AEDIB|NET
AFRICAN EUROPEAN DIGITAL INNOVATION BRIDGE NETWORK

DELIVERABLE 4.1

Report on the selection of 3 ADIHs

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Abbreviations

Acronym	Meaning
AEDIB|NET	African European Digital Innovation Bridge Network
ADIH	African Digital Innovation Hub
AEDIB	African European Digital Innovation Bridge
DIH	Digital Innovation Hub
EC	European Commission
EU	European Union
GA	Guide for Applicants
PPI	Pre-Commercial Procurement Invitation
SME	Small and medium-sized enterprise
WP	Work Package

Executive summary

Digital Innovation Hubs (DIH) are One-Stop-Shops to support primarily Small and Medium Sized Enterprises (SMEs) in their digital transformation. The concept of DIHs has emerged in the European Union (EU) and has been widely adopted with more than 300 DIHs registered in the JRC catalogue (https://s3platform.jrc.ec.europa.eu/digital-innovation-hubs-tool). Within the AEDIB|NET project, the DIH concept has been adopted to the African context with the objective of piloting the implementation of African Digital Innovation Hubs (ADIH).

Based on the feedback of potential applicants and the involvement and commitment of European Union Member States and AEDIB|NET partners, the AEDIB|NET project has extended the scope from three (3) to twelve (12) DIHs and added "Clean Tech" as a fourth specialization area to "Climate Smart Agriculture", "Digital Trade" and "Smart Cities". While AEDIB|NET continues to finance 3 DIHs, all 12 DIHs can benefit from other activities of the AEDIB|NET project (e.g., ADIH Lab, Study Trips, Virtual Internship Programmes, Angel Investor Networks) and EU member states have signaled their willingness to provide funding to the remaining 9 DIHs.

The AEDIB|NET project launched an awareness campaign and a competitive Pre-Commercial Procurement Invitation (PPI) to select the 12 DIHs. The PPI was open from November 2021 to February 2022. Within this period, 70 applications were received. Out of the 70 applications, 28 applications met or exceeded the quality threshold. Applying evaluation scores and balancing criteria, 12 DIHs across the four specialization areas Climate Smart Agriculture, Digital Trade, Clean Tech and Smart Cities were finally selected by the AEDIB|NET project. The 12 DIHs participated in a kick-off event from 26th to 28th of April in Brussels and will proceed with the AEDIB|NET project.

1. Introduction & Background

The AEDIB initiative has the vision of creating a single African-European market for digital innovation. To reach this ambition, digital innovation ecosystems on both continents need to be strengthened and connected to each other. For innovations to flow, bridgeheads must be established on the two continents that are built on shared values and common concepts. Hence, the African European Digital Innovation Bridge is striving to implement structures that serve as these bridgeheads. The AEDIB|NET project has the unique opportunity to pilot and validate different instruments and their combination to build the bridgeheads. Figure 1 illustrates the various instruments to be piloted.
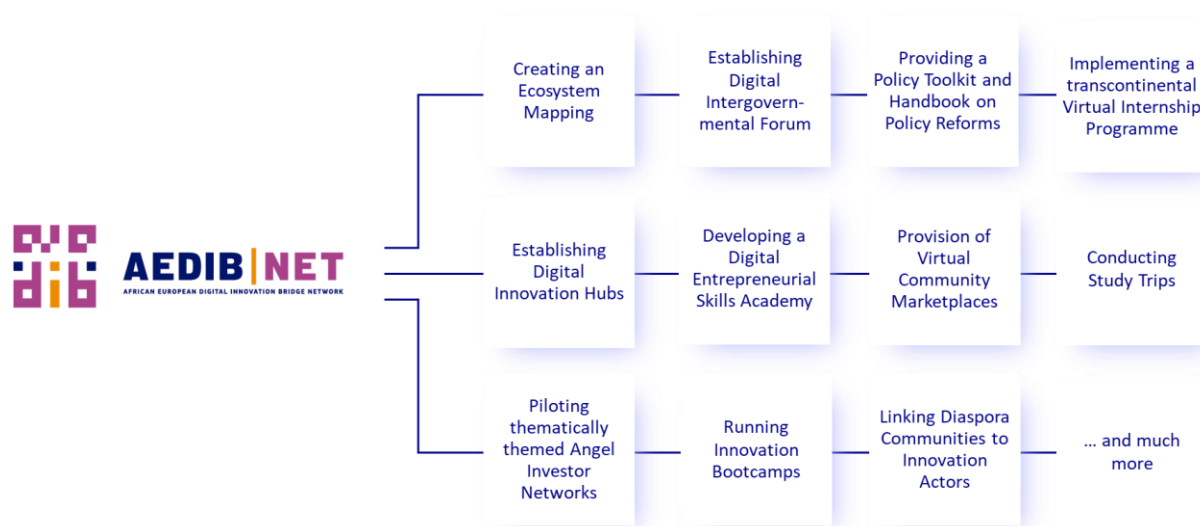
Figure 1: Instruments within the AEDIB|NET project

One of the most prominent instruments to be validated by AEDIB|NET is the concept of Digital Innovation Hubs. DIHs are one of the tools designed under the European Commission's Digitising European Industry Initiative. They are set up as central points of expertise to help predominantly small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) and mid-caps to become more competitive with regards to their business and production processes, products, or services.

The objective of DIHs is to support SMEs with the uptake of digital and innovative technologies. They are seen as a core mechanism to create a strong, collaborative regional innovation ecosystem through providing access to services, facilities and expertise offered by a wide range

of partners. The aim is to ensure that individual SMEs receive the services they need, that targeted sectors get access to innovative, scalable solutions and that stakeholders cooperate with each other at a regional, national and/or pan-European level. To support SMEs in their digital transformation, DIHs provide a set of services in the following areas (see Figure 2):
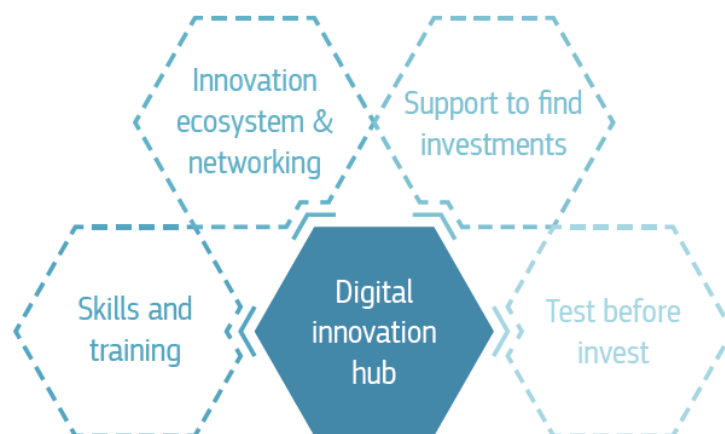
Figure 2: Overview of DIH service areas

Source: Kalpaka et al. (2020): Digital Innovation Hubs as policy instruments to boost digitalization of SMEs[1]

The first set of services are the technological services (1), supporting the development of new innovations based on technological infrastructure and expertise. This is often referred to as "test before invest" function but could include everything from testing to support in R&D collaborative projects.

Next to the technology services, the uptake of technologies also requires business services (2). These will help an SME to adjust its organization and actions to the market and the changes brought by digitization (including supporting access to finance).

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[1] Kalpaka et al. (2020): Digital Innovation Hubs as policy instruments to boost digitalisation of SMEs. https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC121604

DIHs also offer skills and training (3) as another service area. This ensures that their customers have the capacities and capabilities to implement the new technologies. Skills and training are horizontal, covering skills in technology, business, and ecosystem related topics.

Lastly, DIHs also function as a connector in the region and offer ecosystem services (4), to boost the regional innovation ecosystem. Focused on a specific technology or thematic area, DIHs bring together different stakeholders in an innovation relay game to ensure a collaborative network of partners, ultimately enhancing the quality of the collaboration in the region.

The concept of DIHs has received widespread adoption within the European Union's member states and adjacent states. According to the DIH catalogues of the Joint Research Center of the European Commission [2] there are 414 fully operational DIHs in European Union member states and adjacent countries as of June 2022. In alignment with the Digital Europe programme, the concept of DIHs has undergone a further evolution cumulating in the concept of European Digital Innovation Hubs. While adhering the underpinning idea of DIHs, the European Digital Innovation Hub [3] present a next step in the evolution of Digital Innovation Hubs by establishing standards.

