

Jobs and Opportunity Initiative (JOI) and Social Protection Initiative (SPI): PILOT STUDY PROPOSAL GUIDELINES

This document contains an [Overview](#), [Budget Guidelines](#), an [Application Checklist](#), and a [Main Proposal Template](#) for Pilot studies. Please read this document carefully before submitting your proposal.

Submission instructions: To respond to this RFP, all applicants must first **submit the required Letter of Interest on WizeHive, using the relevant application link from the JOI and/or SPI RFP webpages, and following the Applicant Instructions here.** Successful applicants will receive an invitation to proceed with their full proposal materials.

OVERVIEW

Pilot grants are for studies with a clear research question, but for which the design and implementation requires further testing and pilot data. Pilots are not required to include randomized methodology as long as they test for the logistics or first stage results of a treatment/policy intervention using administrative data or surveys or build a monitoring system. The expectation is that these projects will ultimately develop into full-scale randomized evaluations. The maximum amount awarded for a pilot study is US\$75,000. **You should apply as a pilot if the funded work lays the groundwork for a future randomized evaluation because it:**

- tests the efficacy of an intervention or an evaluation design, and acquires data that is qualitative or quantitative in nature, e.g. measuring take up, and/or
- serves as a diagnostic to reveal the behavior of value chain actors, barriers to technology adoption or market access, or the potential for profitability of an intervention under “real world” conditions, and/or
- facilitates 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.

In addition, pilot proposals should:

- have a very clear research question that assesses the feasibility of using a randomized

evaluation to answer this question.

- **clearly articulate the conceptual and methodological distinction between the pilot study and any future follow-on studies, and what exactly the pilot will enable researchers to learn.** The narrative should include a **solid justification for why a pilot is needed, what will be learned, and what a future RCT informed by this exploratory research could contribute to specific topics addressed in the RFP's research agenda.**

If your research design includes randomization to assess the impact of an intervention, please apply for full RCT funding.

Funding per Pilot award: Limited to US\$75,000 or less; eligible PhD students can apply for up to US\$50,000.

Project Timeline: Both the JOI soft skills window and the JOI/SPI joint window cannot fund projects beyond October 31, 2027.

BUDGET GUIDELINES

It is your responsibility that your budget follows your host institution's policies for costs, and **you must submit a letter from the institution to receive the award that states that they have reviewed your proposal and accepted your budget.**¹

Guidelines for completing a Pilot proposal budget: Please submit a detailed project budget using the RCT/Pilot Budget Template provided on the [JOI](#) and [SPI](#) RFP release pages. To reduce processing time, please keep the following in mind:

- **Institute to Receive Award (ITRA) and Principal Investigator (PI) Alignment:**
 - The ITRA must employ the PI formally named in the award. This formally-named PI will be the researcher responsible for the subaward agreement, as authorized by the Letter of Transmission. The formally-named PI must be:
 - An employee of the ITRA, and
 - PI named in the Letter of Transmission, and
 - The main PI named in the IRB approval and IRB application
- **Institutional Review Board (IRB) Requirements:**

¹ If the organization allows you to submit your proposal without such a letter (due to time constraints or some other reason), please describe this in the notes section. Please note that this applies to all projects, including those going through J-PAL and IPA offices. You should contact them in advance to make sure you are aware of their policies for proposal review and give them enough time to meet the proposal deadline.

