Digital Energy Challenge – Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)
Last updated on February 28th, 2025

ENGLISH VERSION

This document summarises the answers to the frequently asked questions about the Call for Projects. It is updated regularly and available for download on the Digital Energy Challenge website.

A. ELIGIBILITY

Q1) Are all African countries eligible for the 2025 edition of the Challenge?

No. The exhaustive list of eligible countries for this fourth edition is specified in the Who Can Apply sections here.

Q2) What does "local" mean in the eligibility criteria for Start-ups?

Within the framework of the Digital Energy Challenge Start-ups, "local" entities must have their management activities headquartered in the country where the activity/project takes place and have at least one full-time employee working in this country.

The nationality of employees is not a criterion for eligibility.

Q3) Are French/European companies' subsidiaries eligible?

Yes, subsidiaries of French, European or of other countries outside Africa can be eligible.
- They are eligible to the Digital Energy Challenge Start-ups as long as they are 'local', meaning that project management activities are headquartered in the country where the activity/project takes place and provided that there is at least one full-time employee working in the project country.
- They are eligible to the Digital Energy Challenge Partnership as technology/service providers provided that they meet the definition and eligibility criteria. Falling within the definition of 'local'(i.e. headquartered in the country where the project takes place and at least 1 full-time employee in the country) is a bonus but not compulsory.

Q4) Are NGOs eligible for the Digital Energy Challenge Start-ups?

NGOs can apply to the Digital Energy Challenge Start-ups at the following conditions:
- Either the applicant is a 'branch' of the NGO which is set up as a company and respects the definition of a Start-up as per the Call for Projects Rules;
- Or the activity for which the NGO applies is planned to spin off as a company in the coming years, has a dedicated team, business plan, and respects the definition of a Start-up as per the Call for Projects Rules, a document available in the application pack;

- Or the activity for which the NGO applies is clearly targeting sustainability/profitability in the coming years, has a dedicated team, business plan, and respects the definition criteria of a Start-up as per the Call for Projects Rules.

Q5) Is there a minimum/maximum number of years of existence for an innovative technology/service provider to apply for the Digital Energy Challenge Partnership?

Yes, innovative technology/service providers must have less than 15 years of existence and have recently developed an innovative solution to be tested in the framework of the Challenge.

Q6) Is there a maximum budget for a project to be eligible?

For the Digital Energy Challenge Start-ups applicants, there is no maximum budget defined for projects. As a reminder, the funding request expressed within the framework of the Challenge must not exceed EUR 150K.

For the Digital Energy Challenge Partnership, the applicant must present a budget estimate for the total Project as part of the application process, with a limit set at EUR 1M maximum. The project presented must be associated with a funding request of EUR 500K maximum (including grant AND technical assistance).

Q7) Are certain technologies/applications automatically excluded from the Challenge? For example, under the theme 'efficient grid management', would a project seeking to improve the maintenance of a coal-fired plant be excluded?

Yes, there is a list of excluded activities, applicable to both Challenge categories (i.e. Start-ups Partnership), which is the same as the exclusion list of AFD's '2019-2022 Energy Transition Strategy'. Are thus excluded:
- Coal-fired power plant-related projects;
- Projects for power stations to produce electricity from fuel oil and diesel;
- Infrastructures associated with an exploration unit for the production or storage of fossil resources or to produce electricity based on fossil fuels.

Q8) Can two Start-ups apply to the Digital Energy Challenge Start-ups in partnership?

Two start-ups cannot apply together to the Challenge. However, it does not prevent the "project leader" start-up that applied to collaborate or partner with other companies for the implementation of the project, including another start-up. For example, subcontracting of any services directly related to the project is an expense eligible to the grant (see part 'C. Benefits' of the FAQ). The Challenge aims at encouraging the transfer of innovative technologies between start-ups. Project owners who do not develop the technological and/or technical solution, but who rely on an innovation developed elsewhere by another start-up - preferably with activities on the continent, and within the framework of an existing or future partnership - may also apply, provided that this solution is at the heart of the project presented.

Q9) Can two service providers apply in partnership to the Digital Energy Challenge Partnership?

The project must be submitted by one technology/service provider. However, it does not prevent the technology/service provider that applied to collaborate with other companies for the implementation of the project. For example, subcontracting of any services directly related to the project is an expense eligible to the grant (see part 'C. Benefits' of the FAQ).

