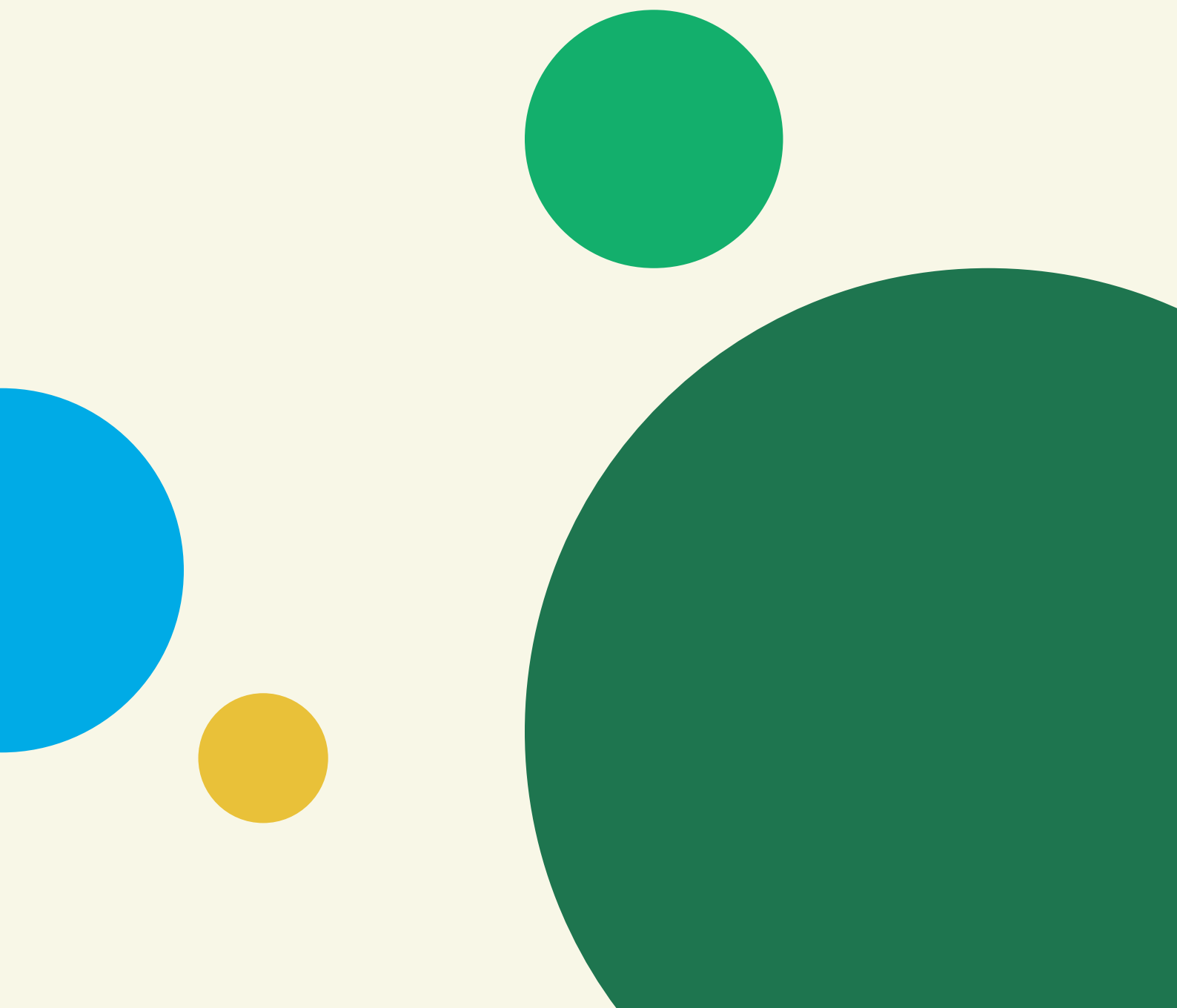


# Independent observers' report on a pilot review of the principles of the research funding process

Formas' annual open call 2023



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# Förord

Formas har uppdrag att främja och stödja grundforskning och behovsmotiverad forskning inom områdena miljö, areella näringar och samhällsbyggande. Den forskning som stöds ska vara av högsta vetenskapliga kvalitet och av relevans för myndighetens ansvarsområden. Vår finansiering av forskning och innovation följer en väl utarbetad process för att säkerställa att vi genomför vårt finansieringsuppdrag med högsta kvalitet och effektivitet. Formas forskarråd har beslutat om ett antal principer för forskningsfinansiering som är styrande i vårt arbete med utlysningar och beredningsprocesser. I syfte att säkerställa högsta kvalitet och transparens i vårt genomförande har vi genomfört en extern granskning i samband med Formas årliga öppna utlysning 2023.

Den genomförda granskningen av finansieringsprocessen bidrar med insikter och rekommendationer med potential att bidra till att utveckla vårt arbete med finansieringsprocessen, öka effektivitet i genomförandet av vårt finansieringsuppdrag och bidra till att forskning får genomslag för en hållbar samhällsutveckling. De rekommendationer som framkommit av granskningen riktar sig till oss på Formas, men i vår strävan mot att bidra till ett öppet och kunskapsbaserat samhälle och ge andra möjlighet att dra nytta av resultat och lärdomar, tillgängliggör vi rapporten i dess helhet.

**Johan Kuylenstierna**  
Generaldirektör Formas

## About the authors

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**Monica Schofield** has since 1999 been head of a unit responsible for research funding support at Tutech Innovation, a knowledge transfer company belonging to Hamburg University of Technology which she joined following a career in industry in Sweden, UK and Germany. She has been involved as an evaluator, reviewer and expert advisor to the European Commission since 1992 and used this knowledge to support many other organisations with training and consultancy regarding topics relevant to EU funding programmes. These include EU/FoU Rådet, later renamed Europaprogrammen as part of Vinnova. More recently she has been a reviewer for the Swedish Strategic Innovation Programmes (SIP) for the 3 and 9 year review. Born and raised in the UK with a Swedish mother, she is a fluent Swedish speaker.

