

SWISS–BULGARIAN
Cooperation Programme



CALL FOR CONCEPT NOTES

**NATURAL RESOURCES AND
BIODIVERSITY MANAGEMENT
LIGHTHOUSE PROJECT**

GUIDELINES FOR GRANT APPLICANTS

2025

GUIDELINES FOR GRANT APPLICANTS

These guidelines apply to potential applicants interested in developing and implementing the Management of Natural Resources and Biodiversity Lighthouse Project under the Swiss-Bulgarian Civic Engagement and Transparency Facility (CETF), which is part of the Swiss-Bulgarian Cooperation Programme (SBCP), itself under the Second Swiss Cohesion Contribution.

Facility operator: Consortium BILSP-BCNL-INNOVABRIDGE (also referred to as 'the Programme Operator') implementing the Civic Education and Transparency Facility on behalf of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation as an entrusted entity.

Open Call title: Management of Natural Resources and Biodiversity Lighthouse Project

Type of call: two-stage application

Open Publication date: publication date is specified in the Call announcement.

Deadline: 31/03/2025 at 5:30 PM EET time zone.

Indicative overall grant budget for the Call: CHF 1 500 000.

Form of grant: a lump sum grant.

Expected project duration: 36 months.

Official Call website: www.swissCETF.bg

For submission: All applications must be submitted by email with e-signed application pack, as described in Section 5.1.1 below.

Questions should be sent by e-mail only, to: po@swisscETF.bg

Important! When writing emails, please begin the subject line with 'LHP1'.

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Abbreviations

AMFESIFSM	Act on the Management of EU Structural and Investment Funds under Shared Management
CETF	Civic Engagement and Transparency Facility
CSO	Civil society organisation
DSA	Daily subsistence allowance
FDFA	Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs
NCU	National Coordination Unit
PO	Programme Operator
PPA	Public Procurement Act
SDC	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
SMA	Support Measure Agreement
SMART indicators	Specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound indicators
SC	CETF Support Measure Steering Committee
VAT	Value Added Tax

Glossary

Applicant	This term may refer to the consortium submitting the proposal as a whole, the lead organisation within the consortium, or specific partners in the consortium, excluding associate partners.
Associated partners	Entities that participate in the project, but without the right to charge costs or claim contributions.
Auditor	Certified auditing organisation hired by the Programme Operator to verify and audit project costs
Beneficiaries	Consortium partners who are signatories of the Grant Agreement (either directly or through an accession form). They shall collectively contribute to the smooth and successful implementation of the project (i.e., implement their part of the project properly, comply with their own obligations under the Grant Agreement and support the coordinator in fulfilling their obligations).
Consortium	An association of two or more entities with the goal of participating in a common project and combining their resources to achieve common project objectives.
Deliverable	A tangible output or result required by the Grant Agreement that must be completed by a specific deadline. Deliverables are used to measure the project's progress and success.
Eligible expenses	Specific costs or expenditures permitted under the terms and conditions of a grant or funding program. These expenses must comply with the guidelines set by the Programme Operator and are generally essential for the successful completion of the funded project or initiative.
Ineligible Costs	Costs that do not qualify for reimbursement or support under the grant agreement. These are explicitly specified in the application guidelines and are not covered by the grant.
Grant Agreement	The formal agreement between the Programme Operator (PO) and the Beneficiaries that outlines the terms, conditions, and obligations associated with the funding provided.
Lead organisation	A legal entity that represents the consortium and serves as the central contact point for the Programme Operator.
Lump sum	A form of simplified cost options that is determined during the case-by-case assessment of an application based on the submitted Detailed Budget Table and in accordance with the predefined terms of agreement on activities and/or outputs and on their completion.
Milestone	A significant, scheduled event or achievement within the project timeline that serves as an indicator of progress toward the overall objectives.

Stakeholders	Any citizen, group, or organisation with an interest in or that is affected by the project. Stakeholders may include public authorities, social partners, non-governmental organizations, public and private organizations, and others..
Steering Committee (SC)	A strategic decision-making body of the Civic Engagement and Transparency Facility (CETF)
Subcontracting	The process by which project beneficiaries outsource specific tasks or services to third-party entities. Subcontracting may be subject to conditions set out in the grant guidelines.
Sustainability	Refers to the continuation of the project's benefits or outcomes after the funding period has ended, often reflecting the long-term impact and viability of the project activities.
Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC)	Governmental agency responsible for international cooperation and humanitarian aid, operating under the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA). SDC provides financial support, guidance, and oversight, working closely with Bulgaria's National Coordination Unit (NCU) at the Council of Ministers to implement projects aligned with bilateral goals.
Programme Operator (PO)	A Consortium that carries out the overall CETF management and implementation

1. Introduction

These guidelines apply to potential applicants interested in developing and implementing the Natural Resources and Biodiversity Lighthouse Project under the Swiss-Bulgarian Civic Engagement and Transparency Facility (CETF), which is part of the Swiss-Bulgarian Cooperation Programme (SBCP), itself under the Second Swiss Cohesion Contribution.

The Second Swiss Cohesion Contribution to selected EU Member States, including Bulgaria, is a key part of Switzerland's European policy. Through its contribution, Switzerland is helping to foster cohesion and stability in Europe, as well as to consolidate and develop bilateral relations with partner countries.

In Bulgaria, the Swiss Cohesion Contribution is implemented through the Swiss-Bulgarian Cooperation Programme (SBCP). The SBCP is based on a Framework Agreement signed on 20 September 2022 between the Swiss Federal Council and the Bulgarian Council of Ministers. Its overall objective is to contribute to the reduction of economic and social disparities within Bulgaria and compared to other European countries.

The Civic Engagement and Transparency Facility (CETF) is a Programme of the SBCP defined in the country-specific setup annexed to the Framework Agreement. The CETF supports Bulgarian civil society organisations and civic initiatives in becoming more effective, representative, and sustainable. By mobilising citizens to actively engage and participate in a more transparent and inclusive public debate regarding the decisions that affect them, the CETF will strengthen Bulgaria as a democratic and social state, governed by the rule of law.

The management and implementation of CETF are conducted within the framework of a Support Measure Agreement (SMA), approved and signed by the Swiss Development Cooperation (SDC) and the Central Coordination Unit Directorate at the Bulgarian Ministry of Finance (later transferred to the Council of Ministers), referred to as the 'National Coordination Unit' (NCU).

While the SDC and NCU are responsible for implementing the CETF, they have agreed, based on the SMA, to establish the CETF Support Measure Steering Committee (SC) as the main decision-making body. The SC is responsible for making key decisions regarding the implementation of CETF components. Additionally, while the SC oversees the strategic direction of CETF, the SDC has mandated a Programme Operator (PO) to manage its operations. The PO was selected and contracted by the SDC through an open tender for a Bulgarian lead organisation. Following this process, the SDC selected a consortium consisting of the Balkan Institute for Labour and Social Policy, the Bulgarian Center for Non-Profit Law, and the Innovabridge Foundation. The PO is responsible for implementing the CETF in accordance with the SMA.

One of the main components of the CETF is the development and implementation of the Management of Natural Resources and Biodiversity Lighthouse Project, which will be undertaken by a consortium of experienced and recognized Bulgarian Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) alongside Swiss partners. The consortium will be selected through a two-stage procedure managed by the PO and approved by the CETF SC. This process includes an open competitive call for concept submissions from potential applicants. The selected applicant, upon SC approval, will be invited to develop a fully-fledged project proposal, which will be discussed in SC and then must receive SDC approval. Upon approval of the full proposal, the applicant will be invited to conclude a Grant Agreement with the PO.

The present document provides guidance for potential applicants on the application rules, submission and selection processes for the Management of Natural Resources and Biodiversity Lighthouse Project.

2. Development Purpose of Swiss-Bulgarian Civic Engagement and Transparency Facility

The primary objective of the CETF is to strategically enhance civic participation and promote open governance in Bulgaria by actively engaging citizens in democratic processes at both national and local levels. CSOs are central to this initiative, recognized as key players in educating citizens about their rights and responsibilities, while fostering transparent and inclusive public participation.