Q10) Can an NGO apply to the Digital Energy Challenge Partnership?

NGOs can apply to the Digital Energy Challenge Start-ups, if they meet the eligibility criteria for NGOs (see Challenge Rules in the application pack and question 4 of the FAQ).
To apply to the Digital Energy Challenge Partnership, an entity must correspond to the definition of a technology/service provider as per the Challenge Rules, and meet the eligibility criteria that apply to the technology/service providers. Thus, an entity that corresponds to the definition of an NGO and not to the definition of a technology/service provider cannot apply to the Partnership.

Q11) My company applied to the Digital Energy Challenge between 2021 and 2024, but the project was not selected. Can my company reapply this year?

Yes, your company can reapply for the same project or for a different one, as long as:
- Your company and your project still meet the eligibility criteria;
- Your project's activities correspond to
    o one of the three themes of the 2025 Digital Energy Challenge Start-ups:
        1. Universal electricity access and mini-grids
        2. Efficient grid management
        3. Resilience and decarbonation of power systems
    o the theme of the Digital Energy Challenge Partnership : Identification and real-time census of connections, declined in six modules:
        1. Energy Demand Assessment (Bottom-up Approach): Development of a solution to assess energy demand evolution over a 10 to 15-year horizon, based on data from load curves and integrating macro-economic factors;
        2. Customer Geolocation and Needs Assessment: Implementation of a Geographic Information System (GIS) to map customers (urban and rural), refine demand analysis in specific areas, and evaluate the necessary network reinforcements (MV and LV) along with cost estimations;
        3. Work Optimization: Development of a tool for planning and optimizing works of network expansion, reinforcement and connections, considering financial constraints, execution capacities, and project timelines;
        4. Digital Project Monitoring: Implementation of a digital project monitoring system, with the possibility of integrating (in addition) geo-satellite data for real-time work tracking;
        5. Customer Connection Monitoring: Development of a module to manage the customer connection works and process within projects;
        6. Interface with Third-Party Applications: Implementation of an interconnection system with Senelec's existing tools (GIS, ERP, customer database, etc.) to ensure data consistency and smooth information flow.

Note: It is possible to propose a solution per module, for a subset of modules, or for all modules. If multiple modules are proposed, the cost must be provided separately for each module.

Q12) My project was selected as one of the laureates of the Digital Energy Challenge in the past, can I apply again?

No, projects previously awarded in the framework of the Digital Energy Challenge are not eligible for the subsequent editions.

However, it is possible for an entity that has been awarded in the past to reapply in the Challenge Start-ups or in the Challenge Partnership if it is a different project from the one that received the award, provided that the success of the awarded project is proven and the entity can demonstrate growth in business since the first award.

In particular, an entity awarded in the Challenge for Start-ups, and applying for a project as an 'innovative technology/service provider' may apply to the Partnership, provided that the success of the awarded project is proven and that the project holders can attest to the growth of the business since the first award.

Q13) What is considered a "digital" project?

A project is considered digital if its digital component(s) meets the definition of the Challenge Rules, i.e. any telecom/computer/cloud-based technology which can be either:
- Developed as the core value proposition (i.e. the main service or product offer) of the start-up/partnership project
- Or used by a start-up/partnership project at the core of its innovative business model (i.e. as a key means to an end)

Q14) Are projects relying on off-grid energy access (e.g., clean cooking projects, solar for productive use, digital solutions for Energy Access businesses, mini-grids) eligible to the Digital Energy Challenge Start-ups 2025?

The three themes of the Digital Energy Challenge Start-ups 2025 are:
1. Universal electricity access and mini-grids
2. Efficient grid management
3. Resilience and decarbonation of power systems

A more detailed presentation of the three themes is available in the Challenge's rules, a document available in the application pack.
This year's Digital Energy Challenge Start-ups mostly targets projects in the field of mini-grids (theme #1), projects ensuring a proper operation of the power grid (theme #2) and projects enabling the development of a greener, most flexible and cost-effective power infrastructure (theme #3).

Therefore, off-grid electricity access projects are only eligible on the condition that they are relating to theme #1 (universal electricity access and mini-grids), i.e. if they consist in digital innovations in the field of mini-grids to maximize their efficiency and impact.

Q15) My company has a project of installation of a renewable energy (RE) production asset. Is it eligible for the Digital Energy Challenge?

