

REPORT

D2.1

D2.1 Policy briefs (macro-level)

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PREMIERE –
PREPARING MULTI-ACTOR PROJECTS
IN A CO-CREATIVE WAY

GA NO. 101086531

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	1
1 Introduction.....	2
2 FOCUS GROUP process	6
3 POLICY BRIEF #1: Challenges and solutions for more effective programming and implementation of the MAA.....	9
3.1 Importance of the Multi-Actor Approach (MAA) in Horizon Europe projects.....	9
3.2 Key challenges and potential solutions.....	10
Block 1: Communicating basic information and terminology related to MAA.....	10
Block 2: Programming and evaluation of the MAA calls	11
Block 3: Creating an enabling environment to support applicants and beneficiaries.....	12
Block 4: Developing proposals for MAA calls	13
Block 5: Implementing MAA projects in practice	13
3.3 Suggested improvements to the MAA definition.....	14
3.4 Suggested improvements to Work Programme content.....	16
4 Next steps	18
Annex.....	19

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Conceptual framework (<i>including main institutional actors, activities undertaken and resources produced</i>) for the governance and enabling of the MAA in the Horizon Europe (HEU) research and innovation programme	3
Figure 2. Overview of the WP2 Focus Group process in 2024.	7

ACRONYMS

Acronym	Long Form
AKIS	Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy of the EU
DoA	Project Description of Action
DG	Directorate General of the European Commission
DG RTD	General Directorate for Research, Technology and Digitalisation
DG GROW	General Directorate for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs
EC	European Commission
EIP-AGRI	European Innovation Partnership for Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability
EU	European Union
FG	Focus Group
HEU	Horizon Europe Research and Innovation Programme
ISS	Innovation Support Services
MAA	Multi-Actor Approach
NCP	National Contact Point
REA	European Research Executive Agency
RPI	Reporting Period 1 of PREMIERE, month 1 - month 18
R&I	EU Commission's Research and Innovation (R&I) framework
SCAR-AKIS SWG	Strategic Working Group of the Standing Committee on Agricultural Research for Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems
WP	Work Package in the work plan of a HEU project

HISTORY OF CHANGES

Date (version)	Section	Changes made
24/12/2024 (v 2)	General comment	Deliverable 2.1 has been modified to simplify, focus and clarify its content following a 'Request for revision' during the RPI review process.
	Title	Reverted to the original title of Deliverable 2.1 listed in the PREMIERE Description of Action (DoA).
	Executive Summary	Insertion of an Executive Summary
	1	Edited and corrected to align the deliverable more specifically with the PREMIERE Description of Action (DoA), and with the restructuring of sections 2-4
	2	Edited to focus more specifically on the Focus Group process employed in RPI
	3	New section inserted containing the core content of Policy Brief #1 on <i>Challenges and solutions for more effective programming and implementation of the MAA</i> .
	4	Minor edits.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Effective implementation of the MAA in HEU and other programmes requires an enabling environment that is ‘fit for purpose’, including establishing and maintaining appropriate institutional governance mechanisms to help ensure efficient MA proposal development.

This document introduces the policy work undertaken in Task 2.1 of the PREMIERE project regarding the effective programming of the MAA approach at the so-called ‘macro-level’ of MAA governance.

Focus Groups (FGs) are the principal mechanism used by PREMIERE to identify shortcomings and discuss improvements in the MAA-enabling environment. This deliverable presents the first FG results from months 1 -18 (RP1) of PREMIERE in the form of the core content of a proposed Policy Brief supported by an annexed report of the FG results.

Key challenges and potential solutions are presented in 5 key ‘blocks’:

- Block 1: Communicating basic information and terminology related to MAA.
- Block 2: Programming and evaluation of the MAA calls.
- Block 3: Creating an enabling environment to support applicants and beneficiaries.
- Block 4: Developing proposals for MAA calls.
- Block 5: Implementing MAA projects in practice.

Additional recommendations are also presented for suggested improvements to a) the MAA definition and b) Work Programme content.

Finally, the deliverable explains the next steps for further development of the Task 2.1 policy work.

1 INTRODUCTION

PREMIERE (Preparing multi-actor projects in a co-creative way) is a European Union (EU) Horizon Europe (HEU) project which aims to strengthen the Multi-Actor Approach (MAA) by supporting the development of more relevant, coherent, and well-prepared project proposals¹.

Effective implementation of the MAA in HEU and other programmes requires an enabling environment that is ‘fit for purpose’. This includes establishing and maintaining appropriate institutional governance mechanisms to help ensure efficient MA proposal development.

PREMIERE WP2 is entitled ‘*Background, (financial) support and evaluation*’ and, during the duration of the project (M1-M60), aims to develop institutional guidelines for **two levels** of MAA governance:

- i) effective programming of the MAA (the so-called ‘macro-level’ governance), and
- ii) improved administration and support of the MAA (the so-called ‘meso-level’ governance).

These guidelines (titled generally as ‘Policy Briefs’) will be delivered as a **series of clear, persuasive, and easy-to-read documents** for policy- and decision-makers that will:

- strengthen their understanding of the capacities and support tools needed at these two governance levels, which gaps are relevant in specific settings, and how they might be filled.
- provide actionable recommendations for strengthening both the programming and implementation of the MAA.

During PREMIERE's initial months, in consultation with the project’s policy (DG AGRI) and project officers (REA), the WP2 team developed a **simple conceptual framework** to help visualise these two governance levels by structuring and presenting in a single diagram (Figure 1) the main institutional actors, activities undertaken, and resources produced in the MAA enabling environment.

¹ see <https://premiere-multiactor.eu/>

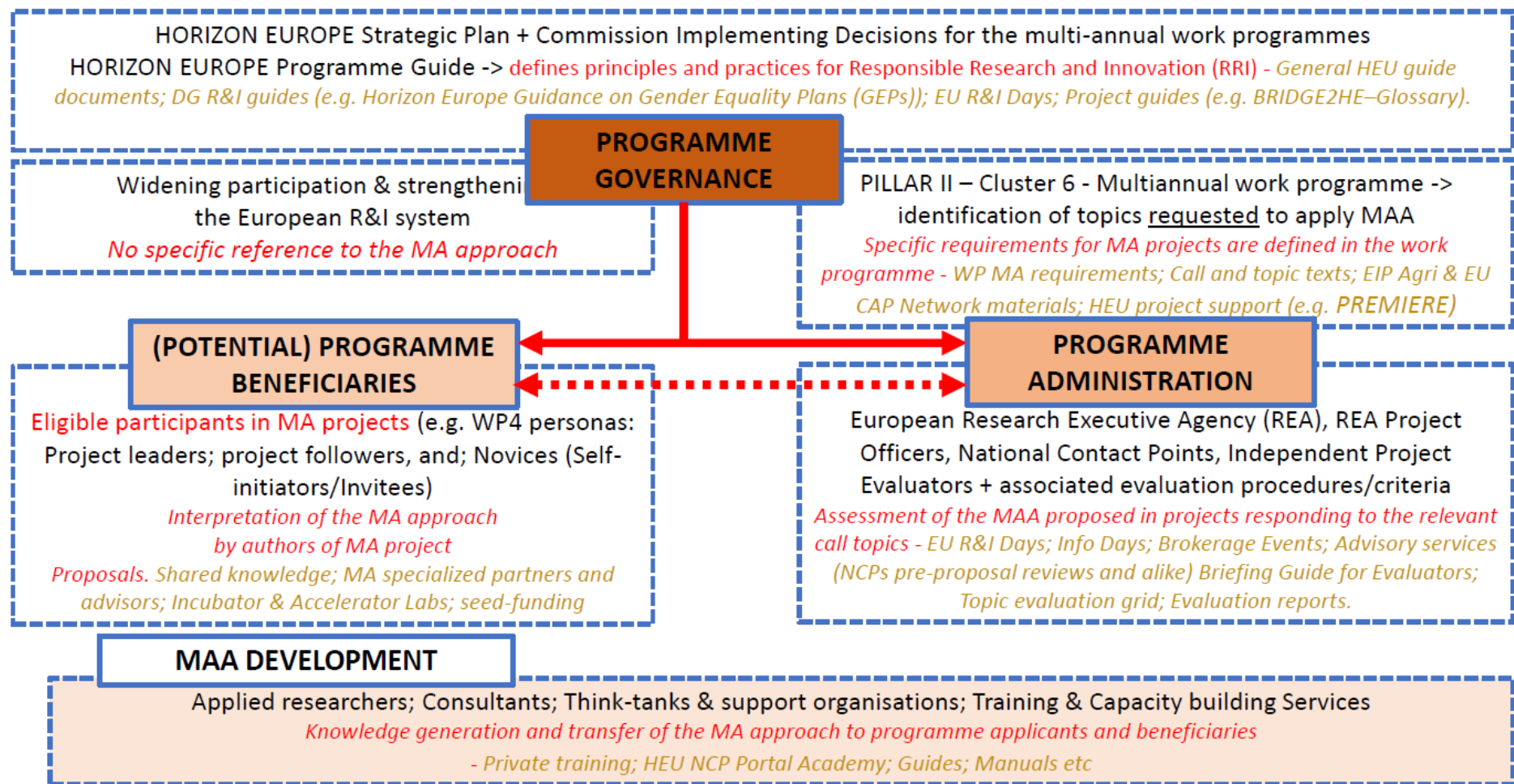


Figure 1. Conceptual framework (including main institutional actors, activities undertaken and resources produced) for the governance and enabling of the MAA in the Horizon Europe (HEU) research and innovation programme

The initial draft of this framework was discussed with the PREMIERE consortium at the project kick-off meeting (Eberswalde, March 2023) and was subsequently extended with further detail and complexity. The framework now provides the basis of all WP2 work and subsequent products and activities.

This **Deliverable 2.1 addresses the effective programming of the MAA approach ('macro-level')** and is complemented by Deliverable 2.2, which addresses improved administration and support ('meso-level').

In accordance with the DoA, the **main activity in Task 2.1 is to convene four online Focus Groups**, each composed of an appropriate selection of 10-20 MAA governance-related experts. Focus Groups are the principal mechanism used by PREMIERE to identify shortcomings in the MAA enabling environment, formulate possible solutions, and develop and disseminate actionable recommendations to improve MAA policies and governance.

All Focus Groups will be **conceived and organised in close working collaboration** with EC colleagues from DG AGRI (Unit F2 – Research and Innovation).