The CETF's strategic focus is on strengthening civic engagement that demands greater transparency and public involvement. CETF aims to cultivate a more robust civic sector—one that is sustainable, independent, and able to act as both a corrective force and a collaborative partner to institutions, while defending civic rights and freedoms and playing a leading role in societal development.

3. Management of Natural Resources and Biodiversity Lighthouse Project

3.1. Rationale

Natural Resources and Biodiversity thematic issues align with key strategic documents and national priorities in Bulgaria. The Bulgarian National Strategy for the Environment and the Bulgarian Biodiversity Conservation Strategy highlight the importance of preserving natural habitats, promoting sustainable land use, and protecting water resources. The Natura 2000 network, which covers around 35% of the territory of Bulgaria, is a testament to the country's commitment to biodiversity conservation. Furthermore, the Bulgarian National Climate Change Adaptation Strategy and Action Plan underscore the need to address climate-related impacts on ecosystems and human health.

CSOs in Bulgaria face significant challenges in tackling these thematic issues. Reports and analyses reveal that limited funding, political pressures, and inadequate legal frameworks hinder CSOs' efforts to protect biodiversity and manage natural resources sustainably. The Civil Initiative for an Effective Biodiversity Policy Project, for example, highlighted the need for improved conservation objectives and management strategies for the Natura 2000 network, showcasing the difficulties CSOs encounter in advocating for effective environmental protection¹.

Climate change in recent years is becoming more drastic, raising public concern, but the authorities have been slow and insufficient in finding sustainable solutions. This gives the impression that economic interests prevail, and environmental organisations are becoming more and more daring in their protection and push for action. As a result, environmental organisations are one of the most threatened NGO groups globally, including in Bulgaria. This is why a project in this thematic field would be key both to achieve sustainable and modern solutions to manage and protect nature and biodiversity, but also to restore faith in citizen participation, especially on this topic that affects everyone. In Bulgaria, environmental causes have a unique historical role in mobilising civic engagement, attracting some of the highest levels of citizen involvement even before 1989. This legacy of environmental activism has continued making environmental causes a powerful catalyst for civic engagement in Bulgaria (for example, the 'Save Pirin' protests in 2012 and 2018 mobilised high levels

¹ <https://biodiversity.bg/Natura-2000-and-biodiversity-conservation-in-Bulgaria-challenges-and-solutions-3-3845>

of civic participation across dozens of locations in Bulgaria). This fact underscores the potential of environmental advocacy, not only to protect the environment and biodiversity, but also to unite diverse groups in working toward sustainable, cross-sectoral solutions.

By involving large numbers of people, environmental causes have the power to re-invigorate public trust in democratic governance and transparency, fostering a renewed belief in citizen participation. For Bulgarians, who take great pride in their country's nature, enhancing these bridges between citizens and decision-makers is essential to sustainable use of natural resources. By encouraging civic engagement in environmental protection, the project has the potential to attain sustainable, lasting cross-sectoral solutions and to increase trust in democratic instrument of governance and transparency.

Bulgarians are proud of the country's nature and building more bridges to involve ordinary people in decision-making processes affecting natural resources will enable increased trust in democratic instruments of governance and transparency. This is corroborated by the findings of the public consultation with CSOs and other key stakeholders in April-May 2024. According to the consultations, the CSOs see themselves as key players in shaping the sustainable development agenda and see the opportunities for this in engaging the public in different participatory practices, conducting general mobilisation campaigns, and forming partnerships with other sectors, including businesses.

3.2. Objectives

The strategic objective of this project align with the CETF's goal of increasing active engagement and participation of Bulgarian citizens in a more transparent and inclusive public debate on decisions that affect them. This strategic objective will be achieved by meeting the following two specific objectives:

- **To boost civic engagement in the management of natural resources and biodiversity.** This includes helping build a sense of shared responsibility, harness local knowledge, and ensure that policies and practices align with the needs and values of diverse communities.
- **To empower citizens in cooperation with relevant science, businesses and the authorities.** Interaction with specialists in the fields of ecology, biology, botany, the environment and other related fields will contribute to the sustainable development and conservation of biodiversity and the natural environment. The achieved impact should be measurable through comparisons of baseline and final data at the completion of the project.

To further elaborate on these objectives, this Lighthouse Project will focus on enhancing cross-sectoral partnerships to promote sustainable development and shared responsibility. It will harness local knowledge to ensure that environmentally friendly policies and practices reflect the values and needs of diverse communities. Additionally, the project will empower citizens by fostering collaboration with, science, businesses and authorities, encouraging their active role in shaping sustainable development and conservation efforts. While the project aims for national impact, many of its activities will be implemented at regional level, ensuring a more localized approach to sustainability.

3.3. Expected Outcomes

In attaining the above-mentioned objectives, this Lighthouse Project will have to contribute to the following expected outcomes:

Expected strategic outcomes in CETF that should be addressed by this Lighthouse Project:

Outcome 1: The number of Bulgarian citizens who actively support or participate in CSOs (including the number of volunteers mobilized) in the field of natural resources and biodiversity is increased.

Outcome 2: The quality and transparency of public debate at both the national and local levels in the field of natural resources and biodiversity is improved.

- The number of CSOs and citizens attending and participating in public debates on natural resources and biodiversity has increased.
- Public debates initiated or influenced by CSOs and citizens have grown during the project's implementation.
- Demonstrated policy impact has been enriched by civic engagement (e.g., laws, policies, strategic documents, public measures, etc.).

Outcome 3: The potential for reducing economic and social disparities within Bulgaria, and in relation to other European countries, is demonstrated through selected Lighthouse Projects.

- At least 70% of these project efforts are directed to regions outside the entire South-West Region and outside cities of Varna and Plovdiv in terms of impact or activities.
- The number of civic actors with improved capacity or better networking abilities in regions outside the South-West Region, Varna, and Plovdiv is increased.
- More civic actors with enhanced capacity are working with disadvantaged groups.

Expected Specific Outcomes related to management of natural resources and biodiversity

- **Nationwide engagement and stewardship.** A measurable increase in nationwide engagement, with demonstrable outcomes in the sustainable management and conservation of natural resources and biodiversity.
- **Increased Participation from Citizens, CSOs, and Local Communities:** Greater and more active participation by citizens, civil society organisations (CSOs), and local communities in natural resource and biodiversity management, leading to measurable improvements in conservation practices and resource management outcomes.
- **Higher Levels of Public Awareness and Education:** Significant growth in public awareness and education concerning the importance of sustainable practices in natural resource and biodiversity management, leading to changes in community behaviours and increased local conservation efforts.
- **Promotion of Inclusive Decision-Making and Shared Responsibility:** Establishment of inclusive decision-making frameworks and shared responsibility models that result in equitable resource allocation and sustainable management practices among diverse stakeholders.
- **Strengthened Cross-Sector Collaboration and Policy Alignment:** Deepened cooperation between government entities, academia, private sector, CSOs, and local communities, leading to coordinated and effective actions that align with national biodiversity goals and support long-term resource sustainability.
- **Improvement in Biodiversity and Ecosystem Health Indicators:** Measurable improvements in biodiversity indicators, such as species richness, habitat preservation, and ecosystem resilience, as a direct result of project activities civic and stakeholder engagement.

Applicants may propose additional outcomes in their concept notes and later in the full project proposal if well justified. Outcomes will be monitored and evaluated both during and after the project implementation. **Initial outcome targets are recommended during the concept note stage, with**

final targets agreed upon during the full application process. These will align with a baseline survey provided by the PO during the second stage of this process.

3.4. Target Groups

The main target groups of this project are CSOs and citizens interested in the natural environment and biodiversity. Specific groups of focus include children, students, parents of young children, and nearby residents of protected areas and natural parks, as well as farmers, pensioners, and local community organisations. Given their roles and influence, the project also aims to engage media outlets, businesses (enterprises and business organisations), and tourism and eco-tourism operators who are stakeholders in regions with significant biodiversity.

