordance with the relevant BELSPO Open Research Data Mandate, each Institution undertakes to make the foreground and background relating to research data, available as soon as possible and free of charge in an approved data repository (Open Research Data Repository). This concerns data that supports the research results, with its metadata and other contextualised (curated) and/or raw data mentioned in the Data Management Plan (DMP) submitted by the grant applicant. The data must comply with the FAIR principle (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable and Reusable) and must be accessible according to the principle "As open as possible, as closed as necessary". In the case of an online article published within an Open Access journal, the Article Processing Charge (APC) will be of maximum 1 300 € (see the budget rules in the Annex), and a copy of the Editor's version must be immediately deposited in an institutional repository and made public and free of access.
- 3) Ethics in research: The European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (2017) serves as ethical reference and self-regulatory framework for research projects funded by BELSPO. <https://allea.org/code-of-conduct/#toggle-id-8> The code originally published in 2014 by ALLEA (All European Academies) and then revised in 2017. All projects must take this code of ethics into account in their research. If necessary, the Ethical Board of the institutions concerned by a project must be consulted before submitting a proposal.
- 4) Gender: BELSPO strongly encourages proposal to take into account the equality between women and men and to ensure gender mainstreaming in the implementation of the project. The proposal should include this both in the choice of the researchers and, where relevant, by integrating the gender dimension into their research. All statistics produced, collected and commissioned are, where appropriate, disaggregated by sex and gender indicators are established where relevant.

I.9 A PRELIMINARY SCREENING FOLLOWED BY AN INDEPENDENT EVALUATION

Applicants must first submit a **pre-proposal**. The submitted pre-proposals will be screened by the Programme Committee to verify the federal character: the proposals must have federal competences

at the heart of their subject of study and thus guarantee that the scientific results concern the federal government in the first place. This should not prevent proposals from also dealing, in a secondary manner, with competences held by the federal authorities, while respecting the coherence desired by the researchers in the treatment of their research subject.

Applicants will be informed by BELSPO if they can submit their **full proposal**.

The **full proposals** submitted will be evaluated by foreign peers, bound by a confidentiality and non-conflict of interest agreement, in a two-stage process.

In the first stage (remote phase), each proposal is submitted to three experts in the field who will work independently of each other. They each fill in an evaluation form. These three forms are working documents for the next stage and are not communicated to the research teams. Any differences of opinion, outliers that are too generous or too severe, will be ironed out in the next stage.

This second stage is crucial: it will provide an objective and consensual rendering of the intrinsic quality of each proposal and its relative position compared to the other proposals submitted (helicopter view). A panel of high-level "generalist" experts is set up. The number and composition of this panel depends on the disciplines and the number of proposals submitted. In the panel meeting all the proposals are discussed in order to have a consensus between the intrinsic and relative quality of the proposal, resulting in a report containing the ranking of the proposals (these are classified according to whether or not they are fundable: highly recommended/recommended/not recommended) and in the finalised consensus reports.

I.10 A TRANSPARENT SELECTION PROCEDURE

The Programme Committee will make a project selection proposal to the State Secretary for Science Policy and Minister of Public Health. This selection is based on the ranking proposed by the Panel of Experts: the *highly recommended* proposals will be selected in any case. Proposals "*not recommended for funding*" will in no case be funded. Strategic choices will be necessary if the budget required for fundable proposals (recommended for funding) exceeds the available budget.

These strategic choices are based on the following objective criteria:

- Coverage of the call: in addition to the highly recommended proposals, there will be proposals that are guided by the inclination to cover all the themes of the call.
- Complementarity and critical mass: this criterion aims to select proposals that are complementary to each other, in order to create a critical mass of projects;
- Transversal criteria: in addition to these first criteria, the strategic choice can also be guided (e.g. in case of a tie) by the gender criterion (in order to balance the gender representation in the final selection and/or give preference to a proposal where the gender dimension in the scientific approach is particularly marked), national coverage (giving preference to research that covers the whole territory in a balanced way) or proposals associating teams from the north and the south of the country.

With these criteria, we seek to form a coherent and solid portfolio of projects.