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## Sammanfattning

Som oberoende observatörer har vi genomfört en granskning av principerna för Formas forskningsfinansieringsprocess, med särskilt fokus på den årliga öppna utlysningen. I uppdraget ombads vi att (i) utvärdera hur Formas principer för finansieringsprocessen efterlevs och ge förslag på förbättringar; (ii) ge rekommendationer om hur principerna bör granskas; (iii) ge förslag på hur regelbundna granskningar av principerna kan genomföras. Vi har följt arbetet i fyra beredningsgrupper i Formas årliga öppna utlysning. Uppdraget, som betraktades som en pilot, var tämligen öppet vad gäller metod och tillvägagångssätt.

Vi inledde granskningen i september 2023 i det skede då den kortlista med projektansökningar som skulle diskuteras vid panelmötet hade utarbetats. Vi fick tillgång till relevant bakgrundsmaterial och intern dokumentation (se bilaga A). Vi följde arbetet i de fyra beredningsgrupperna. Detta följdes upp med intervjuer med panelernas ordförande och vice ordförande, samt med ansvarig forskningssekreterare för respektive panel. En webbenkät skickades ut till ledamöterna i beredningsgrupperna.

Beredningsgruppernas ledamöter berömde Formas sätt att organisera processen, medarbetarnas professionalism och kompetens och interaktionen med processen som helhet. Ledamöter med erfarenhet från andra forskningsfinansiärer uttryckte en tydlig uppfattning om att Formas står sig väl i en jämförelse när det gäller bemötande av granskare och hantering av processen.

Svaren i intervjuerna och i enkäten visade på ett gott förtroende för processens utfall och att de bästa projektansökningarna rankades högt. Vi har dock identifierat ett antal förbättringsområden: 1) Trots en omfattande och, enligt vårt intryck, tydlig information följde ledamöterna inte alltid de instruktioner som gavs om att motivera betyg som ges i den preliminära bedömningen. En konsekvens av detta är att standarden och kvaliteten på beredningsgrupperna underlagsmaterial varierade, vilket skulle kunna påverka arbetet med bedömning och ranking av ansökningarna. 2) Det uttrycktes betänkligheter om att tvärvetenskapliga ansökningar har svårare att hävda sig i konkurrensen. Eftersom den årliga öppna utlysning uttryckligen uppmuntrar till tvärvetenskapliga forskningsfrågor är detta något som Formas bör ha i åtanke vid kommande utvecklingsarbete. 3) Det fanns en osäkerhet kring genomförandet av den slutgiltiga rankingen av ansökningar och panelmötena hanterade den delen av processen olika. Hur detta görs är uppenbarligen inte optimalt.

Vi har lämnat ett antal specifika rekommendationer för övervägande av Formas. Vi anser att Formas medarbetare är kompetenta och noggranna och att det finns en medvetenhet om behovet av att ta itu med de påpekanden vi tar upp i den här rapporten, men det behöver möjliggöras för att faktiskt göra så. Den interna kompetensen kan stärkas genom dialog med externa personer och andra finansiärer, men rutinerna måste anpassas till Formas mål för medelstilledningen.

Vi har observerat och kommenterat granskningsprocessen så som den har tillämpats på den aktuella öppna utlysningen. Vi har däremot inte bedömt hur utlysningen är formulerad eller hur väl de utvalda projekten passar utlysningens mål. Utifrån vad vi har observerat bedömer vi arbetet med Formas forskningsfinansiering, med förbehåll för våra rekommendationer, på det hela taget vara ändamålsenligt. För framtiden behöver dock Formas, liksom alla forskningsfinansiärer, adressera frågan om vilka typer av projekt som ska finansieras i en värld där det politiska trycket på att överföra vetenskaplig kunskap till praktisk tillämpning ständigt ökar. Metoder för att utvärdera forskning och samhällets förväntningar förändras, transaktionskostnaderna granskas och

finansiärer och vetenskapliga tidskrifter konfronteras med svårigheten att rekrytera granskare. Av det vi har sett har Formas väletablerade och fungerande rutiner och det är attraktivt för granskare att medverka i Formas process. För att möta framtida behov behöver beredningsgruppernas sammansättning omprövas mot bakgrund av framtida finansieringsmål så att attraktionskraften i att granska för Formas bibehållas.

En oberoende granskning är ett användbart sätt för alla organisationer att få insikter om styrkor, svagheter och möjligheter till förbättringar av befintliga rutiner. Vi som genomför granskningen kan dock bara ge en partiell bild och det finns även kostnadsaspekten att beakta. Den djupare kompetensen besitter organisationen. Vi anser att det inte är nödvändigt att genomföra en omfattande granskning för varje utlysning. Bättre är att följa upp de iakttagelser vi redovisar i denna rapport, och utnyttja intern och extern expertis för att sätta bedömningen av forskningsfinansiering i kontexten av aktuella trender.

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## Executive summary

This report contains a summary of our findings as independent observers assigned to carry out a review of the principles of Formas research funding process, with a specific focus on the Annual Open Call. We were asked to (i) evaluate how Formas' principles for the funding process are complied with, and provide suggestions for improvement; (ii) provide recommendations on how the principles should be reviewed; (iii) provide suggestions on how regular reviews of the principles can be carried out. We were given four proposal selection panels chosen by the Formas assignment managers to observe. The assignment, being regarded as a pilot, was fairly open as to method and approach.

We joined the process in September 2023 at the stage when the shortlist of proposals to be discussed at the panel meeting had been prepared. We were given access to relevant background material and internal documentation (listed in Annex A). We observed the four selected panel meetings. This was followed up by interviews with Panel Chairs and Co-Chairs and then the Formas Programme Officers for the respective panels. An online survey questionnaire was sent out to the Panel Members.