The original scope of the AEDIB|NET foresaw the selection and establishment of 3 African Digital Innovation Hubs across the African continent along three designated specialization areas: (a) climate smart agriculture, (b) digital trade and (c) smart cities. The 3 ADIHs should be selected through a competitive open call to which candidates from all African countries were invited. To promote the opportunity, an awareness campaign should be launched that should include webinars on the concept of DIHs and on the requirements and process of the

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[2] https://s3platform.jrc.ec.europa.eu/digital-innovation-hubs-tool

[3] https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/activities/edihs

open call. The following chapters will describe the adaptation of the European concept of DIHs to the African context as well as the design and execution of the application and selection process of the Digital Innovation Hubs.

2. Understanding and adapting the DIH concept

As a start, a thorough and detailed understanding of the European concept for DIH was required to adequately identify areas that would require adaptation to the African context. While EDIH present the next evolutionary step of the DIH concept in Europe, the AEDIB|NET team has decided to stick to the more general concept of the DIH. The EDIH concept builds upon already existing structures, promotes a deep-tech focus, and relies on the financial and political engagement and commitment of European Union member states to establish EDIH in their respective countries. Since these factors are absent in most African countries, the concept of EDIH could not be adopted without introducing significant changes that in turn would restrict the collaboration options between African and European DIHs.

Thus, the AEDIB|NET project team used the more general definition of a DIH as a starting point. In a first step, an extensive literature research was conducted with a focus on documents and studies issued by the JRC. Please see table 1 for a summary of the most relevant documents and studies for the AEDIB|NET project.

Table 1: Most important documents and studies on DIHs in Europe

Title	Issuing Body	Year of Publication
Digital Innovation Hubs in Smart Spez**ialisation** Strategies	JRC	2018
Smart Specialisation in the world, an EU policy approach helping to discover innovation globally	JRC	2019
Defining Digital Innovation Hubs as part of the European DIH network	DIHNET.EU	2020
Digital Innovation Hubs as policy instrument**s** to boost digitalisation of SMEs	JRC	2020
European Digital Innovation Hubs in Digital Europe Programme	European Commission	2020

In addition to the literature review, the AEDIB|NET team has conducted several interviews with experts from the European Commission and JRC and would like to thank Matthias Kuom, Gabriel Rissola, Mafini Dosso and Bjorn-Soren Gigler for their time and contributions.

Equipped with the conceptual underpinning of DIH, the AEDIB|NET set out to interview several DIHs in Europe to understand how the concept has been applied in practice and to identify patterns and learnings from the DIHs in Europe. Table 2 lists the DIHs that have been interviewed by the AEDIB|NET team.

Table 2: Interviewed DIHs from Europe

DIH Name	Country
MADE	Denmark
Photon Delta	Netherlands
BioSense	Serbia
Advanced Manufacturing DIH	Lithuania
AIR4S	Spain
DIH Agrifood	Slovenia

Even though the setup, composition, business model and service delivery varied significantly between the interviewed DIH, all DIHs built upon a common concept and understanding that is best summarised by the following definition: **Digital Innovation Hubs are one-stop-shops that help companies to become more competitive with regard to their business/production processes, products or services using digital technologies. They are based upon technology infrastructure (Competence Centre – CC) and provide access to the latest knowledge, expertise, and technology to support their customers with piloting, testing, and experimenting with digital innovations. DIHs also provide business and financing support to implement these innovations, if needed across the value chain.**

Additionally, the interviews illustrated that successful DIHs build upon a solid service offering across the following four service areas: 1) test before invest, 2) access to finance, 3) skills and training and 4) ecosystem building and networking. While each DIH implemented their service offerings strongly tailored to the demand of their respective target group, the

comprehensive coverage of all service areas was regarded as crucial for the success of a DIH and the vision to be a one-stop-shop.

3. Validating the ADIH concept

Based on the detailed understanding of the concept of DIHs in Europe, the AEDIB|NET team foresaw the need to adapt the concept to the African context. For instance, while DIHs is Europe often built upon existing structures and frequently had Research and Technologies Organisations (RTOs), as their nuclei (e.g., Fraunhofer Institutes), similar structures are not prevalent in most African countries. Also, at least part of the funding of most DIHs in Europe stems from public funding, e.g., through dedicated regional programmes for digitisation or from direct public funding of host organisations of the DIHs. Such comprehensive funding options are not available in most African countries and digital innovations are mainly driven by private sector actors. Hence, the AEDIB|NET project team identified the need to validate and adapt the DIH concept with relevant and representative stakeholders in Africa. To this end, the AEDIB|NET team captured the concept of a DIH in a pitch deck and presented the pitch deck to various interview partners at different levels. The team interviewed Pan-African organisations, Africa Research and Technology Organisations, Enterprise Support Organisations and Tech Hubs. Table 3 contains the list of all interview partners. The interview partners were carefully selected based on their potential to either support or host Digital Innovation Hubs.

Table 3: List of interview partners during validation phase

Name	Category	Country
African Union – Policy and Regulation Initiative for Digital Africa (PRIDA)	Political Body	Pan-African
African Development Bank (AfDB)	Political Body	Pan-African
Smart Africa Alliance	Political Body	Pan-African
World Association of Industrial and Technological Research Organizations (WAITRO)	Industry Association	Global

International Association of Science Parks and Areas of Innovation (IASP)	Industry Association	Global
Songhai Labs	Tech Hub	Cameroon
Tshimologong Digital Innovation Precinct	Tech Hub	South Africa
Launch Lab incubator	Tech Hub	South Africa
Close the Gap	NGO	Kenya
BIDCP	Investor	Kenya
SNDBX	ESO	Kenya
Duapa Werkspace	Tech Hub	Ghana
North West University	University	South Africa
Jokkolabs	Tech Hub	Gambia
Growth Africa	ESO	Kenya
AECF Africa	Investor	Pan-African
MMUST	University	Kenya
Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture & Technology	University	Kenya
ImpactLab	Tech Hub	Morocco
City State of Lagos	Public Sector	Nigeria
Niokobok	Private Sector Company	Senegal
UNDP Tanzania	Political Body	Tanzania
Welthungerhilfe	NGO	Zimbawe
Orange Digital Center	Tech Hub	Cameroon
Digital Opportunity Trust	NGO	Ethiopia
Laurendeau & Associates	Investor	Ethiopia
Seme city	Tech Hub	Benin
GSMA	Industry Association	Global

Each interview lasted around one hour in which the AEDIB|NET project team presented a brief input on the AEDIB initiative, the AEDIB|NET project and most importantly on the concept of DIH. Most of the interview time was dedicated towards a discussion around the DIH concept and the need for adapting various aspects to accommodate for the African context. The following common patterns emerged from the discussions:

- Need for ecosystem building through cooperation of multiple actors
- Non-for-profit requirement excludes relevant innovation actors
- Restriction on three specialization areas leaves out opportunities
- Sparse funding threatens the long-term success of DIHs
- Ambiguity of the term "Digital Innovation Hubs"
- Negligence of Francophone countries

3.1. Need for ecosystem building through cooperation of multiple actors

Most of the interviewees stressed the importance of collaboration and cooperation of multiple actors for the emergence of local innovation ecosystems. They expressed concerns that if a single organisation would host a DIH that knowledge, opportunities, and rewards will not be shared among ecosystem actors and in fact could turn out to be diametral towards the desired effect of strengthening an innovation ecosystem. Thus, the interviewees favoured a more facetted approach in that at least two organisations should team up to form a DIH.

3.2. Non-for-profit requirement excludes relevant innovation actors

While all interviewees acknowledged the purpose of DIH to contribute towards a common good, it was strongly argued that a non-for-profit requirement would exclude highly relevant existing actors in African innovation ecosystems. It was stated that in most African innovation ecosystems, private sector actors with profit objectives are the main drivers of digital innovations. Shutting them out from a DIH through the provision of a non-for-profit status would leave out significant players and limit the credibility and potential of a DIH in African countries.

