

HASLER-MERCATOR DIGITALIZATION AND DEMOCRACY

CALL FOR PROJECT PROPOSALS

A joint funding program for up to 4 million CHF in total of the two foundations Hasler Stiftung and Stiftung Mercator Schweiz, open to not-for-profit institutions active in the domain of digital transformation and democracy (this includes Swiss Universities, Universities of Applied Science, non-commercial research institutes, institutions of the ETH Domain, civil society organizations, NGO's and interested public entities).

BACKGROUND

Digital transformation and democracy are deeply interconnected, particularly with the rapid advancements in artificial intelligence (AI). This research program aims to integrate expertise from computer science, social sciences, and normative sciences such as law and ethics in the context of the current and future impact of digital transformation on democratic processes. Furthermore, it wants to promote collaboration between disciplines and other sectors, to maximize the impact of research output beyond academia. Specifically, the program wants to enable empirically grounded projects, which make use of the potential of digital transformation to improve the public good and the democratic system.

Key areas of focus include digital transformation of democratic public infrastructures, shifts in information and communication due to digital media, and the surge in democratic participation facilitated by digital formats.

GOALS OF THE PROGRAM

The HASLER-MERCATOR DIGITALIZATION AND DEMOCRACY program supports intersectoral research projects with societal impact in Switzerland and beyond addressing these and related challenges at the intersection of digitalization, particularly AI, and democracy. Proposals should include initiatives to enhance long-term impact, such as education, information dissemination, reception and deliberation, inclusion, diversity, policymaking, or real-life societal experiments, planned from the outset rather than as afterthoughts.

Typical project subjects include, but are not limited to, the digital transformation of democratic public infrastructures, shifts in information and communication due to digital media, the surge in democratic participation through digital formats, and changes in political self-determination. More concrete subjects could be voter (dis)information on complex topics and its impact on political opinion-making, the role of AI in moderating online political discussions to prevent harassment and promote constructive dialogue, impersonating individuals using AI, detect bias, detect disinformation, synthesize public preferences, reduce emotionality in political discourse, and the role of AI in enhancing civic education. Other topics include distributed autonomous organizations, identifying and controlling intransparent lobbying, explore the development of AI tools for transparent and accountable decision-making in government, new forms of democratic participation and community meetings (Gemeinde-Versammlungen), e-collecting signatures for referenda and initiatives, e-voting, and e-consultations.

The aim of the program is to enable projects, that ideally already try to address the identified and researched challenges and implement possible solutions as a direct consequence of the research planned. They should evaluate their potential societal impact from the get go by defining impact goals ahead of the project. In doing so, they should

be structured as an intersectoral collaboration between actors rooted in larger society as well as traditional academia.

POTENTIAL APPLICANTS AND PROJECT PARTNERS

The program specifically wants to promote the intersectoral collaboration between academia and civil society actors. Whilst advances in information and communication technology as well as in computer science should be at the center of all research projects, only projects between several actors aiming for impact beyond academia – e.g. digital policy proposals and initiatives, new prototypes, awareness campaigns, citizen engagement, etc. – will be accepted.

Proposals will be evaluated according to their scientific quality, their strategic importance to the overall program's objectives and their anticipated applicability and impact beyond research. These criteria being equal, we will give priority to proposals that increase the diversity of the set of funded projects (for example gender balance, classes of institutions, applicants from various language regions). We encourage proposals by newly appointed senior researchers or professors.

Projects must be intersectoral and involve at least one research partner and one practice-oriented partner. On the research side, interdisciplinary collaboration between partners with complementary expertise is encouraged – however at least one partner must be from computer science.

FUNDING RULES

For the research part of the projects, the funding rules of the Swiss National Science Foundation apply (but not covering overhead expenses). The foundations expect that additional project financing will be provided from the participating institutions' resources or other sources.

Proposals should be set up for a duration of at most 4 years. After every year, there will be an interim progress check. For projects with a foreseen duration of more than 3 years, the funding of the final year will be based on an evaluation as part of a specific workshop with the funded projects.

SUBMISSION AND EVALUATION PROCEDURE

The application period is structured in a two-stage procedure to minimize effort for applicants:

During the first stage (short proposal), open ideas are also accepted, for which the suitable interdisciplinary/ intersectoral partner may not yet have been identified. If necessary, the foundations can act as bridge builders to identify suitable partners.

All project candidates in stage two are invited to a complimentary workshop offered by the Mercator Stiftung, helping to specify and sharpen the project idea within the impact maximization framework, prior to finalizing the full proposal.

The corresponding project forms have been published on both foundation websites. The program timeline is planned as follows:

1. Optional Q&A session with all interested parties: Feb 13, 2025, 10:00 (sign up [here](#))
2. Submission of short proposals by March 16, 2025
3. Decision on acceptance of short proposals and invitation to write a full proposal: first week of April
4. Impact refinement workshop with all successful candidates taking place end of April

5. Submission of full proposals by end of June
6. Internal and external evaluation of full proposals until end of August
7. Presentation of selected projects to the decision board & final acceptance: mid Sept
8. Earliest possible start of project funding from beginning of October 2025

The following criteria will guide the evaluation of projects:

- contribution to the international state of the art in the field;
- expected societal impact in relation to other sectors beyond academia;
- coherence of impact management and goals (see criteria: <https://www.projekte-mit-wirkung.ch>);
- degree of intersectoral collaboration;
- originality of the research questions and approach to generate impact;
- adequacy of the methodology and proficiency of the organization; track record of the applicants in the area of the proposal;
- feasibility, organization, and financial planning of the proposal.

STRUCTURE OF SHORT PROPOSAL

The short proposal should be written in English, using the provided template ([download here](#)) and contain the following key information:

- Project abstract
- Expected societal impact, outcome, and output goals of the project (high level)
- Interdisciplinarity: domains covered and list of partners (or placeholder, where identification is pending)
- Planned duration of the project
- Indication of funding: amount requested from the program versus own/other contributions
- Short CV of the project leaders in academia and practice including the three most important publications and/or flagship projects of the last 5 years relevant to the proposal

The short proposal must be submitted as a PDF via the website <https://grants.haslerstiftung.ch> (Grant Type “Program”, with reference to the support programme “HMDD”).

STRUCTURE OF FULL PROPOSAL

The full proposals will require the following additional details:

- Research and project plan: focusing on current state of research, scientific methods applied and significance of planned research on the one hand and a plan for the planned activities/resources for societal impact on the other
- Impact plan: focusing on expected societal [impact](#) (beyond research output) and including a plan how it will be measured – a free workshop to develop the impact goals will be offered to the shortlisted projects
- Description of collaboration approach between parties involved
- Breakdown of funding allocation (staff and other expenses)
- Full team and contact details

CONTACT INFORMATION

For more information, please contact the management offices:

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