- o The IRB is held by the institution that enters into the subaward agreement with MIT. The IRB must have [IORG](#) status and [FWA](#), or
 - o If the institution does not have its own IRB, the institution must engage the services of a commercial IRB or third party IRB to review and provide oversight for the research activities.
- Please refer to the [Award Requirements and Setup Process](#) in the RFP Overview document to review all of the JOI and SPI award requirements in detail as part of preparing your submission.
- Only projects with co-funding should complete both Excel sheets in the template, i.e. both “Total Project Budget” AND “Initiative Budget” (i.e. what you’re requesting from the Initiative) in the budget template. **If the project has other funders, the proposal should clearly explain the marginal contribution of the requested funds from JOI and/or SPI.**
- **Applications must include a brief Budget Narrative document detailing the major costs within the budget in addition to the Excel template.**
- Applicants should review J-PAL best practices on questionnaire design and data collection/management in the [J-PAL Research Protocol Checklist](#), to ensure they have budgeted for expenses associated with piloting and surveyor training, survey translation, field spot checks, and back checking.
- **Awards are paid on a cost-reimbursable basis.** However, MIT may agree to advance payments via a milestone payment structure to Institutes to Receive Award that are based in low- and middle-income countries on a case-by-case basis if requested by the research team. Please note that preparing an advance payment model requires additional time and additional coordination between MIT and the Institute to Receive Award.

Allowable Direct and Indirect Costs

- **Please note that J-PAL Initiatives do not cover PI salaries with the exception of PIs who completed a PhD and are based at an academic institution in a middle- or low- income country (LMIC).**
 - o Pilots may cover up to US\$8,000 per LMIC PI/co-PI, but the total budgeted amount for LMIC PI time should not exceed 25% of the total budget.
- **Project Implementation Costs: For full research projects, implementation costs are expected to be borne by the project partners.** J-PAL funds the costs of the evaluation, not the intervention. However, under some circumstances, initiatives can fund implementation costs where it is a marginal addition to an existing program to offset costs from an experiment (e.g., adding an additional treatment arm or the costs of an encouragement design). These types of costs might include travel, small participant incentives, and/or texting fees.

- Proposals requesting funds for implementation are required to explain why the implementer cannot bear the costs in the budget narrative and must also justify the input costs (e.g., if texting fees are requested as an implementation cost, the budget narrative should include a breakdown of how many texts are planned, the estimated cost per texts, number of people on a given campaign, etc.).
- Universities in high-income countries (according to the [World Bank classification](#)) can charge up to 10% in indirect costs, applied to total direct costs.
- Non-university non-profits from any location and universities from mid- or low-income countries may charge up to 15% in indirect costs, applied to total direct costs.
- Grantees may have reasonable project support costs included in budgets as direct costs. Such costs should be reasonable and explained in the budget narrative.
- Unallowable costs include those labeled as “incidental,” “miscellaneous,” or “contingency.”
 - Office Rent: Any requests for office rent should be explained in the budget narrative.
- J-PAL will only reimburse the lowest available economy/cabin/coach flights. Please review [J-PAL's travel reimbursement policies](#) before completing your budget.

APPLICATION CHECKLIST

Please complete all sections in the online portal (WizeHive) by the full proposal deadline. You must upload several documents to complete your full proposal. All templates for these documents are provided at both the [JOI](#) and [SPI](#) RFP release webpages and listed below.

1. **Proposal Narrative:** Guidance pertaining to the narrative prompts is included in the [Main Proposal Template](#) below. As part of the proposal narrative, you will be required to provide a research timeline.
2. **Proposal Budget:** Carefully review the Budget Guidelines in this document, then use the [RCT/Pilot Budget Template](#) provided on the [JOI](#) and [SPI](#) RFP release pages, which must be completed in its entirety and saved as a single Excel file with the title: [Project Name][Budget].xls(x).
3. **Budget Narrative:** Detail the major costs within the budget, referring to the Budget Guidelines above, in a Word document with the title [Project Name][Budget Narrative].doc(x). This document is required in addition to the Proposal Budget -- i.e. notes included in the Excel sheet do not suffice.
4. **Letter(s) of Support:** It is your responsibility to obtain a letter of support from the following list, ensuring that the language meets the conditions as listed. The review board values the partner/institution/advisor confirmation of willingness to work with the

research team in review of the proposals. **The initiative team will carefully check the language of each letter and that it has been received on time.** Please upload the file as a single PDF file with the title [PI Last Name, First Name] [Name of Organization Letter of Support].pdf. If any of your letters are not in English, please upload a version that has been translated to English. Given that there can be changes to government and partner support, we request that letters are no more than six months old at the time of submission.

