Digital Europe (DIGITAL)
Specific provisions and opportunities for EU outermost regions

The outermost regions face permanent constrains recognised in Article 349 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, which provides for specific measures to support these regions. It is in this spirit that most EU funds and programmes 2021-27 include specific provisions applicable to the outermost regions. In its Communication "Putting People first, securing sustainable and inclusive growth and unlocking the potential of the EU's outermost regions", the European Commission has committed itself to facilitating outermost regions' uptake of EU tools to foster the digital transition and bridge the digital divide between mainland Europe and the outermost regions. The DIGITAL Europe programme is a key tool for this purpose[1].

About DIGITAL

Launched in 2021, DIGITAL is an important EU funding mechanism to bridge the gap between research and market deployment, and accelerate the digital transition of the European economy, industry, and society. It will improve the competitiveness of Europe on the digital market, bridge the digital divide across the EU and reinforce Europe's autonomy. DIGITAL does not address these challenges in isolation, but rather complements other EU programmes such as Horizon Europe for research and innovation and the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) for digital infrastructure[2].

Key Facts :

Programme duration : 2021-2027

Total budget : € 7.588.000.000

Thematic categories : Digital technologies and skills, Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) Research and Innovation (R&I)

Target group : Private enterprises, NGOs and civil society organisations, public authorities

Type of funding : Grants

Projects funded by the Digital Europe Programme are collaborative projects selected through calls for proposals based on two-year work programmes (so far: 2021-22 and 2023-24). The programme funds 50% of the budget of the selected projects (up to 75% for SMEs and 100% for support actions). A few actions also provide smaller scale funding, through Financing Support to Third Parties (See section 'Financial Support to Third Parties' in the work programme).

The programme provides funding for initiatives within the following five core capacity areas:

1. Supercomputing – Build up and strengthen EU's supercomputing and data processing capabilities and increase accessibility, and broaden its use in areas of public interest (e.g. health, environment, security, industry…)

2. Artificial Intelligence (AI) – Open up use to public and private stakeholders, facilitate safe access to and storage of large datasets and energy-efficient cloud infrastructure. Strengthen and support existing R&I in the Member States.

3. Cybersecurity – Achieve a high common level of cybersecurity as more and more services move online.

4. Advanced Digital Skills – Design and delivery of specialised programmes and traineeships for future experts.

5. Best Use of Digital Technologies & Interoperability – Support SMEs and public authorities in their digital transformation and prioritise interoperable systems and solutions.

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1. This factsheet has been elaborated as part of the organisation of seven virtual workshops for EU outermost regions on the following EU competitive programmes: Connecting Europe Facility (CEF); Digital Europe Programme; Programme for the Environment and Climate Action (LIFE); Erasmus+; Horizon Europe; Creative Europe Programme; Single Market Programme.

2. https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/activities/digital-programme & Annex III, Digital Europe Programme Regulation

Opportunities for EU Outermost Regions

The digital sector in the Outermost Regions faces a wide range of challenges which vary from one region to another, and which may contribute to widening the digital divide, including lower levels of internet access, unreliable electricity access, and lack of digital infrastructure, equipment, and skills. As outlined in the Commission Communication on the outermost regions, digitalisation can bring together people, services, and businesses irrespective of their location, and as such, help outermost regions to overcome constraints linked to remoteness.

The DIGITAL programme can support aspects of the digital transition of Outermost Regions. In particular Specific Objective 4 - Advanced digital skills - can enable their populations, especially the youngest, to benefit from appropriate skills development in the technological and digital field. Moreover, the programme's award criteria strive for a balanced geographical distribution and aims to benefit all EU countries, regions, and associated countries[3]. Hence, the participation of Outermost Regions within the programme is encouraged. The following initiatives are particularly relevant to help address the unique challenges in Outermost Regions.

DIGITAL's Core Objectives

Specific Objective 1 – Supercomputing. Under this priority, the programme aims to build up and strengthen its high-performance computing and data processing capabilities. This objective also aims to broaden the use and access to supercomputing in areas of public interest and in the business sector. The geographic location and remoteness of Outermost Regions are an advantageous characteristic in the fields of meteorology, climate, and astrophysics research, which are thematic areas boosted by supercomputing. The objective's actions are managed by the Euro High-Performance Computing Joint Undertaking.