I.11 AN OBJECTIVE AND TRANSPARENT FEEDBACK

At the end of this process, once the selection list has been endorsed by the State Secretary for Science Policy and the Minister of Public Health, the candidate teams are informed of the status of their proposal. This feedback is such that they can understand in an objective and transparent way the elements that led to their (non) selection. To this end, they receive:

- the consensus evaluation report of their proposal,
- an extract regarding their proposal of the panel and the Programme Committee report.

Information about other projects is not disclosed.

II CALL INFORMATION

II.1 DOCUMENTATION RELATED TO THIS CALL

The following documents are available on the BELSPO website:

- Information document (the present document)
- Templates of the Pre-proposal
- Template of the Full proposal
- Gender checklist
- Ethics checklist
- Data Management Plan checklist
- Evaluators eligibility: eligibility rules of proposed experts for the evaluation of the proposal
- Letter of support (to the follow-up committee and/or impact plan)

II.2 CALL FOR PROPOSALS

II.2.1 SCOPE OF THE CALL

COVID is not behind us, but the turmoil of the crisis is. When it burst out in early 2020, it immediately created a wave that shook the world and the Belgian society in all its aspects. This call for proposals will not aim at unravelling all the possible aspects of the COVID crisis but it will focus on 4 main themes.

1. Well-being
2. Inequalities and vulnerabilities
3. Democratic governance
4. Pandemic Intelligence

While a wealth of scientific evidence and data has been generated in many areas of the COVID crisis, these topics present *knowledge needs* for the federal level. The Belgian research community is invited to produce robust scientific information on these topics (see their full description below).

The OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) has at the request of the federal government worked on an independent audit of the Belgian responses to the corona crisis. This report will reveal key findings and recommendations for future preparedness. This report creates potential for knowledge and/or data exchange. Applicants are invited to take note of this report that is expected by the end of the year.

We insist that it is paramount in this programme that the generated scientific corpus is communicated in appropriate format to non-scientific stakeholders (including the federal level in the first place) and discussed with said stakeholders in order to produce **lessons learned and recommendations for federal decision-making**, supporting preparedness for the future.

The 3 first themes are closely intertwined. Therefore, applicants can either choose to examine a specific topic within the theme it belongs to or investigate it across the different themes. And finally, note that virological and clinical research topics are not within the scope of this call.

A budget of 7 million € is dedicated to this call: 5 million € for the first three topics and 2 million € for topic 4 (Pandemic Intelligence).

II.2.1.1 WELL-BEING

CONTEXT

The COVID-19 pandemic and the measures taken to combat it, had a fundamental impact on the well-being of the population in many ways. An accurate understanding of the positive and/or negative changes and/or evolution in well-being, the aspects that led to these changes and the consequences of these changes in well-being in the short and especially the long term, is a necessary step to advance our understanding and draw lessons for the future.

SCOPE

Well-being is a very broad concept. We invite the scientific community to specifically focus their proposals on the following dimensions:

The impact of the COVID crisis on the **mental well-being** of the population in the face of restrictions to freedom (such as lockdowns) requires to be appraised in breadth, width, and intensity by research. The impact of prolonged confinement, in addition to the death of relatives and increased social adversity, might have led, for a portion of the population to psychological adverse effects and intense emotional adjustment reactions that potentially increased the risk of emotional disturbance, anxiety, depression, low mood, irritability, insomnia, and post-traumatic stress symptoms. Substance use (illicit, but also tobacco, alcohol, gambling...) is also an issue that came up during COVID which we need more evidence on. Some of these effects might be persisting still today. Research can also have

a closer look at those who did not (or hardly) suffer(ed) from mental adversities during and/or after the pandemic and showed a resilience capacity.

Beyond individual mental reactions, we are also interested in unveiling the impact of COVID and of the restrictive measures on our **interpersonal relations and dynamics**, as they had to be recomposed inside and outside the so-called household bubble. What should we learn from restricting the population to a small bubble? Topics such as family reconnection, parental stress, domestic violence, the lived experience of each member of the bubble... need further investigation. Outside the bubble, the restrictions on our social life affected our inter-personal relations. Socialisation and in-person social interactions were deeply affected in ways that we need to better understand. Additionally, many important moments in life such as births, deaths, marriages etc., and the (often) associated rituals usually shared with family, friends and acquaintances, could not proceed or happened in isolation and/or in reduced capacity. In this respect, how has COVID affected the lived experience of loneliness, of dealing with mourning and grieve, of changes in socialization, on the impact on friendships and other types of relationships?