Additional target groups include youth and student environmental groups, which can mobilize young people toward sustainability initiatives, and environmental educators and trainers who spread awareness and build conservation skills within local communities. Researchers and scientists focusing on biodiversity, conservation, and sustainable development are also key partners, offering data, insights, and innovative solutions to project challenges.

The project will target CSO constituencies and local and central authorities - particularly at the municipal and regional levels, but with nationwide coverage - who play crucial roles in supporting policy changes, enforcement, and local environmental initiatives. Volunteer groups and environmental activists are critical allies in public awareness and policy advocacy, while cultural and historical heritage organisations are relevant stakeholders where natural and cultural heritage intersect.

By involving such a diverse array of groups, the project will foster cross-sectoral partnerships that empower a broad spectrum of citizens to engage in sustainable resource management. This approach ensures that the project not only addresses natural resources management and biodiversity conservation but also strengthens local communities' roles in sustainable development, aligning with the overarching goals of the Programme.

3.5. Transversal Aspects

All potential concept notes, and later the full project proposal on Natural Resources and Biodiversity Management, must address key transversal aspects with an emphasis on social inclusion. Projects should aim to involve and benefit diverse groups, including disadvantaged communities, ensuring that their voices are represented in decision-making processes related to natural resource management and biodiversity. Proposals should demonstrate how they plan to engage vulnerable groups, promote equal opportunities, and enhance social cohesion.

Furthermore, while sustainable environment is a core focus of the project, it should also be addressed as a transversal issue. Applicants are encouraged to incorporate activities that promote environmental sustainability beyond the project's core objectives, ensuring that all project components contribute to long-term ecological and social resilience.

Equal opportunities and rights, including gender equity, should be mainstreamed throughout all project activities. Projects are expected to reflect a strong commitment to non-discrimination and equal participation, considering the needs and rights of all community members, regardless of gender, age, disability, ethnic or social origin, or other potential sources of exclusion.

Finally, the promotion of good governance principles, such as transparency, accountability, and participatory decision-making, is highly encouraged. Projects that demonstrate an integrated approach

to good governance will be considered favourably during the evaluation process, as these principles are crucial for achieving lasting impact and fostering trust among stakeholders.

3.6. Innovation

Applicants are encouraged to integrate innovative approaches into their project concept notes and later in the full project proposal, exploring new and creative solutions that go beyond conventional methods and ideas. This can include targeting underserved or non-traditional groups, engaging with diverse stakeholders - including those with differing or opposing views - and developing unique activities that foster broader civic engagement. Projects that seek to bridge divides and build consensus through dialogue and collaboration or introduce new ways of addressing complex challenges related to natural resources and biodiversity, are particularly welcome.

Innovation can also be demonstrated through piloting new models of collaboration, utilizing digital technologies to engage citizens more effectively, or experimenting with novel educational approaches to raise awareness and inspire action. Applicants are invited to propose additional innovative elements that strengthen their projects, encourage inclusive participation, and contribute to the overarching goals of the Lighthouse Project. Proposals that show a commitment to exploring new pathways, achieving systemic change, and promoting constructive engagement between diverse groups are particularly encouraged. On a scientific and technical level, applicants are encouraged to demonstrate that they are familiar with and ready to apply digital tools to assess biodiversity and the state of natural resources, such as population count devices, and publicly accessible remote sensing data.

3.7. Sustainability

Applicants are required to demonstrate the sustainability of project outcomes at the institutional, financial, and policy levels. Proposals should present robust strategies for ensuring that project impacts are maintained and results are further developed after the project ends, including robust risk mitigation and management plans. This entails building strong networks and partnerships with local and national stakeholders, creating mechanisms to secure long-term financial support, and contributing to policy development that upholds the project's objectives. Proposals should also emphasise broad engagement by targeting large groups who see their interests represented in the project outcomes, fostering a sense of shared responsibility and ownership. Applicants are encouraged to incorporate capacity-building components that empower communities and civil society actors to continue the work independently, ensuring that project outcomes remain resilient and adaptable to future challenges. Projects that align their sustainability strategies with on-going national and regional priorities and contribute to systemic change will be viewed favourably.

4. Call for a Lighthouse Project

4.1. Overview of the Selection Process

The selection procedure for this Lighthouse project is a two-stage process designed to ensure transparency, fairness, and thorough evaluation.

In Stage 1, applicants submit Concept Notes to the PO, which undergo administrative and eligibility checks before being evaluated by an Evaluation Panel. Based on these evaluations, the PO prepares

an evaluation report with a full list of proposals and recommends one or more Concept Note(s) to the SC, with the possibility to request a proposal in full. The SC then selects one concept for full development in view of approval at the second stage, considering not only the evaluation results and PO recommendations, but also strategic factors such as synergies with other LHPs and support measures under the Swiss-Bulgarian Cooperation Programme. The selected concept will subsequently be developed into a fully detailed project proposal by its promoters in close collaboration with the PO. Once finalised, the PO submits the full proposal to SDC with a recommendation, and SDC makes the final decision.

4.2. Financial Allocation

The indicative budget allocation for the Management of Natural Resources and Biodiversity Lighthouse Project is approximately 1,500,000 CHF. The final budget will be determined based on the scope and quality of the full proposal submitted by the applicant in Stage 2. The CETF SC, with the support of the PO, reserves the right to adjust the budget allocation - including the option not to allocate all available funds - based on budget justification, cost-effectiveness, and efficiency considerations. The final budget will be confirmed and approved during the Stage 2, following the development and submission of the full proposal.

4.3. Budget Currency, Co-financing, Interests and Revenues

The project budget will be drawn up, disbursed to the beneficiary, and reported by the beneficiary in CHF currency.

Co-financing is generally not required. However, while not obligatory, applicants are encouraged to complement this LHP's objectives and work packages with activities funded by other public or private contributions or voluntary work. Although optional, such complementarity funding will add value to the evaluation of concept notes. For further details, see item 4.4 below.

Any interest accrued on the Swiss grant financing will be considered part of the Swiss contribution to the project and will be deducted from the respective payment claim.

4.4. Complementary Activities not Covered by the LHP Budget

Applicants may include in the proposal work packages specific activities that are funded by other sources or through voluntary work. The main goal of this option is to seek synergies with other initiatives implemented by the applicant and to expand the impact of the LHP itself. Though not mandatory, this option will be positively considered in the concept note evaluation process. For a specific activity to qualify under this option, the following rules must be met cumulatively:

- The activity/ies should be relevant to the LHP objectives.
- The activity should be eligible under the eligibility criteria of the LHP.
- The costs for this activity should be eligible according to the eligible costs of the LHP.
- The activity should be defined separately within the appropriate work package, excluding the project management work package.

- The activity should have the same descriptive requirements as any other activity in the project, including its own deliverables/outputs and budget, and be traceable like any other activity in the LHP.

4.5. State Aid and Double Financing

This procedure is not subject to the state aid regime. The funding provided under this measure does not constitute state aid as it does not meet the cumulative criteria for state aid as defined in Article 107(1) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU). Specifically, it neither involves support for an economic activity nor confers an economic advantage on the recipient.

Article 11 of the Treaty on European Union emphasizes the importance of citizens' participation in good governance within the Union, highlighting the need for open, transparent, and regular dialogue with civil society organisations. It establishes the obligation of EU institutions to provide opportunities for citizens and their representative organisations to express and exchange views publicly in all areas of Union activity.

Given the nature of activities envisaged under this procedure, it is not anticipated that CSOs will engage in economic activities involving the provision of goods or services on the market. As such, eligible applicants and beneficiaries under this procedure are not considered as "undertakings" within the meaning of the State Aid Act. Therefore, based on the European Commission's Notice on the notion of State aid under Article 107(1) of the TFEU, the state aid rules are not applicable to them.

A project and its activities supported under this call must not overlap with or be double-funded by similar projects financed by the EU, EEA, International Financial Institutions, bilateral, national, or other external or internal sources. Applicants are required to disclose any potential overlap or double financing during the second phase of this procedure, when a fully developed project proposal is submitted, as well as during the subsequent implementation phase.