Deliverable 2.1 has been created within Task 2.1 (*Strengthen policymaking for the multi-actor approach*) and **encompasses the first two of the four policy-related Focus Groups planned**. This deliverable was prepared for submission in Month 18, but the task will continue with two more Focus Groups undertaken and disseminated during the project's remaining period until Month 60. Deliverable 2.1 should, therefore, be considered a **preliminary deliverable that provides an update on progress and sets the framework for further work**.

It should be noted that the final Policy Briefs produced by Task 2.1 will be discrete, stand-alone documents that will be produced in a common format together with Task 2.2 in RP2 and RP3.

The primary target group of the Task 2.1 policy work is **policy- and decision-makers involved in programming and implementing the MAA** within the Horizon Europe Programme. According to the stakeholder profiling presented in PREMIERE's D1.3 '*Experiences from the Stakeholder Dialogues*', this target group is equivalent to profile VII, representing EU-level policymakers who are

involved in shaping policies and frameworks for the programmes Horizon Europe and EIP-AGRI but also other programmes such as Interreg and LIFE+.

The policy insights from WP2 are also relevant for those working and influencing the structure and support mechanisms for co-innovation projects across the EU. This includes national and regional policymakers and administrators responsible for administering and managing national and regional innovation programmes, ensuring that local and regional contexts are integrated into broader EU initiatives.

Additionally, the PREMIERE policy work aims to engage important intermediaries, such as National Contact Points (NCPs), Innovation Support Services (ISS), and other individuals/entities who support the policy implementation process by providing guidance and resources to those directly involved in Multi-Actor (MA) projects.

2 FOCUS GROUP PROCESS

The theme of ‘**Challenges and solutions for more effective programming and implementation of the MAA**’ within Horizon Europe projects (Cluster 6, Horizon Missions, Partnerships and others) was chosen in consultation with EC colleagues from DG AGRI (Unit F2 – Research and Innovation).

The working hypothesis agreed for discussion was that:

*“Despite significant advances in introducing the multi-actor approach (MAA) in the Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe research programme frameworks, there are still **challenges in understanding and applying the MAA during its programming and implementation which risk limiting its full and effective application, and thereby its impact**”.*

The specific objectives of the FG process were to:

1. Identify **challenges** impacting the effective programming and implementation of the multi-actor approach (MAA)
2. Develop concrete and potentially feasible **solutions** to address the challenges identified
3. Co-create **recommendations** for next steps in the short, medium and longer-term

Since these were substantial subjects to address it was decided **to split into two Focus Groups (FGs)**: the first FG focused on identifying challenges, while the second FG aimed to find solutions to these challenges and co-create recommendations at the highest policy level.

The FG consultation process took place over several weeks during May and June 2024 (

Figure 2). Four participatory activities were organised: i) a presentation webinar, ii) two online discussion groups lasting two weeks each, and iii) a final online discussion group. Each step of the process was informed and supported with a concise working document. The process engaged a total of 51 participants, including EC policy and project officers, NCPs, external experts, project coordinators and other persons with MA expertise.

Focus Group Process – Overview

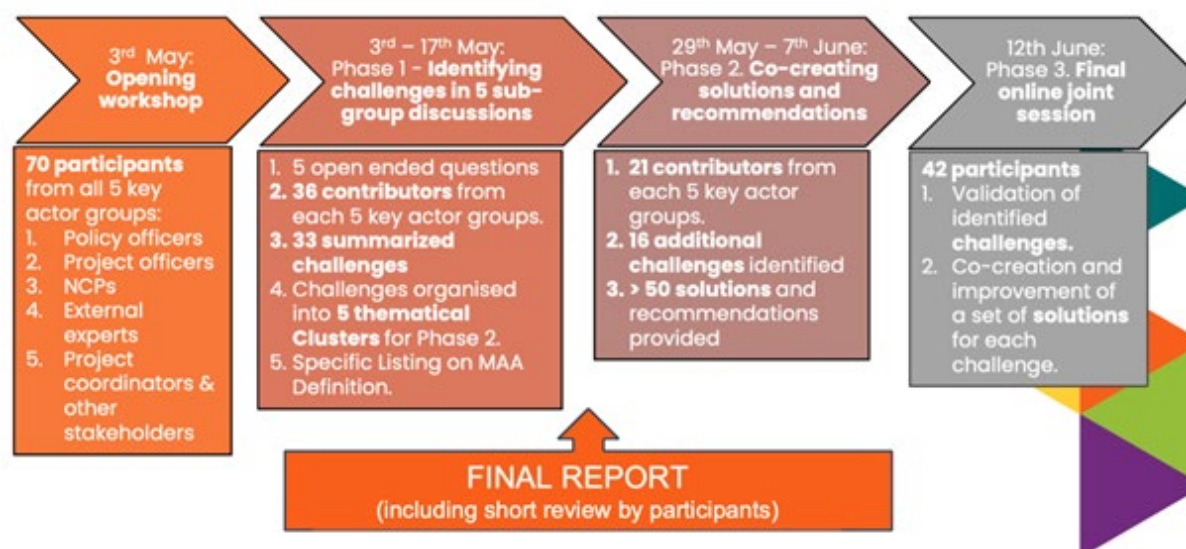


Figure 2. Overview of the WP2 Focus Group process in 2024.

The FG process was hosted by the European Commission, which demonstrated the high policy value given to this process and its results. As soon as the draft final report was completed at the end of June 2024, the EC colleagues are understood to have fed it directly into the preparation process of the 2025 Calls with an MA requirement and the initial discussion of the subsequent EU Framework Programme (FP 10).

Annex I presents the final Focus Group with detailed information on the challenges, solutions and recommendations for more effective programming and implementation of the multi-actor approach (MAA) that were identified.

In total, 48 challenges (Focus Group 1) and 96 solutions (Focus Group 2) were identified and structured into five thematic blocks. The solutions were classified as per their short-, mid-, and long-term applications. The process also included the identification of recommendations for improvement of the official MAA definition as part of the preparation of the 2025 Cluster 6 Work Programme design.

- Challenge Block #1: Communicating basic information and terminology related to MAA.
- Challenge Block #2: Programming and evaluation of the MAA calls.

- Challenge Block #3: Creating an enabling environment to support applicants and beneficiaries.
- Challenge Block #4: Developing proposals for MAA calls.
- Challenge Block #5: Implementing MAA projects in practice.

The main users of the outcomes of the FG are anticipated to be the Policy Officers at the Directorates-General (DG) Agri, DG Environment, DG RTD, DG Grow, and the Project Officers responsible for implementing the MAA.

However, the final draft review has also shown the interest and usefulness of the recommendations for NCPs, proposal developers and others, and this will be further explored at a later stage (see section 0).

3 POLICY BRIEF #1: CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS FOR MORE EFFECTIVE PROGRAMMING AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE MAA

3.1 Importance of the Multi-Actor Approach (MAA) in Horizon Europe projects

The ‘Interactive Innovation Approach’ is a core element of the AKIS and the EIP-AGRI concepts. It aims at increasing the projects’ impact by starting by identifying the end user's needs and creating co-ownership during the project for all involved². The model is based on the MAA that involves all relevant actors with complementary backgrounds and expertise to co-create and share knowledge, best practices, and innovative solutions responding to the needs of the users such as farmers, foresters, and advisors throughout the project. The MAA is considered a form of Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI), aiming to make the R&I process and its outcomes more demand-driven, reliable, and relevant to society, and to achieve a much quicker and bigger impact in practice than in the past.

The MAA was first introduced in 2014 under Horizon 2020. Since then, it has been continuously improved based on experiences, and on evaluators’, Member States’ and stakeholders’ feedback of applicants, project coordinators and other experts, including the discussions within the SCAR AKIS Strategic Working Group.

The Horizon 2020 Programme (2014-2020) included 93 topics and 229 projects that required the application of MAA (24% of all H2020 Cluster 6 Projects³). The MAA was applied almost exclusively to topics that concerned the agricultural and forestry sectors in the Horizon 2020 work programmes of the Societal Challenge 2 – Food security, Sustainable agriculture and forestry, Marine and maritime and inland water research, and the Bioeconomy (SC2).

Under Horizon Europe (2021-2027), the MAA has been opened to all sectors under Cluster 6 going beyond agriculture, forestry and rural areas. Currently, the MAA requirement also applies to topics related to food systems,

² EU SCAR AKIS (2019), Preparing for Future AKIS in Europe. Brussels, European Commission.

³ According to Horizon Dashboard 926 grant agreements were signed in all H2020 Cluster 6.

<https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/opportunities/horizon-dashboard>

bioeconomy, environment, fisheries and aquaculture, etc. As a result, the number of topic calls with the compulsory application of the MAA has notably increased. In Cluster 6 of the Work Programme in the period 2021-2023, 126 topics with a total of 216 projects required the application of the MAA, which represents around 45% of all Cluster 6 Calls). Besides Cluster 6, the MAA has been applied to the Horizon Soil and Oceans Missions as well as in the Calls of several Horizon Partnerships, including ‘Agroecology’, ‘Circular Bio-based Europe Joint Undertaking’ and ‘PRIMA-Mediterranean’.

The MAA has also been further reinforced over time. During the Horizon 2020 period, the MAA has officially become an eligibility criterion. In addition, the definition and requirements of the MAA included in the introduction of the Work Programme⁴ have been revised and simplified. The main actors required to be involved in the projects are indicated in the scope of the topics. The term ‘end-user(s)’ indicates the person(s) putting the project results into practice.

3.2 Key challenges and potential solutions

Despite significant advances in introducing the multi-actor approach (MAA) in the Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe research programme frameworks, there are still **challenges** in **understanding** and **applying** the MAA during its programming and implementation which risk limiting its full and effective application, and thereby its **impact**.

Block 1: Communicating basic information and terminology related to MAA

Key challenges

1. The MAA and other related concepts (AKIS, beneficiaries, actors, end-users, stakeholders, etc.) are often unclear at the national level.
2. Info days and brokerage events are fundamental for better promotion and common understanding of the MAA, BUT they need to reach a broader audience not typically attending such events.

⁴ Horizon Europe Cluster 6 WP 2023–2024, p. 21–23: [wp-9-food-bioeconomy-natural-resources-agriculture-and-environment_horizon-2023-2024_en.pdf](#) (europa.eu)

3. More detailed and practical training and resources are needed to help applicants better understand the MAA and implement the requirements effectively.

Proposed solutions

- Provide official translations of key MAA terms into all EU languages to ensure clarity for all actors, particularly the term 'multi-actor approach' (MAA) itself.
- Design and use activities that go beyond Info Days to target specific actors with formats like working groups, focus groups, and practical project cases.
- Carefully select, present and disseminate good practices of well-established MAA project activities from a wide selection of CL6 destinations and a variety of end users.