In terms of wellbeing and the associated sub-themes, we should draw a specific focus on situation of **populations in specific settings**. Retirement homes for instance were particularly affected by the COVID crisis, because of the high death toll, but also because the older residents suffered from isolation and quarantine measures. The impact from being cut off from the regular social and family contact, deserves to be appraised by research. Similarly, to older people, this analysis could also cover other subpopulations living in specific settings (for example children and adults with – severe - disabilities in healthcare facilities for example).

Specific groups of people experienced the COVID crisis and the associated measures differently than other groups, in potentially adverse or positive ways that should be studied in this programme. In terms of gender, women and men might have experienced the same measures in different ways. In terms of age groups, children and youths seem to have been impacted differently than adults. For them, the onset of the pandemic meant a sudden departure from their familiar environment and schedule. This meant a removal and/or break from their typical school routine, free time occupation (sports, music, art, youth movement...), family life, social engagement with peers, etc. These impacts could have influenced their long-term well-being in various ways such as disengagement, learning deficits, altered relationships with family and friends, digital activities, altered mental well-being ...

The **relation to work**, which massively entered the virtual sphere for a large portion of workers, requires further analysis in terms of the impact on the well-being of the population concerned: aspects such as burnouts, (lack of or changes in) interactions with colleagues, changes in the work-life balance, stress related to remote work, to employment and financial (in)security, and work satisfaction deserve to be considered in research proposals.

We are also interested to know more on the way the COVID crisis might have affected our **values, norms, lifestyles and the way we see our own well-being**. Have we changed the way we consider our own health, selfcare and the health system in general? What is the impact of COVID on this notion

and how has it evolved? Is well-being considered as a collective or more individual concept and has the pandemic altered this idea? What is the importance of well-being relative to other objectives and/or aspects of life and how has it evolved and/or changed? Was the COVID crisis a moment where people revised the way they engage with their family and the balance with work, their community, reconnected to nature, engaged more in sport, reconsidered their lifestyles and ways of consuming (more local, more digital, healthier?), reconnected with their cultural heritage?

The **well-being of the health workforce** deserves special attention in this call as the COVID has put this category under enormous stress. Their capacity to tackle the crisis, their adaptability to a new working environment, changing working conditions, the stress (inside their family life as well), the psychological impact (e.g. PTSD, anxiety, burnout & stress), job satisfaction need to be scrutinised and lessons drawn for the future.

The effect on **mental health services** can also be examined with regards to accessibility and availability of the mental health services, the use of helplines, children and adolescent mental health care, and the stigma surrounding mental health care, etc.

II.2.1.2 INEQUALITIES AND VULNERABILITIES

CONTEXT

The closing of large parts of the economy during the crisis impacted to a larger extent on workers with a weaker social profile and working in sectors with a lower quality of jobs. Also, the self-employed were heavily hit by the closure of their businesses. Due to the automatic stabilizers and their bold extension and additional measures, this did ultimately not result in an increase in inequality and poverty. On the contrary, due to the short-time work scheme employment rates remained relatively stable and started to increase again in 2022. Furthermore, data point to a decrease in the at-risk-of-poverty rate in 2020, the first COVID year. Notwithstanding these positive overall outcomes there remain important blind spots regarding the social impact of the COVID-crisis.

SCOPE

Preparing future crises, but also in view of improving social cohesion in non-crisis times, more knowledge is required on:

- Recently data came available on the second 'COVID-year', 2021. The overall results point to a rather stable overall level, however, there seem to be some increases in the poverty rate for more vulnerable groups. It would be relevant to explore further the evolution of poverty and inequality during the second COVID year;
- The situation of very marginalised categories such as homeless persons and non-registered migrants and refugees, especially during lock-down periods;
- The characteristics and situation of categories who fell between the mazes of the different – extended- protection schemes. It would also be interesting to explore the (non) take up of the

different crisis measures and to assess what can be learned from this (non) take up for actual policy making;

- The transitions between temporary unemployment and work: what was the longer-term impact on job security? and what was the longer-term impact for the self-employed?
- It would also be useful to analyse in more detail the efficiency of protective measures: the support to households (and businesses and companies) has been quick and massive. It is likely that in some respects there might have been overshoots. Identifying ways to target support better in crisis situations would be an important lesson.
- Another area for research is to better understand the way the digital divide has potentially exacerbated existing inequalities between skilled workers (who engaged proportionally more in telework?), and lower-skilled workers (who were more prone to job losses or reduction in hours and adapted working environments – masks, Plexiglas...?). Workers were also divided along new lines: between essential and non-essential workers, teleworkable and non-teleworkable workers. In other words, we want to know whether COVID has increased vulnerabilities on the workplace and whether these might persist.