Across the board, we heard praise for the working relationship with Formas, the professionalism and competence of the staff and the interaction with the process as a whole. Reviewers with experience of other funding bodies expressed a clear view that Formas compares well with other funding bodies in terms of handling reviewers and management of the process.

Responses in the interviews and from the survey showed general confidence in the outcome i.e. that the proposals listed for funding were worthy of receiving funding. However, we have identified a number of areas that should be addressed: 1) Despite a comprehensive and in our impression clear briefing, reviewers did not always heed the instructions given. One consequence of this is that there was a significant discrepancy in the standard of commenting to justify individual scores ahead of the panel meeting and the quality of the written feedback providing the motivation for selection that might influence judgement of proposals; 2) Misgivings were expressed in the way multi/transdisciplinary proposals are scored in comparison with those with a single discipline focus. As the Call documentation expressly encourages multi/transdisciplinary research questions, this is something to address. 3) The handling of proposals at the ranking threshold ('cut-off') for funding was handled inconsistently between the panels and is clearly not optimal.

We have made a number of specific recommendations for consideration. We are of the opinion that Formas staff are competent and diligent and are aware of the need to address the points raised, but need to be brought together to do so. In-house competence can be enhanced by dialogue with external persons and other funding agencies, but procedures must be aligned to the goals of Formas with regard to funding allocation.

We have observed and commented on the running of the review process as it has been applied to the current Open Call. We have not judged the merits of the Call itself, nor how well aligned the projects selected are to the goals of the Call. From what we have observed that, subject to our recommendations, existing management of Formas procedures have on the whole been fit for purpose. For the future, however, Formas like all research funding agencies must address the issue of which types of project to fund in a world where political pressure to transfer scientific knowledge to practice is ever growing. Research assessment methods and expectations of society are changing; the transaction costs are under scrutiny and funding bodies and journals are being confronted with 'reviewer fatigue'. From what we have observed, Formas has a baseline of well-established and respected procedures and is attractive to reviewers. To meet future needs, the



make-up of the review panels needs to be reappraised in context of future funding objectives and the attractiveness of working with Formas maintained.

An independent review is a useful means for any organisation to gather insights into strengths, weaknesses, and pathways for improvement of existing procedures. External observers can, however only, give a partial view and there is also a cost factor to consider. The deeper competence lies within the organisation. We believe it is not necessary to undertake a comprehensive review for each Call. Rather it would be worthwhile following up and responding to the observations given in this report, and in addition to draw on internal and external expertise to look at research funding assessment in the context of current trends.

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## The assignment

The assignment was carried out as a pilot project commissioned by Formas regarding recurrent review of the principles of the research funding process, with a specific focus on the Annual Open Call for Proposals.

The tasks given in the contract assignment description were to:

- evaluate how Formas' principles for the funding process are complied with, and provide suggestions for improvement;
- provide recommendations on how the principles should be reviewed;
- provide suggestions on how regular reviews of the principles can be carried out.

The process of review was not prescribed as one goal of the assignment was to recommend how such reviews should be conducted in the future. We were asked to report observations on the following:

- how peer review is conducted as well as how the appropriateness of the assessment is managed;
- how the assessment criteria for both scientific quality and societal benefit are handled;
- how the principles of impartiality, openness and transparency in the funding process are managed;
- how issues related to conflict of interest, confidentiality and professional secrecy are handled.

The assignment specified delivery of this written report as a starting point for discussions on how Formas' processes can be further developed regarding efficiency, transparency, fairness and compliance with principle of neutrality.

Christina Nyström was the main point of contact at Formas together with Anders Clarhäll to provide in-depth information on the Formas procedures and data. The review was conducted independently. Direct contact with other Formas staff was only regarding the interviews conducted with the Programme Officers responsible for the four panels observed.

## Approach taken

The assignment was undertaken by the undersigned Henrik Fridén, Independent Consultant based in Stockholm and Monica Schofield, Director International Cooperation at Tutech Innovation GmbH, (a subsidiary of Hamburg University of Technology) working together. We were not acquainted with each other prior to undertaking this assignment.

We joined the process in September 2023 i.e. from the stage where the short list of proposals to be discussed at the panel meeting had been prepared. Given that we had a free hand to determine how to conduct the assessment, the initial deliberations were on how to approach the assignment, what to ask and what material was needed. We were briefed about the process and given access to all relevant material.

Following a preparatory meeting in Stockholm all meetings were held on-line. Meetings were frequent between the independent observers. Notes were shared from the panel meetings and

interviews. For reasons of availability, it was agreed at the beginning that Henrik Fridén would observe three panels and Monica Schofield one.

As a guidance for our work, we set about defining the overall goal of the process against which to judge the process i.e. that the best proposals receive funding in accordance with the programme goals and that all stakeholders (funder, reviewers, proposers) have confidence in the result.

To achieve this,

1. There need to be a sufficient number of high-quality call relevant proposals;
2. Reviewers need to have the competence, proper understanding of the selection process and their role within it, plus the capacity (time) to judge and accurately score proposals;
3. The shortlisting process must be able to handle comparisons in a fair and unbiased way;
4. The final listing of proposals should ensure the best are picked;
5. That all stakeholders have confidence in the outcome (including proposers who are not successful).

We observed the pre-panel meeting briefing and panel meeting according to the following schedule. These panels were selected by Formas. The allocation was determined by availability on dates.

