

Online Capacity building program for European based Entrepreneurship Support Organisations (ESOs)

Climate KIC invites Entrepreneurship Support Organisations (ESOs) to join a unique online capacity-building programme aimed at strengthening their ability to support climate-focused startups. Up to 15 ESOs will be selected with priority for those in **Regional Innovation Scheme (RIS) countries**. Selected organisations will gain advanced skills, tools, and methodologies to enhance their impact and support entrepreneurial ecosystems.

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Contents

1. Introduction.....	3
2. Objectives of the Programme.....	3
3. Programme Structure and Online Training Modules.....	4
4. Eligibility & Selection Criteria	4
5. Selection Methodology	5
6. Programme Benefits for Selected ESOs	5
7. Reporting and Communication Requirements.....	6
8. Application Process and Timeline.....	6
9. Application Requirements:	7
10. Budget and Funding	7
11. Terms and Conditions.....	7
12. Amendments and Revisions	8
Annex – Definition of Key Terms.....	8

1. Introduction

Climate KIC is launching an Open Call for European Entrepreneurship Support Organisations (ESOs)¹ to participate in a capacity-building programme aimed at strengthening their ability to foster climate innovation. The programme will engage up to 15 ambitious ESOs, with a priority focus on those based in Regional Innovation Scheme (RIS) Countries², equipping them with advanced skills, tools, and methodologies to support climate-focused startups effectively. Climate KIC has successfully implemented similar initiatives globally, strengthening climate innovation ecosystems through capacity-building and development, knowledge transfer, and community engagement. This programme will leverage best practices from previous projects to ensure impactful and long-lasting results for participating ESOs. The selected ESOs will receive tailored training and networking opportunities, enabling them to develop systemic transformation strategies, enhance leadership on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) strategies, and improve climate innovation capabilities to ensure gender inclusivity and diversity. For this program, at least 50% of the selected ESOs will be women-led. Climate KIC defines an ESO as women-led where 51% of top managerial roles (e.g., CEO, COO or equivalent) are held by women and for the purposes of the programme, the lead participant in the programme will also be a woman.

2. Objectives of the Programme

This programme is designed to:

- Identify and select ambitious ESOs that are either already supporting climate innovation or demonstrate a strong commitment and potential to do so, with a focus on those in RIS countries.
- Build capacity through training modules covering designated topics (more information below).
- Foster collaboration among ESOs by facilitating networking, sharing best practices, and strengthening partnerships through group mentoring sessions.
- Monitor and evaluate progress through a structured framework based on Climate KIC's capability model, tracking ESOs' impact on climate-focused startups.
- Enhance long-term sustainability by equipping ESOs with the tools and methodologies needed to run ClimAccelerators³ independently and successfully beyond the programme duration.
- Deepen knowledge on climate and systems change topics while strengthening expertise in climate-specific entrepreneurship programme elements, ensuring ESOs can effectively support climate entrepreneurs.

We specifically encourage women-led organisations and organisations that have not worked with Climate KIC in the past, to apply to this programme.

3. Programme Structure and Online Training Modules

The programme will deliver online capacity-building modules, with content adjusted based on the needs and context of the selected ESO cohort, to be determined at the onboarding phase. In addition to capacity-building sessions, the programme will provide access to climate innovation resources and networks to support ESOs' development. Participating ESOs will gain insights into designing and implementing effective strategies and programmes to support climate entrepreneurs. The modules offered are divided between a programme-technical focus and a climate-technical focus. The former emphasises topics that can help strengthen ESOs' internal capacity across a range of topics (e.g. how to build MEL or fundraising strategy). The climate-focused modules can build ESOs' knowledge and expertise on climate-related themes such as CO2 mitigation, circularity, adaptation & resilience.

The programme will kick-start in June 2025 and the different training modules will be delivered between June and October 2025. The training modules cover 1,5 to 2 hours each. The expected time investment from selected ESO's is approximately 4 hours a week for the entirety of the programme. This includes the participation in coordination and info calls organized by Climate KIC, the delivered training modules and peer-to-peer learning sessions.

4. Eligibility & Selection Criteria

To be considered for selection, ESOs must meet three specific eligibility criteria. Eligible ESO's will be then assessed based on a set of qualitative selection criteria as is specified below and ranked according to the final scoring result achieved (see section 5. Selection Methodology).

Eligibility criteria

- **ESO definition:** Eligible organisations need to meet the legal definition for Entrepreneurship Support Organisation as specified in the Annex.
- **Geographical scope:** The organisation must be legally registered in one of the Member States of the European Union (EU), and/or in Third countries associated to Horizon Europe.

