



## ECO-INNOVATION CHALLENGE Application Guidelines for Innovators

A flagship initiative of  
**Blueing the Black Sea**  
a GEF Regional Project

08 September 2025



THE WORLD BANK



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# 1. Introduction: Fostering Innovation for a Cleaner Black Sea

Welcome, Eco-Innovators! If you are looking to make a difference for the future of the Black Sea, you have come to the right place!

This document provides essential guidelines for all applicants in the **Eco-Innovation Challenge (EIC)**, a key initiative of the ["Blueing the Black Sea: a GEF regional project" \(BBSEA\)](#). The aim of the EIC is to attract innovative approaches to address key pollution challenges in the Black Sea and support implementation with funding and advisory services. Grants of up to \$300,000 will be awarded to selected projects, alongside an opportunity to get access to a support network of mentors, training and local support.

Our goal is to harness creativity from across the globe and from the Black Sea region to address critical environmental threats, specifically eutrophication, chemical/industrial pollution, and marine litter in the target countries.

This guide will walk you through the structure of the challenge, the application and selection process, and clarify the two distinct pathways for eco-innovators: the **BBSEA Focus Country Window (for Grantees)** and the **Greater Black Sea Window (for Awardees)**. Understanding these differences is crucial for aligning your proposal with the right opportunity.

## 2. The Eco-Innovation Challenge at a Glance

To support innovation at every stage, from early-concept stage to proven solution, the EIC is structured into two primary opportunities, or "windows." While both windows are open to global innovators, they have different objectives, support structures, and outcomes.

### 2.1. BBSEA Focus Country Window (leading to a grant)

**Who it's for:** Innovators with advanced ideas that need support towards implementation.

**Primary Goal:** To fund and execute piloting of eco-innovations on the ground in one of the three BBSEA focus countries: Georgia, Moldova, or Türkiye.

**The Outcome:** Winners will receive a **grant** to help fund the implementation of their innovation, as well as 12 months of specialized **technical assistance** to support their implementation. Winning innovations should demonstrate consistency with the national environmental regulations of the country where implementation takes place.

### 2.2. Greater Black Sea Window (leading to an award)

**Who it's for:** Innovators with early-stage concepts or ideas that require further development before reaching implementation readiness.

**Primary Goal:** To nurture promising ideas that have the potential for broad applicability across the entire Black Sea region.

**The Outcome:** Winners will receive an **award** of tailored, **in-kind technical assistance** over six months to further develop their concept. For example, this support could be focused on improving technological solutions, exposing the eco-innovator to global best practices and local partners, developing business models, marketing plans, or financing strategies.

### 2.3. The Four Pollution Problems

All submitted eco-innovations in either window must address one of the following four critical pollution problems through either prevention at the source or remediation of existing pollution:

- **Agricultural & Livestock Runoff:** Nutrient pollution from fertilizers and animal waste.
- **Municipal Wastewater:** Pollution from urban and residential sources.
- **Chemical & Industrial Pollution:** Contamination from industrial activities, including non-hazardous war-related pollution.
- **Marine Litter:** Plastic, organic and other solid waste

## 3. The Journey: Application and Selection Process

Here are the key steps in the two phases (1. Competition and Award Phase, 2. Execution Phase) of the process that you will follow as an applicant in the Eco-Innovation Challenge.

### 3.1. Competition and Award Phase

Applicants of either window will follow the same competition and award process.. For those applicants that pass the initial competitive screening, emphasis will be placed on providing support to each participant to continue to refine and improve their idea into a full proposal as well as support the participants as a collective to provide opportunities to network and learn from each other.