Block 2: Programming and evaluation of the MAA calls

Key challenges

1. Evaluating the MAA objectively is difficult due to varying vocabulary and interpretations across different backgrounds and regions. The current evaluation process lacks consistency and emphasis on the MAA, leading to subjective assessments (the most highly ranked challenge by far).
2. It is difficult to demonstrate and assess the *"genuine and sufficient involvement of actors (...) from participation in the development of the project idea"* during the evaluation.
3. There is a lack of transparency and understanding regarding the criteria for selecting MAA for specific topics in programming.
4. MAA is assessed differently depending on the topic e.g. in an AKIS topic vs. a technological topic. It is hard to understand the importance of MAA in a given topic.

Proposed solutions

- Update project templates to include elements relevant for the multi-actor approach.
- Develop a procedure to facilitate more objective assessment of MAA e.g. include a small paragraph in the topic text explaining why a proposal includes the MAA and what is expected (users, engagement results, etc) and

ask the proposals to explicitly and precisely explain HOW the MAA will be applied to achieve this expectation.

- Add specific criteria to the evaluators' grid on budget distribution as an indicator of actor and stakeholder involvement.

Block 3: Creating an enabling environment to support applicants and beneficiaries

Key challenges

1. Reaching the most appropriate actors and stakeholders to involve in MA projects and securing their commitment (especially smaller entities) remains very challenging.
2. Information on the MAA remains highly fragmented between numerous documents and other sources on the EU Funding & Tenders Portal and the CAP Network website.
3. National/regional administrations already provide some seed-funding opportunities for supporting MA project proposals, but these need to be more widely available and used.

Proposed solutions

- Develop and promote a platform on the CAP Network website as a 'one-stop shop' for MAA resources with all necessary cross-references to the EU Funding & Tenders Portal (and *vice-versa*). This should specifically include:
i) all relevant project materials e.g. LIAISON, PREMIERE, CARE4BIO etc. and
ii) a Partner Search tool.
- Scale up and out seed funding programmes and integrate with other MA consortia/proposal development tools e.g. travel grants, pre-agreements for 3rd party involvement, lump sum funding templates etc.
- Look at non-CAP and Horizon funding opportunities for enhanced networking and capacity-building activities to support the MAA e.g. national/regional funding, producer organisations, WIDENING, ERASMUS+ etc.

Block 4: Developing proposals for MAA calls

Key challenges

1. Writing Multi-Actor proposals requires more work and more time.
2. Academic and non-academic partners (SMEs, producer organisations, value chain B2B etc):
 - Have different interests & motivations
 - Are difficult to find and to involve
3. Universities and other large-scale organisations have the capacity to initiate and coordinate proposals, whilst smaller-scale partners struggle with the administrative burden.

Proposed solutions

- Access to good practice examples is very important. There is a need to develop videos and infographics to show how to involve SMEs and the pros & cons of MA projects.
- EIP-AGRI Operational Groups (OGs) should be increasingly involved in MA projects, but they need targeted support to develop their understanding and capacity.
- Enhanced network structures are needed as ‘seedbeds’ for new Horizon consortia and novel configurations of actors.
- MA proposals should be reviewed much more critically, and when the MAA is not implemented, they should be scored under the threshold (10/15) and rejected even when no other project will be funded.

Block 5: Implementing MAA projects in practice

Key challenges

1. Ensuring equitable participation of different types of actors and stakeholders during the project requires not only different types of compensation and support, but also thinking about compensation for those who are not direct beneficiaries.
2. The workload associated with MAA activities - both during the proposal and during implementation – is significant and often unrecognised or unrewarded professionally.

3. Sustainability of actions or exploitation of results beyond the project horizon is crucial for greater impact.

Proposed solutions

- More time between the publication of the call for proposal and the deadline for MAA projects to better find and finetune the common objectives between different actors.
- More clarity on the different financial options available for reimbursements of actors and stakeholders.
- Listing opportunities for funding for the preparatory stage: to motivate ‘practice actors’ and ensure a more equitable participation in the proposal stage.
- An EU Multi-Actor Support Hub along the lines of the Horizon Results Booster: to ensure more consistency in the quality of the MAA, providing services to tackle common MAA challenges, e.g., facilitation, translation, support for ‘new’ or small participants, help with jargon.
- An EU Dissemination Fund for completed MA projects to apply for additional post-project exploitation activities, e.g., to differentiate the “product portfolio” to accommodate the needs of different stakeholder groups.

3.3 Suggested improvements to the MAA definition

Distinction between partners and stakeholders

- Include a clear distinction about project partners/actors and external stakeholders.
- The MAA requirements should clearly distinguish between consortium members and external stakeholders. Creating two separate lists for these requirements would help in compliance checking.
- The roles and perceptions of consortium members (actors) and non-consortium members (stakeholders) are often unclear. This distinction needs to be more clearly defined in the MAA description.
- Applicants often struggle with understanding the distinction between stakeholders and actors. This difference is not clearly described in the official MAA definition in the WP. Including this distinction in the WP could help.

End-user involvement

- The requirement for specific end-user involvement to be defined in the topic text is not straightforward as it is not only about specific end-user inclusion in consortium but also his/her role in the project activities.
- Requirement # 2 refers both to excellence and consortium composition: make a separate requirement related to end-user representation in consortium composition.

Clarification of added value requirement

- The requirement to demonstrate a project's added value should be reconsidered or clarified to avoid redundancy, as this is relevant for all projects, not just MAA.

Reference to co-design and co-creation

- MAA is a form of co-design and co-creation, but this is not clearly referenced. Presenting the MAA as a completely new concept can be misleading for participants.

(Note, the definition starts with “The multi-actor approach described here - a form of responsible R&I, aims to make the R&I process and its outcomes more reliable, demand-driven, shared and relevant to society”. We understand it acknowledges this wider concept, still co-design / co-creation could be added here).

- The MAA definition mentions the MAA in a wider RRI context, perhaps a solution may be the addition of co-creation there and emphasis when communicating.

Length and visibility of MAA definition

- The MAA definition in the WP is a bit long. It would be beneficial to flag MAA topics in the cross-cutting priority filters of the EU Funding & Tenders portal and update references from EIP-Agri to EU CAP Network.

Inclusion of cross-fertilization elements

- Adding “experiences” to the list of cross-fertilization elements could enhance clarity.

Number of Practice Abstracts

- The number of Practice Abstracts to be developed in a single project is unclear, adding to the complexity. Explicit reference to Practice Abstracts in the topic text (where required) would ensure applicants take this into account already when designing the proposal. Also, the indication of an “appropriate number” could be further specified and linked to objective elements (e.g. size of the project).

Duplication in evaluation criteria

- The MAA concept is reflected in several different main evaluation criteria. Simplification and harmonisation should be sought. For example, is it necessary to include in the definition both “It must demonstrate the project's added value: how it will complement existing research” and best practices.

Number of requirements

- The 7 requirements are too many and they are not concrete enough.

Realistic objectives for TRL

- MAA does not always result in ready to use (TRL up to 8) solutions at the end of the projects, while the definition and requirements clearly indicate that this should be the primary objective.

3.4 Suggested improvements to Work Programme content

- The requirement for practice abstracts and EU-wide communication in the EIP-AGRI format is often not reflected at the topic level. This necessitates revisions during the GAP phase. Explicit references to practice abstracts and specifying an appropriate number based on project size would ensure better compliance from the start.
- Since PREMIERE offers and has prepared more detailed information, could the project at least be mentioned in the WP / a reference with a link in the footnote and even in the application template? In the latter, more precise instructions on how this should be incorporated/addressed would be desirable.
- MAA should NOT be a technical obligation but an eligibility criterion.
- Better connect the definition (WP Introduction) with the actual MAA topic texts. It is suggested to make this/these definition(s) of MAA much more

prominent in the work programme. This could be as simple as an asterisk as soon as the word appears, but it's absolutely necessary for the resource to be readily available as soon as you read the topics.

- A reference to the work programme page where the definition can be found should appear on each call.
- Topic text sometimes does not explicitly include MAA in the body of the topic text, leaving it only to the general 'Mandatory MAA' statement at the end of the topic.
- MAA used in topics in many areas beyond agriculture, MAA features can be a burden and MAA mainstreaming can be counterproductive: target MAA for F2F topics or when there is a need for actors to be part of the project (e.g. to cover entire value chain).

4 NEXT STEPS

The two tasks of WP2 on policymaking (T2.1) and policy implementation (T2.2) concerning the MAA are closely interconnected. The graphic design of the MAA Conceptual Framework in **Error! Reference source not found.** shows the limited distinctiveness of the two. Therefore, developments and next steps for the two tasks are also discussed jointly from the policy and implementation perspective.

The PREMIERE WP2 team with its activities and products has an impactful relationship with DG AGRI Policy and REA Project Officers. Regular meetings will continue, and activities will be scheduled according to the policy calendars. Currently, the HEU work plan for 2025-2027 is under development. Moreover, the design of the FP10 has kicked off because the Programme will start in 2028. The report on challenges and solutions, addresses these and suggests ideas for the planning and implementation of potential solutions for the challenges associated with the MAA.

The next steps planned for PREMIERE's policy work for policymaking include:

- Planning for the next two policy-level Focus Groups (2025) to address relevant needs for the MAA programming. Potential topics currently under review are: Operational Groups' participation in Horizon Europe; the scope of the MAA beyond Cluster 6 and Horizon Europe, also in connection with Open Science and the RRI concepts and others.
- In autumn 2024, the WP2 team will process the results of the Focus Group process on challenges and solutions for programming and implementation of the MAA. The implementation of several of the solutions currently under review can be addressed by PREMIERE and the project network. This reflection and validation process will be part of the upcoming exploitation activities of PREMIERE. Moreover, the WP2 team will identify priorities aligned with the objectives of WP2 and policy priorities such as the intensity of work for the preparation of FP10.
- WP2 outcomes will continue to feed into the other work packages of PREMIERE such as WP4 and WP5, including the Academy on the project website⁵. WP2 provides opportunities and new ideas on how PREMIERE

⁵ <https://premiere-multiactor.eu/>

can contribute to the improvement of the preparation of multi-actor proposals in the coming years 2025-2027 and beyond.