- a. A letter from the institution to receive the award that states that they have reviewed your proposal and accepted your budget.
- b. letters from each implementing partner, indicating the details of their commitment to partner on the pilot.
- c. **PhD students applying as the primary PI are required to include a letter of support from an affiliate or invited researcher who is eligible for this call.** The letter should indicate the **affiliate or invited researcher's** willingness to be an adviser and to remain involved in a supervisory role throughout the lifetime of the project. The J-PAL-affiliated researcher must be serving or be planning to serve as an advisor on the PhD student's dissertation committee.

5. **Validation and Test Accuracy data: Proposals that include Artificial Intelligence (AI) or any new specialized technology should include validation and test accuracy data in the proposal,** showing that the technology successfully does what it intends.

MAIN PROPOSAL TEMPLATE

Important Information

Review boards appreciate brief or aspects of the study that are more conventional and straightforward, concise answers (which may be well below the word limit) are appreciated.

If a question asks for information you have already provided elsewhere in this form, simply indicate this and reference the title of the question where your answer can be found. Please do not copy and paste the answer again.

Subaward Setup

For grants with **human subject research**, once all materials including IRB approvals/exemptions have been received, MIT typically takes 90 days to establish the subaward. Please provide conservative rather than optimistic estimates for start and end dates to reduce the likelihood of needing to submit no-cost extension requests.

To ensure that your intended ITRA/PI/IRB combination meets MIT's requirements, please thoroughly review and understand the linked FAQ document. ([FAQ: MIT Policy Concerning Subawards, ITRA, and IRB](#)). Reach out to joi_grant_admin@povertyactionlab.org and spi_grant_admin@povertyactionlab.org with any questions.

Full Title of Proposal

Please enter your proposal title. If it hasn't changed since your LOI, copy the original title. *[30 words max/ 200 characters]*

Funding Amount

Please enter the amount of requested funding in USD. This should match the amount indicated in your uploaded budget. *[2 decimal places; Currency; USD]*

Proposed Period of Performance Start Date

What is the proposed start date for this J-PAL grant's activities?

Proposed Period of Performance End Date

What is the proposed end date for this J-PAL grant's activities? Please note that both the JOI soft skills window and the JOI/SPI joint window cannot fund projects beyond October 31, 2027.

Existing Research Project Funded by J-PAL

Are you applying to fund additional research as part of an existing research project previously funded by J-PAL (e.g., a second proposal development grant continuing from a prior proposal development grant, a pilot grant building on a travel/proposal development, a full RCT building on a pilot, etc.)? *[Yes;No]*

Existing Research Project Details

Please provide the title and/or J-PAL grant number of your previously funded project. Please explain how the project has progressed since it was last submitted to J-PAL. If applicable, please upload your most recent narrative report for this project in the Additional Attachments section at the end of this application. *[250 words max]*

Narrative

We recognize that proposals may evolve and change between the LOI and full proposal submission. To ensure your project's information is up to date, we request that you resubmit your answers to the next two fields.

Final Abstract

Write a brief abstract of the study. Please note that this abstract will be added to the Initiative's webpage if the project receives funding. If nothing has substantially changed since the LOI submission, please copy the original response here. *[200 words max]*

Final Research Focus Areas and/or Cross-Cutting Themes

Indicate which Initiative focus areas or themes your proposal relates to; these are described in detail in the RFP materials. If nothing has changed since the LOI submission, please select the original response here. For reference, the JOI and/or SPI research focus areas and/or cross-cutting themes are:

1. Job Creation
2. Training and Matching
3. Social Protection
4. Identifying which soft skills matter, for whom, and under what conditions