The main objective of the Digital Energy Challenge is to promote digital innovations/business models in the energy sector.

Thus, if your project 'solely' consists in the installation – and eventually connection to the grid – of a RE production asset, without a significative innovative digital component or an innovative business model relying on digital features/tools, then it is not eligible to the Challenge.

If your project consists in the installation of RE assets coupled with digital innovations to maximize their efficiency and impact, or to enable the development of a greener, more flexible and cost-effective power infrastructure, then it could be eligible to the Challenge (provided that your company and the project also meet the other eligibility criteria). In that case, a major part of the AFD's funding should be earmarked for the digital and innovative components of the project, rather than for the construction/commissioning of the asset(s).

For example, a project consisting in the installation of mini-grids coupled with tools to facilitate interconnections with the main grid or with other mini-grids would be eligible to the Digital Energy Challenge Start-ups.

Q16) Are there different themes for the Challenge Start-ups and the Challenge Partnership?

Yes. The 2025 Challenge Start-ups focuses on the three historical themes of the Digital Energy Challenge for Start-ups. As a reminder, the three themes are the following:

1. Universal electricity access and mini-grids
2. Efficient grid management
3. Resilience and decarbonation of power systems

A more detailed presentation of the three themes is available in the Call for Projects Rules, a document available in the application pack.

On the contrary, the Digital Energy Challenge Partnership (which is not a 5th edition of the Digital Energy Challenge for Utilities) focuses on answering the specific needs of Senelec i.e. identification and real-time census of connections, declined in six modules:

1. Energy Demand Assessment (Bottom-up Approach): Development of a solution to assess energy demand evolution over a 10 to 15-year horizon, based on data from load curves and integrating macro-economic factors;
2. Customer Geolocation and Needs Assessment: Implementation of a Geographic Information System (GIS) to map customers (urban and rural), refine demand analysis in specific areas, and evaluate the necessary network reinforcements (MV and LV) along with cost estimations;
3. Work Optimization: Development of a tool for planning and optimizing works of network expansion, reinforcement and connections, considering financial constraints, execution capacities, and project timelines;
4. Digital Project Monitoring: Implementation of a digital project monitoring system, with the possibility of integrating (in addition) geo-satellite data for real-time work tracking;
5. Customer Connection Monitoring: Development of a module to manage the customer connection works and process within projects;

6. Interface with Third-Party Applications: Implementation of an interconnection system with Senelec's existing tools (GIS, ERP, customer database, etc.) to ensure data consistency and smooth information flow.

Note: It is possible to propose a solution per module, for a subset of modules, or for all modules. If multiple modules are proposed, the cost must be provided separately for each module.

Q17) I am applying to the Digital Energy Challenge Start-ups. What if my project can fit into all three themes? Which theme should I choose?

If your project corresponds to several themes, you can choose the one that seems the most obvious to you to apply, i.e. the one that your project responds to in the first place. The choice of the theme is not decisive nor penalizing during the analysis of the applications.

Q18) How do I know whether my company is a start-up or a technology/service provider?

The definition of a start-up, as per the Challenge's rule, is a company which:
- Was founded less than 10 years ago;
- Employs at least one person on a full-time basis;
- Counts less than 100 employees;
- Generates less than €1 M of annual turnover;
- Is still in the process of seed/early stage financing: no Series A funding, that is to say less than €1 M raised in total;
- Is 'local', i.e. management activities are headquartered in the country where the activity/project takes place and at least one full-time employee working in this country.

A technology/supply provider shall match the following criteria:
- Be set up (as in formally registered);
- Count more than 5 employees;
- Generate less than €50 M of annual turnover;
- Have less than 15 years of existence;
- Have already developed a specific innovative solution to be tested;
- Have the ability to conduct the project in the language of the utility country (i.e. French for the 2025 edition)

It is possible that a company meets both the definition of a 'start-up' and of a 'technology/service provider'. In that case, you can determine which Challenge category is more suitable for your project depending on the maturity of the solution.
Indeed, the solution proposed by a technology/service provider must be already mature, meaning the solution is already in the commercial stage and could be on the short term scaled up to other installations run by the preselected utility (in 2025, Senelec) or by other utilities.
The Challenge Start-ups targets more early-stage solutions: the company should have already developed a viable product or service but must not necessarily have completed the pilot stage.

Q19) Is a Start-up eligible if it does not have a turnover yet, and/or if it has not raised any funds yet?