4.6. Eligibility

4.6.1. Eligibility of Applicants

Eligible applicants for LHP Natural Resources and Biodiversity Management are Bulgarian and Swiss organisations interested in obtaining grant financial support, which meet the following eligibility criteria:

Legal Status of Bulgarian Applicants

- **Legal entities - Civil Society Organisations (CSOs):**

Applicants must be registered in the Register of Non-Profit Legal Entities of the Bulgarian Registry Agency and must have been established as legal entities for at least three years prior to the deadline of the current call for concept submissions. They include:

- a) Non-profit legal entities according to the Non-Profit Legal Entities Act.
- b) community cultural centres ("*chitalishta*").

- **Consortium (Partnership)**

Must include at least 6 organisations, at least one of which is a Swiss partner;

A single organisation within the consortium cannot receive CETF funding that exceeds 250,000 CHF except for expenses directly related to the required impact evaluation of the project.

- **Independence**

Each Bulgarian consortium member must be independent from the government, public authorities (local and national), political parties, religious organisations, and commercial organisations. If such entities participate in the management of an applying CSO, they may together or separately hold only a minority of the votes in their General Assembly and in the Managing Board, compared to civil society representatives.

Political parties and social partners, including employers' organisations, branch associations, and trade unions, are not eligible.

Legal Status of Swiss Partners

- **Legal Entities**

Must be non-governmental or public entities registered in Switzerland.

- **Operational History**

Must have a history of at least three years prior to the deadline of this concept note call.

Technical and Economic Capacity of the Applicant/Consortium as a whole

- **Proven Experience**

At least three consortium members must have proven experience in natural resource management and/or biodiversity conservation projects, with each member having participated in at least one project valued at a minimum of 100,000 EUR within the past seven years.

- **Lead Applicant**

The lead applicant must be a Bulgarian entity that has proven track record of managing project consortia (with at least three organisations, incl. the applicant) in natural resource management and/or biodiversity conservation, demonstrated through at least one project within the past seven years.

- **Project Management**

The lead applicant must have managed at least one project worth at least 300,000 EUR within the past seven years.

- **National Impact**

Consortium members, collectively, must have implemented projects with national or regional impact, covering at least five NUTS 2 regions in Bulgaria.

- **Swiss Partner Experience**

Each Swiss partner must have implemented at least three projects in the thematic field of this LHP in the last seven years, with at least one of these projects implemented outside of Switzerland.

Exclusion criteria

Applicants subject to the conditions outlined in Article 25, Paragraph 2 of the Act on the Management of EU Funds under Shared Management and Article 7 of Council of Ministers Decree No. 23/2023 as well as other specific conditions, detailed in Annex B Declaration of Honor are ineligible to participate in this procedure and will not receive grant funding.

An applying organisation may participate as a lead applicant in only one CETF project.

Important: An organisation may also act as a partner in up to one additional project under CETF. However, the total amount of funding received by a single organisation under CETF cannot exceed 250,000 CHF, excluding costs related to project impact evaluation and costs related to providing

financial support to third parties (specific for Civic Education lighthouse project). This limit will be verified during the contracting phase. If an organisation exceeds this cap, the consortium will be required to reallocate the excess budget to other consortium members. If reallocation is not feasible (e.g. it concerns the lead organisation), the project will be rejected.

Associate partners

Associated partners are eligible to participate in the project, but will not be counted towards the required minimum number of consortium members. An associated partner may participate in a project but may not declare eligible costs or receive project funds.

Associate partners must meet the following eligibility criteria:

- Be a legal entity registered in Bulgaria or Switzerland;
- Be public or private entities.

4.6.2. Eligibility of Projects

Relevance

Projects will be considered eligible if they align to all strategic and specific objectives and expected 3 outcomes listed in points 3.2 and 3.3 of these Guidelines.

Duration

The duration of a project must not exceed 36 months and all projects must be completed by 31 December 2028. An exception might be granted for impact evaluation activities that could go up to 2 months beyond the official end of the project.

National coverage of activities

Each NUTS 2 region in Bulgaria must be represented in the project by implementing at least one activity in it and involving a minimum of 30 citizens and 5 CSOs. This criterion applies to the project as a whole, ensuring that every region is actively engaged in some capacity, even if specific activities do not involve all regions simultaneously.

70% of the funds shall be directed outside the South-West region and cities of Plovdiv and Varna.

At least 70% of the project must include activities and/or demonstrate impact outside of the South-West region and the cities of Plovdiv and Varna. This criterion applies to the project as a whole, rather than to individual activities. To demonstrate compliance, each concept note should outline how a substantial portion of the activities and their resulting impact will be directed to the targeted regions. Compliance can be achieved by using various indicators, such as the proportion of citizens and CSOs involved, a detailed breakdown of budget allocation per region, or other criteria proposed by the applicants. These examples are provided as guidance and it is responsibility of the Consortium to explain how their proposal will meet this requirement.

The proposed regional compliance model will be presented by applicants and assessed during the first stage of concept notes submission. It will then be further developed and agreed upon in detail during the second phase for the purposes of monitoring, reporting, evaluation, and indicators achievement.

The project should actively promote and demonstrate respect for the core values endorsed by the Programme, including combating hardship and poverty, upholding human rights, fostering democracy, encouraging peaceful coexistence, and preserving natural resources. Beneficiaries are obligated to uphold these values, contribute to them, and act in compliance with both these principles and the established legal order.

4.6.3. Eligibility of Activities

An indicative non-exhaustive list of activities, eligible for funding under this call includes:

- Establishing and supporting national citizen initiatives that encourage people across the country to participate in biodiversity monitoring initiatives.
- Conducting nationwide education campaigns to raise awareness about biodiversity conservation and sustainable natural resource management, reaching schools, communities, and the general public.
- Empowering citizens to learn and advocate for their environmental rights.
- Supporting sustainable environmental practices, with a focus on community engagement and reaching consensus in the society on important environmental topics.
- Advocacy actions for legislative or strategic development in natural resources and biodiversity management, as well as monitoring legislative implementation and raising awareness of its impacts.
- Establishing and supporting national citizen initiatives that encourage people across the country to participate in climate adaptation initiatives, such as community-based climate resilience building, ecosystem restoration efforts, and similar activities.
- Cross-sectoral networking and partnership-building activities (e.g. collaboration with businesses, research and academic institutions, public stakeholders, local organisations, etc.).
- Implementing community outreach and engagement campaigns (e.g. workshops, public forums, community events, digital/social media campaigns to engage a broad audience, etc).

These examples serve as a guide for potential activities eligible for funding.

In addition to the core activities, the following components are mandatory and should be included:

- Management and coordination: ensuring efficient coordination and oversight of project activities.
- Capacity building for the Bulgarian partners: focusing on skills and resources relevant to the LHP's objectives and expected outcomes or aimed at strengthening the overall organisational capacity of Bulgarian partners.
- Communication, dissemination, outreach and visibility activities.
- Impact evaluation: Each project should conduct its own impact evaluation at the end of the project. However, such an evaluation may require a baseline survey at the project's outset. Beneficiaries are therefore encouraged to plan this activity in the early months of project implementation, if needed. Preferably, this activity should be implemented by an external subcontractor.

The project activity structure should be organised into distinct work packages. Beneficiaries will have the flexibility to adjust activities within each work package, provided that the planned outputs/results, deliverables and outcomes are achieved. However, changes to the overall work packages themselves are discouraged and should only be made in exceptional cases. Such changes must be well justified, submitted before the completion of the respective work package, and receive prior approval from the PO to be eligible.

Each work package and its activities will be budgeted separately. Once the budget is approved, a lump-sum approach will be applied at the work package level. This allows beneficiaries the flexibility to manage and adjust activities and budget lines within each work package without the prior permission of the PO, as long as they adhere to the eligibility rules for activities and costs outlined in these Guidelines, achieve the agreed outcomes and deliver the stated deliverables.

