

“This is the way!”

Recommendations from the partner’s seat

Dr. Vitaliy Krupin

Institute of Rural and Agricultural Development, Polish Academy of Sciences
(IRWiR PAN)



Dr. Vitaliy Krupin

Assistant Professor

Institute of Rural and Agricultural Development, Polish Academy of Sciences (IRWiR PAN)

- Key fields: economics, sociology, policy analysis for rural areas and agri-food sector, institutional transformations, climate change mitigation and adaptation.
- A partner and partner-team leader in EU research projects (not yet a coordinator).
- Working within SSH field primarily in Cluster 6, but also Clusters 2 and 5.

Why the partner's view? Most of today's attendees are here to **join** consortia, not to lead them – so I will present the perspective most of you will actually be in.

From a small role to a joint top score

2017

first H2020 project – a small case-study role



2026

a proposal scoring 15/15

In 2017 we managed to win our first joint proposal for a Horizon 2020 project, contribution was demanding (national case study partner and scientific contributor to numerous tasks), yet with minimal budget.

Nine years and several projects later, one of our consortiums' proposal scored 15/15. Everything in between has resulted in today's recommendations for you.

Point of view: the bottleneck in EU's projects is increasingly an issue of **systems integration** – primarily sociology, economics, regulation, behaviour – with technology playing an important, but limited role. All this is the SSH territory.

Point 1 · Don't self-restrict to your “home” cluster

SSH belongs across Horizon Europe – not only in Cluster 2.

- **SSH organisations quietly assume they belong only in Cluster 2.** You don't – in other clusters the SSH is often the missing piece.
- **Don't ask ‘is this my cluster?’ Ask ‘where are the SSH dimensions?’** – impact, governance, behaviour, stakeholder engagement, just transition. They are in almost every call, with the EC often emphasising the necessity of their inclusion.
- **Even EIC's technological innovation challenges ask for behavioural and socio-economic dimensions.** That demand is spread across the programme, not limited to Cluster 2.

Point 1 · SSH runs through every HE cluster

Net4Society's mapping of the 2026-27 Work Programmes puts SSH across Clusters 1, 3, 4, 5 and 6. Cluster 2 isn't shown – it is the SSH cluster, so there SSH is a given.

Cluster	Social aspects	Economic aspects	Humanistic aspects
Cluster 1	Behavioural change & lifestyles; equity & inclusion; health & digital literacy	Sustainability & economic burdens; cost-benefit ratio; workforce efficiency	Trust & outreach; ethics of innovation; psychosocial well-being
Cluster 3	Social dynamics & climate; community resilience; inclusion & radicalisation prevention	Scarcity markets & fraud; criminal-justice efficiency; affordability	Ethics & fundamental rights; language & perception; multicultural & gender analysis
Cluster 4	Human-centric industrial evolution; socio-technical impact; co-creation models	Long-term profitability; accelerated market access; SME & start-up support	Harnessing the arts; strategic foresight; deep consumer insights
Cluster 5	Engagement & acceptance; behaviour & group dynamics; inclusivity & mobility	Costs of inaction; business & market models; socio-economic analysis of mobility	Trust & disinformation; ethics & justice; strategic foresight
Cluster 6	Co-creation & participation; citizen engagement & social innovation; vulnerable groups	Competitiveness & strategic autonomy; market creation & valorisation; rural & urban resilience	Ethics in technology; cultural heritage; policy fairness & coherence

**Source: Dr. Kimberly Couvson-Liebe (Net4Society / PT-DLR), 'SSH integration in Horizon Europe'.
Selected aspects'; Net4Society matchmaking event presentation, 1st June 2026.**

Point 2 · The path of earned trust (1)

Phase 1

Start small – on purpose

The aforementioned H2020 project from 2017: small budget, large and scattered workload. Could be considered a bad deal – but it wasn't. A small role is not a small opportunity; it is an investment in connections, credibility, publications and understanding that make the next project possible. Don't hold out for a big role you haven't earned – contribute how you can and allow time and experience to help you grow and develop.