3.3. Restriction on three specialisation areas leaves out opportunities

One of the most common questions circled around the selection of the three specialisation areas for DIHs in the AEDIB|NET project, namely Climate Smart Agriculture, Digital Trade and

Smart Cities. While most interviewees saw the benefits and crucial role that a DIH can fill in the emergence of digital innovation ecosystems, they expressed the concern that a restriction on the three specialisation areas is too narrow of a focus and would leave lots of opportunities untouched. They argued for a more open definition or the inclusion of additional specialisation areas such as Clean Tech, Manufacturing and Education.

3.4. Sparse funding threatens the long-term success of DIHs

Nearly all interviewees pointed out that the available funding from the AEDIB|NET project with 70.000€ for each of the three DIHs falls short of securing a long-term success of the DIH. Additionally, they expressed concerns that DIHs will not be able to acquire substantial public funding that is required to cover the basic operational costs and set-up of a DIH. At the same time, it was mentioned that there are obstacles to allow a DIH to operate fully financially self-sustainable, mainly the non-for-profit clause and the anticipated skepticism and means for SMEs to fully pay for the service delivery of a DIH.

3.5. Ambiguity of the term "Digital Innovation Hubs"

While presenting the concept of DIH, the most common initial question was with regards to the term "Digital Innovation Hubs". It was challenged why there is a need to establish DIHs if there are already numerous "Innovation Hubs" existing on the African continent. This was due to a misunderstanding of the term. Frequently, interviewees equaled "Digital Innovation Hubs" with the more established forms of "Innovation Hubs" and "Tech Hubs" that mainly run incubator and accelerator programmes for start-ups and offer entrepreneurial support services, such as co-working space, to start-ups. In fact, the AEDIB|NET consortium member AfriLabs is the Pan-African associations of innovation and tech hubs and has over 340 members. However, while the "Innovation Hubs" and "Tech Hubs" mainly target and service start-ups, and run entrepreneurial development programmes, the concept of DIH targets more established companies with a focus on SMEs and has a more technological than entrepreneurial focus. It became apparent that the term "Digital Innovation Hub" requires a solid introduction to properly distinguish the approach from already existing structures and organisations.

3.6. Negligence of Francophone countries

Not directly related to the DIH concept, the AEDIB|NET team received the feedback that partners from Francophone and other non-English speaking counties might be discouraged to apply as the open call and other materials and documents from the AEDIB|NET project as well as the follow-up support to DIHs are exclusively available in English. Additionally, the requirement to hand in applications in English further restrict the potential to establish DIHs in Francophone countries.

3.7. Adapting the DIH concept

After having conducted the validation interviews, the AEDIB|NET project team consolidated the feedback and decided to adapt the DIH concept based on the patterns described above cumulating in the following definition for the AEDIB|NET project of a DIH on the African continent.

> *A DIH is a coordinated group of organisations with complementary expertise and a public-benefit objective, offering a set of services and activities to companies to support their digital transformation and innovation through a one-stop shop.*

3.7.1. Coordinated Group of Organisations

A Digital Innovation Hub consists of 2 or more organisation that team up to form the core of the Digital Innovation Hub. The core entities of a Digital Innovation Hubs serve as the orchestrator of their local innovation ecosystem and mobilise the various actors within the local innovation ecosystem to deliver services. Though the Digital Innovation Hub can deliver its services nationwide, Pan-African, or even globally, the Digital Innovation Hub needs to be firmly grounded in its local innovation ecosystem to draw from and strengthen the expertise and capacity of its local innovation actors. A Digital Innovation Hub can have a dedicated legal body, but it can also exist as a virtual body

3.7.2. Complimentary Expertise

The core entities of a Digital Innovation Hub should complement each other to cover 4 areas of expertise. One of the entities should have a strong expertise in a digitally enabled technology. This could be anything from Artificial Intelligence, Blockchain, Drones, VR/AR to

Internet-of-Things. This should be complemented by a proven expertise in applying the technology to solve challenges in a specific application area, such as spraying services, gaming, traceability etc. Additionally, the Digital Innovation Hub is expected to have a solid sectoral expertise to integrate the applied technologies in the larger context, such as agriculture, urban development, or trade. Lastly, the entities should contribute a financing expertise into the Digital Innovation Hub, which does not necessarily imply that the Digital Innovation Hub provides financing itself, but it should be knowledgeable about the availability and suitability of various financing instruments. While the core entities of a Digital Innovation Hub do not inevitably have to cover all expertise areas, they are expected to draw from other actors in their local innovation ecosystem to cover any gaps.

3.7.3. Public Benefit Objective

The public benefit is achieved if the activities and services of the Digital Innovation Hub:

- aim at achieving the objective of supporting companies in their digital transformation
- serve the interest of the public and not primarily to support profit-making interests
- do not give rise to more than incidental company or personal benefit
- do not compete with commercial offerings

3.7.4. Set of Services & Activities

A Digital Innovation Hub needs to provide services and activities along 4 areas:

- „Test before Invest" should allow companies to try out a digital technology and validate its benefit before investing in it
- Through „Access to Finance", a Digital Innovation Hub should advice and broker financing options to companies that want to deploy a digital technology in their operations
- „Skills & Development" should provide companies and their employees with the required skills to operate the deployed digital technologies
- „Ecosystem Building" should foster the collaboration between existing and the emergence of new actors within the local innovation ecosystem

3.7.5. Companies

The primary target group for a Digital Innovation Hub are Small & Medium Sized Enterprises (SMEs). Small and Medium Sized Enterprises usually run already a profitable or self-sustaining business model but often do not deploy digital technologies to enhance their business, growth, or profitability. The Digital Innovation Hub primarily supports those Small & Medium Sized Enterprises to profit from using digital technologies. Start-Ups and Entrepreneurs are very

important actors within an innovation ecosystem and often act as innovation catalysts. While Start-Ups can also be clients of a Digital Innovation Hub to develop a specific digital innovation, they also serve as essential service providers that a Digital Innovation Hub should mobilise to deliver services to Small & Medium Sized Enterprises.

3.8. Using the DIH concept

The AEDIB|NET project teams used the adapted definition provided in chapter 3.7 as the basis for the open call, the dissemination material, and documents and in all discussion with interested parties and potential applications. To support the concept, the AEDIB|NET team has recorded a video detailing the concept that is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ohOOoGpfYgc.

Additionally, the AEDIB|NET team has decided not to use the term "African Digital Innovation Hub" (ADIH) in its communication and dissemination as it suggests substantial differences and sets DIHs in Africa somewhat apart from DIH elsewhere. For consistency with the terminology of the AEDIB|NET grant agreement, the term ADIH is however used throughout this document.

4. Extending the Scope – from 3 to 12 ADIHs

Initially, the AEDIB|NET project foresaw the selection and establishment of three DIH on the African continent, one for each of the following specialisation areas: climate smart agriculture, digital trade, and smart cities. However, through the interviews with stakeholders and potential applicants as part of the validation process as laid out in chapter 3, the AEDIB|NET team has received very positive and encouraging feedback that the general idea and concept of DIH has strong potential to strengthen African digital innovation ecosystem and to create a true Pan-African network of African innovation actors. At the same time, it was mentioned that the objective of creating just three DIHs on the African continent will fall short of the ambition to create a Pan-African network. The interviews have shown that there was substantial interest from a significant number of potential applicants that would merit the selection and establishment of more than just three DIHs.

Simultaneously, the discussion among the EU member states (Germany, France and Belgium with other member states having expressed their interest to join) and the European Commission advanced on the larger AEDIB initiative. The EU member states indicated their support and commitment for the creation of DIHs beyond the AEDIB|NET project and to continue the support for DIHs after the end of the AEDIB|NET project through including the DIHs in existing or planned international development projects.

Given the interest and support from both the applicants side and the EU member states, the AEDIB|NET project team deliberated on how to seize the momentum and to leverage on the AEDIB|NET project to maximise the impact of the AEDIB|NET project. After carefully reviewing the AEDIB|NET grant agreement, consulting all AEDIB|NET consortium members and discussing with the EC policy officer, the AEDIB|NET project team decided to increase the scope of the AEDIB|NET project to select overall 12 DIHs instead of 3 DIHs. The scope increase is designed in such a way that it does not affect the budget or the timeline of the AEDIB|NET project. For instance, the participants for some of the AEDIB|NET activities (e.g., study trips) will be sourced from 12 DIHs instead of just three while the overall number of participants remains identical.

