J-PAL/CID SOCIAL PROTECTION INITIATIVE

Request for Proposals: Overview and Instructions (Round 3 - 2024)

J-PAL and CID's Social Protection Initiative (SPI) funds randomized evaluations of strategies to improve social protection in low- and middle-income countries. SPI is now calling for proposals from J-PAL affiliates, J-PAL postdocs, researchers affiliated with CID's Evidence for Policy Design (EPoD), and SPI invited researchers for full-scale studies, pilot studies, and travel/proposal development grants. PhD students, with support from an advisor who is a J-PAL affiliate, EPoD faculty affiliate, or SPI invited researcher, are also eligible to apply. **Please see the timelines below for the deadlines associated with different grant types.**

REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS TIMELINE

Date	Milestone
Thursday, April 4, 2024	Proposal submission deadline
May 2024	Funding decisions announced (travel/proposal development grants)
June 2024	Funding decisions announced (pilot and full study grants)

Please note: In past RFPs, SPI requested that applicants submit Expressions of Interest (EOIs) ahead of submitting full proposals. Starting in 2024, we are no longer requiring EOIs–our portal will be open only for full proposal submissions between February 5, 2024 and April 4, 2024.

BACKGROUND

Worldwide, social protection programs are growing in scope to help combat poverty and reduce inequality in low- and middle-income economies. Social protection refers to the wide variety of programs that aim to provide financial assistance to poor families, insure against shocks, and break poverty traps (e.g., cash or in-kind transfers, school feeding programs, public works, active labor market programs, wage subsidies, maternity benefits, and social insurance or pensions). The Covid-19 crisis has further highlighted just how important these programs are in providing a safety net and sustaining livelihoods given challenging economic conditions, as these programs were scaled up quickly in many countries to address the health and economic crisis.

While the body of evidence has been growing on social protection, key evidence gaps remain. To spur a new body of rigorous impact evaluations on social protection, J-PAL and CID established

the Social Protection Initiative (SPI) to fund policy-relevant randomized evaluations on social protection programs in low- and middle-income countries.

EVIDENCE GAPS IN SOCIAL PROTECTION

SPI focuses on developing research around four broad themes:

1. *Social Assistance:* Designing programs aimed at addressing poverty and/or life-cycle challenges in low- and middle-income countries
2. *Social Insurance:* Insuring beneficiaries against shocks (e.g., economic, health, climatic) in low- and middle-income countries
3. *Cross-Cutting Design and Implementation Issues:* Identifying beneficiaries, addressing take-up challenges, and delivering benefits in low- and middle-income countries
4. *Political Considerations:* Examining how politics affects how social protection programs operate in low- and middle-income countries

For an extensive list of open questions and evidence gaps related to these themes, as well as a detailed synthesis of existing evidence on social protection in low- and middle-income countries, please refer to SPI's Evidence Review.

GEOGRAPHIC FOCUS

Projects will be prioritized if they are in the following countries (due to donor preferences):

- **Southeast and East Asia:** Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Mongolia, Myanmar, Philippines, Timor-Leste, Vietnam
- **South and West Asia:** Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Maldives, Nepal, Sri Lanka
- **Pacific:** Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Niue, Papua New Guinea, Republic of Palau, Republic of the Marshall Islands, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu
- Countries in **sub-Saharan Africa**

SPI will also consider projects in any other low- and middle-income country not listed above, though funding for other geographies is more limited.

AWARD TYPES

Three types of proposals will be considered in this round: full-scale studies, pilot studies, and travel/proposal development grants.

Full-scale Studies: These grants are open for studies at a mature level of development. Not only should the research question be clear, but applicants must also demonstrate a commitment from implementing partners, a method of randomization, well-defined instruments, and sample size estimates. Applicants may also request funding to continue research projects that have already started without SPI funding (including those for which field data collection is complete). The expectation is that these projects will result in a paper publishable in a top economics journal. The maximum amount awarded for full-scale studies is $250,000. Suggested period of performance is 24-30 months.

Pilot Studies: These grants are for studies with a clear research question, but for which the design and implementation requires further testing and pilot data. The expectation is that these projects will ultimately develop into full-scale randomized evaluations. The maximum amount awarded for pilot studies is $75,000.[1] Suggested period of performance is one year.