- In parallel, WP1 overlooks the engagement with external stakeholders and actors of other projects. Task 1.3 of PREMIERE keeps a continuous dialogue with the sister projects ATTRACTISS, EU-FarmBook, and ModernAKIS. Moreover, the collaboration with NCPs and their umbrella project Care4Bio will be identified as soon as the new calls for 2025 or beyond. These wide connections also bring opportunities at the governance level, including the recent suggestion to present the results of the Focus Group to the NCP network (to be discussed in autumn 2024).

ANNEX

The Annex, also available as a separate document, completes this D2.1 report:

Annex: Report on ‘Challenges and solutions for more effective programming and implementation of the Multi-Actor approach (MAA)’

FOCUS GROUP REPORT

**Challenges and solutions for more effective
programming and implementation
of the Multi-Actor Approach (MAA),
Focus Group process from May to June 2024**

COORDINATION OF THE PROCESS AND COMPILATION OF THE REPORT

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WITH CONTRIBUTIONS FROM

Participants to the Focus Group process
PREMIERE Consortium Partners





PREMIERE

PREPARING MULTI-ACTOR PROJECTS IN A CO-CREATIVE WAY

GA No. 101086531

Focus Group report on Challenges and Solutions
for more Effective Programming and Implementation
of the Multi-Actor Approach (MAA)

July, 2024

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Overview	IV
1 Introduction to the Focus Group process	1
2 Structure of the reported Challenges and Solutions	5
3 Challenges and Solutions identified	8
3.1 Challenge Block #1: Communicating basic information and terminology	8
3.2 Challenge Block #2: Programming and evaluation of the MAA calls	11
3.3 Challenge Block #3: Creating an enabling environment to support applicants and beneficiaries	15
3.4 Challenge Block #4: Developing proposals for MAA calls	17
3.5 Challenge Block #5: Implementing MAA projects in practice	20
4 Recommendations on the Multi-Actor Approach Definition	24
5 References to information and working documents	27
Appendices	29
Appendix 1: Overview of Number of Participants by Key Actor Groups	29
Appendix 2: Challenges excluded from the Focus Groups process and associated explanations	30

OVERVIEW

This report, prepared by the PREMIERE project team, is based on the results of the Focus Group process “Challenges and solutions for more effective programming and implementation of the multi-actor approach (MAA)” that was hosted by the European Commission and facilitated by the PREMIERE team between May 3rd and June 12th, 2024.

The report compiles the challenges and solutions identified to enhance the programming and implementation of the Multi-Actor Approach (MAA) within Horizon Europe projects. The Focus Group process involved extensive discussions and reflections by key stakeholders from five target groups: Policy Officers¹, Project Officers², NCPs³, external experts⁴, and project coordinators along with other informed and interested stakeholders and experts.

This report consists of seven sections.

1. The **Introduction and Process of the Focus Group** process outlines the background and objectives of the stakeholder engagement and details the steps of the Focus Group process, including the initial kick-off workshop, the phases of online interactive discussions, and the final joint session.
2. The **Structure of the Reported Challenges and Solutions** explains how the challenges and solutions were clustered and presented for reporting purposes. This section provides a table with the number of challenges

¹ Directorate-General policy officers: DG AGRI, DG Environment, DG Grow and DG RTD (DG Research and Innovation)

² Research Executive Agency (REA) and PRIMA Mediterranean Programme

³ National Contact Points (NCPs) for Horizon Cluster 6

⁴ Other experts with experience in Multi-Actor project proposal evaluation.

and related (potential) solutions, categorised by their timeframe for implementation (short-term, medium-term, and long-term).

3. The **Challenges and Solutions Identified** represents the core part of this report. This section presents the challenges and solutions identified during the focus group discussions. The challenges were clustered into five thematic blocks. Each block includes a detailed list of challenges and corresponding solutions, along with a suggested timeframe for application.
4. The **Recommendations on the Multi-Actor Approach Definition** compiles suggestions for improving the understanding of the official definition of the MAA and other work programme content.
5. The **References** lists the documents generated during the focus group process. This list includes other relevant materials that informed the discussions and this report's content.
6. The **two Appendices** provide the number of participants who contributed to the focus group process, categorized by target groups. Moreover, this section lists the challenges identified during the focus group process that were not included in the final compilation of clustered challenges in section 3 of this report.

1 INTRODUCTION TO THE FOCUS GROUP PROCESS

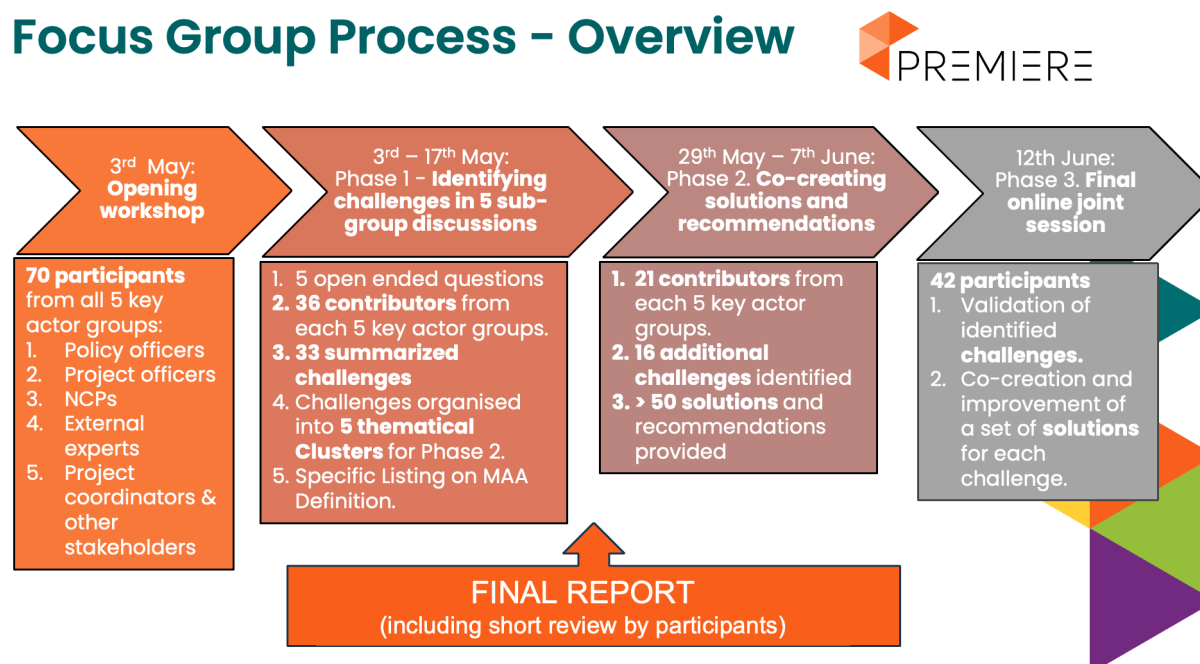
This report compiles the **challenges, solutions and recommendations identified towards a more effective programming and implementation of the multi-actor approach (MAA)** during the PREMIERE Focus Group process in 2024. The contents of this report are the result of the different discussions and reflections of the first policy-related Focus Groups of the PREMIERE project, held between May 3rd and June 12th, 2024. The challenges and solutions within Horizon Europe projects (Cluster 6, Horizon Missions, Partnerships and other), are presented in five thematic blocks, with a prioritisation developed at the last remote discussion meeting. Some of the contents have been slightly edited for coherence but all ideas proposed during the process are documented in this report.

The objective of the Focus Group process was a) to identify limitations and bottlenecks in the programming and administration of Horizon Europe Call Topics with Multi-Actor (MA) eligibility criterion and b) to develop solutions in a co-creative discussion process.

The Focus Group process consisted of four iterative steps illustrated in the Figure 1, and briefly summarized below. Section 5 of this report shows the references and links related to each step.

1. A **‘kick-off’ online workshop on May 3rd** provided an introduction to the MAA concept and outlined the steps of the Focus Group process. The workshop was recorded to ensure that participants who joined later had the opportunity to be informed on the same level as the other participants. In addition, participants had access to a background paper to set the base for the initial discussion and ensure a common understanding of terms and concepts used.

Figure 1: Overview of the Focus Group process



2. In the first phase of the online interactive Focus Group discussion , **participants identified challenges** related to the MAA. They were grouped in five specific key actor groups according to their work focussing on the MAA:

- 1) Policy Officers from the Directorate Generals DG AGRI, DG Environment, DG Grow and DG Research and Innovation),
- 2) Project Officers of the Research Executive Agency (REA),
- 3) Team members of NCPs (National Contact Points for Horizon Cluster 6),
- 4) External experts with experience in MA proposal evaluation,
- 5) Project coordinators, and other stakeholders and experts interested in the MAA.

A synthesis of challenges was created, summarizing the identified challenges from the five actor groups. The comments from the online discussions of the first phase remained available for reference in reading-only-mode until the end of the Focus Group process. At the end of this first

step, participants received a synthesis of challenges, which provided the context for moving into the second phase of the discussions aiming to co-create solutions and recommendations.

3. The second phase of the online interactive Focus Group discussion focused on the co-creation of solutions and recommendations. The challenges, identified by the participants, were divided into five ‘MA Challenge Blocks’:

- 1) Challenge Block #1: Communicating basic information and terminology related to MAA.
- 2) Challenge Block #2: Programming and evaluation of the MAA calls.
- 3) Challenge Block#3: Creating an enabling environment to support applicants and beneficiaries.
- 4) Challenge Block #4: Developing proposals for MAA calls.
- 5) Challenge Block #5: Implementing MAA projects in practice.

During the second phase, participants had the opportunity to propose additional challenges they found missing, with the primary focus being on finding solutions and proposing recommendations for the identified challenges. Participants were continuously encouraged to revise their input, engage with others, and reply to each other's comments throughout the online consultation process.

4. The final online joint session on June 12th supported participants to review and validate the identified challenges. The aim was to improve the proposed solutions in a co-creative way. This session was structured into breakout groups focusing on different challenge blocks. The first part of the session focused on consolidating and validating the identified challenges, discussing their relevance, and prioritizing them. The second part of the

session focused on collaboratively improving solutions and developing a set of solutions for each challenge.

2 STRUCTURE OF THE REPORTED CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

The challenges and solutions identified during the Focus Group process are organised in five blocks (tables in next Section 3). The table format helped with the practical review and the selection of potential solutions by the EC units involved.

The challenges included are also a result of the process and, in preparation for the concluding online discussion, the PREMIERE team organised and edited the solutions in order to facilitate the discussions in the online workshop. This means some solutions were re-phrased or merged in case they were similar or closely connected. Finally, also in the report have sometimes been re-written resulting from the final session discussions, while a majority follow the same text proposed before the final session. Some challenges may overlap in different blocks, as the blocks are clearly not closed boxes.