Steps	Activities	Indicative Timeline
<b>Step 1</b>	<b>Submit Your Idea</b> Submit your initial concept through our Call for Expressions of Interest (EOI), outlining your solution and selecting your preferred application window.	08 Sep - 14 Nov 2025
<b>Step 2</b>	<b>Refine Your Proposal</b> After the screening, up to 50 innovators (25 per window) will be invited to participate in the accelerator-led orientation. You'll receive expert guidance to strengthen your idea before submitting a detailed technical (and for the Focus Country Window, financial) proposal to the Limited Call for Proposals.	Dec 2025 - 01 Mar 2026
<b>Step 3</b>	<b>Compete in the Finals</b> If you are chosen as one of the top 20 finalists (10 per window) , you will participate in an intensive, accelerator-led bootcamp to perfect your business model and master your pitch. The competition culminates at our Shark Tank Event, where you will present your innovation to a high-level jury.	01 Apr - 15 Jun 2026
<b>Step 4</b>	<b>Become a Winner and Launch your project</b> If selected as one of the 10-20 winners at the Shark Tank Event, you will proceed to the execution phase. Grant winners will begin their 18-month implementation projects, while award winners will start their 6-month tailored mentorship program.	From July 2026

### 3.2. Execution Phase

This is where the paths of Grantees and Awardees diverge.

- **For Grantees:** Winners of the BBSEA Focus Country Window will enter into a Grant Support Agreement (GSA) with UNOPS to begin the 18-month implementation of their innovation. They will also receive bespoke technical assistance for the first 12 months of implementation.
- **For Awardees:** Winners of the Greater Black Sea Window will begin their six-month bespoke technical assistance program with the accelerator.

## 4. Differentiating Grantees and Awardees: A Clear Comparison

Understanding your potential role as either a Grantee or an Awardee is key to a successful application.

### 4.1. The Grantee Pathway: Why Apply to the BBSEA Focus Country Window?

If your innovation is selected through this window, you become a **Grantee**. This pathway is designed for innovators who are past the conceptual stage and are ready to make a direct, measurable impact. It's an opportunity to move from plan to action with significant backing.

#### When is this Window the Right Choice for You?

You should consider applying to this window if, for example:

- **You are ready to test your solution in the market.** You have a proven prototype, or a tested methodology, or a technology that is ready for deployment.

- **You have the ability to execute a sizable grant.** Your organization has the necessary legal, financial, and operational structures to manage a substantial grant and oversee an 18-month project.
- **You have a clear implementation plan.** You have a good idea of *how* and *where* you want to implement your project in Georgia, Moldova, or Türkiye, and may already have local partners.
- **You are ready to scale.** Your goal is not just to test an idea, but to implement a solution that can demonstrate tangible results and become a model for wider adoption.

### What Makes It a Valuable Opportunity?

Winning a grant through this window provides the resources and support necessary to turn your vision into a reality:

- **Substantial Financial Support:** You may receive a significant grant of **USD 50,000 to USD 300,000**, depending on the scope, scale, and demonstrated need of your project. This funding is designed to cover direct costs of project implementation, from equipment and personnel to operational expenses. **Please note that the maximum amount is not guaranteed nor intended as a default request.** Applicants are strongly encouraged to submit a realistic, cost-effective budget that clearly aligns with project goals and reflects actual financial requirements. Proposals with well-justified, efficient budgets may receive favorable consideration over those simply requesting the upper limit without clear justification.
- **Hands-On Implementation Support:** You get **12 months** of continuous, hands-on support from an *"international accelerator"*<sup>1</sup>. This isn't just mentorship, it's active assistance with project management, navigating local regulations, marketing, and overcoming implementation hurdles.
- **Direct Market Access and Impact:** This is your chance to deploy your solution in a real-world setting. You will generate concrete data, create a powerful case study, and demonstrate your innovation's effectiveness to potential future clients, partners, and investors.

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<sup>1</sup>An international accelerator is a time-bound program that rapidly scales early-stage companies for global markets by providing intensive mentorship, and access to a worldwide network.



- **Build a Scalable Business Case:** Successfully implementing a grant-funded project proves your model's viability and creates a strong foundation for scaling your operations commercially or seeking follow-on funding.

### 4.2. The Awardee Pathway: Why Apply to the Greater Black Sea Window?

If your innovation is selected through the Greater Black Sea Window, you become an **Awardee**. This pathway is the ideal launchpad for promising early-stage innovations that need expert support to become ready for piloting. This window aims to serve as an incubator and showcase for the next generation of environmental solutions.

