

How to write a Horizon 2020 proposal that impresses on impact

Exploiting your research for impact is essential if you want to get your Horizon 2020 proposal funded.

There are just three things you need to get right to create a Horizon 2020 proposal that delivers impact:

- Measurable impact goals (including goals beyond those set out in the call for proposals) that you can monitor and evaluate
- Well-targeted stakeholders and/or publics
- A credible impact plan that can be pursued with each stakeholder and/or public

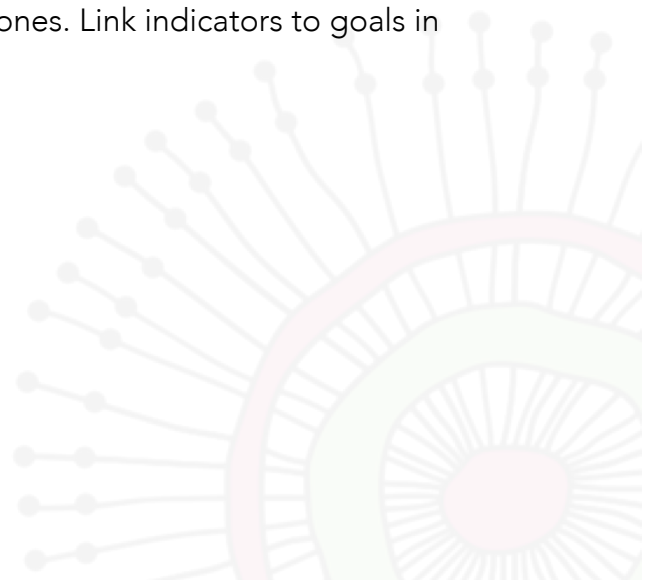
This guide shows how you can use two simple templates to create a robust and competitive plan for impact that addresses each of these three points. It focuses on Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Actions to address societal challenges, but will be useful for Innovation Actions and proposals for national funders.



1. Measurable impact goals you can monitor and evaluate

Identifying impact goals is the easy part of most Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Actions, as “expected impacts” are clearly defined in calls for proposals (under different challenge themes in work programmes that are published every three years or so). More challenging is to identify additional impacts that complement the expected impacts, integrate these goals throughout your proposal and find a way of measuring your impact:

- **Ensure the project will meet each of the “expected impacts”** outlined in the call text (how to do this is explained in the next section)
- **Identify further impacts not outlined within the call**, which complement or extend the expected impacts and can easily be achieved within budget (e.g. that would enhance innovation capacity, create new market opportunities, strengthen competitiveness and growth of companies, or address environmental or social issues linked to your research). Consider also identifying intermediate impacts that will arise during your pathway to impact e.g. conceptual, attitudinal, cultural or capacity building impacts, upon which you would build more instrumental expected impacts
- **Make sure your proposal is challenge-led and links to the expected impacts for your call throughout the proposal**, not just in the sections dedicated to impact. Make sure that each of the impacts is linked to research in your work programme
- **Make your impact goals specific and measurable by identifying indicators** that will demonstrate progress towards and/or achievement of each impact goal. It is common for researchers to identify indicators of progress towards impact that reflect the success of activities designed to generate impact, but that do not actually say anything about whether or not the expected impact has been achieved. Make sure you have the means of measuring each indicator, including time, expertise and resources, and budget accordingly. Make sure indicators are robust and reliable, and will convincingly demonstrate causality, showing conclusively that your research contributed to the impacts observed. Consider identifying baselines and milestones. Link indicators to goals in a table.

