

SDG Challenge

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

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Terms of Reference

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General

Q1. What is challenge funding?

Challenge Funding is a *solution-focused* approach to research funding that directs research activities at specific, often complex, challenges or problems. Challenge funding uses defined timelines, stage gated funding and incentive prizes to accelerate research activities toward tangible impact.

Q2. How is challenge funding different to traditional research grant funding?

Like traditional funding approaches, challenge funding provides grants to support teams to develop their ideas. However, in addition, it also uses defined timelines (or phases) in conjunction with incentive prizes to direct and accelerate research activities. SFI's approach to challenge funding also provides significant additional supports to team such as training, mentoring and networking opportunities.

SFI's approach to challenge funding differs in a number of ways to other approaches:

- **Teams** – Its focuses on teams rather than individual researchers and has the expectation that non-academic members will play an important leadership role in defining how research is planned and undertaken.
- **Stakeholder Engagement** – Engagement with stakeholders to understand issues and to reflect their needs as part of research activities is a key component of SFI's approach. Without engagement from stakeholders, potential solutions may not be meaningful or impactful.
- **Training and Skills** – Challenge funding provides a valuable opportunity for researchers to undertake engagement and innovation activities to accelerate their research. Not all researchers will have experience in these areas so in order to support their participation, training is provided during challenge programmes with skills development forming a central part of the supports provided.
- **Agility** - In challenge funding, teams need to engage with stakeholders which may change their perspectives and ideas. Challenge funding enables and supports this and encourages agility amongst teams in order to deliver impact.

Q3. How is the SDG Challenge different from other challenges?

The SDG challenge is a partnership programme between SFI and [Irish Aid](#) and reflects the shared objectives of the two organisations to leverage research to contribute to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Irish Aid deliver a significant part Ireland's Official Development Assistance (ODA) programme, and as such, this focus on international development is also an important aspect of this programme. The objective of the SDG Challenge is to develop transformative, sustainable solutions that will contribute to addressing the UN SDGs in Irish Aid's partner countries.

The objectives of the SDG Challenge are:

- To generate impact through advancement of sustainable solutions in addressing global sustainability issues and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs);

- To support the mobilisation of transdisciplinary teams, comprising academic researchers and societal stakeholders to identify key development challenges where sustainable solutions can deliver transformative impact with a focus on southern partner countries;
- To enable the development of collaborations between researchers in Ireland and researchers in partner countries where Irish Aid works;
- To support development, deployment and demonstration of sustainable solutions across a range of application areas.

Q4. What is the SFI Future Innovator Prize and how is it part of the SDG Challenge?

The SDG Challenge is run within the challenge-funding framework of the SFI Future Innovator Prize Programme, which is structured around the principles set out above. The SFI Future Innovator Prize consists of three phases: Concept, Seed and Prize Award. Following application review, successful teams will be awarded funding of up to €50k over 6 months to undertake team building, scoping and concept validation activities during the Concept Phase. They then undergo a rigorous review before receiving additional funding of up to €250k in the 12-month Seed Phase to further validate and prototype their proposed solutions. Finalists compete to be awarded follow-on funding within the challenge prize fund of €1M.

Challenge theme and solution

Q5. What are the SDGs?

The SDGs refer to the UN Sustainable Development Goals. At its heart are the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are an urgent call for action by all countries - developed and developing - in a global partnership. They recognize that ending poverty and other deprivations must go hand-in-hand with strategies that improve access to food, good health and education, reduce inequality, and spur economic growth – all while tackling climate change and working to preserve our oceans and forests. More information on each of the 17 SDGs can be found at: <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

Q6. What type of solutions is the SDG Challenge looking for?

Solutions must rely on or be directly informed by a STEM innovation. Applicants may also wish to consider novel approaches to enable decision and policy-making, such as for planning, measurement, monitoring and evaluation, as well as meaningful inclusion of local communities in these processes, particularly women and youth. Please review the more detailed challenge theme in the call document to consider how your idea might be relevant to addressing the challenge.