Travel/Proposal Development Grants: These grants cover exploratory work related to preliminary research ideas, such as conducting background research, developing partnerships, visiting field sites, and collecting preliminary data. The expectation is that these funds will be used to support costs related to PI travel to develop a proposal for a pilot or full-scale randomized evaluation during a subsequent call for proposals. The maximum amount awarded for travel/proposal development grants is $7,500. Suggested period of performance is six months.

Please note, initiative pilot and travel grants may be used for activities intended to facilitate access to administrative data for designing or conducting an RCT. Examples of these activities include, but are not limited to, negotiating data use agreements, conducting exploratory data analysis and cleaning, or setting up technical access mechanisms.

Please note that SPI was established to fund randomized impact evaluations of programs and policies being implemented in the field. As a general rule, SPI does not fund pure lab experiments. A proposal may be considered if there is a randomized field evaluation of an underlying program or policy which supplements a lab experiment.

ELIGIBILITY

J-PAL affiliates, J-PAL postdocs, EPoD faculty affiliates, and SPI invited researchers are eligible to apply for any type of SPI funding. Please note that SPI invited researchers are nominated and reviewed on an annual basis, with the review based on a nominee's previous research with a particular emphasis on randomized evaluations related to social protection. All proposals may include collaborators outside of this network.

In addition, PhD students may be eligible to apply for travel/proposal development grants or up to $50,000 in pilot or full-scale funding. To be eligible, PhD students must have a J-PAL affiliate,

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[1] Please note that full evaluations requesting less than $75,000 are considered full research projects and evaluated accordingly. The criteria for pilot funding apply only to proposals requesting funds to conduct piloting, or pre-randomization, activities.

EPoD faculty affiliate, or SPI invited researcher on their thesis committee at their host university. This adviser must provide a letter of support and indicate willingness to remain involved in a supervisory role throughout the lifetime of the project.[2] If the student is pre-thesis, the letter should state "I am actively responsible for supervising this project/research and anticipate being on the student's thesis committee." In addition, in order to apply for up to $50,000 for pilot or full-scale funding, graduate students must provide documented evidence of successful preparatory activities.

Please note that any J-PAL affiliate, J-PAL postdoc, EPoD faculty affiliate, or SPI invited researcher can submit a maximum of three pilot or full-scale proposals within a 12-month period to SPI, either as a main PI or co-PI on a proposal.

Applicants that are delinquent in their deliverables to SPI or other J-PAL initiatives may submit proposals, but will not be eligible to receive additional funding from any J-PAL initiative. You may submit applications to SPI, but your application will not be considered for funding until your deliverables become current.

APPLICATIONS

Proposal applications are due by April 4, 2024. Please submit your application via J-PAL's online portal.

To facilitate your proposal development, we have posted reference application documents on SPI's website that outline in detail all required information that applicants will be asked to provide when submitting a proposal to SPI. You are welcome to begin drafting your proposal materials using these templates, as the fields and content included in these reference documents will be required in the online portal system. Please do not complete or submit these reference documents to SPI for consideration.

REVIEW PROCESS

Proposals are reviewed along five broad criteria: academic contribution, policy relevance, technical design, project viability, and value of research.

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[2] Please note that PhD students are eligible to submit a maximum of two travel/proposal development grant applications and two pilot/full study proposals during their time as graduate students. All else equal, priority will be given to graduate students who have not applied before. Applicants who received travel/proposal development funding as graduate students but have since moved to another institution may only apply for funding to continue that same project, and may not apply for funding for unrelated projects unless they have since become a J-PAL affiliate, EPoD faculty affiliate, or SPI invited researcher.

Full-scale and Pilot Proposals: Selection of awards follows a three-stage process.

- First, proposals are screened by the SPI co-chairs to confirm that they align with SPI's priorities. The most promising candidates for funding are moved to the peer review stage.
- Second, proposals that pass the co-chair screening phase are distributed for peer review to referees selected from a roster of researchers and policy experts on social protection issues assembled by the SPI co-chairs. Each application is reviewed by two referees: one member of the SPI Review Board and one J-PAL affiliate or EPoD faculty affiliate not on the board.
- Third, application proposals are reviewed and scored by the five members of the Review Board, consisting of the SPI co-chairs and three other J-PAL affiliates chosen by the J-PAL Directors. All board members submitting a proposal in the current round of funding are required to recuse themselves from this review.[3] Based on the scores and the comments of the referees, the review board votes on the status of the application. The status of an application can fall into four categories: (1) approved, (2) conditional approval (with minor revisions or clarifications), (3) revise and resubmit during this or a subsequent round, and (4) not approved. _Please note that the revise and resubmit status will be assigned only in very rare circumstances._

Travel/Proposal Development Proposals: The SPI co-chairs review the proposals and make final funding decisions.