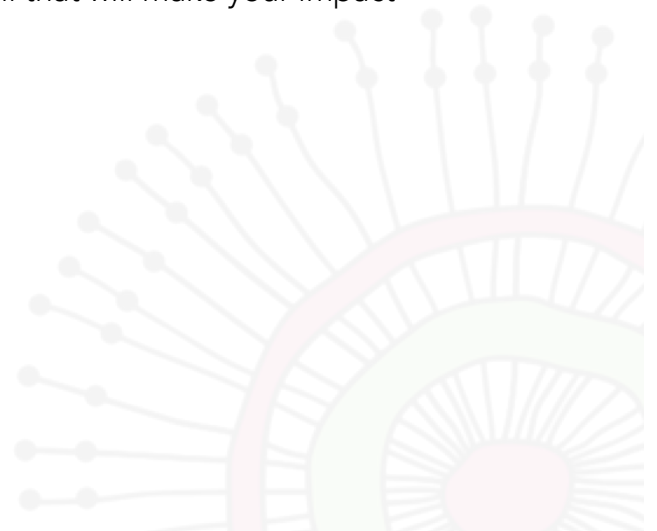


2. Well-targeted stakeholders and/or publics

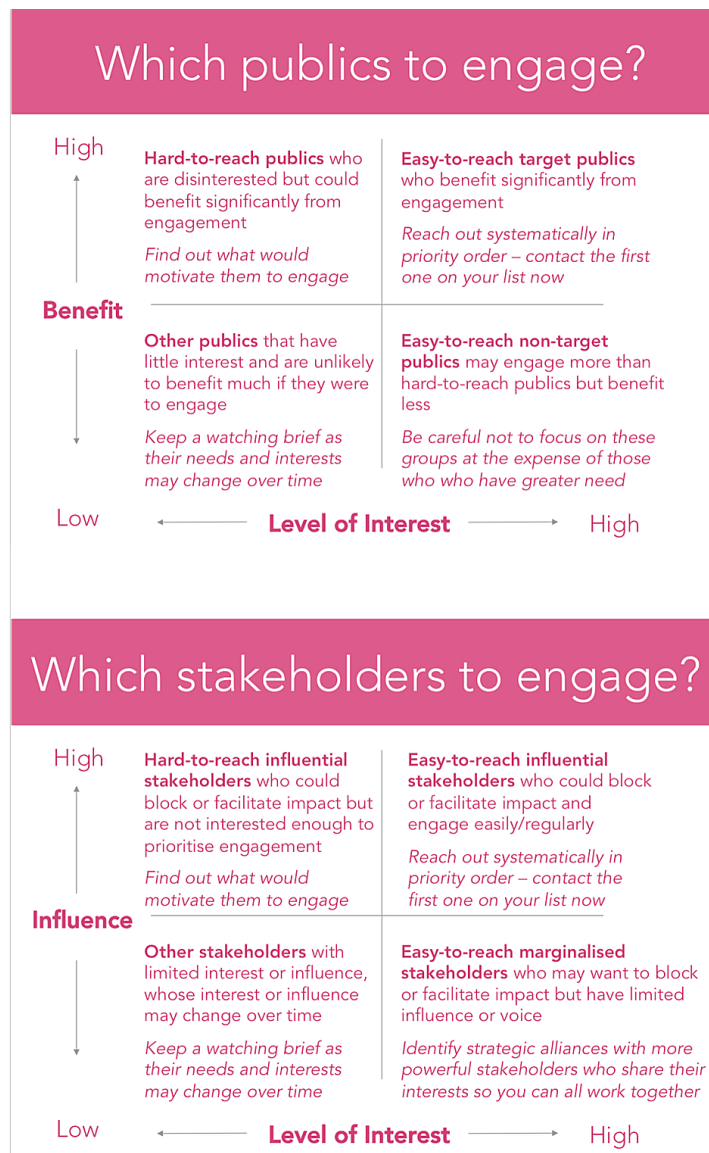
Now you've got some clear impact goals, you need to identify the publics and/or stakeholders that will benefit when these goals have been achieved. Here are some tips to make this easy:

If you have limited knowledge and experience of publics/stakeholders working in your area, team up with a colleague who knows more. If you have time and contacts, consider inviting someone from outside academia who works with the people you want to help, and get them to advise you on the key groups you need to reach out to