The only exception is the financial support for the DIHs. The Grant Agreement stipulates financial support of 70.000€ for each of the original 3 DIHs. This financial support remains

unchanged and will only be released to 3 DIHs. However, the EU member states Belgium, France and Germany have committed to provide equivalent funding to 9 DIHs through the international development cooperation programmes if the DIH proposal meet the requirements for available funding opportunities.

Thus, the AEDIB|NET project's new scope is to select 12 DIHs. All 12 DIHs will have access to the AEDIB|NET activities as displayed in figure 3. Additionally, 3 DIHs will receive financial support of 70.000€ through the AEDIB|NET project as stipulated in the Grant Agreement while the remaining 9 DIHs have the opportunity to receive funding outside of the AEDIB|NET project through international development cooperation projects from Belgium, France, and Germany.

The AEDIB|NET team has also suggested to include a fourth specialisation area "clean tech". The specialisation area of "clean tech" was mentioned by most interview partners as a topic of high priority in most countries and among most innovation actors. "Clean tech" encompasses digital solutions and digitalisation in the areas of circular economy, environmentally friendly energy sources and storages, sustainable water management, energy efficiency and efficient use of natural resources.

5. Designing & Launching the Pre-Commercial Procurement Invitation

Building upon the adapted concept of DIHs in Africa as defined in chapter 3 and upon the increased scope as laid out in chapter 4, the AEDIB|NET project team moved on to design and launch the open call for application from African consortia to establish DIHs. In a first step, the project team evaluated the different available option to release the funding of 70.000€ to three DIHs as stipulated in the Grant Agreement. After deliberations, the AEDIB|NET project team identified the "Pre-Commercial Procurement" process as most suitable financing instrument.

5.1. Pre-Commercial Procurement Process

Pre-Commercial Procurement is a tool to stimulate innovation as it enables the public sector to steer the development of new solutions directly towards its needs. It is an important approach to public procurement of research and development (R&D) services and develop breakthrough innovative solutions (products and services) for the societal challenges of the future. A Pre-Commercial Procurement serves the following purposes:

- Develop breakthrough innovative solutions (products and services) for the societal challenges of the future
- Provide first customer references for innovative organisations
- Facilitate the access of new innovative players to the market
- Share the risks and benefits of designing, prototyping, and testing new products and services between procurers and suppliers
- Create optimum conditions for wider commercialisation and take-up of results
- Reduce market fragmentation, reducing costs for procurers and creating wider markets for companies
- Create highly qualified jobs
- Act as a "seal of approval" for innovative companies confirming the market potential

Please refer to https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/pre-commercial-procurement to learn about the purpose and requirements of Pre-Commercial Procurement.

The Pre-Commercial Procurement process is split into three (3) phases as shown in figure 3
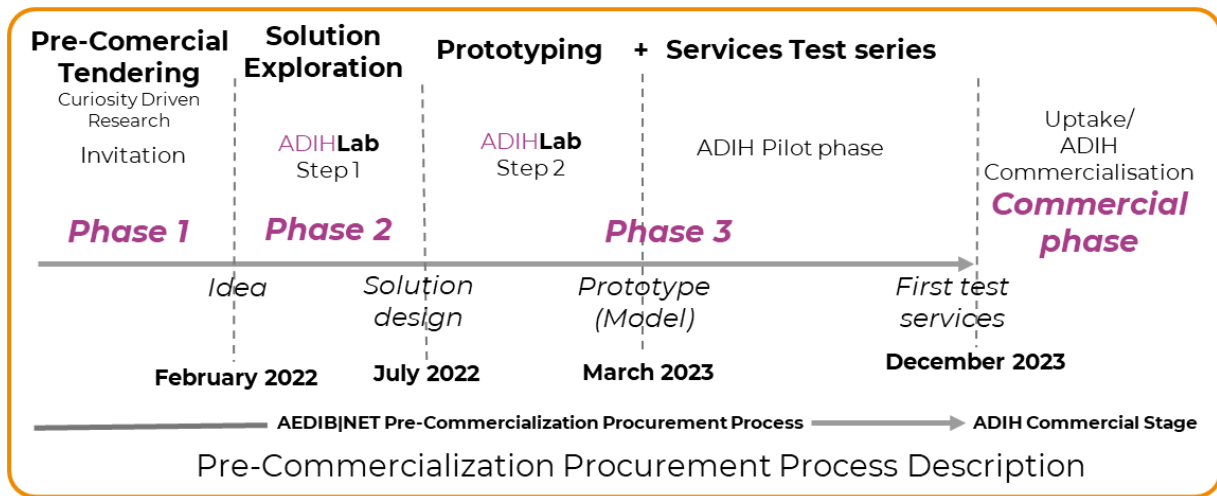
Figure 3: Pre-Commercial Procurement Process Description

The whole Pre-commercial Procurement process consists of three (3) phases, a Pre-Commercial Tendering (Curiosity Driven Research) as phase 1, a "Solution Exploration" as phase 2, and a Prototyping and Services in the form of a test series as phase 3, which will take place after the selection of the three (3) DIHs to receive funding of 70.000€ through the AEDIB|NET project.

Phase 1 is the Pre-Commercial Tendering, or Curiosity Driven Research, through which up to twelve (12) proposals (submitted by consortia) that offer the best possible solutions to set up the DIHs in Africa, were selected. This document describes the process of phase 1 in detail.

5.2. Pre-Commercial Procurement Invitation

Consequently, the open call was adapted to suit the requirements of a Pre-Commercial Procurement and was framed as a Pre-Commercial Procurement Invitation. For ease of reading, the terms open call and Pre-Commercial Procurement Invitation are used interchangeably throughout this document acknowledging that the requirements of an open call and a Pre-Commercial Procurement differ. A Pre-Commercial Procurement Invitation is an offer for organizations who have products and services in a pre-commercial stage to enter into a competitive selection process after which, if selected, they will receive funding to develop their products and services on the basis of a Cooperation Agreement that will guide the project development, the outcomes expected and the deliverables required, all these considered of

essential value in terms of knowledge provided to the invitation promoter. The Pre-Commercial Procurement Invitation addressed the following aspects:

- Challenging the African market inviting up to twelve (12) consortia to set up their DIHs in Africa.
- Exploring and comparing pros and cons of alternative solutions of setting up the DIHs in Africa in four separate digital innovation fields: a) smart cities, b) climate smart agriculture, c) digital trade, and in d) Clean Tech.
- Training the consortia for the definition and development of their individual DIH plans.
- Evaluating the proposals at different stages to select progressively the best fit solutions.
- Retaining at least 3 participating projects until the last phase to ensure a future competitive market.
- Inviting the remaining up to nine (9) projects to participate in AEDIB|NET's initiatives.

5.3. Target Groups for the Pre-Commercial Procurement Invitation

The AEDIB|NET project identified different types of organizations on the African continent as potential target groups for the Pre-Commercial Procurement Invitation. While the following list is an indicative list for suitable hosts for a DIH, the AEDIB|NET project team decided to accept applications also from organizational types not listed:

- Research and Technology Organizations (RTOs),
- Technology Hubs,
- Science, Technology, or Innovation Parks,
- Entrepreneurship Organizations, Incubators, Accelerators, and Investors
- Funding entities and local banks
- Private Technology Providers,
- Economic, Industrial and Technological Development Agencies
- Public Agencies and Organizations,
- Technological Development, Research, and Innovation Foundations,
- Universities and Research Centers, Vocational Training Institutes,
- Chambers of Commerce,
- Industrial Clusters
- Associations and Professional Organizations
- and, as the previously listed types of organizations are merely indicative, any other suitable organizations will also be welcome

However, in line with the definition of DIH in the African context, the AEDIB|NET project decided to allow only applications from applicants willing to create a consortium of at least two organisations (as per the above listed type of organizations) to create and test a Digital Innovation Hub at the local African market.