Please note that proposals may be shared with SPI's funders, the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and the Livelihood Impact Fund.

If you would like to appeal a decision of the SPI Review Board, please email Initiative Manager Beatriz Velho (bvelho@povertyactionlab.org) within one week of the announcement, detailing the reasons for the request for reconsideration (maximum two pages in length). This request will then be communicated to the reviewers.

EVALUATION CRITERIA

- **Academic Contribution:** Does the study make a significant contribution toward advancing knowledge in the field? Does it answer new questions or introduce novel methods, measures, or interventions? Is there academic relevance? How does the study compare with the existing body of research? Does the research strategy provide a bridge between a practical experiment and underlying economic theories?
- **Policy Relevance:** Does the study address questions crucial to understanding pressing issues on social protection in low- and middle-income countries? Does it address the priority questions outlined in the SPI evidence review? Will results from the intervention

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[3] In addition, no spouse, partner, or immediate family member (parent, child, or sibling) of any individual named on a proposal application may serve as a peer or board referee in the round in which the applicant's proposal is being reviewed.

have broader implications? How, if at all, will the "lessons learned" have relevance beyond this test case? Is there demand from policymakers for more/better information to influence their decisions in this area? Is there potential for the implementing partner to scale up this intervention?

- **Technical Design:** Does the research design appropriately answer the questions outlined in the proposal? Are there threats that could compromise the validity of results? If so, does the proposal sufficiently address those threats? What changes could the researchers make to improve the design?
- **Project Viability:** Is the relationship with the implementing partner strong and likely to endure through the entire study? What is the credibility and policy influence of the implementing partner? Are there any other logistical or political obstacles that might threaten the completion of the study, for example, government authorization or Human Subjects review? For pilots, do researchers describe how piloting activities would inform a full-scale randomized evaluation?
- **Value of Research:** Is the cost of the study commensurate with the value of expected lessons learned? Does the study leverage funding from other sources?

GRANT CONDITIONS

Full-scale and Pilot Grants: If your proposal is selected for funding, the terms of the award will be as follows:

1. **Research conduct**: Grantees will be required to provide copies of all applicable IRB applications and approvals. Specific instructions will be given in the Notice of Award. In addition, they are expected to adhere to MIT's community-wide policies that are available here, as well as policies put in place by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). In particular, please familiarize yourself with the DFAT Ethical Research and Evaluation Guidance Note and the Ethical Practice Checklist.

2. **Peer-review proposals:** Grantees may be requested to peer-review proposals in future SPI rounds.

3. **Project registration:** Before starting fieldwork, researchers must register their RCT with the AEA RCT Registry (http://www.socialscienceregistry.org). Registration includes 18 required fields (such as your name and a small subset of your IRB requirements), and the entire process should take less than 20 minutes if all documentation is in order. There is also the opportunity to include more information, including power calculations and an optional pre-analysis plan. Grantees are required to submit proof of AEA registration with their three-month Start-up Report. Please note that registration is only required for RCTs (not pilots). For questions and support with the registry, please contact the help desk (support@socialscienceregistry.org). *(Full studies only)*

4. **Annual progress reporting:** Grantees will be requested to provide a brief start-up report three months after the start of the award period, annual financial updates, annual progress reports, a final financial report within 60 days of completion of the award period, a final

narrative report either 2 months (*pilots*) or 4 months (*full studies*) after the end of the award period, and (*full studies only*) a final report with preliminary results within 12 months of completion of the award period.

5. **Collecting and reporting program cost data:** Policymakers are interested in program costs, as it is one of the key factors in their decision to support a program. Cost data also allows for cost effectiveness analysis (CEA), which J-PAL may conduct (with permission from the researchers), even if such analysis is not part of an academic paper. In order to facilitate cost collection, SPI awards include $1,000 to defray expenses associated with collecting cost data. SPI will provide a costing worksheet for grantees to update annually. If grantees are unable to collect detailed cost data, grantees are still required to provide estimates of total program cost, average cost per beneficiary, and marginal cost to add another beneficiary. *(Full studies only)*

6. **Collecting and reporting Gender-disaggregated data:** J-PAL, through its Gender sector, is making an effort to study heterogeneity in program impacts by beneficiary/participant gender more systematically. Many studies funded by J-PAL initiatives already collect data on study participants' gender. In such cases, and when outcome data are individual-specific, we request that grantees conduct heterogeneity analyses by beneficiary gender for the study's main results for internal reporting to J-PAL (to be shared in the final grant report). A single study might be underpowered to detect heterogeneous treatment effects, or null results might not seem interesting in one study, but these findings may be meaningful when included in an analysis across studies. J-PAL will use the reported results for (a) determining potential pooled statistical analyses to conduct across studies and (b) generating gender-related policy lessons in Social Protection. Our reporting template will include a question on this, which researchers are encouraged to fill in when applicable.