**Table 1.** Observed pre-panel meetings and dates.

<b>Panel</b>	<b>Observer</b>	<b>Date</b>
Panel 3 Ecosystems and Biodiversity on Land	Henrik Fridén	19.9.2023 Pre-panel meeting 3.10.2023 Panel meeting, Early career (EC), incl. ranking + part of research projects (RP) 4.10.2023 Panel meeting, Remaining RP incl. ranking, wrap-up and “open floor”
Panel 5 Food Production	Monica Schofield	14.9.2023 Pre-panel meeting 27.9.2023 Panel RP 28.9.2023 Panel EC
Panel 9 Urban and Rural Areas	Henrik Fridén	6.9.2023 Pre-panel meeting 26.9.2023 Panel meeting, EC, part of RP 27.9.2023 Panel meeting, RP (remaining), final ranking, wrap-up and ‘open floor’
Panel 10 Norms, Practices and Governance	Henrik Fridén	15.9.2023 Pre-panel meeting 28.9.2023 Panel meeting, RP and (part of) EC 29.9.2023 Panel meeting, (part of) EC + final ranking both categories

Observations of meetings were shared. We reviewed the material provided. From these we discussed how to get additional feedback from those involved and decided to interview the Panel Chairs, Formas Programme Officers and to send out a short survey questionnaire to Panel Members in the above panels. For this, we had Formas assistance in implementing the questionnaire using Formas' tool for this purpose. The survey was set up to be anonymous.

Our presence was explained at the panel meetings. We invited the Panel Members to contact us to give feedback of their own volition. During the online meetings, we listened in with camera off.

Subsequent to observing the panel meetings, we considered within the remit and timeframe of the assignment, how best, to gain sufficient insight in what is a complex and multi-faceted process. To complement and check our observations, we decided it important to draw in the perspectives of others. We conducted online interviews with the Panel Chairs and Co-Chairs and Programme Officers. These lasted about 40-90 min. Questions were sent in advance, but the interviews took the form of a discourse. This was followed up by an online survey (anonymous) of Panel Members (Chairs and Co-chairs excluded).

We looked at the materials provided by Formas to guide and analyse the process, but our focus has been to extract opinions from those taking part as well as our own observations.

## Observations from the panel meetings

### Pre-panel meetings

The pre-panel meetings were held about two weeks prior to the panel meeting to inform about procedures for the process ahead.

We observed the following:

- All four pre-meetings followed the same schedule and lasted around one and a half hour. A standard presentation was used with some tailoring of the messaging for the specific panel in question.
- The presentation was comprehensive and repeated some of the information given in the document 'Information and Instructions for Formas Review Panels'. We observed that relatively little time was given to presenting how to conduct the assessment discussions on each proposal and set a final score. Examples were given, but only discussed briefly.
- It follows that we had the impression that some of the newcomers were left uncertain on some aspects of the process. Questions arising at the pre-panel meetings were answered satisfactorily by Formas staff and/or Chairs.

### Panel meetings

All four panels followed a similar process, however, the character of the meetings varied.

- All meetings started on time and were well structured. There were few or no issues with the reliability of the technical connectivity in general. Meetings started with a *Tour de Table* including an ice breaker question. The Formas Programme Officer presented the schedule and the task of the meeting using a standard presentation with similar content as for the pre-panel meeting;

- In this presentation, Formas gave the number of applications which could be funded in each category (Early Career or Research Projects);
- The panels took a formal decision to agree on the shortlist before commencing the ranking discussion;
- A novelty for this year was that after ranking the proposals by the mean individual assessment scores, they were presented in a descending scored list (i.e. those with the highest first) to the panel. Proposals were then discussed in that order. They then were ranked in the order of the final score.
- Conflicts of interest (CoI) were handled by those concerned being put in a separate virtual room during the discussion of the corresponding proposal;
- Each proposal was introduced by the rapporteur giving a 2 min summary of the individual assessment and this was followed in most cases by a ~10 min discussion between the four reviewers assigned to that proposal. In general, time keeping was good, however, on a number of occasions, the discussion took too much time causing time-keeping issues. There were noticeable variations in the ability of rapporteurs to summarise the assessment notes. Generally, discussions were conducted in a respectful manner, allowing all opinions to be heard. There were occasions where an individual was allowed to dominate the discussion, but on the whole those that had something to say did so. The quality of the discussion on individual proposals varied, depending on the mixture of domain knowledge of the reviewers. Some chairs lead the discussions more strongly than others;
- The handling of proposals listed on the threshold (funding cut-off point) varied. There appeared to be no rules and guidelines for the Chair and Panel Members to use to guide the decision on how to differentiate between proposals of the same score and apparent merits. The only clear instruction being that the criteria were to be treated equally;
- Chairs sometimes asked reviewers who had read several (at least two) proposals around the cut-off to rank them individually against each other, this in order to separate between those of the same scores and merits. This has the consequence that a few reviewers had a deciding vote on which should be placed above and below the cut-off.
- Some of the panels had an ‘open floor’ exercise after the final ranking session, where panel members were given the opportunity to express what went well and what can be improved.

## Feedback from interviews

All interviews yielded a very rich dissemination of experience. Both the Chairs and Co-Chairs (referred to below as Chairs) and Programme Officers showed a very high level of competence and understanding of the task and were open, reflective and able to be self-critical.

### Feedback from interviews with Chairs

The eight Chairs of the panels observed were interviewed. They welcomed the opportunity to provide their reflections on the selection process and gave insightful feedback. Interviews were done online and lasted about 45-90 min. Questions to steer the discussion were provided in

advance. All were asked about their confidence in the outcome and asked explicitly for their views on how well the Formas procedures compared with their experience of practices of other funding bodies.