The tables also include a suggested period for the application of the solutions: Short-term (in the 2025 Horizon Europe Work Programme), Medium-term (in the 2026-2027 Horizon Europe Work Programme), Long-term (in the Research and Innovation Framework Programme FP10 for the following funding period, 2028-2034).

Block#1 'Basic information and terminology' was excluded from the final online workshop because of its crosscutting character. Instead, the facilitators of the groups focussing on the other thematic Blocks included any potential comments referring to the definition of MA terms and concepts. Moreover, a potential discussion about definitions resulting in a common re-phrasing of terms would not have been an efficient use of the stakeholders' engagement in the online workshop. Consequently, the PREMIERE team selected and

prioritised the block#1 topics based on their expertise as MA project beneficiaries and coordinators.

Table format 'Colour coding'

The table format includes a colour coding according to the participants' prioritisation at the final Focus Group session. The challenges and solutions with the white background were classified as the most relevant issues, while those shaded in grey did not receive a priority selection. A small number of challenges identified during the Focus Group process were considered to be excluded from this Focus Group process. However, the Appendix of this report compiles these and explains the particular reasons for exclusion, postponement and/or investigation in another PREMIERE WPs.

Table format with * Asterix

When an asterisk* appears in the text of a solution, this indicates that the References section of this report provides further details on that matter.

Table format horizontal alignment

Finally, note that the solutions are presented always in parallel to a certain challenge. However, some solutions may also contribute to more than one challenge (which is not indicated in the document). Moreover, solutions have not been filtered for duplicity or overlap, thus clearly some of them respond to a 'one or another' choice. These details do not affect the value of the table. Instead, the given simplified format facilitates the readability of the tables.

Table 1: Number of identified challenges and solutions on programming and implementation of the multi-actor approach

Challenge Block	No. of Challenges	No. of related solutions	Solutions		
			Short term	Medium-term*	Long term*
Block #1: Communicating basic information and terminology related to MAA	10	15	4	9	2
Block #2: Programming and evaluation of the MAA calls	11	23	10	6	7
Block#3: Creating an enabling environment to support applicants and beneficiaries	5	18	4	6	8
Block#4: Developing proposals for MAA calls	8	18	6	7	5
Block #5: Implementing MAA projects in practice	16	22	10	5	7
Total	48	96	34	33	29

**Solutions rated as short to medium-term were classified 'Medium Term'. Those rated medium to long-term were classified 'Long Term'.*

3 CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS IDENTIFIED⁵

3.1 Challenge Block #1: Communicating basic information and terminology

Ch. no.	Final synthesis challenges	So. no.	Final synthesis solutions	Solution Timeframe
1.1	The MAA concept itself and others related (AKIS, beneficiaries, actors, end-users, stakeholders, etc.) are often unclear at national level. Clear and translated definitions, with the instructions of the kind of actors to be included, are needed for all involved	1.1.1	When a new MAA proposal is registered by a coordinator, the F&T portal should send an automated message with a clear explanation on what it means to comply with MAA, including a glossary of key concepts and links to Q&A, relevant resources and training materials.	Short to Medium
		1.1.2	Have official translations of key MAA terms into all EU languages to ensure clarity for all actors, particularly the term 'multi-actor approach' itself.	Medium
1.2	Info days and brokerage events are fundamental for better promotion and a common understanding of the MAA, but they need to better share resources and practical approaches and reach a broader audience, including end-users who may not typically attend such events.	1.2.1	Increase the number of national/regional info days and other events (in native language) targeting specific stakeholders. In these, explain the MAA concept, clarify how end-users should be involved in proposal drafting and offer clear and acceptable incentives for their participation.	Short
		1.2.2	Design and use activities beyond info days to target specific actors, formats like working groups, focus groups, brokerage events, and practical cases of project presentations may be more effective for engagement. Additionally, there should be follow-up events and discussions to address ongoing concerns.	Medium
		1.2.3	Use the Rubric on the MAA* of PREMIERE, and a selection (positive/negative) former ESR statements presentations and events.	Short
1.3	More detailed and practical trainings and resources are needed to help applicants better understand MAA and implement the	1.3.1	Any kind of additional information material (e.g. videos, factsheets, etc.) is welcomed.	Short to Medium

⁵ The challenges and solutions in white background were prioritized as most relevant by the participants at the final focus group session, while those in grey background did not receive a priority selection.

3.1 Challenge Block #1: Communicating basic information and terminology

Ch. no.	Final synthesis challenges	So. no.	Final synthesis solutions	Solution Timeframe
	requirements effectively. Materials from the EC, CARE4BIO, LIAISON, PREMIERE e.g., annotated proposal templates, webinars, and training sessions, are available but need broader communication and use.	1.3.2	Provide a compilation or database good practices of well-established MAA for inspiration. The examples must correspond to the diversity of destinations and areas that apply to the MAA.	Short
1.4	There is a need to clearly distinguish between MAA in relation to consortium members and external stakeholders. Only partners can significantly impact project outcomes, and relying solely on stakeholders can undermine the project's effectiveness.	1.4.1	Use the MAA definition to express this clear distinction. A proposal is included in the listing of Definition and Work Programme changes, included as Section 4 of this FG report.	Short to Medium
1.5	The EU Funding & Tenders Portal and the Multi-actor projects page of the CAP Network are valuable online communication channels that are currently underutilized. Optimizing the use of these platforms can enhance the promotion and explanation of MAA, making it more accessible and understandable for all stakeholders.	1.5.1	Increase the promotion of the CAP Network page as a 'one-stop shop' for MAA resources, with cross-references to the Funding & Tenders Portal. Ensure the platforms are highly visible, cross-referenced, and frequently updated. Ensure precise, clear and complete basic information on the MAA in the F&T Portal.	Short to Medium
1.6	Experienced project coordinators, who are often overconfident in their knowledge and skills, may not engage with available MAA resources and strategies. These 'hard-to-reach' coordinators require targeted efforts to ensure they understand and adopt new MAA strategies effectively	1.6.1	Provide specific training to both evaluators and coordinators to improve understanding and implementation of MAA in the proposal.	Long
1.7	Communicating with stakeholders is challenging due to a lack of time and financial resources. One-on-one communication and translations in multi-lingual projects are resource-heavy, especially in agriculture and forestry where many stakeholders do not speak English.	1.7.1	Facilitate and update a toolbox for language management in MAA projects with a selection of the best translation tools for different type of language-based activities and materials, including automated and human-assisted methods, and referencing cost estimates.	Long
1.8	Despite a clear definition of MAA, the differentiation between a stakeholder and an actor in projects remains unclear even after 10 years of its introduction into EU framework programs.	1.8.1	Proposals should clearly explain and justify the MAA and consortium composition, with evaluators assessing their quality based on the project objectives. To ensure this, evaluators must first understand the MAA.	Short
		1.8.2	Establish clear definitions that are easily understood by non-English speakers to prevent confusion for coordinators and reviewers.	Medium

3.1 Challenge Block #1: Communicating basic information and terminology

Ch. no.	Final synthesis challenges	So. no.	Final synthesis solutions	Solution Timeframe
1.9	MAA to be better acknowledged as part of existing co-design and co-creation processes, rather than as a completely new concept to avoid confusion amongst applicants.	1.9.1		Medium
1.10	MAA material on agriculture only could be misleading: in Horizon Europe, MAA is applied to many areas beyond agriculture, so when presenting best practices or successful projects, it would be good to cover the variety of areas under CL6. There is a large variety of end-users, not only farmers and foresters, as presented in the definition, so it is important to reflect this variety when producing communication material on MAA.	1.10.1	See 1.2 solutions	Medium

3.2 Challenge Block #2: Programming and evaluation of the MAA calls

Ch. No.	Challenge		Proposed solutions	Solution Timeframe
2.1	Evaluating the MAA objectively as an eligibility criterion is difficult due to varying vocabulary and interpretations across different backgrounds and regions. While a convincing MAA should influence the final project score, the current evaluation process lacks consistency and emphasis on the MAA, leading to subjective assessments.	2.1.1	Coupled solution: 1) Standardise a short paragraph structure in all MAA topic texts explaining why a proposal includes the MAA and what is expected in terms of actors and the expected involvement. 2) Require in the topic text that proposals must include an abstract text making the MAA explicit and indicating how it is addressed in the proposal.	Short
		2.2.2	Define guidelines to ensure clear differentiation and connection of MAA actors (beneficiaries) and external stakeholders involved	Medium
		2.2.3	Incorporate MAA into the technical requirement instead the eligibility criterion to make MAA a concrete aspect of the project's interdisciplinarity and methodology, making it easier for evaluators to assess.	Long
2.2	It is difficult to demonstrate and assess "genuine and sufficient involvement of actors (...) from participation in the development of the project idea" (i.e. actors' involvement in proposals' preparation) during the evaluation. Evaluators need clear criteria to assess the roles and contributions of different partners within the consortium, ensuring alignment with the project's concept and call requirements.	2.2.1	Add specific criteria to the evaluators' grid to assess the distribution of the budget between different partner types to ensure that the financial commitment to diverse actors is explicitly considered during evaluation. In parallel proposal writers need to be informed that their budget distribution will also be evaluated in terms of involvement and commitment of different stakeholders.	Short
		2.2.2	In connection to solution 2.1.1 above, include a special paragraph in the proposal template where applicants must explain the MAA and justify the involvement of each stakeholder in the context of the project's concept and the call's requirements. This paragraph should detail how stakeholders were involved in preparatory meetings, the development of proposal sections, and other relevant activities.	Medium
		2.2.3	Require the proposals coordinators to provide a list of the types of actors involved, along with a justification for their involvement. Allow for flexibility in actor involvement allowing to simply outlining the types of actors involved and their roles over the project's duration.	Short
		2.2.4	Evaluation should be more learning-oriented than focused only on deliverables but also on management processes and approaches to change and fostering brokerage with other projects.	Short