5. Leveraging soft skills to increase the effectiveness of broader labor markets and private sector development policies and programs
6. Do soft skills interventions require tackling other constraints to be effective?
7. Improving implementation quality and scalability of soft skills interventions

The Policy Problem

Provide a summary of the policy problem that motivates this research, explaining its importance and how it aligns with the research priorities in the RFP Overview. Support your case with descriptive data, a brief literature review, or other evidence of the problem in this setting. Save finer details of the intervention for the Intervention Details question below. *[250 words max]*

Research Relevance

Describe the knowledge gap your project addresses, how it will advance the field, and why the research is valuable. *[250 words]*

Intervention Details

Describe the intervention or treatment to be evaluated in the full RCT if this pilot is successful. While the final intervention design to be evaluated in a full RCT may differ from the pilot, please provide enough detail about the planned intervention for the committee to assess its potential. Please name the implementing partner(s), specify the target population and describe how the intervention will affect specific outcomes of interest that will be measured in the study. Demonstrate meaningful *ex ante* uncertainty about the results of the study, i.e., that given existing evidence there are both reasons to believe the intervention(s) studied are promising and also reasons to doubt whether they will achieve their goals. *[400 words max]*

Pilot Evaluation Design

Provide a brief description of the pilot evaluation design. While a pilot itself does not need to be a randomized trial, it should be designed to provide the information needed to design a randomized trial that can be implemented effectively. What information is needed to show that a good trial can be run will vary by study. Describe the knowledge gap your project addresses, how it will advance the field, and why the research is valuable. In your description, please include the following:

- a. Describe what information you aim to gather through this pilot and how the activities proposed will help fill key design or implementation gaps.
- b. Describe how the proposed activities inform the relevance and design of a potential follow-on proposal for a full RCT.

- c. Please also discuss anticipated treatment groups, data collection and measurement plans, key outcomes, and your theory of change.
- d. Optional Preliminary Power Calculations - If the pilot is a “mini-RCT,” please provide power calculations. In your response, please consider:
 - i. The preliminary power calculations for the expected design of the eventual full-scale RCT should be detailed, convincing, and well-justified, e.g., based on assumptions from existing literature and/or what you learned from your travel/proposal development activities, for any impacts that the research team plans to measure.
 - ii. Power calculations should quantitatively demonstrate that the study is well-powered enough to detect effects on the outcome(s) of interest that would be practically or conceptually meaningful.
 - iii. Proposals should articulate which null hypotheses are relevant for this exercise and why (in particular, not assuming that the null of zero impact is necessarily the relevant one).
 - iv. For more detailed information about power calculations, see this resource: <https://www.povertyactionlab.org/resource/power-calculations>.

[600 words max]

AI: Validation and Test Accuracy Data

Proposals that include Artificial Intelligence (AI) or any new specialized technology should include validation and test accuracy data in the proposal, showing that the technology successfully does what it intends. If applicable, please provide that validation and test accuracy data here, or attach it in the "additional attachments" section. If not applicable, please write "N/A." *[200 words max]*

Timeline

Please write out a timeline with key project activities. Please note that both the JOI soft skills window and the JOI/SPI joint window cannot fund projects beyond October 31, 2027. *[200 words max]*

Local Researchers

Please describe whether/how the project involves researchers local to the project context. *[100 words max]*

Implications on Equity and Social Inclusion

Please comment on whether the research proposal addresses equity or social inclusion. Topics of social inclusion include but are not limited to: gender, income level, location, ethnicity, race, language, citizenship status, disability, and the intersection of multiple factors. Explain whether and how the project design allows us to learn about baseline between and differential impacts on groups mentioned above. Explain which reasons (if any) there are to expect that the intervention(s) studied may have disproportionate benefits for disadvantaged groups. *[200 words max]*

Reporting Requirements

Gender Analysis and Reporting

Pilot grantees are required to report on gender-disaggregated impacts. Please confirm “Yes” or “No” that you will disaggregate data and outcomes by gender. If you respond No, please briefly explain why this would not be feasible. *[200 words max]*