Please note that the request for gender-disaggregated data only applies to J-PAL internal reports and does not extend to the academic paper or online J-PAL summary. Additionally, we recognize that there will be cases where this reporting is not applicable for various reasons. In these cases, the PIs can just provide a brief explanation to be shared with the Gender sector.

7. **Collecting and reporting data disaggregated by disability status, minority status, and child status:** J-PAL, through its Social Protection sector, is making an effort to study heterogeneity in program impacts for traditionally marginalized groups more systematically. When such individual-specific outcome data are collected, we request that grantees conduct heterogeneity analyses by disability status, minority status, and child status. Please note that this request only applies to J-PAL internal reports and does not extend to the academic paper or online J-PAL summary.

8. **Data publication**: Grantees may be requested to share data collection instruments and methodologies with other grantees. Furthermore, researchers funded through this grant will be required to publish de-identified data in accordance with J-PAL's Data and Code Availability Policy. J-PAL's research team can work with you to clean, label, de-identify, document and replicate datasets collected as part of a randomized trial before publishing

them in the J-PAL Dataverse or another data repository of your choice. Requests for data publication services can be made by sending an email to data@povertyactionlab.org. (*Full studies only*)

9. **Participate in SPI activities:** Grantees may be requested to participate in one of the SPI's activities at a mutually agreed time and place. Activities may include evidence workshops, matchmaking conferences, or presentations to one of SPI's donors.

10. **Credit SPI**: Any presentations and publications, including academic papers, policy briefs, press releases, blogs, and organizational newsletters that emerge from this project should credit the J-PAL/CID Social Protection Initiative. The exact wording on crediting SPI and donor support will be provided in the terms of your award.

Travel/Proposal Development Grants: If your proposal is selected for funding, the terms of the award will be as follows:

1. **Research Conduct**: Grantees will be required to provide copies of all applicable IRB applications and approvals. Specific instructions will be given in the Notice of Award. In addition, they are expected to adhere to MIT's community-wide policies that are available here, as well as policies put in place by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). In particular, please familiarize yourself with the DFAT Ethical Research and Evaluation Guidance Note and the Ethical Practice Checklist.

2. **Submit report**: Grantees are required to submit a brief report within 30 days of completing travel. If the travel/proposal development work results in non-initiative-funded follow-on projects, grantees should inform SPI as part of their final report or upon receipt of additional funding.

3. **Participate in SPI activity**: Grantees agree to participate in one SPI activity or event. SPI will cover associated costs.

4. **Credit SPI**: Any presentations and publications, including academic papers, policy briefs, press releases, blogs, and organizational newsletters that emerge from this project should credit the J-PAL/CID Social Protection Initiative. The exact wording on crediting SPI and donor support will be provided in the terms of your award.

ADMINISTRATIVE NOTES

Full and pilot grants are paid on a cost reimbursement model, through a subaward contract from MIT to the Institute to Receive Award (ITRA). Travel/proposal development grants are paid as travel reimbursements. For more information on budget, requirements, and process, please see instructions in the relevant application forms, for which reference documents exist on the SPI webpage.

For subward contracts established between MIT and the ITRA, MIT requires that there is a subawardee PI at the ITRA who will be responsible for overseeing the work on the ground. This may be one of the academic co-PI's or it may be a non-academic PI, such as the Executive Director or Director of Research of the ITRA. This person must be formally affiliated with the ITRA. Affiliation could be as a professor, associate professor, staff, fellow, or some other type of relationship that is recognized by the university or organization. If a PI team plans to work with IPA or a similar research implementation organization and uses that organization as their ITRA, then the PI team should flag this in their application and the research implementation organization should submit a letter showing their willingness to take on the project if funding is awarded. A J-PAL Affiliation or J-PAL Invited Researcher status does not constitute an official affiliation with J-PAL regional office host universities.