3.2 Challenge Block #2: Programming and evaluation of the MAA calls

Ch. No.	Challenge		Proposed solutions	Solution Timeframe
2.3	There is a lack of transparency and understanding regarding the criteria for selecting MAA for specific topics in programming and it is unclear how MAA is evaluated in these contexts (some topics explicitly require collaborations between various sectors but do not explicitly mandate MAA in the body of the topic text).	2.3.1	Establish an editorial board for the call topic drafting process that provides a systematic review after the initial drafting, involving different units to ensure clarity, consistency, and alignment with MAA requirements. The board will verify whether the inclusion of MAA is justified and consistent across similar topics. The board can recommend redrafting.	Long
		2.3.2	Create a figure of "Coordinator / Advisor on the MAA" for the topic drafting units, to supervise the process of MAA labelling of work programme topics.	Medium
2.4	MAA is assessed differently depending on the topic: core part of the topic (e.g. AKIS): significant weakness; technological topic: minor shortcoming; it is hard to understand the importance of MAA in a given topic, lighter stakeholder engagement could be considered in some cases	2.4.1	This is reasonable; and it is associated to the differences that MAA can have when applied to different sectors, e.g. farmers involvement in Agri project has different characteristics to brand owners in a bio based one. Therefore, a different degree and type of MAA in different topics makes sense, and this should be clear in the topic text.	Short
2.5	MAA topics with a technology (product, service, etc.) component do not always result in ready to use (TRL up to 8) solutions at the end of the project, while the definition and requirements clearly indicate that this should be the primary objective (i.e. optimization is sought). At the same time, MAA is particularly useful for 'wicked' problems⁶, where there is no consensus nor clear solutions identified among actors, and have to evolve in a transformational context, where TRL does not apply.	2.5.1	Requirements for the MAA should clarify on this. If the goal is a market technological solution, also, call texts should indicate it. For transformative goals, other requirement should be developed instead of TRL, such as the evolution of strategies and activities for societal change, changes in networks, or increased empowerment for change.	Long

⁶ A wicked problem is a problem, usually social or cultural, that is challenging or impossible to solve either because not enough is understood about the problem, the number of stakeholders involved, the number of varying opinions, the economic burden, or the impact of these problems with other problems. (Source: <https://wicked-problem.press.plymouth.edu/chapter/what-is-a-wicked-problem/> visited 8.7.24).

3.2 Challenge Block #2: Programming and evaluation of the MAA calls

Ch. No.	Challenge		Proposed solutions	Solution Timeframe
2.6	Extensive and complex requirements in MAA calls can lead to proposals that focus on ticking boxes rather than detailing concrete actions, complicating the evaluation process.	2.6.1	Include a dedicated section in the proposal template where applicants must describe how the network has established a MAA during proposal preparation and how it plans to leverage this approach throughout the project.	Long
		2.6.2	Detail how the budget distribution reflects the involvement and commitment of different stakeholders.	Medium
		2.6.3	Adopt a strategy for the use of MAA in different areas: in some cases, MAA is too heavy, co-design & co-creation can be done without the 7 requirements, “not about us without us” as co-creation motto.	Long
		2.6.4	Separate the requirements in MAA calls into two distinct lists: one for creating a multi-actor consortium and another for involving multi-actor stakeholders outside the consortium (Definition recommendations Section 4).	Long
2.7	It is difficult programming the MAA in specific sectors (e.g. fisheries and aquaculture) that lack a framework like the EIP AGRI, operational groups, and practice abstracts. Finding effective dissemination solutions at the EU level is not straightforward.	2.7.1	Promote the use of National Rural Networks and EMFAF-funded LAGs that focus on fisheries and aquaculture and other national or regional fish-related projects to include local actors in proposals.	Medium
		2.7.2	Design smaller, more focused call topics specifically for niche sectors like fisheries and aquaculture to ensure competition among potential applicants, making the call topics more accessible and manageable for smaller consortia. This is a strategic decision to be considered.	Medium
2.8	Application templates do not provide precise instructions on crucial aspects related to the MAA.	2.8.1	Develop and integrate an annotated checklist for applying MAA into existing templates like those provided by Care4Bio*.	Short

3.2 Challenge Block #2: Programming and evaluation of the MAA calls

Ch. No.	Challenge		Proposed solutions	Solution Timeframe
2.9	It is challenging to fit MAA into the lump-sum scheme and third-party financing (cascading calls) to facilitate the involvement of diverse actors. Lump sum often complicates the involvement of “small” partners, which can lead to artificial segmentation of projects, undermining the multi-actor logic and relevance.	2.9.1	Organize a webinar on how to fit MAA into the lump-sum scheme and third-party financing.	Short
		2.9.2	Annotated templates developed by CARE4BIO: Completing the lump sum section with more details about MAA.	Short
2.10	There is no option for applicants to provide a rebuttal to reviewer comments.	2.10.1	Implement a system where applicants can provide feedback on the reviewers' work through those who review the ESRs before publication to ensure that applicants' concerns are heard and addressed without compromising the efficiency of the evaluation process.	Long
		2.10.2	Ensure adequate review of all 'Complaints about proposal rejection' petitions (see Horizon Europe Online manual 3.2.6), and use them to improve future review processes.	Short
2.11	Lack of sufficient time from topic publication to submission	2.11.1	Ensuring adequate time from publication to submission deadlines is necessary to facilitate meaningful MA involvement in proposals and consortia. For instance, government representatives may require several weeks to obtain internal acceptance to participate in the proposal.	Short

3.3 Challenge Block #3: Creating an enabling environment to support applicants and beneficiaries

Ch. No.	Final synthesis challenges		Final synthesis solutions	Solution Timeframe
3.1	Reaching ‘multi-actors’ through different activities remains challenging.	3.1.1	Address the fragmentation of existing enabling environment (very strongly argued by the NCP participants) -> consolidate all existing support materials (including from support projects - PREMIERE, Care4Bio, etc.) for beneficiaries, NCPs etc. and place on a single repository with linkage to it from all relevant places	Medium - Long
		3.1.2	Establish funding programs at the level of RDP or ESF funding that include budget for cross-border networking, events, and conferences involving industry or value chain clusters across regions to enable private players be part of the seed bed for new project idea and proposal consortia. Creative funding models are needed to support a privately driven enabling environment.	Long
		3.1.3	Increase the visibility and accessibility of existing/new supporting materials and tools for MAA applicants (online repository available).	Short
		3.1.4	Develop an online repository where actors can register and showcase their interests including filter per topic, type, region etc.	Medium
		3.1.5	Organize regular webinars and online meetings to discuss best practices, share updates, and foster collaboration.	Medium - Long
3.2	Seed-funding opportunities for preparing multi-actor proposals are already provided by some national and regional administrations. Are they useful? Could they be further promoted/scaled up? How?	3.2.1	Scale up seed-funding programs provided by national and regional administrations to include more actors, such as NGOs, not just universities. The seed funding should be structured to offer smaller budgets for participant partners and larger budgets for coordinators.	Medium
		3.2.2	Consider support from the European Commission to finance national seed-funding programs, potentially through a technical assistance payment for Research Ministries.	Long
		3.2.3	Showcase successful seed-funding models (PREMIERE will provide a report), share best practices to help other countries develop or improve their seed-funding schemes and simplify the application requirements for seed-funding by requiring a simple motivation letter and a budget outline.	Short

3.3 Challenge Block #3: Creating an enabling environment to support applicants and beneficiaries

Ch. No.	Final synthesis challenges		Final synthesis solutions	Solution Timeframe
		3.2.4	Reach and resource the smaller partners to engage with consortia. Eligibility criteria to ensure reach those who have most need	Medium
3.3	There is a need for improved networking between acting agencies at the regional (where applicable), national and EU levels.	3.3.1	Showcase successful examples of networking and collaboration practices, such as the "Network to Innovate" run by Baltic countries, Finland, Sweden, and Poland and Bioeconomy initiatives (Bioeast.eu). Foster strong collaborations with relevant organizations at the national and regional levels, as exemplified by successful partnerships like those between Romanian authorities and NCPs, to enhance opportunities and reach end-users effectively.	Medium - Long
		3.3.2	Encourage NCPs and other agencies to join the National Community of Practice of the modernAKIS project to share information and collaborate with relevant organizations.	Short
3.4	Limited human resources make it challenging to provide continuous and comprehensive support to all MAA applicants and beneficiaries. For example, in some countries, there is only one full-time NCP for Cluster 6.	3.4.1	Better dissemination of guides and good practices etc. to NCPs - topic specific etc. tailored for NCPs	Short
		3.4.2	Better co-ordination at MS level between Ministries responsible for NCPs and those familiar with Cluster 6 / MAA	Long
		3.4.3	Transnational support via NCPs and national Cluster 6 community	Medium
		3.4.4	Provide specialized training for NCPs on how to effectively utilize tools and materials Identify common needs and actions across different countries to tailor the training accordingly. Offer workshops/ training for NCPs to enhance their support capacity. Collaborate with experienced actors to share best practices.	Medium - Long
		3.4.5	Introduce a buddy system where experienced coordinating teams of Horizon projects mentor new proposal developers.	Medium
3.5	While programs like CARE4BIO and WIDERA.NET offer travel grants for NCPs and beneficiaries to participate in trainings and brokerage events, the lack of information, distance, and motivation to participate remain significant barriers.	3.5.1	Provide travel grants for actors to participate in various trainings and brokerage events. Establish a working group where several administrative units from different areas meet and exchange knowledge on a regular basis, allowing both sides to learn from each other on an equal level. Invite EU-level representatives to attend regularly.	Long
		3.5.2	Survey Cluster 6 NCPs to identify barriers more precisely to enable more targeted solutions. There are multiple barriers to participation which need to be differentiated.	Medium

3.4 Challenge Block #4: Developing proposals for MAA calls

Ch. No.	Final synthesis challenges		Final synthesis solutions	Solution Timeframe
4.1	Writing MAA proposals requires more work and time compared to those involving only researchers.	4.1.1	Ensure accessibility to short videos and infographics with key statements, punchlines; show how to be more effective in proposal preparation.	Medium
		4.1.2	Provide partial reimbursement for project writing to enable more time and effort in developing better-quality proposals (Interreg Europe does this with its funded proposals).	Long
		4.1.3	Monitor the proposal development and ensure that expectations are met and - goals are not lost. <i>(PREMIERE experimented a monthly coaching follow-up of proposal preparation during all its concretion process, with a methodology available)</i>	Short
4.2	Academic and non-academic partners (SMEs, producer organisations, value chain B2B etc): Have different interests & motivation; Are difficult to find and to involve	4.2.1	Develop and disseminate practical examples of how MAA can be included in project design. These examples should highlight successful implementations and common pitfalls to avoid, helping consortia understand what works in MAA and what doesn't.	Medium
		4.2.2	Implement a more extensive EC-supported scoping and network/consortium building phase. This phase should focus on facilitating the formation of diverse consortia, allowing for better alignment of research goals with practical challenges.	Long
		4.2.3	Address the gap between the scientific interests of researchers and the practical challenges faced by other actors, such as farmers. Have key actors training in soft skills, by using successful examples. These efforts should be registered in the proposals showing the crucial role of MAA.	Medium
		4.2.4	Use funding schemes to support the development of networks and provide advice on network development and its role for innovation.	Long
4.3	Proposal development initiation and coordination remains mostly in the hands of universities and research organisations and in some cases some other large-scale organisations.	4.3.1	Implement stricter evaluation criteria for MAA. Proposals should be scored lower if there is insufficient involvement of practice partners, regardless of the quality of other areas.	Long
		4.3.2	Create a buddy network where experienced project partners mentor newcomers. Pair new coordinators with seasoned partners to provide advice and guidance.	Medium