#### When is this Window the Right Choice for You?

You should consider applying to this window if:

- **Your idea is at an early stage.** You may have a brilliant concept, initial research, or a basic prototype, but it's not yet ready for implementation in the next 18 months.
- **You need expert guidance.** You recognize the need for technical or business mentorship to develop a viable business model, refine your technology, or create a market-entry strategy.
- **You want to grow without the pressure of a large grant.** You prefer to focus on developing your idea without the immediate administrative and reporting responsibilities of managing a large financial grant.
- **Your solution has broad, regional potential.** Your innovation is designed to be applicable across the entire Black Sea basin, not just one of the three focus countries.

#### What Makes It a Valuable Opportunity?

Winning an award in this window provides a unique and powerful set of benefits to accelerate your idea:

- **World-Class Mentorship:** You receive a bespoke, in-kind technical assistance package valued at up to **USD 20,000**. **Please note, this is an in-kind award and not a cash grant.** This involves **6 months** of tailored support from the international accelerator on critical areas like technology validation, business strategy, financial modeling, and investment readiness.
- **De-Risk and Validate Your Idea:** This is a low-risk, high-reward opportunity to test, refine, and prove your concept with expert feedback. Success in this window serves as a powerful validation of your idea's potential, making it far more attractive to future partners and investors.
- **A Stepping Stone to Major Funding:** The primary goal of the accelerator's support is to move your innovation towards "investment-readiness." This award provides you with a pathway to prepare yourself for future grant applications (including a future EIC) or pitching to venture capitalists.
- **High-Profile Networking and Visibility:** As a finalist, you gain unparalleled access to a network of regional experts, policymakers, investors, and fellow innovators. Presenting at the **Shark Tank Event** places your idea on a major international stage.
- **Lower Barrier to Entry:** This window is accessible to a wider range of innovators, including individual researchers, academic teams, and newly-formed startups that may not yet have the extensive financial management capacity required for a large grant.

Here is a summary of the key facts:

WINDOWS	BBSEA FOCUS COUNTRY WINDOW (Pathway for Grantees)	GREATER BLACK SEA WINDOW (Pathway for Awardees)
PRIMARY OUTCOME	Grant & Implementation Support	In-Kind Technical Assistance Award
FUNDING	<b>USD 50,000 - \$300,000</b>	No monetary award, but technical <b>assistance worth up to USD 20,000 (in kind only)</b>
PROJECT STAGE	Ready for Implementation	Early-Stage Concept
MAIN GOAL	On-the-ground execution in Georgia, Moldova or Türkiye	Concept development and refinement for future implementation
SUPPORT DURATION	<b>12 months</b> of accelerator support	<b>6 months</b> of accelerator support

## 5. Roles and Responsibilities

### **EIC Management Team (UNOPS & Accelerator):**

Responsible for the strategic design, planning, and execution of the challenge. This includes managing the selection process, providing mentorship, overseeing grant agreements, and ensuring all environmental, social, and fiduciary standards are met.

### **Eco-Innovators (Applicants, Finalists, Winners):**

Responsible for developing and proposing sound, innovative solutions. You must actively participate in all required phases, from orientation to the Shark Tank. Winners (both Grantees and Awardees) must fulfill their respective commitments regarding project implementation or concept development.

**We look forward to receiving your innovative solutions and  
working together to protect the future of the Black Sea.**

**The Black Sea marine ecosystem  
and future generations thank you!**

## 6. Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

### 1. General Eligibility

#### **Q: Who can apply to the Eco-Innovation Challenge?**

**A:** The competition is open to individuals, companies, organizations, startups, NGOs, universities, and research institutions from any World Bank-eligible country. Depending on your stage of innovation and institutional capacity, you can apply under either the **BBSEA Focus Country Window (grant)** or the **Greater Black Sea Window (technical assistance)**.

#### **Q: Can I apply as an individual?**

**A:** Yes. Individuals can apply, particularly under the Greater Black Sea Window which does not require institutional grant management capacity. However, the BBSEA Focus Country Window requires applicants to be legally registered organizations with the financial and legal capacity to manage a grant.

#### **Q: Can I apply from outside the Black Sea region?**

**A:** Yes. Global applicants are welcome. However, for the **BBSEA Focus Country Window**, you must propose implementation in **Georgia, Moldova, or Türkiye**. Partnering with local organizations is encouraged.