Thus, the Pre-Commercial Procurement Invitation addressed organizations that are willing and capable to assume the position of regional digital innovation hub, accelerating and supporting the digitalization of SMEs, and who will develop the approach toward collaborative work environment with all other local players, including governments, industry, finance sector, technology actors, academia, and social organizations, and assume the role of innovation ecosystem orchestrators, for which they must be adequately and recognized by these players.

Additionally, the organizations were required to possess a degree of expertise in specific areas of digitalization and see real opportunities in their regions for the development of this expertise providing services that will boost the digital demand and at the same time develop a digital technological offer fostering the creation of competitive digitalization markets in their regions.

5.4. Eligibility Criteria

To ensure that the applications are only received from consortia that are suitable as hosts for a DIH and that are in line with the adapted concept of DIHs in Africa, the AEDIB|NET project team issued a list of eligibility criteria that applicants had to meet for their applications to be considered and evaluated.

5.4.1. Consortia Eligibility Criteria

- Applications must be presented by consortia consisting of a minimum of two (2) organizations.
- The consortium members must have at minimum an internal agreement to enter into the creation of a Digital Innovation Hub aiming a public benefit, under the following principles:
  - That it is created with the mission to support companies in their digital transformation
  - That it is created to serve the interest of the general public and not (primarily) to support profit-making interests
  - That the DIH's activities will not give rise to more than incidental economic benefit to the Consortium, its partners or affiliated entities.
  - That it does not compete with existing commercial offerings

- o That it has identified the roles and responsibilities of its consortium members
- The consortium's purpose must include the provision of services to companies to support their digital transformation and innovation.
- At least two (2) consortium members must have minimum five (5) full time staff collaborators.
- At least half of the consortium members must carry out operational activities in the location (region) of the hub to be developed.
- The consortium members must have complementary expertise in technology, application area (listed above in point 3), and financial capacity to create the hub.

5.4.2. Digital Innovation Hub (DIH) Project proposal Eligibility Criteria

- The proposed location for the Digital Innovation Hub must be in one (1) of the fifty-five (55) Member States of the African Union3.

- The DIH will have a dedicated specialization area, in either:
  - o Climate Smart Agriculture
  - o Smart Cities
  - o Digital Trade
  - o Clean Tech
- The DIH, through its members, must provide a list of references (i.e., portfolio of previous projects, success stories, etc.) that show an expertise in the proposed technology specialization area

5.4.3. Application presentation Eligibility Criteria

- Applications must be provided via the Pre-Commercial tendering website. The Invitation had two cut-off dates. The first and main cut-off was Tuesday, January 18, 2022, 16:00 Lagos (Nigeria) local time, and the second and supplementary cut-off date was Tuesday, February 8, 2022, 16:00 Lagos (Nigeria) local time. Proposals submitted by any other means, or after the second cut-off date will not be considered eligible.
- All applications received must be complete, readable and in English in all its mandatory sections.
- The declaration of honor must be included and submitted properly by the applicant. AEDIB|NET will verify the submitted statements.

5.5. Technology Platform & Application Form

As stipulated in the AEDIB|NET grant agreement, "GearBox" of FundingBox was used as the technological platform to launch, manage, and evaluate the Pre-Commercial Procrument Invitation process. To participate in the Pre-Commercial Procurement, applicants were required to hand in an application through an online application form at a dedicated website hosted by the GearBox. Besides of the application form, the website featured a variety of content on the

AEDIB|NET project, the Guide for Applicants, actually the document that explains in full detail all the aspects and conditions about the Pre-Commercial Procurement Invitation for applicants' acknowledgment, a FAQs and a community section called the "AEDIB|NET Forum", created within the Digital Innovation Hubs Community DIHNET.EU, where news about the open call were posted, and applicants could interact with AEDIB|NET project team and amongst themselves.

Besides collecting the contact information of the applicants, consent to data processing, and checking basic eligibility criteria (see chapter 5.X), the main part of the application form was structured along the three awarding criteria: relevance, impact, and implementation.

5.5.4. Relevance

Relevance is the extent to which the project will address specific and actual needs and opportunities reinforcing and securing the digital technology ecosystem in the region, its alignment with the objectives of the Pre-Commercial Procurement Invitation, its contribution to existing local and regional policies and strategies in the areas of digitalization and innovation according to the DIH's technological capabilities and specialization areas, the project's capability to overcome financial obstacles, build digital capacity, foster entrepreneurship, and address other major challenges.

In the application form, applicants were required to provide details to the following questions:

5.5.4.1. Focus

Please describe the alignment with the objectives and activities described in the invitation, and how the project will address these objectives, themes and priorities expressed

5.5.4.2. Challenges

Please describe the specific challenges to be addressed through the DIH and the instruments and activities to be created and established to approach them.

5.5.4.3. Main Players

Please describe how the consortium is organized and its formal and legal structure.

5.5.4.4. Contribution to policies and overcoming financial obstacles

Please describe the DIHs contribution to existing policies, strategies, and activities at local, regional, national an African level

5.5.4.5. Contribution to digital inclusion and other major societal challenges

Please describe and explain how the DIH will address digital inclusion and other major societal challenges, such as gender equality, environmental, rural development or other social needs and opportunities in its region

5.5.5. Impact

Impact is the extent to which, along the program, the DIH will advance in its set-up and deliver results and outcomes, the plans to communicate and disseminate the project and its achievements, strengthen the competitiveness of its target users (namely SMEs supported in digitalization efforts) resulting in benefits for the society, improve the employment conditions and activate entrepreneurship, build digital capacity, and contribute to the creation of a real digital Pana-African and Transcontinental innovation bridge.

In the application form, applicants were required to provide details to the following questions:

5.5.5.1. DIH Creation

Please describe your vision regarding the DIHs development along the two (2) years of project duration and the outcomes it will deliver related with the demands and challenges described in the relevance section of the application form

5.5.5.2. DIH Promotion

Please describe the communication and dissemination activities (target groups, main messages, tools, and channels) you will perform along the program duration to promote the DIHs activities and results maximizing their impact by reaching out to target groups and stakeholders.

5.5.5.3. Strengthen the competitiveness of target users

Please describe how the project will strengthen the competitiveness of the target users resulting in benefits for the society.

5.5.5.4. Pan-African and Transcontinental Innovation Bridge

Please explain the extent to which the DIH will contribute to the creation of a real digital Pan-African and Transcontinental Innovation Bridge and how it considers to materialize its participation.

5.5.6. Implementation

Implementation evaluates the overall consortium and its participants' maturity, capacity, and experience, including the one in its specialization areas, as well as their teams to participate and carry out the work to create the DIH, the soundness of their participation proposal and the resources provided for it.

In the application form, applicants were required to provide details to the following questions:

5.5.6.1. Maturity of the action

Please describe the current state of the project in terms of the story and status of the consortium agreement and the years and existing references of previous collaborations between the partners.

5.5.6.2. Capacity of the consortium

Please describe how your organization is to set up and operate the DIH, headcount, percentage of their time dedication, professional profiles, the skills included, missing skills ad actions to cover the missing skills.

5.5.6.3. Team introduction

Please introduce the team that is leading the project, time collaboration together, professional profiles, backgrounds, positions, experience, percentage of their time dedication and contribution within the project.

5.6. Launching, Running and Closing of the Pre-Commercial Procurement Invitation

The Pre-Commercial Procurement Invitation was launched on the 19th of November 2021 through the AEDIB|NET submission platform at https://aedibnet.fundingbox.com. The first, and main, cut-off date was Tuesday, January 18, 2022, 16:00 Lagos (Nigeria) local time, and the second and supplementary cut-off date was Tuesday, February 8, 2022, 16:00 Lagos (Nigeria) local time. Proposals submitted by any other means, or after the second cut-off date were not considered eligible. The second cut-off date was supplementary, meaning that in the case that after the evaluation of the applications submitted in the first cut-off date, the results showed that the number and quality were, under the Selection Committee's consideration, sufficient to

cover the requirements of the project and to reach its goals, the second cut-off proposals could be left without evaluation.

Proposals had to be written in English in all mandatory parts to be eligible. Only parts written in English were evaluated. All mandatory sections of the proposal must have been completed. Additional material not specifically requested in the online application form was not considered for the evaluation.