- **For stakeholders, consider the relative interest each group or organisation has in your work, and their relative influence over your ability to achieve your impact goals.** This influence could be negative (blocking you from achieving impact) or positive (enabling you to achieve things that would not have been possible without their help). See the graphics below for examples of actions you can take with each of the categories of publics and stakeholders that emerge from this analysis
- For publics, in addition to considering their relative interest in your work, **consider the extent to which different groups (e.g. demographics, interest groups) might benefit** from your work. See the graphics below for examples of actions you can take with each of public
- **Reach out to as many of the groups that emerge as benefiting strongly or being highly influential before you submit your grant application** to get their feedback and help with your pathway to impact. This will lead to a stronger, more credible pathway and will give these groups a greater sense of joint ownership, making them more likely to engage if you get funded
- **Download the Fast Track Impact stakeholder and publics analysis template to do a full analysis.** You won't have room to put all of this information in your proposal, but you will be able to use this information to group publics and stakeholders into categories (e.g. third sector, business, policy, or different sectors, socio-economic classes or interests), make strategic choices about who to highlight as key collaborators and give you a level of detail that will make your impact summary and pathway highly believable



This infographic shows how you can identify, categorise and prioritise publics and stakeholders for engagement, prioritising publics who will benefit most, and identifying the most influential stakeholders who can help you achieve impacts:



3. A credible communication and impact plan

All Research and Innovation Horizon 2020 projects are obliged to have a “communication plan” and work package (or similar) in the proposal and grant agreement. Often these are written by SME or HEI partners with communication expertise who are brought into the consortium specifically to design and deliver a WP on communications and impact. The challenge of this approach is that the groups leading this work may not have a strong

grasp of the research being conducted in other WPs (e.g. a communications consultancy) or may understand the content but have a limited grasp of the research process (e.g. an NGO working in the topic area). If you want to design this WP yourself as the co-ordinator or integrate communication and impact into another WP (e.g. doing action research or social science in an otherwise natural or physical science project) here are some ideas that can help you develop a highly competitive approach:

- **Focus on communication that is designed to lead to measurable non-academic impacts** from your research. Impact can be defined as demonstrable benefits to individuals, organisations and society that could not have been possible without new knowledge arising from your research (after Reed, 2016). Explain how you will “disseminate” research outputs to the academic community (e.g. via conferences and papers) but don’t use this as a substitute for communication with wider audiences and generating non-academic impacts
- Typically in a dedicated WP, **develop a communication and impact strategy with clear goals and milestones**. This should involve all project partners in some way, and start at the beginning and run throughout the project (not just at the end). Guidance to evaluators also suggests that a communication strategy should also be strategically planned, address clear objectives, be targeted to audiences beyond the project’s own community including media and publics, have pertinent messages, use the most appropriate medium and means and be proportionate to the scale of the research. Integrate principles of Responsible Research and Innovation throughout your proposal, including in your communication strategy (e.g. see <https://www.rri-tools.eu>). Build in legacy arrangements to your plan to ensure project outputs are available after the project ends
- **Fund professional research communicators and impact experts**, ensuring the funds allocated to this are proportionate to the scale of your project (consider including further training for your impact team as part of your proposal)
- **Work with the European Commission to amplify your messages** e.g. see list of publications through which they promote their funded research at: https://ec.europa.eu/easme/sites/easme-site/files/h2020_ee_info_day_2016_how_to_prepare_an_excellent_proposal.pdf (p58)
- **If your impact includes commercial exploitation, work with industrial partners to do the necessary market research prior to submitting your proposal**, so you can propose a credible commercialization strategy. If this is not possible, get letters of support from major players in the sector showing support for the research and interest in the market. Also make sure you cover any issues around Intellectual Property and regulatory and other barriers to market

- **Download the Fast Track Impact Planning template to create a full impact plan at** www.fasttrackimpact.com/resources. You can include an initial activity to co-produce a full post-award impact plan using this template with your stakeholders and publics as one of your first deliverables. Although you won't have room to put all of this information in your proposal, conducting a full, systematic plan at this stage will enable you to write your proposal in a way that is coherent and convincing, with specific details that will lend credibility to your plans.