Applicant Eligibility

Q7. Can an individual researcher apply to a challenge call under the SDG Challenge?

One of the key features of SFI challenge funding is its focus on teams and the importance of including diverse expertise. Individual researchers cannot apply by themselves to the SDG Challenge. Teams

must represent collaborative and equitable partnerships between researchers in Ireland and researchers in a partner country (see partner country questions for more details), and applications must include funding allocations for both. Please see question below on team composition for more information.

Q8. How many people should be part of a team applying for the SDG Challenge and which should be their profile?

The core applicant team must consist of either 3 or 4 members.

Mandatory team members:

- Team Lead (an academic staff member or a contract researcher at an eligible institution in Ireland)
- Partner Country Team Co-Lead (academic staff member employed at an eligible HEI or RPO in the selected partner country)

In addition, the core team must include one or both of the following members:

- Team Co-Lead (an academic staff member or a contract researcher at an eligible institution in Ireland)
- Societal Impact Champion (non-technical expertise to support in validating challenges, and advise on solution development)

Q9. What is the role of the Societal Impact Champion? Are they a mandatory team member?

While teams are not required to identify a Societal Impact Champion at any stage of the SDG Challenge, they are strongly encouraged to consider including this team member at the application stage or at a later date during the programme.

The Societal Impact Champion will have a leadership role in the team and will support identification and validation of challenges in addition to advising on solution development. It is envisaged that they will play a crucial role in contributing to the identification of barriers and in developing strategies to overcome them. They may also play a key advocacy role and assist in maximising the societal impact of the solution. It is envisaged that the Societal Impact Champion will come from a non-academic sector, for example: the public sector/government, industry, non-governmental organisations, charities, patient advocacy, philanthropy or civil society.

Q10. What is the expected profile of applicants to the SDG Challenge?

Postdoctoral, early career or established researchers based at [eligible research body](#) may lead teams under the SDG Challenge, subject to meeting the eligibility criteria described in the call document. Applicants should be ambitious and motivated to address important societal challenges and be willing to engage in an agile programme to support the development of their solution.

Profiles of funded teams supported under previous SFI challenge programmes can be found on the SFI website <https://www.sfi.ie/challenges/>.

Q11. Can a researcher from an AHSS discipline lead on an application/team?

Yes, researchers from any discipline can lead on an application to the SDG Challenge. It is noted that the remit of the programme requires that proposed solutions rely on or are directly informed by a STEM innovation, and as such, it is expected that teams include expertise in the STEM research area underpinning the proposed solution (either as lead or co-lead). It is expected that a significant component of the research activity undertaken as part of a project funded under a challenge call will be STEM-related.

Q12. Can an applicant who applied for another SFI Challenge apply to this call?

Core team members may be named on applications to different challenge calls, or be members of broader challenge teams, regardless of whether these are running concurrently or consecutively.

It is noted that applications must propose distinct ideas or, if they have been previously reviewed, must adhere to the [SFI Resubmission Policy](#). Furthermore, given the nature of challenge research, applicants should strongly consider their capacity and that of team members to deliver on project objectives if team members are included on applications to multiple concurrent or consecutive calls.

Given the time commitment involved with leading on an SFI Challenge award, SFI may follow up with individuals managing other/multiple SFI grants to provide justification and rationale for how they would manage two or more major SFI grants. This information is provided for planning purposes by SFI Scientific Staff, and will not be shared with reviewers.

Q13. I hold an SFI/IRC Pathway Award. Am I eligible to apply to SFI Challenge Calls?

SFI/IRC Pathway award holders are permitted to apply to the SDG Challenge as either Team Lead or Co-Lead.

As outlined in the SFI/IRC Pathway Programme call document, potential applicants to the SFI Challenge Programmes should note that SFI-IRC Pathway awardees are expected to dedicate the majority of their time to that award in the first year of the award. It should also be noted that your commitment to the Pathway award should not drop below 50% at any point over the course of the award.