Important: Project activities should primarily be implemented on the territory of Bulgaria. However, certain activities may take place in Switzerland, e.g. expert work by Swiss experts and their participation in online events, awareness and visibility activities and other relevant tasks, provided they are well justified.

The following types of activities are **ineligible**:

- Purchase of land or real estate;
- Acquisition of assets or minor works not directly related to project objectives, implementation or the overall organisational capacity of consortium members;
- Ongoing activities, already funded by other sources (except for complementarity activities as described in item 4.4.);
- Individual scholarships for study and participation in training courses.

4.6.4. Eligibility of Costs and Cost Categories

To be eligible under CETF grant programme, costs must be related to eligible activities and meet the following requirements:

- **Timing:** costs must be incurred and paid during the project implementation period (except for costs related to the final impact evaluation, reporting and audits). Exceptionally, costs in respect of which an invoice has been issued in the final month of eligibility are also deemed to be incurred within the dates of eligibility if the costs are paid within 30 days after the final eligibility date;
- **Project relevance:** costs must be linked to and necessary for the implementation of the work package and respective deliverables as well as for achieving project objectives and expected outcomes;
- **Cost Categories:** be described in eligible cost categories as set out in current section;
- **Identifiability and Verifiability:** if the project proposal funded costs must be identifiable and verifiable, recorded in beneficiaries' accounting records and determined according to the applicable accounting standards of the country and the usual cost accounting practices of the beneficiaries;
- **Legal compliance:** costs must comply with the requirements of applicable tax and social legislation;
- **Financial soundness:** costs must be reasonable, justified and comply with the requirements of sound financial management, in particular regarding economy and efficiency.

The beneficiaries' internal accounting and auditing procedures must permit a direct reconciliation of the costs and revenue declared in respect of the project with the corresponding accounting statements and supporting documents. The expenses should be reflected in the accounting records of the final beneficiary through separate analytical accounting accounts.

Documentation justifying costs must be kept by the beneficiaries (the lead applicant and the partners) for five years following the approval of the final audit report.

The eligible direct costs for the project are those costs which meet the above eligibility criteria, can be clearly identified as specific costs directly linked to the project implementation and can be attributed to it directly.

Non-recoverable VAT will be considered an eligible expense. VAT is eligible provided that beneficiaries can prove that they are unable to recover it according to the applicable national legislation. If recoverable, VAT is not eligible. Should a beneficiary become VAT registered during the project, any VAT that becomes recoverable will no longer be considered an eligible cost.

Eligible cost categories:

The following categories of eligible costs will be covered:

Direct costs

- A. Personnel costs
- B. Travel, accommodation and subsistence costs
- C. Materials and supplies costs
- D. Investment costs (fixed tangible and intangible assets)
- E. Small works costs
- F. External expertise and services costs

G. Indirect costs

The types of costs are presented in more details below:

A. Personnel costs – Remunerations and related costs for staff employed by the beneficiary or equivalent.

Eligible costs include remunerations for staff employed directly for project purposes. Remunerations costs should not exceed the average rates corresponding to the beneficiaries' standard remuneration policy. In addition, they should not be higher than the generally accepted market rates for the same kind of task.

Costs of regular staff employed on a permanent or temporary basis (labour or civic contracts) are eligible based on reported work schedules and documented functions and tasks performed for the project. These costs will be verified using regular receipts, payroll records, timesheets, or other internal documents provided by the beneficiary that demonstrate the actual time worked and paid.

Project administration/management personnel may include a project manager, a project coordinator, a technical assistant, and an accountant for each of the partners in the consortium. Additional staff needs to be justified specifically.

The work performed by volunteers is eligible for inclusion in the project budget only for the purposes of the complementary activities not covered by the LHP Budget (described in item 4.4.), provided it directly supports the objectives and activities of the project. Volunteer work must be clearly defined, documented, and relevant to the project's outcomes. The value of volunteers' work should be calculated based on a standard unit cost, such as the applicable national minimum wage, or gross average salary, or minimum insurance income or an equivalent benchmark.

The cost of work performed by external experts to the team members under subcontracting arrangements should be classified as services rather than personnel costs. An external expert is somebody who works incidentally for the organisation or for a relatively short period of time. External experts can be hired regularly under different projects, but the organisation does not consider them part of the permanent staff.

B. Travel, accommodation and subsistence cost

Travel costs must not exceed the most reasonable market rates and must follow the most direct and economic route. For air travel, economy class is the standard benchmark for cost analysing. Air travel is acceptable only for distances exceeding 400 km, i.e. two-way flight of above 800 km. Expenses for travel will be verified based on the relevant cost and payment documents (invoices, tickets, receipts, payment orders, bank accounts statements etc.) and must align with standard market rates.

Accommodation and subsistence costs related to the participants in the action are eligible provided that they are in line with the beneficiaries' usual practices. Costs for accommodation (e.g. hotel) are eligible and will be verified based on the actual cost and payment documents (e.g. invoices, receipts, payment orders, bank account statements, travel orders, etc.). Maximum accommodation rates are set to:

- 200 BGN/day for Bulgaria;

- 360 BGN/day for EU, EFTA, Switzerland and EU candidate countries.

Daily subsistence allowances (DSAs) are paid in addition to costs for accommodation as a flat-rate amount and are considered to cover breakfast and two main meals, local transport (inner city), the cost of telecommunications and all other incidental expenses. The maximum DSA per person is the double size of statutory recognized costs in accordance with the Bulgarian or Swiss legislation.

C. Materials and other supplies

Costs for materials and consumable supplies necessary to achieve project objectives are eligible if related to project activities and deliverables or to organisational capacity building.

D. Investment costs (fixed tangible and intangible assets)

Costs for purchase of equipment and other fixed tangible assets as well as intangible ones (e.g. software, intellectual property and copyrights, etc.) are eligible provided that they are essential for the implementation of the project main objectives or organisational capacity building. These costs must be justified in the full Application Form and must align with the project's objectives and expected outcomes

E. Small works costs

Costs for small works are eligible provided they are absolutely necessary to achieve the project objectives or for organisational capacity building in line with project objectives and expected outcomes. These costs must be in relevance to project activities and deliverables.

F. Costs for external expertise and services

The costs of subcontracting or service provision by an external party (excluding project partners) directly related to project activities and service delivery are eligible. These costs should not exceed 30% of all direct costs, as the project should be implemented using the consortium's own resources.

G. Indirect costs

Indirect costs (overheads) are divided into the following two categories:

G1. Administrative Costs Overhead: These costs are automatically limited to a **flat rate of 10%** of the total eligible direct project costs of each partner. Applicants' indirect organisational expenses, for example, for office maintenance, services and utilities, rent, communications, stationery, etc., shall be calculated at a flat rate of 10% of the eligible direct project expenses.

G2. Organisational Capacity Building and Development Overhead: These costs support the organisational capacity building and development. These costs are limited **up to a maximum of 15%** of the total eligible direct project costs of each partner. Eligible costs under this category may include the purchase of fixed tangible and intangible assets, staff capacity building, additional staff costs for personnel not included in the project (e.g. staff involved in training, strategic planning, or organisational development, as well as temporary or auxiliary personnel brought on to strengthen the organisation's structure or skills in ways that indirectly enhance project outcomes), refurbishment works, and other related expenses, provided they are well justified.

For Indirect costs no supporting documents need to be provided for indirect costs. However, these costs need to be actually incurred, traceable in the accounting system, and available for review upon request.

Additional cost thresholds and ceilings

The combined investment costs for fixed tangible and intangible assets along with small works costs related to project activities (excluding the capacity building overhead) **should not exceed 15% of the total eligible costs**. After project completion, the fixed tangible and intangible assets must remain in the ownership of the beneficiaries / project partner for at least 5 years and to be available for being checked. This ceiling is set in order to ensure a balance between investments and funding of the partners' core operations.