II.2.1.3 DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

CONTEXT

The management of the COVID crisis has proved how hard it can be for governments (in Belgium and elsewhere) to maintain public trust and to explain democratic governance when taking hard restrictions to civil rights in an emergency situation.

SCOPE

Scientific evidence on the reasons behind adherence to- or desistance from sanitary measures, (dis)trust in public discourse and governmental communication is needed. In this vein, research could also examine the link between temporary derogations from civil liberties and individual rights in the context of emergency measures, and the framing of populist and extremist discourses.

The role of social media in this crisis is also a topic for research. Have social platforms, by trapping people in ideological “echo-chambers”, fostered polarisation, radicalisation and the spread of misinformation and ‘fake’ news to counter official policies and scientific discourse? Has COVID been a moment of acceleration in these processes and were certain people affected more or less than others?

Research can also contribute to understand public opinion on scientific discourse and the public’s perception of its uptake in public policies and in official communication. Furthermore, the (changing) role of the different government administrations within the context of pandemic uncertainty and public trust in these institutions can be scrutinized.

Overcoming the COVID crisis was also partly the achievement of the collaboration of European member States and the European Commission. However, this was not done without pervasive

tensions: while some recognised the need for enhanced cooperation and solidarity across borders, other fall back on a reductionist vision of the nation-state to solve the problem. Research can help build knowledge on the role of international and European cooperation for national governments to overcome the COVID crisis and for other (potential) large-scale crisis in the (near) future.

II.2.1.4 PANDEMIC INTELLIGENCE

CONTEXT

The COVID-19 pandemic shook the world and taught us that a strong government is important to properly address a health crisis. A strong government also implies a strong scientific basis ('evidence-based') to legitimise the policies pursued. The FPS Public Health recently took stock before the House of Representatives and proposes reforms in the management and organisation of our crisis capacity in the health pillar. Thus, the main expertise in crisis management and emergency medical assistance will be brought together within one Directorate-General at the FPS Public Health. In addition, intense cooperation with the federal states will be pursued.

In the framework of further development of the preparedness capacity, the identification of risks, their assessment, and prioritisation is essential. Systematic evaluations of health risks are currently carried out by the 'RAG', with the new Strategic Scientific Committee (SSC) providing strategic scientific advice from a broad public health perspective, which creates a robust basis for the RMG to fine-tune concrete measures.

But this is not sufficient. In addition to the structural embedding of a number of expert groups, training and research should focus more than before on 'public health'. Consolidating and broadening 'surveillance' and developing a broader 'pandemic intelligence' network are also important components of our capacity to cope with future crises.

SCOPE

Further analysis is needed on how to strengthen 'epidemic intelligence' in the context of future pandemic preparedness, and the first concrete steps towards a structural network should be taken. This requires a long-term vision in which (1) the various sub-fields of epidemiology and health crisis management should be given more attention in various training courses; and (2) a network structure between the expertise in government and at universities and knowledge institutes nationally and internationally is created and in which the limited resources for scientific activities in this policy-relevant domain are used efficiently.

Primary and secondary questions have been established related to this theme. Primary questions:

- Based on policy 'lessons learned' and international benchmarking, what are the possible conceptual and structural options for the expansion and development of a 'pandemic intelligence' network or consortium in Belgium?

- Based on a number of criteria, what is the proven expertise at knowledge institutions in Belgium and what are the missing gaps to be developed in this domain (based also on international benchmarking)? How could this be solved concretely?
- What are the organisational, legal and financial aspects that need to be taken into account? This also entails the (substantiated) proposal of necessary scientific processes regarding consensus or decision-making, validation, transparency of levels of evidence and the policy on conflicts of interest and scientific publications.
- What are the necessary structural partnerships with European/international organisations?
- Secondary questions:
 - What governance structure should be used for this purpose, taking into account the division of authorities?
 - How is 'multidisciplinary' scientific cooperation best defined in this domain and what is the role of academia in this?
 - Which evaluation and monitoring system is best suited to monitor the performance of such a network?
 - Are there good examples of communication strategy? What channels are available or should be developed?