3.4 Challenge Block #4: Developing proposals for MAA calls

Ch. No.	Final synthesis challenges		Final synthesis solutions	Solution Timeframe
		4.3.3	Support and encourage the involvement of EIP-AGRI OGs in MA Horizon proposals. OGs are valuable national activities for training and leading multi-actor networks, having already established multi-actor networks. The leading organization of the OG can be the actual partner in the project, with the OG itself being involved. Emphasize the inclusion of OGs in call texts, and further highlight their importance in informational events and brochures.	Short
4.4	The administrative burden for smaller organisations/partners to become beneficiaries in a project is challenging.	4.4.1	Strengthen support mechanisms to engage and support small partners in navigating administrative processes and securing financial resources.	Medium
4.5	It is challenging for newcomers to search for and join a consortium for the first time. While marketplaces and brokerage events aim to address this, they are often insufficient due to language barriers and the dominance of experienced organizations that do not rely on these events to build their consortia. Consequently, newcomers struggle to access pre-formed consortia.	4.5.1	Enhance and diversify networking opportunities, organize targeted marketplaces specifically designed for newcomers, ensuring they can engage with experienced organizations and key players in the network.	Short - Medium
		4.5.2	Newcomers need to invest time in joining stakeholder platforms or joining workshops to get a foot in the door of the big players, over a few years EU network involvement is an investment. This starts with training, getting to know the network better, going in person to brokerage events, contacting known partners and searching for organisations who have been or are part of a project, etc.	Short
		4.5.3	Increase the availability of cascade funding for non-tech projects.	Medium
4.6	It is challenging to reach and engage small partners (the agri-food system has 99% SMEs). Effective mechanisms, such as clusters, research centres, and regional associations, are required to streamline funding and research needs, though there is significant diversity in how these structures are organized across Member States.	4.6.1	Learn from the OGs and introduce similar solutions to other groups that also are expected to adopt the MA approach. Sectoral clusters and enterprise networks exist, but there is a lack of connection that networks the MAA. There is no need to reinvent the wheel but learn from models and clusters on the way they operate - the strategy of learning and focusing on improvement. A Service Point collecting and distributing information can support the MAA clusters community.	Long

3.4 Challenge Block #4: Developing proposals for MAA calls

Ch. No.	Final synthesis challenges		Final synthesis solutions	Solution Timeframe
		4.6.2	Use NCPs to help coordinators identify and connect with potential partners. Organize regular training sessions on partner identification, project topics, and the application process. Strengthen brokerage events by ensuring they are well publicized and accessible to all relevant participants. See also 4.2.	Short
4.7	MAA call topics can address wicked situations, i.e. with general little agreement on objectives or issues, many interdependent factors and very difficult to solve. MAA is appropriate for addressing these wicked problems, but there are additional challenges to demonstrate and evaluate the contribution of consortium proposals and their methodologies.	4.7.1	Projects should be seen as contributors to ongoing transformation processes rather than complete or finalised solutions. This means managing projects in a way that builds people's skills to continue transformative efforts even after the project ends. This approach aligns with MAA's goal of connecting research with real-world dynamics, using tools like living labs, EIP-Agri groups and lighthouses.	Short
4.8	Opening the consortium for other types of actors makes the proposal development process (and later on implementation) more time-consuming. This might bias the MAA that is then covered by a 'stakeholder engagement strategy' during implementation or alike, not in line with the true meaning of the MAA, creating issues during implementation.	4.8.1	Paying attention to the needs of each entity present in the group and help to move as close as possible to these goals. Raising awareness regarding these individual interests of partners. Ensure that everyone's expectations are in the project, then the project goes well. It's a balancing act that can be achieved if a space for improvisation is introduced in the project.	Short

3.5 Challenge Block #5: Implementing MAA projects in practice

Ch. No.	Final synthesis challenges		Final synthesis solutions	Solution Timeframe
5.1	Ensuring equitable participation of actors and stakeholders during the project requires addressing the compensation / benefits for those who are not direct beneficiaries.	5.1.1	Provide clearer guidance to coordinators on the different financial options available for reimbursing stakeholder and actor involvement efforts. Include detailed explanations of each option's pros and cons to help coordinators make informed decisions.	Short to Medium
		5.1.2	Cost/incentive for end-user involvement in proposal preparation: look for examples or good practices.	Short
		5.1.3	Compensation of end-users for participating in project activities: inform applicants during Info Days on existing rules on service contracts, travel cost for project meetings, prizes and vouchers	Short to Medium
		5.1.4	Base new calls on predefined R&I agendas that are drafted with and by stakeholders, ensuring the balance of different territorial needs. This approach allows MAA proposals to be seen by actors as effective tools for implementing these agendas and achieving the desired outputs, even if it requires more than one project cycle.	Long
		5.1.5	Strong communication of non-financial motivation, i.e positive image, networking, new connections	Short
		5.1.6	An EU Hub to support different types of organisations being part of MA Projects and help them with their participation, e.g. EU Food Loss and Waste Prevention Hub	Long
5.2	Language and cultural barriers, and differences in regional capabilities can hinder participation. Some stakeholders may lack language skills for international collaboration.	5.2.1	Translate key events and key materials and include a basic glossary with translation of terms. Determine responsible body and means of funding to ensure these translations.	Long
5.3	The additional workload associated with MAA activities is significant, and these efforts are insufficiently recognized/rewarded in academic professional promotion/career improvement systems.	5.3.1	Offer a new dissemination fund allowing completed projects to apply for additional exploitation activities post-project. This scheme could be designed following the model of German Ag Agency's program to support further dissemination and impact of project results.	Long
		5.3.2	As education is not an EU policy, solutions to this have to develop at national level in Member States	Long
		5.3.3	Introduce a two-stage approach, where successful first-round ideas receive funding for further elaboration and allocate additional funds to support internal functioning and communication.	Long

3.5 Challenge Block #5: Implementing MAA projects in practice

Ch. No.	Final synthesis challenges		Final synthesis solutions	Solution Timeframe
5.4	There is a need to ensure that exploitation activities extend beyond the HEU project consortium network to achieve greater impact.	5.4.1	Offer more practical examples of how a MAA can be included in project design, detailing what works in the implementation and what doesn't.	Short
		5.4.2	The MAA DiverIMPACTS* project includes a policy brief on actionable knowledge development with recommendations on changes to proposal development and project governances and recommendations to research policy design that can be used to further the recommendations here.	Short
5.5	Engaging actors in MAA projects requires tailored communication for each group (e.g., policymakers, entrepreneurs, researchers, etc.). Aligning research outcomes with actors' needs, local and regional development targets, and social acceptance is challenging. Internal conflicts within multi-actor consortia can arise requiring multiple, time-consuming discussions.	5.5.1	See 5.1 Solutions	---
5.6	Allocating budget to support farmers participating in projects, beyond just research activities, is challenging. Ensuring the sustainability of these actions after the project ends is also crucial.	5.6.1	See 5.1 Solutions	---
5.7	Involvement of 'real' practitioners/end-users as partners can be challenging, especially as projects are often led by the academic sector. Need for early and meaningful engagement and appropriate financial reward for all partners.	5.7.1	Use and engage existing local agricultural networks, such as demonstration platforms, observatories, open farms, and living labs, early in the project to include relevant practitioners and end-users. Organize open days and demonstration activities to foster collaboration. Start dissemination and communication activities at the project's outset to capture and integrate all relevant actors' feedback, involving social scientists to ensure effective integration. Clearly define the distinct roles and tasks of each actor type in the project proposal and execution plan.	Short
		5.7.2	Provide more information on the link between the EIP-AGRI OG, EU CAP Network and Cluster 6 to ensure that relevant actors have access to Cluster 6 opportunities.	Medium

3.5 Challenge Block #5: Implementing MAA projects in practice

Ch. No.	Final synthesis challenges		Final synthesis solutions	Solution Timeframe
		5.7.3	Create a database with the information of networks or relevant entities and make it accessible to project coordinators during the planning phase to help coordinators search for and identify different actors needed for their projects.	Long
		5.7.4	Develop hands-on guidance documents to help coordinators identify and support small partner organizations (<i>see PREMIERE Brokerages</i>)	Short
5.8	Budgeting for MAA activities is difficult due to uncertainty in the number of external experts required and the transfer of funds between categories, limiting project efficacy.	5.8.1	The number of external experts to be involved and the associated budget is not known. But the project can make a rough estimate. As long as the budget position is in place, shifting is possible and if not possible, then Amendments are an option. However, a substantial share of the budget needs to be reserved for actors - independent if they were involved as actors or come later as stakeholders.	Short
5.9	MAA projects lack the necessary flexibility. They should be managed as complex systems with adaptive management approaches. Consortia needs flexibility to include and exclude partners as needed, and projects should allocate budgets for unforeseen needs.	5.9.1	Allow consortia more flexibility in including and excluding partners as project needs evolve. Allocate part of the budget as 'seed money' to address needs as they arise during the project. The longer a project the more relevance for flexibility.	Long
5.10	There is often a lack of leadership skills among the coordinators and consortium members to engage different actors.	5.10.1	Start building capacity in MAA projects by enhancing the common understanding of MAA. Address the identified impediments at various levels: individual, local team, project team, and the overarching innovation system to be aware or try to overcome them.	Medium
		5.10.2	Provide training courses for coordinators on how to handle the challenges of MAA and engage different actors.	Medium
		5.10.3	Create and distribute tools to help coordinators address key questions about actor collaboration and conflict resolution. These tools may already exist in projects such as LIAISON* or EUREKA* and should be better disseminated.	Short
5.11	Effectively communicating research and integrating practitioners' practical knowledge during the project is essential but challenging.	5.11.1	Consortia should include at least one social science partner to enhance communication and collaboration among various actors.	Short
5.12	There is a need to ensure a better impact of the project by supporting actions beyond the project lifetime or allowing for the continuation of projects.	5.12.1	European Network of Living Labs - Can this association have any role in identifying solutions to these challenges?	Short

3.5 Challenge Block #5: Implementing MAA projects in practice

Ch. No.	Final synthesis challenges		Final synthesis solutions	Solution Timeframe
5.13	Many research activities require more time than the project duration to produce peer-reviewed and robust results useful to practitioners. This can lead to disappointment among practitioners and researchers being uneasy about sharing preliminary results. Clear identification of activities expected to produce ready-for-practice results is needed.			---
5.14	The AKIS system that may underpin the multi-actor approach is not known or not widely shared beyond the sphere of agricultural technical institutes and advisers who have already taken part in European projects.			---
5.15	Solutions are needed to tackle the problem of overwhelming stakeholders with requests to participate in multiple proposals that exceed their capacity to manage these demands. This is the question of 'stakeholder fatigue'			---

4 RECOMMENDATIONS ON THE MULTI-ACTOR APPROACH DEFINITION

Participants' input related to improving the definition of the MAA and other work programme content suggestions were extracted and compiled. These suggestions emerged throughout the Focus Group process, and although similar suggestions are merged, they are listed exactly as proposed, meaning that some may overlap or repeat the same idea.