Summarising the remarks:

- All Chairs seem very satisfied with the Formas process and especially the support given by the Formas Programme Officers. Those able to compare with the procedures of other funding bodies rated it highly in comparison. The process is seen as fulfilling the requirement of being fair, unbiased and transparent.
- All were satisfied with the final selection of proposals for funding (though as one chair remarked, it would be a failure on their part if this were not the case). However, almost all identified ranking around the threshold (cut-off), varying quality of comments in individual assessments and the grading of multi/transdisciplinary projects, as areas to be improved upon.
- In the case of the latter, the observation was made that scientific experts tended to assess proposals based on their own specific scientific field to the detriment of judging the value and competence in the multidisciplinary approach and that this is something to address.
- Ranking around the threshold was cited as problematic due to inadequacy of guidance on how to prioritise individual proposals. Chairs asked for clearer instructions and mandate on the decision.
- It was noted that the consistency and quality of remarks justifying the scores varied considerably and needs to be improved.
- The Swedish speaking Chairs raised some concerns regarding possible language barriers in the application of the grounds for assessment. For example, the use of “minor”, “some notable” and “several notable” shortcomings could be difficult to apply if you do not have a high proficiency in English. The “value words” like good, very good and excellent may also have different meanings in other languages. This was something we also observed.
- Some chairs questioned the newly introduced order in which the proposals with the highest mean score from individual assessments, i.e. the proposals at the top of the shortlist, are discussed first, citing the risk that the more difficult discussions gather towards the end of the list.
- A further observation made by those who could compare, was that the level of engagement, discussion and reconciliation of different opinions are easier to resolve when people are together in the same room.

### **Feedback from Programme Officers (POs)**

Two interviews were conducted online, one as a physical meeting at Formas and one as a combination of the two. A set of questions were used for all interviews which were sent to the POs beforehand (see Annex B). Interviews took between 45-90 minutes.

- Overall the POs were confident that the best proposals were awarded funding, but also expressed concerns about judgement of multi/transdisciplinary projects.

- POs were confident that there was no prejudicial bias shown towards proposers. However, POs also commented reviewers tend to be more positive if the proposal is in their own field.
- There was general agreement that the instructions given to panel members needs further improvement, particularly regarding the writing of comments at the stage of individual assessment. Imprecise comment reduces the ability of others to comprehend the reasoning for the score and ultimately affects the quality of subsequent discussions which is so crucial to achieving the final list.
- There was agreement that discussion and prioritising of proposals around the threshold needs to be improved to make the approaches taken more consistent and comprehensible.
- There was an almost total agreement that the newly introduced order in which proposals are discussed, having the highest scored ones first, is not as good as the previous one based on registration number. Some mentioned observing tactics from reviewers to promote proposals which they themselves fancied when approaching the cut-off.
- The criteria for assessment were generally held to be satisfactory.
- POs expressed the opinion that physical meetings provide better attendance, a greater sense of teamwork and better interactive discussion. However, it was recognised that online meetings make participation from a wider geographical area easier.
- The greatest discrepancy lay in recruitment of reviewers. There is no standard procedure for recruitment, rather it is left to each PO to recruit reviewers using their own method and largely worked individually on this, with some sharing of names on request. Recruitment of reviewers with the right profile of knowledge, skills and personality is clearly demanding.

## Feedback from the survey of Panel Members

As a follow up to the panel meetings and interviews, we prepared a survey comprising 14 questions mostly with free text responses (see Annex C). This was sent out by Formas to the 93 panel members (excluding Chairs) of the four panels observed. It was sent out 7 November. 52 responses were received by the deadline 20 November.

Summarising: 73% of the respondents were from university or research institutes and 27% from government agencies, NGO:s and business, reflecting also the proportion of reviewers with those backgrounds. About a third of respondents were participating in the Annual Open Call review for the first time. The main reason cited for undertaking the role was that it gave a chance to gain insight into emerging research topics, followed by that it was considered a professional duty. Very few considered that the role carried prestige, nor that it was paid was a major factor (though in the general comment box, one respondent remarked that the reduced pay rate due to the effect of the exchange rate did not justify the commitment in time).

Overall, the respondents were very happy with the briefing they were given and the Formas organisation of the process. In general, there was satisfaction in the outcome: that it was fair and yielded the correct list of proposals to fund. Weaknesses in the process noted related to the handling in cases outside the domain of expertise of the Panel Members, but it seems that there was satisfaction that the discussion compensated for this. It was noted that it was open to

dominance by strong-willed individuals, but there seems to be confidence that this is managed through the discussion.

Views on the online format of meetings were mixed. Most seem happy with the online format citing convenience, and environmental credentials. Others noted that while the online meetings were well organised, they missed the greater interactive character of a meeting in presence.

Those who have experience of evaluating for other funding bodies, rated Formas very highly in comparison. Respondents were across board very complimentary about their experience overall. 98 % of all respondents responded 'yes' to the question whether they would recommend the task of assessing proposals to others. Many respondents gave constructive overall comments at the end.

## Observations on documents provided by Formas

We were provided documents from all panels with the individual assessments including scores and comments for each criterion. For shortlisted proposals, we were also provided with the final scores agreed at the panel meetings and the written final statements.

### Scoring of the selection criteria

To assess how the scoring systems was applied, we looked at the column *Slutbedömning* listing 215 Early Career and 288 Research Project proposals in total. The results show that most proposals receive scores in the higher scale. No proposals were scored 1 or 2. Around 2 % got a grade 3 (fair). The middle grade 4 (good) was given to around 20 % of the proposals. The majority, around 53 %, were given a grade of 5 (very good), 22 % got a 6 (excellent) and a little over 3 % received the highest grade 7 (outstanding). In total, around 80 % of the proposals received a final grade above the "middle value" of 4.

Due to the rather time-consuming quantitative analysis process, we did not take a detailed look at the score given for each of the four separate criteria. However, it appears the pattern is similar.

This suggests that the scoring does not reflect the differentiation one would expect between top proposals selected for funding and the others.