Communication, dissemination and visibility costs should be **a minimum of 5% and up to 10%** of the total amount of the eligible project costs. These may include expenses related to communication personnel and experts, publications and printing, project website maintenance, social media management, production of promotional materials, video production, media coverage, participation in conferences, as well as the acknowledgment of CETF contribution to the project, and other relevant activities, provided they are well justified. Development of new websites will be approved only in exceptional cases, such as an outdated website or the absence of a website. The PO reserves the right to reduce the requested grant if the proposal is acceptable but unit costs or unit quantities are considered too high. The PO reserves the right to reduce the requested grant if the proposal is acceptable but unit costs or unit quantities are considered too high.

Ineligible costs

The following cost categories are ineligible and therefore not accepted:

- Contributions in kind (excluding complementary activities described in item 4.4 above): these are contributions that are not invoiced, such as voluntary work, equipment or premises made available free of charge;
- Costs for purchasing land and buildings;
- Debt and debt service charges;
- Doubtful debts;
- Provisions for future losses or potential future liabilities;
- Interest payable;

- Depreciation costs;
- Currency exchange losses;
- Bank charges;
- Recoverable VAT;
- Excessive or reckless expenditure;
- Costs incurred before the beginning and after the end of the project excluding costs for audits, impact evaluations and final reports;
- Costs incurred or contributions made for activities implemented during a suspension of the Grant Agreement;
- Double financing.

Lump sum budget approach

The lump sum approach will be applied at the work package level and broken down by partners. Project activities should be organised in work packages (WP), each with its own budget.

Beneficiaries must define and justify the lump sum by submitting a detailed budget table for each beneficiary (lead or partner) and per work package, with cost estimates provided for each cost category, during the second stage.

While beneficiaries will have flexibility within a work package to adjust types of activities, costs, number of units, and unit costs, these changes must comply with the general eligibility rules. However, budget changes at the work package level are generally not permitted. Reallocation of the budget between work packages will only be allowed in exceptional cases and must be approved by the PO in writing.

For changes that do not require prior approval (within a work package and partner), beneficiaries should present the modifications with the respective financial and technical reports. If approval is required, a budget revision must be submitted and approved before implementing the changes.

Although the lump sum approach provides flexibility in activities and budget adjustments, strict control and monitoring will focus on the project's outputs and deliverables. Any adjusted activities and costs must still achieve to the corresponding deliverables and outputs, which in turn must contribute to achieving the intended outcomes and remain relevant to the respective work package. Changes to outcomes will only be permitted in exceptional cases, which must be well justified and approved in advance by the PO. The PO reserves the right to reject any changes made to activities, costs, deliverables and outputs if they are deemed inconsistent with the approved project objectives, activities, timeline, or if deemed unjustifiable or unreasonably costly

Payments to beneficiaries based on incurred costs will be issued upon completion of separate activities and delivery of planned deliverables. Work packages and activities with a long duration (e.g., Management, Dissemination and Exploitation, Impact evaluation, etc.) could be reimbursed at intermediate payments.

Work packages that are partially implemented by the end of the project, including those with partially delivered deliverables and outputs, may be partially verified by external auditors responsible for financial verification and auditing, and paid by the PO. The completion of work packages is not based on a successful outcome, but on the completion of activities and deliverables as described in the project plan. Justifications for partially verified deliverables and outputs will be assessed on a case-by-case basis.

4.7. Income and Profit of the Projects

Non-profit rule - The LHP shall not have the purpose or effect of generating a profit for the beneficiaries (the project should not be structured to create a profit). Profit is defined as a surplus of total actual receipts over the total actual costs of the project.

Revenues or incidental income that naturally arise from the project's operations are allowed, as long as they are reinvested in the project or retained for the beneficiaries' ongoing non-profit activities. These revenues are considered resources to sustain or enhance project activities, not as personal or organisational profit.

4.8. Procurement

Subcontracting core activities and project management to third parties is prohibited. Subcontracting is only allowed for specific tasks that are not core parts of the project. In developing the full Application Form, beneficiaries must clearly specify which tasks will be subcontracted.

If the beneficiary needs to conclude contracts to carry out the Project and these contracts are considered eligible direct costs in the estimated budget, the beneficiary must comply with the Public Procurement Act (PPA) when legally required. In doing so, the beneficiary must adhere to the principles of transparency and equal treatment of potential contractors and avoid any conflict of interests.

Beneficiaries that are not contracting authorities under PPA, must follow the Procurement Rules specified in the Grant Agreement.

All partners are required to follow the same rules of the programme regarding reporting, payments, project non-profit rule, procurement, and other relevant obligations.

5. Application and Selection Procedure

This call for proposals follows a two-stage application procedure. Applicants are initially invited to submit a detailed concept note as a consortium. If the concept note is selected, it advances to the second stage where the selected consortium will be invited to draft and submit a full proposal (ref. 4.1). The process includes the following details:

5.1. Concept Notes Application Process

5.1.1. Submitting a Concept Note

Concept notes must be submitted in Bulgarian. To be eligible, they must meet the following requirements:

- **Submission Deadline:** Concept notes must be submitted by 31/03/2025
- **Electronic Submission:** Concept notes must be submitted electronically via email to po@swisscetf.bg. Applicants will receive a confirmation email acknowledging receipt of their submission with reference number. If no confirmation is received within one hour during the last day or within 24 hours in the days before the last day they should first check their spam or junk folder.

- **Required documents:** The concept note application package includes the following documents:
 - **Concept Note** (in Bulgarian), signed with a valid electronic signature by the legal or authorized representative of the Lead Organization, or by the legal representatives of the organization in cases where they represent the organization jointly. In the case of authorization, a Power of Attorney in free format, signed by the legal representative(s) of the organization, must be attached.
 - **Declarations of Honour from Lead Organisation / Partners:** Declarations must be in Bulgarian (for Bulgarian partners) and in English (for Swiss partners). Each partner must duly sign their own declaration either with an electronic signature or a handwritten signature (printed, signed and scanned) by the legal representative of the organization or by the legal representatives of the organization in cases where they represent the organization jointly .
 - **Partnership Statement:** The Partnership Statement must be in Bulgarian (for Bulgarian partners) and in English (for Swiss partners). Each partner (incl. associate partners) must duly sign their own statement either with an electronic signature or a handwritten signature (printed, signed and scanned) by the legal or authorized representative of the Lead Organization, or by the legal representatives of the organization in cases where they represent the organization jointly. In the case of authorization, a Power of Attorney in free format, signed by the legal representative(s) of the organization, must be attached .

The partnership statement must also be signed by the Associated Partners, and it is sufficient for it to be signed by only one legally authorized or authorized representative of the organization.

The full application package for the first stage, submission of Concept notes, is available on the PO's website: www.swissCETF.bg

The required documents may be attached either as single PDF files or zipped into one folder.

5.1.2. Questions and Answers

Applicants may submit questions related to Stage 1 of the application process **no later than 14 working days before the application submission deadline**. Questions can be sent in Bulgarian or English. Questions may only be submitted via the following email address:

po@swisscETF.bg

- PLEASE DO NOT TELEPHONE –

Answers will be published within 7 working days of receiving each question in the “Questions and Answers” section of each call on the CETF website: www.swissCETF.bg. All answers will be published in both Bulgarian and English, with Bulgarian as the primary language. The PO will provide only general guidance in response to questions and will not offer preliminary opinions on the eligibility of applicants, partners, proposed activities, or costs.

5.2. Concept Notes Evaluation and Selection Process

5.2.1. Administrative and Eligibility Check of the Concept Notes

Upon submission, the PO staff will compile a list of all registered applications. Each application will undergo an administrative check and an eligibility check to verify its compliance, using a "yes/no" assessment system according to the table below. PO staff will subsequently prepare and publish a list on the Programme website indicating which applications have passed or been rejected at this stage.

Applicants have the right to submit complaints to the PO within 10 working days of receiving notification of the decision on the administrative and eligibility check. Complaints will be handled in accordance with the CETF Grievance Redress Mechanism published on the CETF website.