#### **Q: Can I submit more than one idea?**

**A:** Yes. There is no limit to the number of proposals an applicant (individual, organization, or consortium) can submit. Each idea must be submitted as a separate Expression of Interest (EOI).

### 2. Application Process

#### **Q: How do I submit my Expression of Interest (EOI)?**

**A:** Submit your EOI via email to **BBSEA.EIC@unops.org** with the subject line: *EOI for the Eco-Innovation Challenge*. While use of the Annex A application form is strongly

recommended for completeness, you may submit in any format that clearly addresses the required components.

**Q: What is the deadline to submit an EOI?**

**A:** The deadline is **14 November 2025 (midnight Central European Time)**. Late submissions will not be considered.

**Q: Can I make changes to my EOI after submission?**

**A:** No changes are allowed after the submission deadline. However, if you need to update your submission before the deadline, you may send a revised version with a clear note indicating it replaces your earlier submission.

**Q: Can I make changes to my idea/team/country of implementation at proposal stage?**

**A:** Yes, the changes can be made during the full proposal development stage.

**Q: What language should the application be submitted in?**

**A:** All EOIs must be submitted in **English**. This includes any supporting documents.

**Q: Is there a specific format for the EOI?**

**A:** While you may submit in any format, it must address all required components. Use of the **Annex A – Application Form** is strongly encouraged to ensure your submission is complete and aligned with evaluation criteria.

**Q: Will I receive confirmation that my application has been received?**

**A:** Yes, a confirmation email will be sent upon successful receipt of your submission. If you do not receive confirmation within 2 working days, you may follow up via email.

**Q: Is there a word or page limit for the EOI?**

**A:** The recommended word limit for the main sections (such as the eco-innovation description) is approximately **1,000 words**. Try to be concise while providing sufficient detail. Supporting documents may be included as annexes if needed.

**Q: Can I submit supporting documents with my application (e.g., designs, business plans, letters of support)?**

**A:** Yes, you may include attachments such as concept notes, diagrams, financial projections, or letters of support. These should be clearly referenced in your main application and attached as separate files.

**Q: What happens after I submit my EOI?**

**A:** EOIs will go through an initial screening by the UNOPS and accelerator team. Longlisted applicants (up to 25 per window) will be invited to participate in the orientation phase and develop a more detailed proposal.

**Q: Will I receive feedback if my application is not selected?**

**A:** Please note that direct feedback will only be provided to applicants advancing to the proposal stage. While every effort will be made to provide some minimal feedback to those not longlisted, due to the expected volume of applications, individual feedback may not be possible.

**Q: Can I contact someone for help while completing the application?**

**A:** Yes, you may email questions to [BBSEA.EIC@unops.org](mailto:BBSEA.EIC@unops.org). The final deadline to submit questions is **Thursday, November 6, 2025**. However, please allow time for responses and consult the FAQ and documentation before reaching out. In accordance with our transparency policy, all submitted questions and their official answers will be made publicly available in the Q&A section of the UNGM platform.

**Q: Can I apply to both windows with the same innovation?**

**A:** No. You must choose one window. However, there is flexibility during the accelerator-led orientation phase. If it becomes clear your solution is better suited to the other window, a transfer may be considered.

### 3. About the Two Windows

**Q: What is the main difference between the two application windows?**

**A:**

- **BBSEA Focus Country Window:** For solutions that can be implemented over 18 months in Georgia, Moldova, or Türkiye. This window offers **grants of**

**USD 50,000–300,000 plus 12 months of technical assistance.**

- **Greater Black Sea Window:** For early-stage concepts. This window offers **in-kind technical assistance worth up to USD 20,000 over 6 months** — no direct funding.

**Q: What happens if my idea is early-stage, but I have a clear plan for implementation in a focus country?**

**A:** If you have both a viable plan and the capacity to manage a grant, you may apply under the BBSEA Focus Country Window. However, if your concept still requires refinement, the Greater Black Sea Window may be better suited to help you de-risk and develop it further.

**Q: Can I move from the Greater Black Sea Window to the Focus Country Window later?**

**A:** Yes, if your idea gains traction, technical maturity, or a local partner during the program, you may be invited to resubmit under the BBSEA Focus Country Window.