Qualitative selection criteria

- **Experience in the entrepreneurial ecosystem:** The organisation can showcase they are supporting startups and innovation ecosystems. Eligible organisations can provide a track record of their past and current experience in entrepreneurial ecosystems, preferably in the climate space.
- **Sustainable stewardship:** The organisation can demonstrate the capacity to integrate sustainability principles into organisational processes, ensuring alignment with climate impact objectives and minimal environmental footprint in programme activities.
- **DEI-Leadership:** The organisation can demonstrate having internal DEI policies, as well as evidence of integrating DEI principles into external program activities. For this program, at least 50% of the selected ESOs will be women-led.

- **Capacity & Engagement:** Eligible organisations can showcase their interest and dedication to climate innovation and their interest to grow their expertise in this area so that they can better contribute to entrepreneurial ecosystems. The organisation has the ability to commit to full participation in training, mentoring, and reporting activities.

5. Selection Methodology

The selection process consists of four stages:

1. **Application Eligibility** – Initial review to ensure compliance with eligibility criteria.
2. **Pre-selection-** Based on the qualitative selection criteria as specified under section 4, eligible organisations will be scored based on the weighted scoring matrix below.

Selection components <i>we will score each component on a 5-point scale, with 0 being the lowest and 5 the highest. Applicants needs to score a minimum of 10 points to be considered for the interview process.</i>	Weighting (%)
Experience in the entrepreneurial ecosystem	30%
Sustainable stewardship	20%
DEI-Leadership	30%
Capacity & Engagement	20%

**Please see section 4 for a detailed description of each selection component*

3. **Interviews-** applicants that score 10 points or above will be considered for an interview to introduce their organisation and their interest in the programme. A pre-selection of highest scoring applicants may be applied in the case a high number of applications are received.
4. **Final Selection-** the final selection of the organisations to be part of the final cohort will be made based on:
 1. Initial scoring based on the qualitative selection criteria
 2. Interview outcome (identical set of questions)
 3. Suitability within the final cohort. (i.e. we will consider the climate readiness level and meeting the % threshold of women-led organisations of the cohort, as mentioned under section 4).

6. Programme Benefits for Selected ESOs

Selected ESOs will receive:

- Access to tailored online trainings.

- Participation in online group mentoring sessions and peer-learning activities.
- Positioning within the Climate KIC Community, connecting with innovation partners across Europe.
- Practical tools and resources to enhance support capabilities for startups.
- Long-term engagement opportunities for collaboration with Climate KIC initiatives.
- Integration into a global climate innovation ecosystem, enabling access to expertise, funding opportunities, and partnerships beyond the programme duration.

A select number of ESOs that demonstrate strong engagement, alignment with programme objectives, and readiness for acceleration programmes may have the opportunity to apply for a ClimAccelerator open license. More information on the selection criteria and application process for that opportunity will be shared later in the programme.

7. Reporting and Communication Requirements

Participating ESOs will be required to:

- Attend regular online check-ins with Climate KIC.
- Submit a mid-term progress report detailing activities and impact measurement.
- Provide a final impact report at the end of the programme summarising outcomes and key learnings.

Beyond the programme duration, selected ESOs are encouraged to remain engaged with the Climate KIC Community and may be invited to participate in follow-up impact assessments or community activities. Further engagement opportunities will be communicated to participating ESOs.

8. Application Process and Timeline

The call will be launched through public engagement webinars, providing guidance on the programme's objectives and application process.

Key dates:

- Call publication: April 2025
- Info session: 23 April 2025 (11:00 am, CET)
- Application deadline: 2 May 2025 (by 12.00 pm, CET)
- Selection notification: 27 May 2025
- Programme kick-off: 2 June 2025

9. Application Requirements:

Applications must be submitted via the online application form, which amongst other things, will request questions and inputs on:

- Legal entity of the applicant
- Geographical location
- Organisational profile and relevant past projects.
- DEI leadership statement highlighting the current strategies that are implemented supporting DEI causes.
- Explaining the organisation’s motivation to join the program and how it intends to apply knowledge gained from the programme to advance climate innovation in its respective region.
- A self-assessment of the organisation’s climate innovation maturity level, based on the following scales:⁴

Level 1	Awareness: Basic understanding of climate action but no structured programming.
Level 2	Early-stage support: Offers startup programmes but lacks deep climate impact integration.
Level 3	Established: Actively runs climate-specific startup support programmes.
Level 4	Leading: Demonstrated expertise in scaling climate innovation, strong partnerships, and funding mechanisms.

10. Budget and Funding

The programme is fully funded by Climate KIC and will cover:

- Training costs.
- Resource and tool development.
- Evaluation and impact measurement activities.