II.2.2 PROJECT TYPES

Projects must be submitted by a **network** of researchers composed of at least two partners from two different eligible Belgian scientific institutions.

The project may require specific or punctual expertise (in Belgium or elsewhere), which can be delivered in the form of **subcontracting** (see budget rules below).

Networks jointly share obligations and responsibilities during the implementation of the project. The project **should be balanced**, even if different partners may have different tasks and subsequently different budgets.

The participation of **Federal Scientific Institutions (FSIs)** and the cooperation between research partners of **different Communities or Regions** is encouraged. In the final selection step, in case of a tie between proposals equally ranked by the Panel of experts, priority will be given to networks in which one or more FSIs are involved and/or to networks composed of partners from different communities and/or that cover the Belgian territory. And finally, the gender dimension (in the network composition and in the content of the proposal) will also serve to delineate projects in the final stage.

The **cooperation with non-Belgian scientific researchers** is possible, provided that these bring their own funding sources to the project. Since foreign researchers are not signatories to the research contract, the responsibility of their input to the project falls entirely under the responsibility of the coordinator of the project.

The programme promotes **equality between men and women in research**. The projects should therefore seek for a balanced network composition.

A **coordinator** (belonging to a Belgian research institute) must be appointed in each proposal. The coordinator shall:

- Coordinate all activities to be carried out in the framework of the project.
- Coordinate the internal meetings between the network members.
- Coordinate the meetings with the Follow-up Committee and write the reports of these meetings.
- Coordinate the production of the interim and final project reports intended for BELSPO.
- Inform BELSPO of any problems that might hinder the implementation of the project.
- Coordinate the synthesis and translation of the research results, with a view to applications and support for decision-making.
- Coordinate the publication and dissemination of the research results.
- Organise meetings related to the project's progress between the network and BELSPO.

II.2.3 PROJECT START AND DURATION

The research contracts will be concluded no later than 15/12/2023.

Projects can have a duration of 24 to 36 months max (excluding a period ranging from 1 to 6 months for implementing the impact plan that follows the scientific work). In any case, the end date may not exceed 15 December 2026.

II.2.4 INDICATIVE CALENDAR OF THE CALL

The calendar for the call for proposals is as follows:

Launch of the call	End of April 2023
Deadline submission of pre-proposal	17 May 2023 @ 14h00
Deadline submission full proposals	6 July 2023 @ 14h00
Evaluation (remote + panel)	July - September 2023
Research contracts concluded	November-December 2023
Start projects	December 2023

III CALL PROCEDURE

III.1 SUBMISSION PROCEDURE

III.1.1 PHASE 1 – PRE-PROPOSAL

Applicants shall submit a Pre-proposal by 17 May at 14h00 by email to BELSPO using the following email address: POST-COVID@belspo.be

A **pre-proposal** contains:

- Title and acronym;
- One and a half-page (max) description of the proposal;
- the network composition;
- a list of 4 (or more) potential evaluators that are not in conflict of interest with the network and a list of up to 2 non grata foreign experts. Note that Belspo will use max. 1 expert suggested from the list of 4 only in case of default of other experts contacted.

The description of the pre-proposal is understood as an early stage of reflexion. The content of the description in the full proposal may vary from that of the pre-proposal to some extent. However, it cannot diverge to a point that the expertise mobilised for the evaluation of the proposal will become irrelevant. Changes concerning the partners (including the coordinator) are accepted. Acronym must remain the same.

III.1.2 PHASE 2 – SCREENING STEP OF THE PRE-PROPOSALS

The **Programme Committee will screen** the pre-proposals to delineate the ones that are within the federal competences from the ones that are not.

This screening is not an evaluation but an *examination of the federal character of the core of the proposal*.

Topics of research are studied in a comprehensive way and therefore usually cut across competences. Therefore, proposals **can** incorporate elements that are within the competences of other levels of government and can generate policy recommendations for them. But in any case, **a proposal can be**

funded by the federal level if and only if the core of the proposal and the core of the policy recommendations and lessons learned are destined to the federal level.