Table 2 presents the specific recommendations for refining the definition of the MAA.

Table 2: Suggested improvements to the MAA definition

Number	Suggested improvements to the MAA definition.
1 Distinction between partners and stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Include a clear distinction about project partners/actors and external stakeholders.• The MAA requirements should clearly distinguish between consortium members and external stakeholders. Creating two separate lists for these requirements would help in compliance checking.• The roles and perceptions of consortium members (actors) and non-consortium members (stakeholders) are often unclear. This distinction needs to be more clearly defined in the MAA description.• Applicants often struggle with understanding the distinction between stakeholders and actors. This difference is not clearly described in the official MAA definition in the WP. Including this distinction in the WP could help.
2 End-user involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Requirement for specific end-user involvement to be defined in the topic text is not straightforward as it is not only about specific end-user inclusion in consortium but also his/her role in the project activities.• Requirement # 2 refers both to excellence and consortium composition: make a separate requirement related to end-user representation in consortium composition.
3 Clarification of added value requirement	The requirement to demonstrate a project's added value should be reconsidered or clarified to avoid redundancy, as this is relevant for all projects, not just MAA.

Number	Suggested improvements to the MAA definition.
4 Reference to co-design and co-creation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> MAA is a form of co-design and co-creation, but this is not clearly referenced. Presenting MAA as a completely new concept can be misleading for participants. <i>(Note by PREMIERE, the definition starts with 'The multi-actor approach described here - a form of responsible R&I, aims to make the R&I process and its outcomes more reliable, demand-driven, shared and relevant to society.' We understand it acknowledges this wider concept, still co-design / co-creation could be added here)</i> The MAA definition mentions the MAA in a wider RRI context, perhaps a solution may be the addition of co-creation there and emphasis when communicating.
5 Length and visibility of MAA definition	The MAA definition in the WP is a bit long. It would be beneficial to flag MAA topics in the cross-cutting priority filters of the F&T portal and update references from EIP-Agri to EU CAP Network.
6 Inclusion of cross-fertilization elements	Adding “experiences” to the list of cross-fertilization elements could enhance clarity.
7 Number of Practice Abstracts	The number of Practice Abstracts to be developed in a single project is unclear, adding to the complexity. Explicit reference to Practice Abstracts in the topic text (where required) would ensure applicants take this into account already when designing the proposal. Also, the indication of an “appropriate number” could be further specified and linked to objective elements (e.g. size of the project)
8 Duplication in evaluation criteria	MAA concept is redundant and is reflected in different main evaluation criteria. Simplification and harmonization should be sought. (For ex: do we really need to include in the definition: “It must demonstrate the project's added value: how it will complement existing research”) and best practices.
9 Number of requirements	The 7 requirements are too many, they are not concrete enough
10 Realistic objectives for TRL	MAA does not always result in ready to use (TRL up to 8) solutions at the end of the projects, while the definition and requirements clearly indicate that this should be the primary objective.

Finally, table 3 includes additional recommendations for the Cluster 6 Work Programme content related to the MAA.

Table 3: Suggested improvements to Work Programme content

Number	Other Work Programme content suggestions
1	The requirement for practice abstracts and EU-wide communication in the EIP-AGRI format is often not reflected at the topic level. This necessitates revisions during the GAP phase. Explicit references to practice abstracts and specifying an appropriate number based on project size would ensure better compliance from the start.
2	Since PREMIERE offers and has prepared more detailed information, could the project at least be mentioned in the WP / a reference with a link in the footnote and even in the application template? In the latter, more precise instructions on how this should be incorporated/addressed would be desirable.
3	MAA should NOT be a technical obligation but an eligibility criterion.
4	Better connect the definition (WP Introduction) with the actual MAA topic texts. It is suggested to make this/these definition(s) of MAA much more prominent in the work programme. This could be as simple as an asterisk as soon as the word appears, but it's absolutely necessary for the resource to be readily available as soon as you read the topics.
5	A reference to the work programme page where the definition can be found should appear on each call.
6	Topic text sometimes does not explicitly include MAA in the body of the topic text, leaving it only to the general 'Mandatory MAA' statement at the end of the topic.
7	MAA used in topics in many areas beyond agriculture, MAA features can be a burden & MAA mainstreaming can be counterproductive: target MAA for F2F topics or when there is a need for actors to be part of the project (e.g. to cover entire value chain)

5 REFERENCES TO INFORMATION AND WORKING DOCUMENTS

The following paragraphs provide access to the documents prepared for the facilitation of the online consultation process, and to other relevant documents and projects associated with the further development of the programming, implementation of the MAA in real live project settings.

Documents generated during the Focus Group process

1. **Background paper** – a document that provides a general framework to open the debate and set the base for the initial discussion.
2. **Synthesis Table of Challenges** – a synthesized summary of all identified challenges from individual contributions in the 5 key actor groups from the first phase of discussions.
3. **Synthesis Table of Challenges and Solutions** – a summary of all identified challenges, provided solutions, and recommendations, divided into challenge clusters.

Other documents of relevance

1. **Definition of the Multi-actor Approach** – European Commission. (2023-2025). Horizon Europe [Work Programme. 9. Food, Bioeconomy, Natural Resources, Agriculture and Environment](#). European Commission Decision C(2024) 2371 of 17 April 2024. Accessed 29.04.2024.
2. **Horizon Europe On-line Manual**. Funding & Tenders Portal. Visited 19.4.2024.
3. **ESR Policy Brief** – Pietx, J. and M. Redman. 2023. Discussion paper: Expression of the Multi-Actor Approach in Evaluation Summary Reports (ESR) in Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe proposals: analysis, trends, and applications. Horizon PREMIERE. <https://zenodo.org/records/8377184>
4. **PREMIERE project Padlet board**. Visited 2.5.2024.
5. **Policy Brief on Producing Actionable Knowledge** – Walter Rossing, Luca Colombo, Barbara Koole, Antoine Messéan. 2022. Producing Actionable Knowledge for Crop Diversification. Horizon DiverIMPACTS. <https://zenodo.org/record/6353589>

6. [Care4Bio annotated templates \(RIA, IA & CSA\)](#) - annotated proposal templates for both first stage and full proposals for Research and Innovation Actions (RIA) / Innovation Actions (IA) and Coordination and Support Actions (CSA).
7. [LIAISON project](#) – Interactive Innovation Toolbox.
8. [EUREKA project](#) – practical knowledge and innovative solutions that are generated by Horizon 2020 multi-actor projects. EUREKA is the sister project of [EURAKNOS](#).

APPENDICES

Appendix I: Overview of Number of Participants by Key Actor Groups

PREMIERE Facilitating team	Kaie Laaneväli-Vinokurov (METK)	
	Jordi Pietx (HCC)	
	Mark Redman (HCC)	
	Susanne v. Münchhausen (HNEE)	
	Evelien Cronin (ILVO)	
	Mikelis Grivins (BSC)	
	Laura Quijano (CIHEAM)	
	Maarja Pikkmets (KKLM)	
	Valentina Carta (CREA)	
Total of 51 participants contributed to the focus group		
Actor groups	No of participants	% from all the participants
Policy officers	13	25%
Project officers	8	16%
NCPs	7	14%
External experts	5	10%
Project coordinators and other informed/interested stakeholders/experts	18	35%

Appendix 2: Challenges excluded from the Focus Groups process and associated explanations

Participants mentioned the following challenges during the Focus Group process, but they were – for good reasons – not included in the final compilation in section 3 of this report. The text in brackets and italics indicates the reason(s) for exclusion.

- CL 1 MAA material on agriculture only could be misleading: in Horizon Europe, MAA is applied to many areas beyond agriculture, so when presenting best practices or successful projects, it would be good to cover the variety of areas under CL6. There is a large variety of end-users, not only farmers and foresters, as presented in the definition, so it is important to reflect this variety when producing communication material on MAA. *(This challenge and a potential solution are already covered by 1.2)*
- CL2 Evaluators face difficulties due to language barriers, conceptual inconsistencies, and unclear application of MAA across similar topics. *(This was discarded by the participants to the final Focus Group session which considered language not to be a challenge during the evaluation process nor for the written proposals).*
- CL3 Enabling environment means that there is sufficient information available (clear definition, guidelines, examples of good practices etc.) that helps applicants to understand the philosophy of MAA. MAA idea has been in the framework program for 10 years, but it is still differently understood. If MAA is considered important by the funding authority, then it should give it more emphasis in the evaluation phase, so that evaluators are able to recognise a convincing MAA. *(This has been considered a definition and not a challenge.)*
- CL4 There is a significant gap between the interests and motives of academic and non-academic partners, making it difficult and more challenging to develop an excellent MAA. *(CL4 merged into a single 4.2)*
- CL4 Engaging actors working across the agri-food value chain, such as cooperatives, wholesale, food industry, retail, and service, is challenging. While existing platforms are helpful, better implementation structures similar to EIP-AGRI are needed to fully embrace the food industry and food retail. *(CL4 merged into a single 4.2).*
- CL4. Coordinators need assistance in finding appropriate partners, especially SMEs, farmers and other producers, civil society organisations and policymakers, who may not be visible online or active in academic networks. *(merged into a single 4.2)*

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