## 4. Innovation and Scope

**Q: Are nature-based solutions eligible under the Eco-Innovation Challenge?**

**A:** Yes, absolutely. Nature-based solutions (NbS) are strongly encouraged, especially if they offer innovative ways to address the Black Sea's pollution problems. Examples include constructed wetlands for wastewater treatment, buffer strips to reduce agricultural runoff, green infrastructure, and ecosystem restoration approaches. As long as the proposed solution is novel within the local context and aligns with one or more of the four target pollution issues, it is eligible under both windows of the EIC.

**Q: What counts as an “eco-innovation”?**

**A:** Any practice, technology, or service that offers a new or significantly improved solution compared to locally available best practice to address one or more of the four defined pollution problems. Here a list of example innovations:



Pollution problem	“Technology black box”	Improved processes	Early stage concepts
Agricultural and livestock runoff pollution	Microbial pesticides; New sludge treatment plant for pig waste	Integrated pest management	Daily digitized mapping of run-off estimates for the watershed
Municipal wastewater pollution	New use of nutrient cycling enzymes	Remote real time monitoring of wastewater outfalls	Wastewater recycling and re-use
Chemical/industrial pollution (including war-related)	Small scale fisheries apply new technology for more sustainable packaging	App-based system for reporting concentration of chemical/industrial waste (including war-related waste)	Sustainable fuel for sea-based transportation industry
Marine litter	New technology for removing surface litter 50 km from coastline	Hotel associations develop a standard for waste collection and disposal	Remote sensing of marine litter and mapping of pick-up

**Q: What if there is a best practice from outside the Black Sea region that we would like to implement in a BBSEA focus country? Would this be considered innovative?**

**A:** Yes. As long as the solution is new to the context where it will be implemented and offers improvement over current local practices.

## 5. Funding and Support

**Q: What does the grant cover under the BBSEA Focus Country Window?**

**A:** Eligible costs include personnel, equipment and materials, travel and fieldwork, operational expenses, minor infrastructure and training. You must demonstrate

capacity to manage these funds responsibly. Specific requirements will be outlined in the limited Call for Proposals.

**Q: Is co-financing required?**

**A:** Demonstrating matching funds or in-kind contributions will strengthen your application. Specific requirements will be outlined in the limited Call for Proposals.

**Q: Will the Greater Black Sea Window award funding later?**

**A:** No direct funding is provided under this window. However, winners receive targeted support to refine their ideas and improve investment-readiness. Successful awardees may be introduced to funding partners.

**Q: Who owns the intellectual property (IP) of my innovation?**

**A:** You do. All intellectual property rights remain with the applicant. Neither UNOPS nor the World Bank will claim ownership of your innovation.

## 6. Implementation and Infrastructure

**Q: What kinds of infrastructure are allowed?**

**A:** Only **low-risk installations and minor installations** are eligible. Your installation must involve standard, well-understood technologies in stable environments, with:

- Low probability of failure
- Low-moderate environmental or social risks or impacts
- Minimal complexity and investment

**Q: How will you assess infrastructure risk?**

**A:** UNOPS will assist the applicant with a screening of the proposed infrastructure for environmental, social and technical risks. Complex or large-scale infrastructure projects are not eligible.

### 7. Teams and Partnerships

#### **Q: Can we apply as a consortium?**

**A:** Yes. Consortium applications are welcome and encouraged, especially for the BBSEA Focus Country Window. A lead entity must be designated to receive and manage the grant.

#### **Q: Are women-led or youth-led projects encouraged?**

**A:** Yes. To foster diverse participation, the EIC especially encourages applications from women-led, youth-led, and community-based initiatives.

### 8. After Selection

#### **Q: What happens after I submit my EOI?**

**A:** EOIs will be screened and the top 25 applicants per window will be invited to an orientation and proposal refinement phase.

#### **Q: What if I'm not selected?**

**A:** Even if not selected for the final award, reaching the full proposal stage provides a significant opportunity for exposure. The top 50 applicants (25 from each window) invited to submit a full proposal may be featured on the official BBSEA website and social media channels.

With your consent, this feature will showcase your **innovation's title, a brief description, and your contact information**, putting your project in the spotlight for potential partners, investors, and stakeholders across the region.