- ⇒ The coordinators of the pre-proposal will be informed by **23 May** whether there are invited or not to submit a full proposal.

Deadline for the Pre-proposal:

17 May 2023 @ 14h00

Deadline for informing applicants on their pre-proposal:

23 May 2023

III.1.3 PHASE 2 – FULL PROPOSAL

Applicants **must submit the Full Proposal using the templates available on the website of the call** (https://www.belspo.be/belspo/organisation/call/POST-COVID_2023_en.stm).

Deadline for Full proposals:

6 July 2023 @ 14h00

To be submitted via POST-COVID@belspo.be

III.2 EVALUATION AND SELECTION PROCEDURE

The general principles of the evaluation process are described in section I.8. In this section, we describe the process in detail.

III.2.1.1 SCIENTIFIC PEER REVIEW EVALUATION

BELSPO organises and coordinates a scientific peer review evaluation of each proposal for which the evaluation takes place in two steps:

- An individual remote written evaluation
- A Panel meeting

III.2.1.2 WRITTEN EVALUATION

For each proposal, an individual written evaluation is performed by a set of 3 international independent experts having an adequate combined expertise to evaluate the research proposal. BELSPO is responsible for composing this trio of remote evaluators using our own database and, in case of default, using max. 1. expert suggested by the applicants.

The written evaluation takes place remotely, each expert using the same evaluation form. During this assessment, the experts will only have access to the proposal(s) they will evaluate. They will not know who the other 2 reviewers are, nor will they have access to their evaluations.

Each reviewer will assess the proposal and provide comments taking into account (sub)criteria, namely in the following categories:

- In/out of scope
- Scientific quality
- Quality and efficiency of the implementation
- Impact

III.2.1.3 PREPARATION OF THE PANEL EVALUATION

BELSPO will anonymise and compile the individual evaluations for each proposal and transmit them to the Panel.

Using the three remote evaluation forms, a **Consensus Report** will be drafted by one of the panel members for each proposal, using the same evaluation template as in the remote stage.

The consensus reports will be discussed and finalised - by adjustments if necessary – by a set of panel members (appointed as readers), then finally in the plenary session of the panel.

In preparation of the panel meeting, BELSPO will translate each consensus evaluation into a numeric score. In practice, this will be done as follows:

1. Translating the appreciations given to each sub-criterion into scores.
2. Adding the scores of the sub-criteria to obtain a total for each criterion.
3. Performing a weighted sum of the criteria in the following way:

WEIGHT OF THE DIFFERENT CRITERIA ¹	
Scientific quality	40%
Quality and efficiency of the implementation (incl budget)	20%
Impact	40%

¹ In/out of scope serves only to discard proposals that are not within the scope of the Call and will not be counted as criterion for the 'scientific ranking'.

Each proposal has consequently one single overall score. Therefore, proposals can be ranked arithmetically. This ranking serves as input to the discussion in the panel. The discussions in the Panel will readjust scores if needed until a final ranking (or Panel Funding scenario) is reached.

III.2.1.4 PANEL EVALUATION

A **Panel meeting** will be organised by BELSPO. The Panel will receive the corresponding **Proposal Rankings**, and will have access to the proposals as well as the **draft Consensus Reports**.

The Panel will be composed of experts having the broadest possible expertise on the research addressed in the call. These will have not participated to the remote evaluation in the Call². The number of experts in the Panel will depend on the topics and expertise that need to be covered.

Prior to the meeting, each panel member will have access to:

- the **Full proposals**
- the **Compiled individual evaluations** (anonymous)
- the pre-drafted **Consensus Report**
- the pre-drafted **Panel Funding Scenario** (the document ranking the proposals according to their arithmetical score)

The outcome of the Panel is 1) a finalised ranking list where proposals are allocated in one of the following categories : highly recommended for funding/recommended for funding/Not recommended for funding. And 2) a Panel report where the final position of each proposal in this ranking is explained.

The Panel may list the proposals within each category by order of preference for funding or put them in alphabetic order within each category.