The PO will evaluate the administrative and eligibility compliance of consortia and their concept notes against the formal submission requirements, based on the following criteria:

Table 1: Administrative and Eligibility grid for LHP proposals.

Section I: Criteria for administrative compliance of the Concept Note	Yes	No	N.A.
1. The project proposal is received by the deadline via the designated email			
2. Concept Note, completed in Bulgarian with all sections filled out, is signed by the legal or authorized representative of the Lead Organization, or by the legal representatives of the organization in cases where they represent the organization jointly. In the case of authorization, a Power of Attorney in free format, signed by the legal representative(s) of the organization, must be attached.			
3. Declarations of Honour of Lead Organisation and Partners: Declarations are provided in Bulgarian (for Bulgarian partners) or in English (for Swiss partners). Each partner has submitted their declaration, signed either with electronic signature or by providing a scanned copy of the handwritten signature by the legal representative of the organization or by the legal representatives of the organization in cases where they represent the organization jointly.			
4. Partnership Statement: Statements are provided in Bulgarian (for Bulgarian partners) or in English (for Swiss partners). Each partner has submitted their statement, signed either with electronic signature or by providing a scanned copy of the handwritten signature by the legal or authorized representative of the Lead Organization, or by the legal representatives of the organization in cases where they represent the organization jointly. In the case of authorization, a Power of Attorney in free format, signed by the legal representative(s) of the organization, must be attached. The partnership statement must also be signed by the Associated Partners, and it is sufficient for it to be signed by only one legally authorized or authorized representative of the organization.			
Section II. Eligibility of beneficiaries, projects and activities	Yes	No	N.A.
1. Legal Status for Bulgarian Applicants is CSOs registered in the Register of Non-Profit Legal Entities of the Bulgarian Registry Agency and must have			

<p>been established as legal entities for at least three years prior to the deadline of the current call for concept submissions:</p> <p>(a) not-for-profit legal entities according to The Non-Profit Legal Entities Act</p> <p>(b) chitalishta.</p>			
2. Consortium includes at least 6 organisations, with at least one Swiss partner and the remaining being Bulgarian CSOs.			
3. Each applicant abides by the rule of being lead applicant in no more than one CETF project.			
4. Each Bulgarian consortium member (excluding associate partners) is independent from the government, public authorities (local and national), political parties, religious organisations, and commercial organisations. If such entities are involved in the management of an applying CSO, they may collectively or individually hold only a minority of votes in both the General Assembly and in the Managing Board, compared to civil society representatives.			
5. None of the Bulgarian consortium members is a political party or a social partner, such as employers' organisations, branch associations, or trade unions. However, the latter could be associate partners.			
6. Each of the Swiss partners is a non-governmental or public entity registered in Switzerland.			
7. Each partner has been operational for at least three calendar years prior to the deadline of this concept note call.			
8. At least three consortium members have proven experience in natural resource management and/or biodiversity conservation projects, with each having participated in at least one project valued at a minimum of 100,000 EUR within the last seven years.			
9. The lead applicant is Bulgarian and has managed project consortia (with at least three organisations) in the thematic field of the LHP, with at least one project in the last seven years.			
10. The lead applicant has managed at least one project worth at least 300,000 EUR for the last seven years.			
11. Consortium members, collectively, have implemented projects with national or regional impact, covering at least five NUTS 2 regions in Bulgaria			
12. Each Swiss partner has implemented at least three projects in the thematic field of this LHP in the last seven years, with at least one of these implemented outside of Switzerland.			
13. The concept note / project objectives and outcomes align to all strategic and specific objectives and expected 3 outcomes outlined in points 3.2 and 3.3. of the Guidelines.			
14. The duration of the project does not exceed 36 months.			

15. The concept note / project covers each NUTS 2 region, implementing at least one activity per region and engaging a minimum of 30 citizens and 5 civil society organisations (CSOs) in each region.			
16. At least 70% of the concept note / project must include activities and/or demonstrate impact outside of the South-West region and the cities of Plovdiv and Varna, with evidence of this provided by the applicant.			
17. The proposal has at least one core work package with eligible activities as per item 4.6.3 and four horizontal work packages: project management, capacity building, communication (incl. awareness and visibility activities) and impact evaluation.			
18. The project actively promotes and demonstrates respect for the core values endorsed by the Programme, including combating hardship and poverty, upholding human rights, fostering democracy, encouraging peaceful coexistence, and preserving natural resources. Beneficiaries are obligated to uphold these values, contribute to them, and act in compliance with both these principles and the established legal order.			

The Concept note application will be rejected in any of the following cases:

- If the application deadline is not met.
- If the consortium members do not meet the eligibility requirements or fail to comply with consortium composition rules.
- If the lead applicant does not submit a duly completed and e-signed Concept Note template.

In all other cases if some administrative and eligibility criteria are not demonstrated, the applicants may be requested in writing by the PO to provide the missing documents and clarifications. In these instances, applicants will be notified in writing by the PO via email, specifying the required information, the deadline (at least 5 working days) by which a response is to be provided, and the method for providing it.

Failure to provide the documents in the specified format and within the deadline for submission may lead to the rejection of the entire project proposal.

The PO will notify each consortium via email and publish a list of concept notes rejected during the administrative and eligibility check on the website www.swisscetf.bg. The rejected applicant will have 10 working days to contest the decision by submitting a written complaint via email to the PO by mail.

Applicants may withdraw their concept proposals from the evaluation process at any stage by submitting a written request via email. Withdrawn proposals will not be considered by the Evaluation panel. Withdrawal of a proposal shall be recorded in the report of the Evaluation Panel. All withdrawn project proposals will be archived for audit purposes.

The Evaluation panel and the PO shall not be held responsible if applicants do not receive correspondence from the PO due to wrong and/or incomplete contact details provided by applicants.

5.2.2. Evaluation of Concept Notes

Each concept note will be evaluated by a panel of five evaluators, comprising internal experts from the PO staff and external specialists. The evaluation will be conducted using the evaluation grid below. The final evaluation score will be reached by consensus among the five evaluators.

Table 2: Evaluation Grid for LHP Concept Notes.

Evaluation Criteria	Max score	Ref. in Concept Note Template
1. Relevance	20	
Alignment with CETF objectives and outcomes	4	5.1.1., 5.1.2.
Relevance to the thematic focus area	3	5.1.3.
Appropriateness and significance of the target groups	3	5.2.2.
Cross-sectoral synergies and collaboration potential	4	5.4.2.
Contribution to horizontal aspects – social inclusion, environmental sustainability, gender equality, anti-discrimination, and good governance	2	4.3
National and regional coverage	4	5.2.3.
2. Concept quality / Excellence	30	
Sound and realistic intervention logic	5	4.1., 5.1.1., 5.1.2., 5.2.1.
Clear description of project challenges, planned activities, expected outputs, anticipated outcomes, and overall impact	5	4.1., 5.1.1., 5.1.2. 5.2.1.
Innovation in approach and methodology	5	4.2.
Use of SMART indicators (specific, measurable, accessible, relevant and time-bound) for tracking and verification	2	5.6.
Level of ambition in addressing project objectives	5	4.2.
Detailed description of work packages and activities	5	5.2.1.
Communication strategy, scale of outreach and awareness, interactive/innovative elements that hold the potential to engage new and/or underrepresented audiences.	3	5.3.1.
3. Impact	10	
Thematic impact	4	5.1.3.
National impact and significance	4	5.1.1., 5.1.2.
Broader Impact based on the complementary activities described in item 4.4.	2	5.2.1.
4. Partnership quality	15	

Justification of partnership relevance in achieving the project objectives, including the integration of diverse skills and disciplines.	5	2.1.1.
Clarity of Partners' roles, responsibilities and complementarity	5	2.1.1.
Swiss partner(s) and other associated partners added value	5	2.1.1.
5. Expertise	15	
Consortium members expertise	5	2.2., 2.3
Qualification of key experts involved in the project	5	5.5.
Team composition in terms of expertise and knowledge	5	5.5.
6. Sustainability of project outcomes	10	
Institutional sustainability: potential for long-term integration within existing structures	4	5.4.1.
Financial sustainability: plans for funding and resource management post-project	2	5.4.1.
Policy level sustainability: alignment with policy frameworks and potential for influencing	4	5.4.1.
Total	100	

A Concept Note may be approved for the second stage, if the overall final evaluation score is at least 60 points.