Specific Objective 2 – Artificial Intelligence. This objective aims to develop Europe's AI capacities and promote public and commercial application, in particular for SMEs. Furthermore, as data fuels AI, it intends to create quality data sources and safe cloud storage spaces. In the Outermost Regions, the gathering of data and the participation in an open-source shared data market is crucial to ensure data sovereignty and an acceleration of local AI applications. The promotion of data spaces in the fields specific to Outermost Regions such as marine and climate research, agriculture, and tourism are vital to develop and enhance social and economic processes.

Specific Objective 3 – Cybersecurity. As more and more services move online, this objective aims to build and enhance EU's cybersecurity infrastructures and promote safe practices. The digital infrastructure and services in Outermost Regions should be as strong as the remainder of the EU to maintain the integrity of the wider network. The actions under this objective are implemented through the European Cybersecurity Industrial, Technology and Research Competence Centre and the Network of National Coordination Centres in accordance with the Cybersecurity Competence Centre Regulation

Specific Objective 4 – Advanced Digital Skills holds particular significance for Outermost Regions as they often face limited access to educational and economic opportunities due to remoteness. Developing digital skills and literacy is crucial to bridge the digital divide and empower local stakeholders. Enhanced digital skills can facilitate access to online education, e-commerce, and remote work, which are essential for boosting economic growth, social well-being, and links to the wider EU. Furthermore, good digital literacy is particularly important for SMEs to unlock their potential for innovation, entrepreneurship, and participate in the EU's Digital Single Market. European Digital Innovation Hubs (EDIHs) are an important tool to Outermost Regions as they can offer tailored solutions to their unique challenges. This objective also supports the Digital Skills and Jobs Platform.

Specific Objective 5 – Best use of digital technologies. By fostering the adoption of cutting-edge technologies and digital technologies and maximising their use, this objective recognises the pivotal role of digitalisation in driving economic growth, innovation, and sustainability across the EU. Under this objective, the programme aims to build and strengthen EDIHs and their network (further explained below). Bridging the digital divide will allow Outermost Regions to harness the benefits of digitalisation as well and better face their unique challenges.

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3. Article 20, "Digital Europe" Programme Regulation

European Digital Innovation Hubs (EDIHs)

EDIHs are regional entities that support local businesses and public administrations for accessing digital solutions, expertise, and knowledge. One of the initial steps of DIGITAL was to create a network of EDIHs covering a wide geographical area including **specific local entities to address the specific constraints of Outermost Regions**[4]. This initiative combines the benefits of a local presence and an access to a pan-European network of knowledge and expertise. Under this programme, EDIHs are funded at **50% by DIGITAL, and 50% by the Member States,** other sources of EU funding (e.g. ERDF) associated countries, regional authorities, and/or private sources. High-quality candidates for whom there was no DIGITAL Europe funding available were given a 'Seal of Excellence' and once operational, are integrated into the network. In the first two rounds of restricted calls, 151 projects were chosen and funded. The current EDIHs with a focus on Outermost Regions are the following:

DIGITAL Funded EDIHs specific to the ORs	'Seal of Excellence' EDIHs specific to the ORs	Non-regional EDIHs explicitly active in the ORs
- CIDIHUB (Canarias) - EDIH La Réunion	- Smart Island Hubs (Madeira) - Azores Digital Hub	- Portugal Blue Digital Hub (PBDH)

Links above are available in the footnotes.

Outermost Regions are encouraged to take advantage of this network, in particular the EDIHs specific to these regions since they will be able to propose targeted solutions to boost digital capacities of local SMEs and public authorities.

Complementarity with other programmes

Horizon Europe Programme – DIGITAL and the Horizon Europe Programme have dedicated synergies aimed at complementing each other. The two programmes share some thematic areas but their actions, expected outcomes and intervention approaches are distinct and complementary. Horizon Europe focuses on research, innovation, technological development, and infrastructure support, including digital technologies[5]. In comparison, DIGITAL Europe aims to increase digital capacity and promote knowledge and technology exchange for research and innovation. As digital technologies are developed through Horizon Europe, DIGITAL Europe can progressively adopt and deploy them. Furthermore, both programmes collaborate on skills development, aligning procedures and governance structures to enhance coordination and synergy between them. Accelerating the digital transition through these two programmes can be advantageous for Outermost Regions to bridge the digital divide with the remainder of the EU. More information about Horizon and its opportunities for outermost regions can be found here or on the programme's website here.

Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) – The digital strand of this programme focuses on investments in new digital technologies and infrastructures to ensure that all European citizens are connected, including the Outermost Regions. The synergies between this programme and DIGITAL are complimentary, as CEF-Digital builds and strengthen digital infrastructures such as the deployment of 5G networks or the submarine cable connections to Outermost Regions, while the latter focuses on the utilisation of these new technologies and improving digital skills. Furthermore, the synergies between the two programmes will ensure interoperability and standardisation of new technologies and skills as part of developing the Digital Single Market. More information about the CEF programme can be found on its website here, and about its Digital component here, and a summary fiche presenting the opportunities for outermost regions is available here.

Shared management programmes such as European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), European Social Fund+ (ESF+), European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), and the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF) – Synergies with these initiatives will provide bridges between smart specialisation and support to the digital transformation of EU's society and economy. DIGITAL will also complement and support trans-national networking and mapping of digital capacities to make them accessible for SMEs and ensure interoperability of systems and solutions across all EU regions, including Outermost Regions.

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4. Article 16, "Digital Europe" Programme Regulation

Links: CIDIHUB - https://cidihub.org/
EDIH LA Réunion - https://reunionthd.re/
Smart Island HUbs - https://smartislandshub.eu/index.php/en/
Azores Digital Hub - https://azoresdih.pt/

5. Pillar II, Cluster 4 – Digital, Industry, and Space

Synergies with other programmes such as InvestEU, the Common Agricultural Policy, Erasmus+ (see summary fiche here), Creative Europe (summary fiche for ORs here), and others also exist seeing that digital transformation is a cross-cutting challenge that is relevant for all sectors to promote digital inclusion and boost European competitiveness on a global scale.

Example of funded projects

There has been a handful of projects funded by DIGITAL in the Outermost Regions such as Developing cybersecurity in the digital transition of European outermost regions which aims to reinforce the digital capacities of Very Small Enterprises (VSEs) and SMEs, or the Canary Islands Digital Innovation Hub, a partnership of 10 organisations supporting digital transition in the Canary Islands.

More information

How to apply?

Calls for proposals are published on the EU Funding and Tenders Portal. More information on how to get funding for the DIGITAL programme can be found here, and general information on how to apply for EU calls here.

Currently open calls

Cloud, Data, and AI (deadline 23 January 2024)

- Data Space for Tourism This call (€8 million) aims to develop a common data space for tourism to foster access to information with an expected impact on productivity, greening, and sustainability. It will also allow to better align offers to tourists' expectations.
- Data Space for Cultural Heritage This call (€4 million) aims to support an operational data space for cultural heritage. The objective is to make more high-quality content available, particularly in 3D, foster reuse of digitised cultural resources and provide more opportunities for the community to offer enriched services, thanks to the use of advanced technologies.

Advanced Digital Skills (deadline 21 March 2024)

- Specialised education programmes in key capacity areas – Advanced digital skills analysis This call (€30 million) will help design and deliver education programmes in advanced digital skills for developers and users of advanced digital technologies. These will be created by consortia of education, business, and research organisations.
- Specialised education programmes in key capacity areas Another action (€2 million) will help analyse the advanced digital skills needs in Europe in the key digital areas and strategic sectors.
- Cybersecurity Skills Academy This call (€10 million) aims to launch the Cybersecurity Skills Academy. This will fund the implementation of new trainings and the scale-up of successful ones with a special focus on the needs of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) and public administration.

Applicable EU law

Regulation (EU) 2021/694 establishing the Digital Europe Programme

Other information

Digital Europe Programme: DIGITAL Webpage
Work Programmes: DIGITAL Work Programmes
European Digital Innovation Hubs: EDIHs Webpage, Catalogue of EDIHs
Funding and tenders: Funding & tenders (europa.eu)