Yes. There are no minimum thresholds for the turnover or the funds raised. There are however maximum thresholds: a start-up must generate less than €1 M of annual turnover and still be in the process of seed/early stage financing (no Series A funding, that is to say less than €1 M raised in total) to be eligible.

Q20) Is a university or research center eligible to participate in the Challenge as an innovative technology/service provider?

No, universities and research centers are not eligible as technology/service providers. Nevertheless, universities and research centers can be eligible to the Challenge Start-ups if the research team intends to perpetuate its offer within the framework of a private structure (e.g.: commercial spin-off of a research project).

B. APPLICATION/SELECTION PROCESS

Q21) Is it possible to submit several applications?

For a Start-up: it is possible to submit several applications, as long as the projects concerned are different. However, please note that the quality of the application is key for being pre-selected and selected. Thus, if you are not able to submit two applications of good quality, we recommend you focus on the one that has the best chances of being selected (considering the scope of the Challenge and the clarity of the project).

For a technology/service provider: you can submit different applications for different projects. However, you should make sure that you have enough time and resources to submit two applications of good quality. Remember that is possible to propose a solution per module, for a subset of modules, or for all modules in one application.

Q22) What are the criteria used to prioritize and select the applications?

For the Challenge Start-ups, three main criteria will guide the selection process:
- Innovation: the level of innovation and role of digital technologies in the project;
- Impact: several indicators will be considered, including the level of replicability, number of beneficiaries;
- Economics and risk management: business model, risk anticipation and mitigation, competencies of the project team.

For the Challenge Partnership, the criteria are
- Innovation: the level of innovation and role of digital technologies in the project;
- Impact: several indicators will be considered, including the level of replicability, number of beneficiaries;
- Solution integration and risk profile: conditions for food at the Utility and risks (identification, remediation…)
- Financial strengths and support needs

Q23) How is an innovative project defined?

A project can be innovative in two ways:
- Intrinsically innovative, i.e. it provides a new solution to an identified problem.
- Innovative in relation to its local context, if the existing solution is provided in a new environment.

Q24) When assessing the impact of the project, are you only considering the impact that the project will have over the span time of the grant agreement, or over its entire life?

The prioritization and selection processes consider the possible impact of the project over its entire lifetime.

Q25) Who are the members of the Pre-selection and Selection Committees?

- The Pre-selection Committee will be composed of people from the Challenge Organisation. In the case of the Challenge Start-ups, no other people will intervene. In the case of the Challenge Partnership, representatives of the Utility may be involved;
- The Selection Committee will be composed of people from the Challenge Organisation (plus the Utility in the case of the Challenge Partnership) with the participation of experts and partners (in particular in the field of Finance) providing an external viewpoint. For example, experts from African energy hubs or from investment funds with a focus on Africa.

NB:
- For the partnership, the committee will be composed in accordance with the Utility.
- The composition of the committees may differ between the Challenge Start-ups and Partnership, and from one edition to another.

Q26) Will the non-selected projects receive personalized feedback on their applications?

Due to the large number of applications received (around 200 in 2024), we are not able to provide each applicant with personalized feedback. Only the applicants that passed the pre-selection phase (but not selected by the selection committee) will obtain more detailed feedback.

Q27) What documents do I need to provide to apply?

To apply, you must fill in the Excel application form that can be downloaded online from the Challenge page. The forms are different for the two calls for projects (Start-ups and Partnership). In particular, the form for the Partnership requires to prepare a detailed budget estimate **and** key elements of the business model to upload with the application.

Q28) What documents do I need to provide for the advanced analysis?

The advanced analysis phase will take place from June to July 2025.

Within this period, the pre-selected Applicants in both Challenge categories will be notified and invited for the advanced analysis phase. The pre-selected Applicants will be invited to fulfil and submit an electronic advanced analysis form (received and sent back by e-mail) for the Consultant to run a comprehensive analysis of the project with regard to the established criteria. On top of this additional form, the Organiser and Consultant may conduct interviews with project owners to complete the evaluation.

NB: Additional financial documents will likely be required so that specialised members of the selection committee or advisers can run a comprehensive analysis as well.

For the Partnership only, complementary data may be gathered via a Q&A with the Utility. Potentially, a "playground" allowing to test and compare solutions quantitatively based on the Utility's real data may be put in place.