III.2.1.5 FINAL SELECTION OF PROPOSALS BY THE MINISTER

The Programme Committee will make a proposal for the selection of proposals to the State Secretary for Science Policy and Minister of Public Health. This selection is based entirely on the ranking proposed by the Panel of Experts: the *highly recommended* proposals will be selected in any case. Proposals "*not recommended for funding*" will in no case be funded. Strategic choices will be necessary in case the budget required for fundable proposals (recommended for funding) exceeds the available budget.

These strategic choices are based on the following objective criteria:

² In case of need and as a last resource BELSPO may call upon Panel members to perform remote evaluations, in the same way that if some Panel member finds him/herself unable to attend, we may invite a remote expert to the Panel.

- Coverage of the call: in addition to the highly recommended proposals, there will be proposals that are guided by the willingness to cover all the themes of the call. Note that the available budget is not subdivided by theme so that all teams are competing for a single global budget;
- Complementarity and critical mass: this criterion aims to select proposals that are complementary to each other, in order to create a critical mass of proposals;
- Transversal criteria: in addition to these first criteria, the strategic choice can also be guided (e.g. in case of a tie) by the gender criterion (in order to balance the gender representation in the final selection and/or give preference to a proposal where the gender dimension in the scientific approach is particularly marked), national coverage (giving preference to proposals that cover the whole territory in a balanced way) or proposals associating teams from the north and the south of the country

With these criteria, we seek to form a coherent and solid portfolio of projects.

The final selection decision of proposals to be funded is made by the **State Secretary** in charge of **Science Policy** and the **Minister of Public Health** based on the **Funding proposal by the Programme Committee**.

IV CONTRACTUAL OBLIGATIONS FOR SELECTED PROJECTS

! ATTENTION !

Due to the specific budget modalities of this programme, the project beneficiaries will be asked to open a dedicated and blocked account in 2023, to which 100% of the allocated project budget will be transferred. To this end, all project partners must submit an invoice to BELSPO for their complete project budget at the latest on 15 December 2023. If no invoice is received by this date, the project cannot be financed.

IV.1 CONTRACTS

For the selected proposals, a contract is concluded between BELSPO and the funded team(s).

For this purpose, the submitters of the selected proposal will be asked at the end of the evaluation and selection procedure to concisely formulate the specifications on the basis of which the contract is to be drawn up. This Technical Annex to the contract will be drawn up in consultation with BELSPO and will take into account the recommendations formulated by the foreign evaluators.

Adaptations to the original proposal may relate, among other things, to the content of the research, the composition of the project partnership or Follow-up Committee, the budget, the proposals for valorising the research.

BELSPO grants the selected projects the funds required for their implementation. BELSPO shall reimburse at most, and up to the amount specified in the granted budget, the actual costs proven by the partners providing these costs are directly related to the implementation of the project.

IV.2 REPORTS AND PROGRESS MEETINGS

The contract foresees the following reports to be submitted to BELSPO:

- Initial report: to be submitted within three months after the start of the project.
- Activity reports: to be submitted annually.
- Final report: to be submitted at the end of the project.
- If deemed useful by BELSPO, an activity report may be requested for an external evaluation of the project.
- BELSPO can ask for a report or other input at any time during the course of the project in order to provide scientific support to valorisation and service actions related to the programme.

These reports are to be included in the project work plan and the cost of preparing them (including possible translations) must be covered by the project budget.

Meetings on the project's progress must be organised - minimum once a year - between the project partner(s), BELSPO and the follow-up committee. The organisation of these meetings must be included in the project work plan and the project budget.

V COMPLAINTS

BELSPO places great importance on the quality of its service and on improving the way it operates. A special form to handle complaints has been created.

The complaint form is available at the following address:

http://www.belspo.be/belspo/organisation/complaints_en.stm

Complaints submitted anonymously or which are offensive or not related to our organisation will not be processed.

A complaint is handled as follows:

- Once your complaint has been filed, a notification of receipt will be sent.
- The complaint will be forwarded to the relevant departments and individuals and will be processed within one month.
- An answer will be sent by e-mail or letter.
- The complaint will be treated with strict confidentiality.

If you are dissatisfied by the initial response to a complaint, you can always contact the Médiateur Fédéral / Federal Ombudsman, rue Ducale / Hertogstraat 43, 1000 Brussels (email: contact@mediateurfederal.be / contact@federaalombudsman.be).