Potential applicants are advised to contact challenges@sfi.ie or the programme manager for their SFI/IRC Pathway Award in the respective funding agency to confirm their eligibility.

Q14. Do I need to have a PhD to apply to the SDG Challenge?

It is expected that the team lead and co-lead will typically hold a PhD or [equivalent](#) to meet this eligibility criterion for the SDG Challenge.

However, it is recognised that in certain disciplines relevant to this call, such as engineering or international development, research-active members of academic staff may not hold a PhD or equivalent. Such research-active staff members may be considered eligible to participate as a Team Lead or Co-Lead but must confirm their eligibility with SFI in advance of submission of an application.

Requests must be made by the research office of the host research body to SFI by e-mail (challenges@sfi.ie) and should include a completed narrative CV template, which must demonstrate evidence of appropriate research experience. In such cases, only current members of academic staff will be considered.

It is noted that eligibility for this call will not be considered in the assessment of eligibility for other SFI funding calls and does not correspond to confirmation of PhD equivalence.

Partner countries

Q15. What does “Irish Aid partner countries” mean under the SDG Challenge?

The SDG Challenge aims to have impact in one of Irish Aid’s partner countries. In this SDG Challenge Call, eligible Irish Aid partner countries are: Cambodia; Laos; Palestine; Vietnam; ODA-eligible countries on the African continent; ODA-eligible Small Island Developing States (SIDS). ODA-eligibility of countries is determined based on the DAC list of ODA-eligible countries¹.

Q16. How are Partner Country Team Co-Lead added to the application on SESAME (SFI’s grant management system)?

Partner Country Team Co-Leads are not required to have a registered profile on SESAME. During the application process, they should be designated as an Academic Collaborator. This is for the purposes of submission of the SESAME application only and, in the review process, they will have equal status to that of other team members.

Involvement of other organisations

Q17. Can industry be involved in the SDG Challenge?

Yes. Research teams funded under the SDG Challenge are encouraged to engage with stakeholders, which may include industry. This engagement is undertaken in order to develop greater understanding of a challenge and/or solution.

Teams supported under the SDG Challenge may include industry as a team member (i.e., Societal Impact Champion) or collaborator. In this case, their involvement **must** comply with the definition of “effective collaboration” and the conditions relating to the allocation between the parties of the results and/or intellectual property rights arising from the collaboration as per the 2022 Framework for State aid for research and development and innovation (2022/C 414/01) (the “Framework”²) Please see the relevant section of the call document for details on SFI’s policy on State aid and how compliance will be demonstrated.

¹ <https://www.oecd.org/dac/financing-sustainable-development/development-finance-standards/DAC-List-of-ODA-Recipients-for-reporting-2024-25-flows.pdf>

² https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=uriserv:OJ.C_.2022.414.01.0001.01.ENG

Q18. Can charity organisations, NGOs or non-profit organisations participate in the SDG Challenge?

Yes. Applications to the SDG Challenge are led by academic teams. However, we do strongly encourage academic research teams applying to SFI Challenge Programmes to engage with organisations outside of academia to bring knowledge and expertise directly relevant to the proposed challenge/solution to their team. These may include charity organisations, NGOs or non-profit organisations. Representatives from these organisations may be included as a non-academic team member, referred to as the Societal Impact Champion. Teams may also include non-academic partners in their wider team.

It is noted that only researchers at SFI Eligible Research Bodies are eligible to receive funding through the SDG Challenge.

Funding

Q19. How much funding is available for the SDG Challenge?

Applications to the programme can request up to €300,000 in total direct costs over a duration of 18-months. Up to €50,000 can be allocated for use during the Concept Phase of the programme (Months 1 – 6) while the remaining request of up to €250,000 can be allocated to the Seed Phase (Months 7 – 18). To reflect the collaborative nature of the research to be undertaken and the joint leadership of teams funded under this programme, applications must include funding allocations for researchers based in eligible institutions in both Ireland and in the partner country. Following the Seed Phase, one or more teams may be provided with follow-on funding from the prize fund of up to €1M.