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START-UPS

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PARTNERSHIP

C. BENEFITS

Q29) What kind of expenses are eligible for the grant?

The eligible expenses are the following:
- The purchase of equipment directly related to the project;
- The purchase of software and digital tools directly related to the project (e.g. software licenses);
- Subcontracting of any services directly related to the project;
- Recruitment, remuneration and training of staff directly related to the project;
- Administrative expenses (including custom rights and banking fees) directly related to the project.

Q30) What is the maximum funding request and how is it divided between grant and Technical Assistance requests?

For applicants in the Start-ups category, the maximum funding request is EUR 150K. At least 25% of this funding request must be dedicated to Technical Assistance needs, or, in other words, a maximum 75% of the total funding request shall be dedicated to the grant request. This means that for a funding request of EUR 150K, at least EUR 37.5K must be earmarked for the Technical Assistance, and a maximum EUR 112.5K can be earmarked for the grant.
Note that the Technical Assistance envelope will be allocated at the discretion of the Selection Committee.

For applicants in the Partnership category, the maximum funding request is EUR 500k. At least 15% of the funding request must be dedicated to Technical Assistance needs, or, in other words, a maximum 85% of the total funding request shall be dedicated to the grant. This means that for a funding request of EUR 500K, at least EUR 75K must be earmarked for the Technical Assistance, and that maximum EUR 425K can be earmarked for the grant.
Note that the Technical Assistance envelope will be automatically allocated to the winning projects, although the final amount will be decided at the discretion of the Selection Committee.

Q31) About the Technical Assistance:
- **What is the Technical Assistance?**
- **Will it be provided systematically?**
- **How will the Technical Assistance provider be chosen?**

For awardees of the Digital Energy Challenge Start-ups:
- The Technical Assistance provided may cover needs such as: 360° diagnosis, technical expertise, strategic/expert advice, accounting/financial support, operation reporting tools development and support. Applicants are asked to specify their anticipated need for Technical Assistance by filling in the appropriate field on the Application Form (a document included in the application pack);
- The Technical Assistance will not be systematically provided to the winning Start-up. The Selection Committee will evaluate the Technical Assistance request and decide to provide it – or not – to the winning start-up. The Selection Committee can also ask the winning

start-up to change its Technical Assistance request, if the Committee judges that the identified need is not the most pressing one.
- The Technical Assistance provider will be selected by the winning Start-up based on a shortlist proposed by the Consultant, with validation of the final perimeter of intervention by the Challenge Organisation Team. In the application form, the applicants are asked to specify if they already know a relevant Technical Assistance provider for the identified scope of work, and if yes to indicate its name. Upon validation of the Challenge Organisation Team, this entity will be integrated in the Technical Assistance provider shortlist.

For awardees of the Digital Energy Challenge Partnership:
- The Technical Assistance provided may cover needs such as: technical expertise, project management assistance, project ownership assistance, strategic/market expert advisory. Applicants are asked to specify their anticipated need for Technical Assistance by filling in the appropriate field on the Application Form (a document included in the application pack);
- Applicants to the Digital Energy Challenge Partnership are encouraged to consider a project management assistance or a project ownership assistance, especially in the case of a first collaboration. The winning project will be systematically provided with a Technical Assistance, but the Selection Committee may ask them to reconsider the scope and value of their Technical Assistance request;
- The Technical Assistance supplier will be selected by the winning project owners from a shortlist agreed with the Utility, the Consultant and validated by the Organiser. In the application form, the applicants are asked to specify if they already know a relevant Technical Assistance provider for the identified scope of work, and if yes to indicate its name. Upon validation of the Challenge Organisation Team, this entity will be integrated in the Technical Assistance provider shortlist.

Q32) Is there a maximum duration for the project?

The duration of the project funded by the Digital Energy Challenge should normally be between 12 and 18 months (time to market or project implementation).
If your project deployment is longer than 18 months, the grant may cover only one phase of the project, provided that this phase is clearly defined and explained in the application form.

Q33) Will the selected companies get the opportunity to meet each other and eventually develop business relationships beyond the Digital Energy Challenge?

Yes, the awardees will all be invited to an award ceremony and a bootcamp (location still to be defined). One of the main objectives of the bootcamp is indeed to foster synergies between projects and companies, with specific activities such as "networking sessions", as well as with more informal moments, allowing start-ups, technology/service providers and utilities to meet each other.