For any proposal submitted, the applicant acted as the main contact between the consortium and AEDIB|NET. It was the applicant's responsibility to ensure the timely submission of the proposals. Applicants were encouraged to submit their proposals a few days prior to the submission deadline to avoid any potential technical problems during the submission process.

A submitted proposal could be edited and updated as often as needed until the closing deadline of the Pre-Commercial Procurement Invitation. The last saved version of the submitted proposal at the time of each Invitation cut-off deadline was only considered for evaluation. Any further modification of the proposal was not possible. The submission platform allowed the applicants to download their complete proposals in PDF format for reference purposes.

Though applicants could submit multiple applications, no Consortium can be funded twice by AEDIB|NET, nor any Consortium member can participate in the project through more than one Consortium. Therefore, in the case that more than one proposal with any similar team members, or members belonging to more than one Consortium were among the selected projects, only the one with the highest score was selected.

The AEDIB|NET project team took into consideration the existence of potential conflicts of interest among the applicants and one or more AEDIB|NET Consortium partners. AEDIB|NET Consortium partners, employees, and permanent collaborators could not take part in this Pre-Commercial Procurement process.

6. Designing & Running the Awareness Campaign

Once the Pre-Commercial Procurement Invitation was launched on the 19th of November 2021, the AEDIB|NET project team engaged in creating awareness, identifying potential applicants, and encouraging applications. The awareness campaign was structured in three streams: mass outreach, active sourcing, and application support.

6.1. Mass Outreach

Next to using the dissemination channels of the AEDIB|NET project itself through Twitter, LinkedIn, Website and Press Release to promote the Pre-Commercial Procurement Invitation, all AEDIB|NET consortium members used their existing channels to raise the awareness in their followers and members. For instance, AfriLabs leveraged their extensive network and member base of Tech Hubs and Entrepreneurial Support Organizations across Africa to elicit interest and encourage applications.

To support the mass outreach effort, the AEDIB|NET project team created visual assets that could be used by the communication departments of all AEDIB|NET consortium members. Figures 4 shows an example of the visual assets.

Figure 4: Example of visual asset to support mass outreach

Figure 5 illustrates an example on how the assets were utilised by the AEDIB|NET consortium members.

Figure 5: Example of a LinkedIn post by Enabel

Additionally, external organisations such as WAITRO, the global association of RTOs, supported the awareness by spreading the opportunity of the Pre-Commercial Procurement Invitations within their membership. Figure 6 shows the example of the WAITRO newsletter.
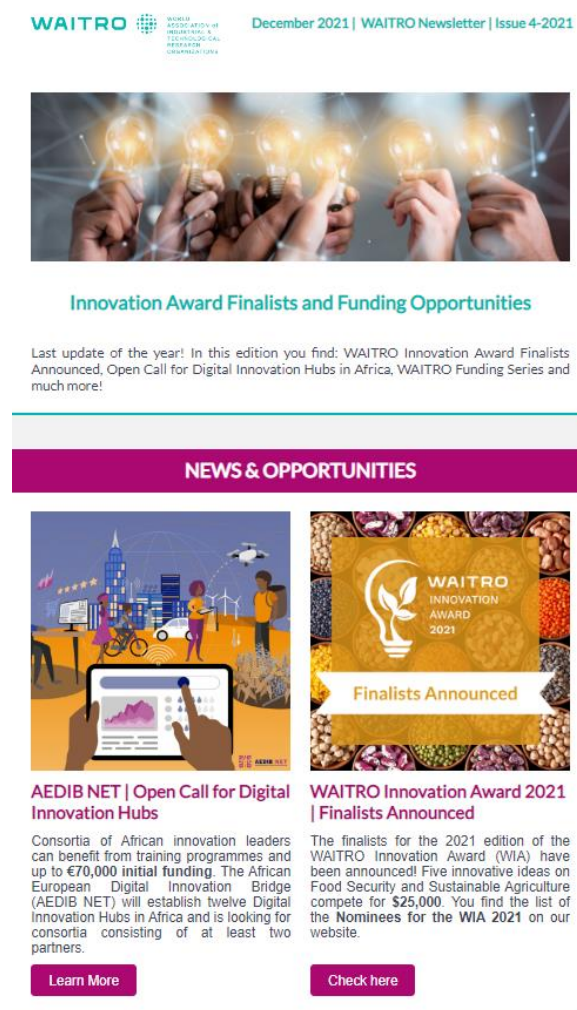

Figure 6: WAITRO Newsletter promoting the Pre-Commercial Procurement Invitation

6.2. Active Sourcing

To supplement the mass outreach, the AEDIB|NET consortium members also actively scouted within their network to identify potential applicants and approached the potential applicants individually to elicit their interest and encourage applications. For instance, GIZ engaged their country offices in Africa to scan their bilateral portfolio to identify suitable candidates and broker the contact to them. This in turn led to several individual meetings with potential applicants, e.g., from Togo, Benin, Ethiopia, Uganda, and other countries. Similarly, Expertise

France and Digital Africa engaged their partners in African countries and conducted specific events and workshops on AEDIB|NET and the Pre-Commercial Procurement Invitation in Senegal and Tunisia that have resulted in high-quality applications.

6.3. Application Support

In the period while the Pre-Commercial Procurement Invitation was open, the AEDIB|NET project team held two (2) webinars to inform and instruct applicants on the project and how to fill in the application form. The dates and how to inscribe to participate in these webinars appeared in the submission platform's landing page, sent through direct emails to all the applicants, announced in the AEDIB|NET Forum and spread through the social media channels of AEDIB|NET and the AEDIB|NET consortium members.

The first webinar was hosted on the 14th of December and focused on the Pre-Commercial Procurement process and the evaluation procedure but also encouraged questions and answers from participants. The questions that were raised during the webinar were also hosted and answered at the FAQ section of the AEDIB|NET submission website. The first webinar was attended by 83 persons.

The second webinar was hosted on the 11th of January and focussed on a detailed explanation of the application form and are featured various questions and answers opportunities. The second webinar was attended by 72 persons.

6.4. Analysis of Communication Channels

The analysis of the effectiveness of the awareness campaign revealed that the multi-facetted approach for the awareness campaign managed to elicit interest on a broad level. Applicants were asked to indicate how they became aware of the Pre-Commercial Procurement Invitation. Table 4 depicts the distribution.

Table 4: Distribution of awareness sources for applicants
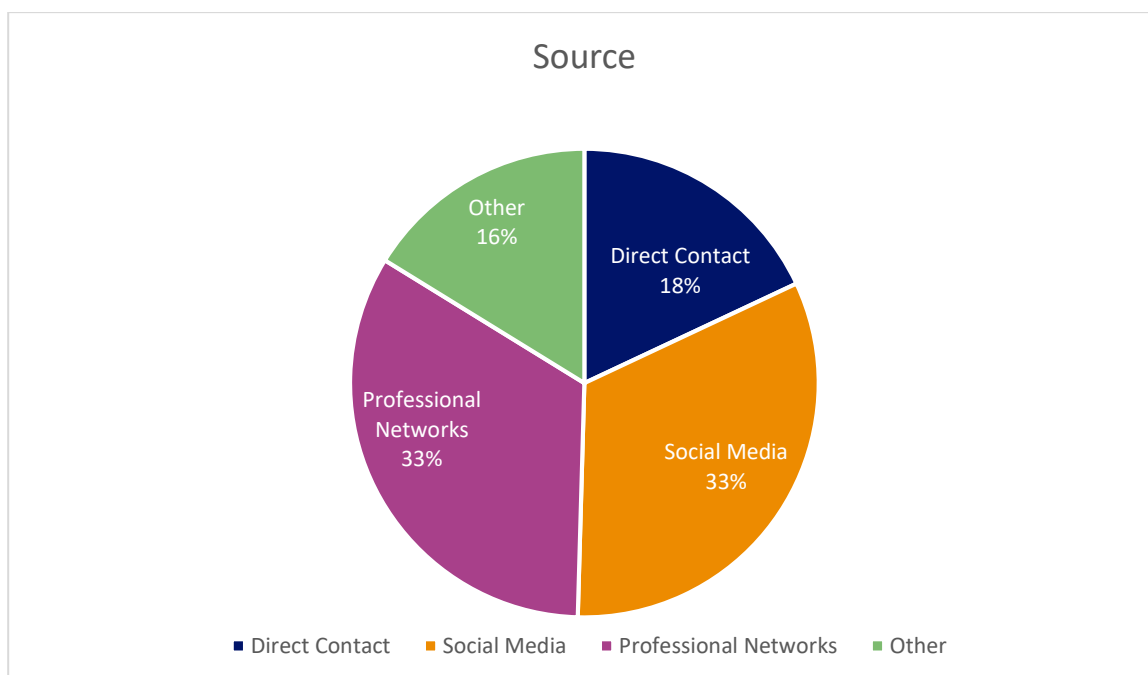
7. Evaluating the Pre-Commercial Procurement Invitation