Please review the [SFI Grant Budget Policy](#) as well as the call document for eligible costs and team member salary scales.

Phase	Funding (Direct costs)	Duration (Months)
Concept	€50k	6
Seed	€250k	12
Prize	€1M	24

Q20. What is the workshop support grant?

Funding (up to €5k) is available through the Workshop Support Grant to provide limited support for organising networking events, that can instigate team formation and seed idea generation. Organisers are expected to include participants from potential partner countries in these networking events. Awards may not be used to support activities of individual applicants in the preparation of their application. All events must take place before the application deadline, 8 October 2024.

Q21. How do I apply for a workshop support grant?

Applications for this support grant must be made by email (to challenges@sfi.ie) through the research office at your host research body, using the application form available through the call webpage. Departments, institutions and Research Centres are encouraged to apply, but individual researchers may also apply to organise such an event. Submissions must be made by 13:00, 5 July 2024.

Q22. How is the funding managed between Ireland and the partner country?

The Team Lead and their host Research Body will be responsible for administration and management of the award and will be required to enter into a collaborative research agreement with host research body of the Partner Country Team Co-Lead to manage transfer of funds, including overheads.

For budget allocations to the Partner Country Team Co-Lead, the following guidance should be followed:

- Concept Phase: a maximum of €23k (of the total €50k) may be allocated to the Partner Country Team Co-Lead.
- Seed Phase: a maximum of €115k (of the total €250k) may be allocated to the Partner Country Team Co-Lead.
- Eligible costs for the Partner Country Team Co-Lead are the same as those in the SFI Grant Budget Policy. However, local institutional salary scales should be used for team members funded under this award and should be indicated in the budget justification. Subject to appropriate justification, a contribution of up to 50% of salary costs for the Partner Country Team Co-Lead may be requested.

Q23. Is teaching buyout an eligible cost under the SDG Challenge?

Team Leads and Co-Leads based at Technological Universities (TUs) or Institutes of Technology (IoTs) are permitted to apply for teaching replacement of up to a maximum of 50% of their teaching load for the duration of each phase of the programme. Salary scales for replacement lecturers must be reasonable and justified appropriately within the budget justification. Teaching replacement requests must be pro-rata and proportional to the time commitment to the award. Confirmation for support for these requests should be included in the Letter of Support from the Research Body.

Q24. Can postdoctoral researchers who apply to the SDG Challenge as a team member request their salary as part of the budget?

Yes. Postdoctoral researchers based in any eligible research body who are acting as a Team Lead or Co-Lead may include up to 100% of their salary as part of the budget request in line with their time commitment to the project.

Q25. Can costs associated with the Societal Impact Champion be requested as part of the budget under the SDG Challenge?

While it is not permitted to request direct support for Societal Impact Champions (e.g., salary or fees), expenses that can be directly aligned to the execution of the research programme may be eligible. Activities may include, for example, travel costs associated with team activities, organisation of workshops, stakeholder engagement, and other related activities. Requests for such costs must be appropriately justified.

Review process

Q26. How will my application be evaluated?

Following submission, applications are checked for eligibility. Following these checks, documentation will be assessed by a panel of international experts. Projects will be assessed based on the criteria highlighted in the call document.

Q27. How do the teams advance from one phase to the next under the SDG Challenge?

Progress reviews will take place at the end of the Concept and Seed Phases and progress will be assessed by an international expert panel based on the same criteria used at application stage. The Concept and Seed Phase Progress Reviews will also include an interview between the expert panel and the applicant group.

Please note that while there is sufficient funding available for all teams to proceed from the Concept to the Seed Phase, teams will be required to demonstrate progress to date and high impact potential as assessed by the expert panel.

Q28. When will applicants be notified of the outcome of the application review process?

It is envisaged that applicants will be notified in December 2024. Awards will commence on 1 February 2025.