### Final written statements

The final written statements are of two forms: proposals not shortlisted for the panel discussion are given a standard statement, but no further comment. They are presented with scores for the four criteria, which are calculated means from the scores given by four reviewers at the stage of individual assessment, and an overall score based on these means. The shortlisted proposals discussed at the panel meeting receive the scores resulting from the consensus discussion at the meeting together with a specific summary written by the rapporteur, with support from the other reviewers.

Despite the fact that the importance of consistency in the structure, the application of the scoring scales and comment on their justification was stressed in the briefings and guidelines, we note that the format and quality of the written final statements shows a large variability. A significant number did not conform to the Formas guidelines and gave insufficient information as to the strengths and weaknesses of the proposal, whereas others were well-structured, informative, and clear.



## Remarks on the 2014 Independent Observers Report

After making our own observations, we compared these with the 2014 Independent Observers Report on the 2014 Open Call<sup>1</sup>. Recommendations in this report have either been addressed or are obsolete, but there are a few key points raised in this report, that we have observed are still issues: the handling of multi/transdisciplinary projects and dealing with competing proposals at the cut-off point.

## Concluding remarks

Taking all these perspectives into consideration, we draw the following general observations and conclusions:

1. Across the board, there was praise for the working relationship with Formas, the professionalism and competence of the staff and the interaction with the process as a whole. Overall, we can state with confidence that, Formas compares well with other funding bodies in terms of handling reviewers and management of the process.
2. A programme like the Annual Open Call, with a very large number of proposals to be handled, is a complex management task requiring an efficient logistics chain and good cooperation between POs, Chairs and Panel Members. We judge the over-all process to be well functioning. POs expressed satisfaction with the support from Formas central programme management.
3. It seems there is general confidence in the outcome i.e. that the proposals listed for funding were worthy of receiving funding. However, the quality of the written feedback providing the motivation in our judgement could be much improved to express more clearly the justification – the strengths of the proposal – and aspects which could be improved. This is our view on reading the comments, which is also backed by the comments given by Programme Officers and Chairs.
4. A caveat to the general satisfaction expressed, are misgivings in the way multi/transdisciplinary proposals are scored in comparison with those with a single discipline focus. As the Call documentation expressly encourages multi/transdisciplinary research questions, the fact there are misgivings in the way these are judged must be considered a significant weakness in the review process. We note that this was also mentioned in the 2014 Review. This is an issue faced by many funding bodies, so there is an opportunity for Formas to set a good practice example here.
5. The handling of proposals at the ranking threshold ('cut-off') for funding is clearly not optimal and was handled inconsistently between the panels. The lack of a toolbox for clear and consistent handling of this, we consider to be a weakness. This was also noted in the 2014 Review.
6. Despite a comprehensive and apparently clear briefing, it appears that reviewers were not always consistent in their interpretation as to what constitutes excellent, good etc. This is reflected in variations in the standard of the final written statements. Greater quality control is needed.

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<sup>1</sup> Independant (sic) Observers' Report Formas 2014 Calls

7. It appears that participation and the quality of the discussion in the panel meetings held online is not as good as with physical meetings though the online format makes participation for some easier.

## Comment on potential for bias

We were asked explicitly to look at any evidence of bias taken to cover issues such conflict of interest, neutrality and fairness of the judgement etc. Our observations are:

- From our observation of the panel discussions, we saw no evidence of bias towards ethnicity, gender, place of work. The discussions and final ranking appeared to be fair, though the tendency by reviewers to prioritise their own areas of research was commented upon. This can be attributed to the fact that it is natural if you have expertise in a particular area, you will judge through the lens of this expertise. The fact of having several people read and score proposals should mitigate this bias, but this depends on the Chairs' ability to moderate discussions so that all views are taken into account.
- Notwithstanding this, concern was expressed by POs and Chairs that multi/transdisciplinary projects do not fare as well as single discipline project in the scoring for that reason.
- According to the statistics given, women had a success rate of 12 %, whereas it was 17 % for men. In our opinion, this is a large discrepancy which needs further analysis and possible action from Formas.
- When it comes to Panel Members, we observe that for the most part, the scientific discipline specialists were non-Swedes while user representation came largely from Sweden. The lack of knowledge of the Swedish context (including established practices, institutions and governance structures) coupled with the user representatives being less strong in articulating their point of view against the scientific representatives, means that possibly social impact aspects could be less strongly weighted in some cases. This was noted both by us and the POs. On the other hand, it was also remarked that non-Swedes were better able to take into account international benchmarks.
- There is a dominance of native English speakers in the cohort of reviewers. This seems to be a pragmatic decision on the part of POs, especially for Panel Chairs. However, this gives native English speakers an advantage in the discussions and may also present a disadvantage to non-native speakers in understanding and applying the criteria.
- Selection of reviewers is very much in the hands of individual POs who are in turn dependent on finding people with the right qualifications who are available. We do not have direct insight into whether this introduces bias. However, individual POs raised the point that the recruitment of reviewers could be a potential source for bias if this risk is not taken into account.
- It was remarked, based on experience from the UK that simply relying on volunteers to sign up to reviewing proposals, makes it vulnerable to conflicts of interest. The Formas procedure whereby appointments are made by invitation and some form of remuneration offered avoids one potential source of bias in those undertaking the review.

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## Recommendations on key topics to address

### 1. **Build on the expertise and experience that exists**

We wish to acknowledge the competence within Formas and the Chairs and reviewers in reflecting on and resolving matters that need improving. This competence could and should be consolidated, for example, through a portfolio of working groups as a co-learning exercise. Having common procedures is important to the integrity of the review process overall.

### 2. **Review procedures for recruiting reviewers**

Key to the selection of the best proposals, is the judgement of the reviewers and the consensus meetings of the panels. Therefore, recruitment of people with appropriate backgrounds is crucial. We recommend a review of how different POs undertake this task, sharing of contacts, the balance of Swedes, non-Swedes, the integration of user and academic research perspectives and sharing of experience. Preventative measures regarding bias should also be considered. Often such sharing is through informal networking at the office, but with increased home office working this vital communication channel can be lost.