At the closing of the second cut-off date, the AEDIB|NET project team received 70 fully submitted applications from which 32 were submitted towards the first cut-off date and 38 to the second cut-off date. In total, 589 applications were started from which 189 application were at least edited twice which resulted in the 70 fully submitted proposals. Overall, the fully submitted proposals originated from 22 different African countries. Figure 7 provides a summary of the geographical distribution of the submitted proposals.
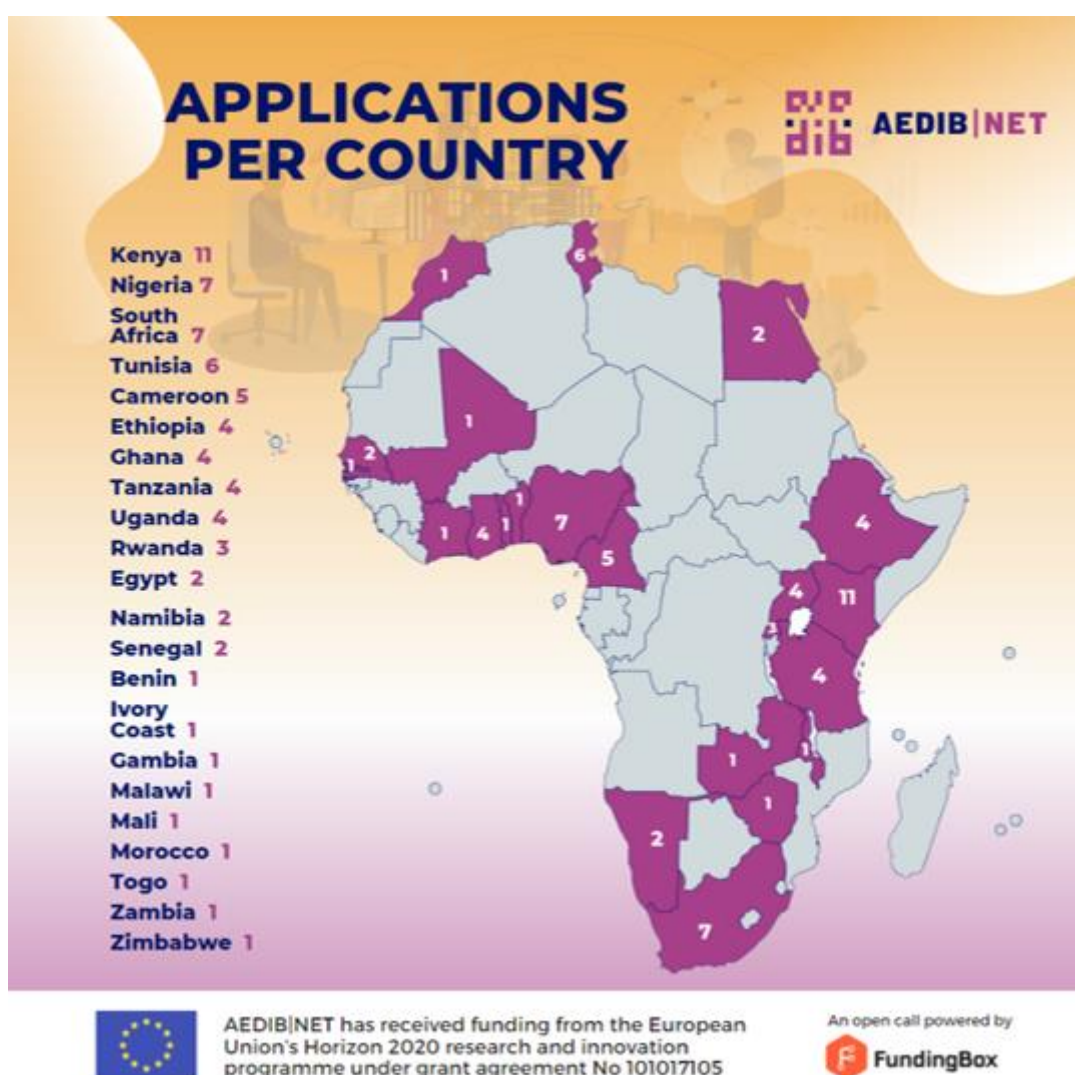

Figure 7: Geographical distribution of proposals

On the specialisation areas, Climate Smart Agriculture was the frontrunner. Figure 8 depicts the distribution across the specialisation areas.

Figure 8: distribution of the specialisation area of proposals

60 applications featured mixed-gender leading teams while 7 applications were 100% led by women as shown in figure 9.

Figure 9: Gender balance of proposals

The evaluation of the 70 submitted proposals was performed through the steps explained in the following points.

7.1. Eligibility check

Proposals that did not comply with all the eligibility criteria as laid out in chapter 5.4 were excluded from shortlisting at the "Eligible Applicants List" and discarded for the evaluation process. Applicants were informed about their results of the eligibility check. Out of the 70 submitted proposals, 3 did not pass the eligibility check and were not considered in the evaluation process.

7.2. Internal Evaluation

Each submitted proposal that passed the eligibility check was evaluated by two (2) independent qualified AEDIB|NET internal evaluators. Each of AEDIB|NET consortium members nominated at least one evaluator. All the evaluators received a dedicated training on the evaluation criteria and agreed upon baseline values. Proposals were assigned randomly to evaluators with the exception that the two evaluators for each proposal were from different AEDIB|NET consortium members.

The proposals were evaluated within the awarding sections a) Relevance, b) Impact and c) Implementation as detailed in chapter 5.5.

The evaluators scored each award section on a scale from 0 to 5:

- 0 = Proposal fails to address the criterion or cannot be assessed due to missing or incomplete information
- 1 = Poor – criterion is inadequately addressed or there are serious inherent weaknesses
- 2 = Fair – proposal broadly addresses the criterion, but there are significant weaknesses
- 3 = Good – proposal addresses the criterion well, but a number of shortcomings are present
- 4 = Very good – proposal addresses the criterion very well, but a small number of shortcomings are present
- 5 = Excellent – proposal successfully addresses all relevant aspects of the criterion. Any shortcomings are minor.

Each evaluator produced an Individual Evaluation Report. The final score will be calculated as an average of the individual assessments provided by the Evaluators. For each award section, the minimum threshold is 3 out of 5 points. The total maximum score will be 15 points, with a minimum total threshold of 10 points.

In case of ties, the following criteria were used to rank the projects, in order:

- First: Earliest cut-off date submission
- Second: Relevance score
- Third: Implementation score
- Fourth: Impact Score
- Fifth: Lowest date of the application's last edit

The cases, in which the scores for a certain criterion provided by two evaluators differed in 4 or more points, would have been discussed and settled in the "Consensus Meeting" through a direct dialogue between the concerned evaluators and under the arbitration, if required, of the Selection Committee. However, there were no cases in which the evaluations differed by 4 or more points.

All the proposals that obtained a score above the threshold, passed on to the selection step and were listed according to each one's technology specialization area in "four (4) separate Ranking Lists", classified from the highest scored to the lowest.

Out of the 67 evaluated proposal, 28 proposals exceeded the threshold of at least 10 points with a minimum of 3 points in each award section. Those 28 proposals moved on to the selection phase.

8. Selecting the 12 DIHs

8.1. Selection Committee

The "Selection Committee" carefully looked at the 28 proposals and the respective Ranking List for each of the four specialisation areas. The Selection Committee consisted of five (5) AEDIB|NET consortium partners representatives from Enabel, Expertise France, Digital Africa, GIZ and FundingBox and decided by consensus on the short list of 12 proposals that will be invited to continue in the Pre-Commercial Procurement process. The discussion was based on the Ranking Lists obtained as a result of the Internal Evaluation process, one per specialization area.