Threshold Criteria for Key Sections:

1. Relevance: If the total score for the "Relevance" section is below 12 points, the proposal will not be recommended to proceed to the second stage.

2. Concept quality / Excellence: If the total score for the "Concept Quality / Excellence" section is below 20 points, the proposal will not be recommended to proceed to the second stage.

3. Impact: If the total score for the "Impact" section is below 6 points, the proposal will not be recommended to proceed to the second stage.

A report, including the list of evaluated concept notes and their respective evaluation summaries will be prepared. The top-ranked applicants may be invited for remote interviews to provide further clarifications, if necessary, before the Evaluation Panel finalises the ranking and shortlists successful applicants for Stage 2. The SC will receive an evaluation report, summaries of the concept notes, and, upon request, the full concept notes for all evaluated applicants. The final decision on the ranking of concept notes and the selection of the top-ranked concept note will be made by the CETF SC. This decision will be based on SC deliberations, strategic considerations such as synergy with other lighthouse projects and support measures within the Swiss-Bulgarian Cooperation Programme, and the evaluation conducted by the Evaluation Panel.

Important! Following the evaluation of the concept notes, the PO retains the authority to recommend the inclusion or exclusion of specific activities and outcomes in the preparation of the full proposal in the second stage. Additionally, during the second stage full project development, the PO reserves the rights to request changes to project specifications, as deemed necessary.

5.2.3. Interview with Top-Ranked Candidates

The two highest-ranked applicants from the evaluation may be invited to participate in an interview with the Evaluation panel. The interview will focus on key aspects of the concept notes, guided by the concept note template and evaluation grid. The interview may be used to clarify details and to gather additional information about the concept ideas, which will then be presented to the Steering Committee.

5.2.4. Final Evaluation

Following the interviews (if conducted), a final ranking and evaluation of the concept notes will be completed. The results of this evaluation will be presented to the CETF SC for consideration and approval.

5.2.5. Final Decision on the Selected Candidate

The CETF SC will make the final decision on which concept note will proceed to the second stage.

5.3. Second Stage: Full Proposal Development and Contracting

5.3.1. Notification of Applicants and Advancement to the Second Stage

All applicants will be notified in writing by the PO via email regarding the results of the Call for Concept notes. The notification sent to the consortium with the approved concept note will include the requirements for the second stage.

5.3.2. Verification of Eligibility and Staff Expertise

At the beginning of the second stage, the applicant must provide proof of compliance with all eligibility criteria, along with evidence of the expertise of the proposed key staff. This step is conducted to minimize the risk of investing time and resources into project development if the applicant is later found to be ineligible. If any of the stated eligibility criteria or key staff qualifications cannot be substantiated or are found to be untrue, the applicant may be subject to disqualification.

The required supporting documents may include:

- Current Status Certificate for Swiss partners; for Bulgarian partners the PO will conduct the verification directly by consulting the relevant public registries.
- Organisational experience proofs such as project references / contracts / approved project final reports / audit reports / annual organisational reports.
- CVs of Proposed Key Staff or other relevant proof documents if needed.
- Lead Organisation / Partners' Declarations of Honour reconfirming they do not fall under the ineligibility criteria outlined in Article 25, Paragraph 2 of the Act on the Management of EU Structural and Investment Funds under Shared Management (AMFESIFSM) and Article 7 of Council of Ministers Decree No. 23/2023.

- Other supporting documents, as necessary, to demonstrate that specific eligibility requirements or evaluation criteria are met.

5.3.3. Full Project Development

During the second stage, the selected consortium will be invited to develop a detailed project proposal based on the concept note approved in the first stage. This phase's aim is to further refine the project's scope, activities, and expected outcomes, incorporating any feedback and recommendations provided by the PO, SDC, and the CETF SC.

At the outset of the 2nd stage, the applicant will receive a comprehensive support package to facilitate project development and management. This package includes a Grant Agreement template, implementation guidelines (including visualisation guidelines), procurement procedures for subcontractors, reporting templates, and access to an online platform for project reporting. The platform will facilitate the contracting, reporting, communication, and other aspects of project management, ensuring a structured and efficient workflow.

The detailed proposal will be prepared using the full application form provided, which also includes a detailed budget template.

The full proposal will include the complete application form and a detailed budget template including additionally:

- **Detailed Methodology** – A thorough plan of activities including methods, strategies for achieving each objective and outcome, with resources and deliverables, and interim results, if any.
- **Outcomes/Outputs/Deliverables description** – Each deliverable must have its expected outlook and details described. Outputs and outcomes must be complemented by SMART indicators.
- **Project Timeline** – A detailed schedule and a Gantt chart that clearly outlines the phases of the project and deadlines for each activity as well as the time of deliverables submission.
- **Internal Monitoring and Evaluation Plan** – A framework for tracking progress and measuring success, with specific SMART indicators and methods.
- **Organisational structure and management procedures inside the Consortium.** Consortium partners may choose to prepare and sign partnership agreement that details the roles, responsibilities, decision-making processes, financial arrangements, conflict resolution mechanisms, and communication protocols among the partners. This agreement can help ensure transparency, accountability, and smooth collaboration within the Consortium, providing a framework for managing joint activities and achieving project objectives effectively.
- **Impact evaluation strategy** – description of the main outcomes and indicators that will be evaluated as well as which of them will need baseline assessment at the beginning of the project.
- **Budget** – An itemized budget that details all projected costs associated with the project broken down by partner, type of costs, work packages and activities as well as costs and payments schedule.
- **Risk Assessment** – A detailed list of potential risks, including an assessment of their likelihood and potential impact on key project elements such as schedule, costs, achievement of objectives, outcomes, deliverables, and implementation quality. Additionally, this includes developing strategies for mitigating these risks to ensure smooth project implementation.

5.3.4. Technical and Financial Review of the Full Application

Once the full project proposal is developed, it will undergo a thorough operational and financial review by the PO. This review ensures that the proposal meets all requirements, adheres to budget constraints, and adequately addresses the expected outcomes and impact. During this process the PO may require the Consortium to adjust the proposed full Application Form and budget before finalizing it.

5.3.5. Submission to SC

A summary of the full Application Form, including strategic elements such as a description of the main objectives, outcomes, work packages with activities, and budget will be submitted to the SC for discussion and recommendations.

5.3.6. Submission to SDC

The finalized full Application Form will be submitted to SDC for final review and approval.

5.3.7. Contracting Phase

Upon approval by the SDC, the PO will initiate the contracting phase. The contracting phase formalizes the agreements between the applicant (Consortium) and the PO.

Procedure for Unforeseen Circumstances - If unforeseen circumstances arise during Stage 2 that prevent the signing of a Grant Agreement, the PO may consider inviting the second-ranked applicant from Stage 1 to submit a full project proposal. This option will be pursued only if there is a solid justification and SC approval.

6. Timetable – Deadlines – Project Duration

Timetable and deadlines (indicative)	
Stage 1	
Deadline for submission of concept notes:	31/03/2025
Information on evaluation results Stage 1:	12/05/2025
Stage 2	
Development and submission of full proposal:	14/05/2025 – 30/06/2025
Approval of the project proposal	23/07/2025
Grant agreement signature:	31/07/2025

Starting date and duration of the LHP

The indicative duration of the project should be maximum 36 months. The project is expected to start not earlier than August 2025, and be completed at the latest by 31 December 2028.

7. List of Annexes in this Application Package

- **Annex A Concept Note Template** (in Bulgarian);
- **Annex B Declaration of Honour** for Lead organisation / Partners (in Bulgarian for Bulgarian entities and English for foreign entities);
- **Annex C Partnership Statement** (in Bulgarian for Bulgarian entities and in English for foreign entities).