Phase 2

Own the unglamorous work

Second H2020 a year later: we led communication, dissemination & exploitation WP, and carried the Polish case study. The work-packages others might undervalue are exactly where an SSH partner can lead, deliver visibly and become indispensable. We didn't wait for permission to matter – we took the part in which we could show our potential.

Point 2 · The path of earned trust (2)

Phase 3 · Grow into the role you envisaged

Since 2021, after understanding our strengths, we typically lead work-packages and tasks – because we finally understood: our best role, what we can deliver, and what responsibility we can carry.

Budget ≠ money.

It is the capacity to hire excellent people who achieve the objectives – a budget matched to what you can achieve beats a bigger one you can't.

“Be the SSH partner the coordinator never has to worry about”.

That peace of mind is what you're really offering.

Point 3 · Be the partner who gets re-invited

12

Horizon projects

9 ongoing and 3 past,
across two Horizon framework programmes

Horizon Europe is a small world – coordinators and partners participate in the networking.

The best strategy is to be the partner people want back: reliable, delivering on time, responsive while the proposal is still being written (not sitting quiet for weeks).

The proof you have earned trust is simple: you get invited again. Most of our later projects came exactly that way.

Point 4 · Write to deliver – not just to win

“We wrote it to win the project – now let’s think how to make it work”.

- **Beware being the “passenger” partner:** present in the consortium, but absent when the proposal is actually built, the methods verified, the stakeholder work thought through.
- **The ‘pilot trap’:** in technology a solution shines in the demo yet fails in the real market. Proposals fail the same way, winning on paper what partners don’t perceive as achievable.
- **Validate with stakeholders:** their real needs, willingness to adopt new ways and practices, implement them in their future activities. Doing this in an unbiased, robust and transparent way is the SSH job. Skip it and the solution fails later, innovation could be revolutionary, but will get stuck on the upscale stage.
- **Money is remuneration** for valuable results – not the goal itself. When partners are there to make change, the work runs smoothly.

Point 5 · Segregating our achievements



Refuse to leave anything in the 'failure' box: ask **what** and **why** until it becomes experience.

I tell my son, who plays chess: you only grow by playing a stronger opponent.
So study the proposals that won, they are the source of inspiration.

An honest failure

- 2.5 months of work – much of it vacation time. A full SSH package, ready to go.
- Submitted two hours before the deadline. The Portal would not cooperate, maybe because thousands were submitting at once. The work never reached the evaluators.

Responsibility and foresight build trust. You do your part – fully, early, carefully – because it is yours to do, not because you are asked.

Practical lesson: submit a day early, not two hours before – the Portal slows when thousands submit at once.

ECOPESIA – what a 15/15 looks like

Project “ECOPESIA: Enhancing Climate & Ecosystem Outcomes through the promotion & upscaling of Payments for Environmental Services In Agriculture” is starting September 2026 and will be implemented until 2031.

15/15

best result ever

20

partners

6

countries

8

pilots

Five on excellence, five on impact, five on implementation. The evaluators found SSH **“very well integrated”** – governance design, behavioural analysis, participatory methods. SSH didn’t just fit a Cluster 6 project; it was a clear necessity.

Point 6 · Write as a co-creator, not an applicant

Answer the whole call – including what is written between the lines – with the complexity the European Commission asks for.

Many read a call selectively and miss the objectives between the lines; the result lacks the complexity the EC requires.

You are not aiming to please or convince the European Commission. You are co-creating tools with the EC for society's development, with the EC laying the foundation in the call and you taking it further.

Contact information

Dr. Vitaliy Krupin, vitaliy.krupin@gmail.com

Institute of Rural and Agricultural Development, Polish Academy of Sciences (IRWiR PAN), Poland

www.irwirpan.waw.pl · www.linkedin.com/company/irwir-pan · www.facebook.com/irwirpan

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