J-PAL is committed to ensuring a high level of compliance and security for all of our subawardees. In a recent discussion of our subaward process, MIT raised an important compliance issue when the institute to receive award (ITRA) is different from the IRB of record. In order to be compliant, there must be a clear and documented link between the IRB of record and the implementing organization who receives the funding (the ITRA). If your ITRA is not the same as your IRB of record, the ITRA must be named as a site involved in the research on the IRB and the subawardee PI at the ITRA must also be listed on the IRB, as this person is accepting responsibility for the research taking place at said institution.

Please note that indirect charges are limited to 10 percent of direct costs for universities from high-income countries (most OECD countries; please reach out to spi@povertyactionlab.org with questions), and 15 percent for universities from low- or middle-income countries and independent non-profits regardless of location.

GUIDANCE FOR WORKING WITH A PRIVATE SECTOR PARTNER

J-PAL funding will be awarded with the presumption that money will be used only for academic/research costs (e.g., RA time, survey collection, participant incentives, etc.). If the budget includes funding to cover activities such as, but not limited to, focus groups, product design, marketing, or any other direct costs that would normally be funded by a business as part of its day-to day operations, the application should explain why the implementer/firm cannot bear these costs in the budget narrative. In general, activities that would occur anyway even absent the research should not be funded, while those that should typically be covered by the firm but would not have been implemented without research should be justified.

As in all J-PAL projects, PIs should ensure a written agreement which safeguards the PI's intellectual freedom to publish. This includes specifying who owns the data and ensuring that any third party's right of review is limited to preventing the disclosure of confidential information.

A Data Use Agreement should be in place when using administrative data provided by the company. Though it is not a requirement that the partner be named in the paper, the decision of

whether to do so should be made in writing and ex ante so that it does not depend on the results.

CODE OF CONDUCT

Since J-PAL is part of MIT, everyone who is associated with J-PAL, including researchers worldwide receiving grants from J-PAL initiatives, are considered part of the broader MIT community. Therefore, it is our hope and expectation that they will adhere to MIT's community-wide policies that are available here. A part of MIT's broader policies, this section, titled "Relations and Responsibilities Within the MIT Community," contains specific provisions regarding personal conduct, harassment, discrimination and retaliation, violence against community members, and substance use. Please take some time to review these.

Because almost all researchers we work with are also part of other university communities, they may also be subject to their host universities' policies and procedures. Many of these policies may be very similar to the MIT policies above. Finally, many researchers are separately affiliated with other academic associations and organizations, including the American Economic Association, and they should continue to abide by the codes of conduct established by the associations and organizations to which they belong. The AEA's code of conduct is available here.

If anyone wishes to report that a researcher has violated MIT community policies, they should consult the individuals and offices identified in the relevant policies linked above. In addition, all violations can be directly reported to any of the following J-PAL contacts for further action: (i) Global Executive Director; (ii) any of the regional Executive Directors; (iii) Cindy Smith (Global Director of Finance and Operations); or (iv) Anna Omura (Associate Director of Finance and Operations).

RELATED INITIATIVES

Please do not submit the same proposal to more than one J-PAL or IPA initiative at the same time. Before applying to SPI, consider whether your proposal may be better suited for the J-PAL Digital Identification and Finance Initiative in Africa (DigiFI), J-PAL Governance Initiative (GI), J-PAL Inclusive Financial Innovation Initiative (IFII), or J-PAL Innovation in Government Initiative (IGI). These initiatives share similar themes and, in some cases, geographic focus, and support rigorous research that will lead to policy relevant findings. If you are uncertain about which initiative to apply to, please contact spi@povertyactionlab.org.

Digital Identification and Finance Initiative in Africa (DigiFI): DigiFI aims to generate rigorous evidence on how African governments, private companies, and NGOs can leverage digital payments and identification systems to improve lives through better public service delivery, governance, and financial inclusion.

Governance Initiative (GI): GI funds randomized evaluations of interventions designed to improve participation in the political and policy process, reduce corruption and leakages, and strengthen state capacity.

Inclusive Financial Innovation Initiative (IFII): IFII aims to generate evidence on what digital financial services (DFS) work, why they work, and how they can be deployed to maximize impact.

Innovation in Government Initiative (IGI): IGI funds technical assistance to governments to adapt, pilot, and scale evidence-informed innovations with a strong potential to improve the lives of millions of people living in poverty.

FUNDING

Support for the Social Protection Initiative is provided by the Australian Government through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and the Livelihood Impact Fund.