7 other key strategies for making your impact competitive

1. Be specific

The number one piece of advice is to be specific. Tell reviewers exactly who you will work with (not just government, or even a particular department, but the specific policy team and if you have it the name of your contact in that team). Specify your goals clearly, with specific indicators that will tell you when each goal has been met. Explain how you will complete each activity in credible detail and why this is the best way of achieving a specific impact e.g. instead of social media, identify the platform you will use, who you will target that is on that platform, and what impact goals you will be able to preferentially achieve via this medium.

2. Demonstrate demand or interest in your work

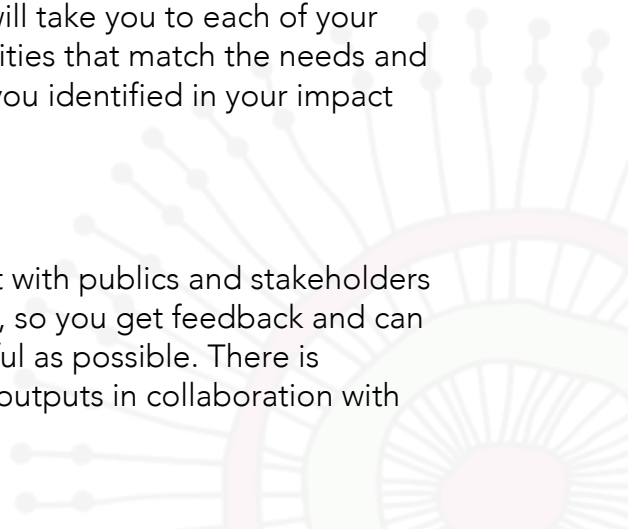
Find evidence of growing public interest in the issues you are studying, numbers of people attending public engagement events or watching programmes linked to your subject. Demonstrate that stakeholders want/need your work, and if possible co-develop your pathway to impact (and in some cases the whole project) in collaboration with them. Establish an advisory panel (there is actually peer-reviewed evidence that these lead to impact more than many other pathways) and name the people you have invited, indicating where they have confirmed involvement.

3. Check you have activities to reach each of your goals

Systematically check if you have activities that will take you to each of your impact goals, and that you have identified activities that match the needs and preferences of each public/stakeholder group you identified in your impact summary.

4. Make it two-way

Where possible, focus on two-way engagement with publics and stakeholders rather than one-way communication of findings, so you get feedback and can adapt your approach to be as relevant and useful as possible. There is research evidence that projects that co-design outputs in collaboration with



the people who need them, achieve greater uptake of their outputs because they are more relevant and people have a sense of shared ownership. Even for communication outputs like policy briefs, getting feedback from your target audience during the writing process can significantly increase the likelihood that your communication hits its mark.

5. Link to your impact track record

Talk about your track record on achieving impact, ideally with the groups and issues linked to your proposal. It is difficult to “prove” that you will be able to do what you are suggesting you will do, and some of the best evidence you have is a track record of having delivered impacts for these groups in these areas in the past. If you haven’t got a track record yourself, consider bringing someone into your team who does and get them to work with you on your pathway to impact.

6. Keep it simple

Use plain English and make your pathway to impact stand alone (e.g. spelling out acronyms), as a lay member of a funding panel may only read the impact related parts of your proposal in any detail.

7. Seek specialist impact pre-review feedback

Don't rely on academic pre-reviewers to provide feedback on the impact sections of your proposal. Instead, seek feedback from someone in your University who specialises in impact, or if possible, get feedback on these sections from someone who works with the publics or stakeholders you want to benefit.

Find out more

For more information and links, see the online version of this guide on the Fast Track Impact website: www.fasttrackimpact.com/resources (see Research Impact Templates).