### 3. **Ensure reviewers have the required understanding of the need to align scores and comments**

More examples are needed on how to apply the score consistently and provide corresponding comments that makes the reason for the score clear. There needs to be a revision process for feedback not meeting the required standard. A calibration exercise before the individual assessment is recommended and should also give examples of the proper ways to formulate comments and their relation to scores. This may also be of importance before the panel meeting ranking.

### 4. **Review procedures for determining first ranking shortlist**

It was not clear to us exactly how the results from the individual assessments are transformed into the shortlist of proposals to be considered at the panel meeting. However, we understand that the list is prepared by the POs in consultation with the Chairs, with the Panel Members invited to propose additional proposals to be discussed. There is a normalisation of scores, but how the results are taken into account remains somewhat obscure. Even some of the Chairs seem to be uncertain how this works. We suggest that Formas ensures the transparency of this step of the process.

### 5. **Provide a toolbox to handle decisions regarding proposals at the threshold**

Develop a set of guidelines and orientation on how to handle the ranking of proposals just above and below the cut-off threshold. These need to be made clear to Panel Members prior to the meeting.

### 6. **Address the evaluation of multi/transdisciplinary projects in relation to single discipline projects**

Across the board there was unease that multi/transdisciplinary projects were not judged on their own merits. Treatment of multi/transdisciplinary projects, e.g. how to balance research excellence and societal relevance needs to be addressed. Consideration could be

given to reviewing these in a separate panel or providing better guidance on how to assess these.

#### **7. Reflect on the pros and cons of digital meetings**

Online meetings are convenient, they ease the burden of travel for many, but the interaction is not the same as in a shared physical space and the social interaction that goes with it. We recommend to look at how the experience of online meetings could be improved and be made more interactive (for example with more use of online tools such as chat etc.). An alternative would otherwise be the re-introduction of physical panel meetings, perhaps at an easily accessible location.

#### **8. Review the number of proposals and workload of reviewers**

With a popular programme for funding comes the matter of over-subscription and the need for sufficient reviewers to read and judge all submissions fairly. We recommend further feedback on the time commitment involved and reflection on whether this is sustainable.

## **Reflections on this review and recommendations for a future action**

### **Reflections on the process adopted**

The assignment we undertook was set with an open remit regarding execution. Any review of this nature depends on the information provided, what is observed, but also by the time available. We were asked to come up with suggestion for how Formas can develop a structured assessment process for the future and make some suggestions below. Firstly, here is a summary description of the process we adopted.

We joined the review process in the final phase of selecting proposals. This meant we were not engaged when the shortlists of proposals were prepared. Four panels were pre-selected for us to observe. Up to observing the pre-panel and panel meetings, it was not quite clear as to what we would encounter. As stated above, Henrik Fridén observed three panels and Monica Schofield just the one, therefore Henrik was in a position to make comparisons and noted that while these followed a similar format, the dynamics were different. As a next step, we decided to follow-up our observations by soliciting the views of the Chairs, Co-Chairs and Programme Officers. These interviews took time to schedule, but was worthwhile for the insights given. We agreed between us a list of questions to use as a frame, but the interviews were conducted as conversations to encourage interviewees to express opinions freely. We also thought it important to get a broader base of views from Panel Members but as this was a large number of individuals, we decided to do this by online survey. We worked on the set of questions asked taking in feedback on these.

These were choices we made. Overall, we consider this to have worked very well and can be recommended as a framework for future reviews of this nature. The interviews allowed us to check our observations and ensure that the report reflects a more holistic view on the process. The online survey allowed us to pick up some more comments and impressions.

Throughout the assessment, we exchanged views and debated conclusions between ourselves. We found ourselves quickly drawing the same conclusions.

A limiting factor was that we joined the process in the final selection phase once the shortlists for the panels had been selected. This meant we did not feel able to comment on the process prior to this stage. Much material was made available by Formas, but time constraints limited the amount of analysis we could perform.

Overall, we were satisfied with the work according to our interpretation of the assignment. Contributing to this was the good personal chemistry between ourselves (foreseen by those who selected us) and the very cooperative, helpful support given by Christina Nyström and Anders Clarhäll who were the assignment managers for Formas.

## Reflections on how to meet future needs

An independent review is a useful means for any organisation to gather insights into strengths, weaknesses, and pathways for improvement of existing procedures. External observers can, however, only give a partial view. There is also a time-cost factor to consider. We believe it is not necessary to undertake a comprehensive review for each Call as has been conducted here. Rather it would be worthwhile following up and responding to the observations given in this report, but then to set up a group to include external persons with funding system experience, to look at future scenarios.

We make the following suggestions:

### 1. Review of project alignment to Calls and outcomes

In this assignment, we have observed and commented on the running of the review process as it has been applied to the Annual Open Call 2023. We have not judged the merits of the Call itself, nor how well aligned the projects selected are to the goals of the Call. From what we have observed, subject to our observations and recommendations above, existing management of Formas procedures have on the whole been fit for purpose, but funding outcomes i.e. what the funded projects deliver in terms of the Call objectives should perhaps be the subject of separate review.

### 2. Organisational reflection

While external observations can be useful, a starting point that often is overlooked is the competence that lies within the organisation. There is a wealth of insights that could be explored by engaging with Programme Officers and experienced Chairs/Co Chairs. Mindful of the fact that time pressures on operational matters often hinder systematic shared reflection, this needs proactive leadership.

Formas could develop and test a self-assessment model, based on the knowledge of the organisation, which focus on learning and integrate this into the overall process. Strong support from management is required, including enough time and resources for the staff involved.

### 3. Gathering international benchmarks

Formas like all research funding agencies must address the issue of which types of project to fund in a world where political pressure to transfer scientific knowledge into practice is ever growing. In particular, how to balance judgement of scientific excellence and societal impact is a challenge in any selection process.