Participation in the programme is provided free of charge to the selected ESOs. However, no additional funding or financial remuneration will be granted to them.

The programme will be held online, and no travel budget is foreseen.

11. Terms and Conditions

- **Participation Requirement:** Selected ESOs must attend at least 80% of training and mentoring sessions.
- **Compliance:** Failure to meet participation requirements may result in disqualification from the program and possible future opportunities with Climate KIC
- **Confidentiality and Data Protection:** All participating ESOs must adhere to strict confidentiality and data protection policies.
- ESOs that successfully complete the programme by meeting the required participation thresholds (at least 80% attendance in training and mentoring sessions) will be eligible to receive a Certificate of Participation⁵.

- A limited number of the ESOs that successfully complete the programme may be invited to apply for a dedicated ClimAccelerator open call⁶, providing them with additional resources and support to scale their climate-focused acceleration initiatives. For this opportunity separate (eligibility & selection) procedures will apply.
- In case of low participation (below 75% attendance), Climate KIC will initiate conversations with the respective ESO. If no improvements are made, Climate KIC may decide to disqualify the ESO from the programme.

12. Amendments and Revisions

This initiative presents a unique opportunity for ESOs to enhance their climate entrepreneurship support capabilities, gain access to exclusive resources, and contribute to scaling climate innovation across Europe.

Climate KIC reserves the right to adjust programme content, methodologies, and evaluation criteria based on feedback from participating ESOs and evolving climate innovation priorities.

Annex – Definition of Key Terms

Entrepreneurship Support Organisations (ESOs)

Entrepreneurship Support Organisations (ESOs) are entities that provide structured support to startups and entrepreneurs, particularly in innovation-driven sectors. These organisations play a crucial role in fostering entrepreneurial ecosystems, providing access to funding, mentorship, training, and business development services.

- Eligible ESOs for this programme are non-profits, for-profits and foundations, including:
 - Accelerator – Organisations that provide time-limited, cohort-based programmes to help startups scale rapidly.
 - Incubators – Entities offering early-stage startups access to workspace, mentorship, and resources to develop their business ideas.
 - Innovation Hubs – Centres that facilitate collaboration between startups, researchers, investors, and corporates to drive innovation.
 - University-Linked Entrepreneurship Centres – Institutions that support student and faculty entrepreneurs through education, mentorship, and research.
 - Climate-Focused Business Support Networks – Organisations dedicated to advancing entrepreneurship in climate innovation and sustainability.

These organisations must demonstrate a track record in supporting startups, particularly those focused on climate solutions, sustainability, and circular economy models.

Regional Innovation Scheme (RIS) Countries

The Regional Innovation Scheme (RIS) is an initiative of the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT) aimed at bridging regional disparities in innovation performance across Europe. It focuses on countries and regions that historically receive lower levels of funding for innovation and entrepreneurship.

RIS countries include EU Member States and Horizon Europe Associated Countries with moderate or modest innovation performance, as defined by the European Innovation Scoreboard. The goal of RIS is to enhance the innovation capacity of these regions, ensuring that entrepreneurial ecosystems and support structures benefit from increased participation in European innovation initiatives.

As of the most recent EIT definition, RIS countries include:

- EU Member States with moderate or modest innovation performance, such as:
 - Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Italy (specific regions), Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Spain (specific regions).
- Horizon Europe Associated Countries, such as:
 - Western Balkan countries (e.g., Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia), Ukraine, and other associated countries.

This programme prioritises ESOs based in RIS countries to ensure a more inclusive distribution of innovation support across Europe, addressing gaps in regional innovation ecosystems and strengthening climate-focused entrepreneurship beyond traditionally well-funded hubs.

Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI)

DEI stands for diversity, equity and inclusion which is a concept used by Climate KIC to design and assess, programs, projects and partnerships on their level of inclusion.

Climate KIC's vision for the future is one of a prosperous, inclusive, climate resilient society founded on a circular, zero carbon economy. To make this a reality, we want to create diverse, equitable, and inclusive partnerships, programmes, accelerators, and incubators that engage a wide range of entrepreneurs and innovators with the aim of uncovering innovative solutions to address climate change.

We also recognise that the impacts of the climate crisis will not be equally borne and therefore, want to focus programmes on supporting 'at risk' groups, for example, women and gender minorities, young people, members of racial and ethnic minority groups, indigenous people, disabled people, and people living in extreme poverty. This could be directly supporting participants or entrepreneurs that are from these groups or entrepreneurs/innovators who are creating solutions for these groups.

Climate KIC actively seeks to assess our engagements and partnerships on how DEI is incorporated at both organisational and programme level (e.g. Incubators, Accelerators or other entrepreneurship programmes).