To promote diversity, to ensure a geographical spread and to secure additional funding opportunities within the 12 selected proposals, the Selection Committee agreed upon the following selection and balancing criteria:

- Select the proposals based on their potential (quality threshold & score)
- Do not have more than one proposal from the same country in each specialisation area
- Select the proposals most likely to be eligible for funding outside the AEDIB|NET project (aligned with EC and EU member states priorities)
- Have in the overall selection list at least one proposal from each African region (Northern, Western, Eastern, Central and Southern)
- Ensure that at least 3 proposals from Francophone countries are on the selection list
- Do not have more than 2 proposals from the same country across all categories

The Selection Committee nominated three (3) proposals per Ranking List, plus one (1) in reserve, up to a maximum of sixteen (16) that moved on to the Panel Review. However, the specialisation area of Clean Tech was an exception as there were only 3 proposals within Clean Tech that exceeded the threshold out of which 2 were from the same country. Hence, the Selection Committee decided to recommend just two proposals from the Clean Tech specialisation area while increasing the recommendation within Smart Cities to four proposals.

8.2. Panel Review

To finalize the Pre-Commercial Procurement Invitation, the recommendation for the selection of the 12 DIHs was presented to a panel review consisting of representatives of the EC (policy

officer), GIZ, Expertise France, Digital Africa and Enabel as mandated by the respective EU member states Germany, France, and Belgium. The policy officer provided the appraisal of the recommended selection without any changes to the selection list as put forward by the Selection Committee.

8.3. Selection List

Overall, 12 proposals were selected to participate further in the AEDIB|NET project out of which 3 proposals will receive funding through AEDIB|NET while the remaining 9 proposals are likely to receive financial support through international development cooperation projects of the EU member states Belgium, France, and Germany. Tables 5 to 8 list the 12 selected proposals per specialisation areas

Table 5: Selected DIHs in CleanTech

DIH Name	Country	Consortium Members
CleanTech Hub Nairobi	Kenya	• Circular Innovation Hub • Growth Africa Foundation • Nairobi Circle Innovations Consulting
CleanTech216	Tunisia	• Ipalm • Talent Lab • Future Island

Table 6: Selected DIHs in Climate Smart Agriculture

DIH Name	Country	Consortium Members

JKIAN	Kenya	• Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology • Impact Africa Network
Geospatial Innovation Agri Hub (GIA Hub)	Senegal	• Conseil National de Concertation et de Coopération des Ruraux • Yessal AgriHub • Université Cheikh Anta DIOP of Dakar
Smart Kilimo Project	Tanzania	• Westerwelle Foundation Tanzania • Agriedo Hub • Smartcore Enterprise Limited

Table 7: Selected DIHs in Digital Trade

| **DIH Name**	**Country**	**Consortium Members**
DOORS- Digital Innovation for SMEs	Rwanda	• Coventry University Africa Hub • 250Startups Incubator
DigiTrade Innovative Hub	Egypt	• Bibliotica • LilyShop • Leadership
237 DT Innovation Lab	Cameroon	• Orange Digital Center Cameroon • ActivSpaces • Cameroon Angels Network • Université Catholique D'Afrique Centrale

Table 8: Selected DIHs in Smart Cities

DIH Name	**Country**	**Consortium Members**

Smart City Lab	Rwanda	• Ministry of ICT and Innovation • Rwanda Information Society Authority • Rwanda ICT Chamber
ICEALEX	Egypt	• The Smart Future Cities Laboratory (SFCL) – Ain Shams University • Impact Circles
Digi_Cities	Côte d'Ivoire	• Green Invest Africa • i-Hub Abidjan
Wits Enterprise / Tshimologong Digital Innovation Precinct	South Africa	• Wits Commercial Enterprise • Tshimologong Digital Innovation Precinct

Analysing the composition of the selected consortia to host the DIHs, the AEDIB|NET team found a widespread distribution of type of ogranisations. Table 9 depicts the different types of organisations.

Table 9: Distribution of types of organisations of the selected 12 DIHs
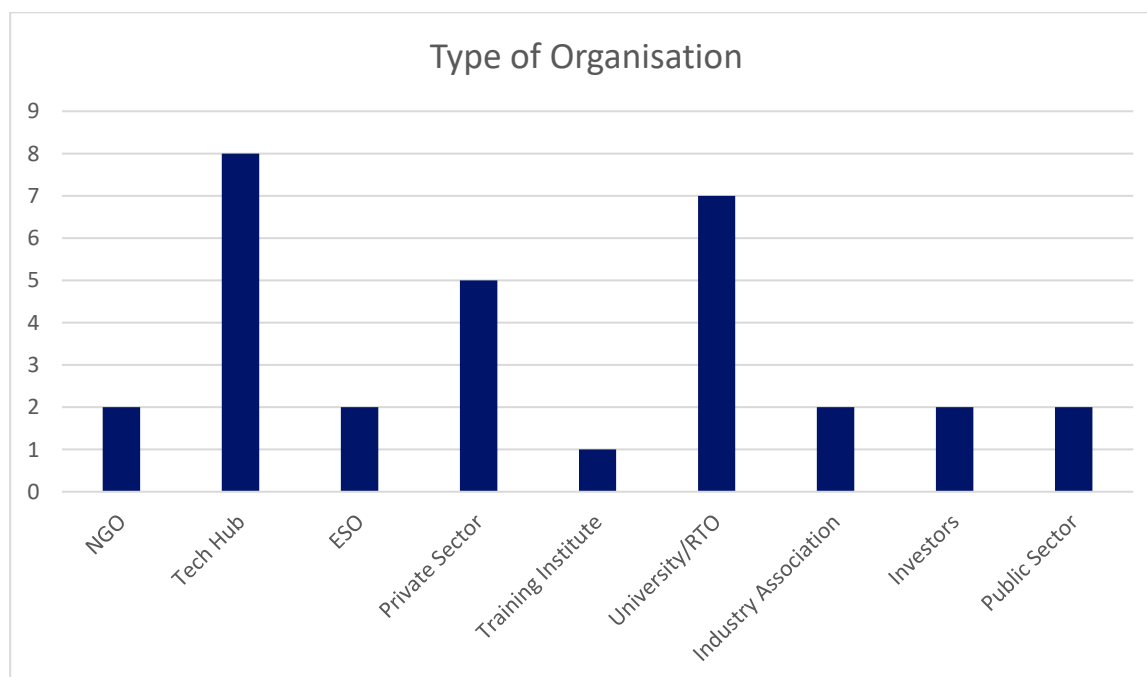
After the panel review, the twelve (12) selected proposals were informed and invited to provide documents regarding their formal status. The AEDIB|NET project team verified them to prove each of the selected candidate's eligibility.

Once validations were carried out, and before starting any activity, each selected DIH consortium signed a Cooperation Agreement with FundingBox and was invited to participate in the ADIH-Lab step 1 program and to a kick-off event in Brussel from the 26th to the 28th of April 2022.

9. Meeting the 12 ADIHs

All 12 selected DIHs were invited to an in-person kick-off meeting from the 26th to the 28th of April 2022 in Brussels. On the first day, the policy officer from the European Commission as well as the AEDIB|NET project team provided the context, objective, and structure of the AEDIB|NET project and the larger AEDIB initiative. A particular focus was placed on how DIHs are intertwined into AEDIB|NET project and the key role they play. This was followed by short presentations of each selected DIH to introduce their concept, vision, ideas, and partners.

In the afternoon, the AEDIB|NET project members could pitch their activities within the AEDIB|NET project to the DIHs. An overview of the activities is shown in figure 1. To follow-up, the AEDIB|NET project members had the opportunity to sit down individually with each DIH to discuss their activity in detail and collect feedback from the DIHs (e.g., on the study trips) in rotating world café style. This exchange was continued on day 2 in the morning. The afternoon and the entire 3rd day were dedicated to the ADIHLab training provided by FundingBox that laid the foundation for the ADIHLab Step 1 as shown figure 3.