Formas should take note of developments elsewhere. Formas as a member of the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA)<sup>2</sup> can use this as vehicle to steer its own

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<sup>2</sup> <https://coara.eu/>

funding assessment priorities and assist its constituent the research community in Sweden in adopting reforms.

Formas could take note of work done in the emerging field of research on research funding. For example, the Research on Research Institute<sup>3</sup>. An overview of how many European funding agencies perform assessment and selection of proposals is presented in “Science Europe Study on Research Assessment Practices” (2019)<sup>4</sup> carried out by Technopolis Group for Science Europe. This is a comprehensive report that includes a section reflecting on the topic of bias. Formas could consider commissioning a study perhaps more focussed on funding assessment procedures related to its remit.

#### 4. Maintaining reviewer loyalty

The principle of having external reviewers who are experts in the domain read and judge proposals is intrinsic to the credibility of any research funding allocation. Trust in the funding body’s fairness depends on the recruitment and willingness of people to perform this task. The same applies to peer review of papers for publication. The Technopolis report highlights an issue which is becoming more widely of concern namely that the demand for review exceeds the availability of people to perform the task – “*Exhaustion of the pool of reviewers and their ‘fatigue’*”<sup>5</sup>.

From our review, those taking part in the proposal review were very complimentary of the interface to Formas and, as the survey responses show, would recommend the task to others. This is valuable capital for Formas. Therefore, we recommend continuing to carefully curate this relationship and keep an eye on incentives provided by others seeking the same skills and expertise. A further consideration is the expectations on time commitment. It would be worth examining what efficiencies could be made in this respect.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://researchonresearch.org/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.scienceurope.org/media/fmdihogq/se-study-on-research-assessment-practices-report.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Science Europe Study on Research Assessment Practices pg 16

# Annexes

## 1 Material received

1. Call for proposals to Formas Annual Open Call and additional information published on Formas Website
2. Instruction e-mails from the call coordinator to programme officers
3. Template e-mails prepared by the call coordinator for program officers to distribute to chairs and panel members
4. Instruction manuals:
  - a) Information and Instructions for Formas Review Panels 2023
  - b) Responsibilities of the rapporteur
  - c) PM rekrytering av ledamöter (Memorandum on how to recruit panel members)
5. Slideshow presentations prepared for briefing at pre-panel meetings and panel meetings
6. Shortlists of proposals to be discussed at panels meetings of panel 3, 5, 9, and 10
7. Final list of proposals ranked by the panels, including final statements
8. Independent Observers' Report 2014

## 2 Interview questions (indicative) for Chairs and Programme Officers

### Chairs

1. Overall how do you rate the outcome of the selection process?
  - a. Do you have confidence the best proposals are selected?
  - b. Do you feel the process is fair, unbiased and transparent?
  - c. Do you think there is the right mix of people involved in the panels and are they prepared for the task (by Formas)?

In this, we will also discuss the balance of scientific excellence and societal needs, the grounds for assessment, scoring/grading and the process leading up to the final selection of projects proposed for funding by the panel.

2. How do you rate FORMAS process compared with other funding selection processes you have experience of?
  - a. In general terms how do you rate the interactions with FORMAS officers?
  - b. Do you feel the the scoring criteria is reasonably well expressed and used consistently before and during the panel meeting?
  - c. How satisfied are you with the panel discussion approach?
  - d. Do you have experiences with other selection models of projects?
3. Do you have any recommendations on how things could be improved?

### Programme Officers

- a. How you go about selecting reviewers and your views on this?
- b. Instructions to and introduction of panel members and chairs?
- c. How do you go about producing the shortlist for the meeting?  
How satisfied are you with the way the panel performed - before, during and after the panel meeting?
- d. How the meeting format works - pros and cons?
- e. Criteria/scoring system and its application
- f. Is the work load overall manageable?  
Are you getting proposals you want to have?  
What would you like to improve?
- g. What is good as it is and what can be improved of the above?



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### 3 Survey questions

1. In which panel are you a member during the annual open call 2023?
  - Panel 3. Ecosystems and biodiversity on land
  - Panel 5. Food production
  - Panel 9. Urban and rural areas
  - Panel 10. Norms, Practices and Governance
2. What type of organisation is your primary employer?
  - University or research institute
  - Governmental agency, NGO or business corporation
3. What do you consider was the primary reason you were recruited to contribute with your skills and experience to the review process?
  - Primarily to contribute with skills and experience in research
  - Primarily to contribute with skills and experience in impact and user-needs
4. Was this your first year as a panelist in the Formas open call?
  - Yes, this was the first year
  - No, I have participated before
5. What is your main motivation to do it?
  - Consider it professional duty to contribute
  - Good way to gain insight into emerging research topics
  - Assignment carries prestige
  - Being paid for this assignment
  - Enjoy the work
  - Other, namely
6. When reviewing for the Formas open call for the first time, did you feel you were well-briefed on the task before assessing the proposals?
7. Were you satisfied with the final ranking list of proposals recommended for funding by the panel in the annual open call 2023?
8. In your opinion, what are the strengths of the Formas process in this call?
9. In your opinion, what are the weaknesses of the Formas process in this call?
10. What is your opinion on the online meeting format?
11. How do you rate Formas' process and management compared to other funding bodies you have been a reviewer for?
12. Overall, how did you find the experience?
13. Would you recommend the task of assessing proposals in this call to others?
14. Do you have any other comments or recommendations?

Formas is a government research council for sustainable development. We fund research and innovation, develop strategies, and conduct analyses and evaluations. Our areas of activity are the environment, agricultural sciences and spatial planning. We conduct systematic reviews that aim to make it easier for Sweden to achieve our environmental goals. We also communicate about research and research results.