Potential Risks

To protect research participants, staff, and community members, to comply with donor requirements, and to maintain a strong reputation for ethical research, J-PAL wants researchers to think carefully about the risks their research projects could face and how they will address such risks. Successful applicants must provide updated answers in annual narrative reports only if there have been substantial changes since their proposal or last annual narrative report. **Please answer the following questions in detail:**

Completion Risks

Are there any technical, logistical, ethical, or political obstacles and risks that might threaten the completion of the project (e.g., technical platform not ready, implementation capacity, government authorization, or other funding)? How do you plan to monitor and prevent/address these types of risks throughout the project? *[200 words max]*

Implementing Partners Risks

Please discuss any information about the implementing partner(s) that could pose ethical, reputational, or legal risks (e.g., child safeguarding, corruption or misuse of funds, etc.). If applicable, what proactive measures have you taken or will you take to assess, monitor, and mitigate/prevent any such potential risks? *[200 words max]*

Participants, Staff, Community Members Risks

For each of the groups below, please describe any potential unintended consequences or risks of this project to them. What proactive measures have you taken or will you take to assess, monitor, and mitigate/prevent any such potential risks?

- a. Program and research participants
- b. Staff (e.g., implementing partners, research assistants, enumerators)
- c. Community members (e.g., untreated members of a household, untreated neighbors, or broader communities if the treatment might have spillover or downstream effects beyond the study sample)

[200 words max]

Contractual Limitations

Are there any contractual limitations on the ability of the researchers to report the results of the study? If so, what are those restrictions, and who are they from? *[200 words max]*

Child Safeguarding

Particularly for projects working with children, what child safeguarding risks exist? *[200 words max]*

Partnership Questions Important Information

In this section, please provide details about the organizations or entities collaborating on your project. These may include field research implementers, government agencies, co-funders, and technology providers. You can list up to three key partners.

Partnership Status

Have you established communication with relevant stakeholders including but not limited to government agencies and implementing partners, for research collaboration?

[Yes; No] If your answer is yes, please answer the following questions below:

J-PAL Regional Office Support

If your project takes place in a country that has a J-PAL office but that office is not your research implementation partner, please explain why you chose not to work with them. Your answer will help us understand how J-PAL offices can better respond to the needs of PIs. If your research implementation partner is a J-PAL office, please write its name below. If your project is in a country without a J-PAL office, please write “N/A.” *[100 words max]*

Name of Partner Organization

Indicate the name(s) of the partner organization. *[30 words]*

Role of Partner Organization

Indicate the role of the organization on this project.

[Co-funder; Scale-up Partner; Research Partner; Intervention Implementation Partner; Government Partner, Tech Partner]

Partner Description

Please provide a brief description of the partner(s), the partner's involvement in project activities, and any in-kind or financial support they have committed or provided to the project. If you are adding a co-funder as a partner, please indicate the total amount of received or committed funding, the funded proposal or project title, and the name of the primary PI for the co-funded proposal or project. *[250 words max]*

Point of Contact Based at the Partner Organization

Please provide details about your point of contact at the partner organization. [First Name, Last Name, Role or Title, Email Address]

You can enter up to three partner organizations.

Institutional Review Board and Institute to Receive Award

To ensure that your intended ITRA/PI/IRB combination meets MIT's requirements, please thoroughly review the linked FAQ document. ([FAQ: MIT Policy Concerning Subawards, ITRA, and IRB](#)). Reach out to joi_grant_admin@povertyactionlab.org and spi_grant_admin@povertyactionlab.org with any questions.

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

For awards that include human subject research, IRB approvals (including exemptions) are required to be in place prior to a subaward agreement being issued and prior to any human subjects research commencing. If this proposal receives initiative funding, you will be required to submit:

1. All IRB approval(s) or exemption(s), and
2. All IRB-approved protocols, and
3. Any IRB-approved consent forms

Institutional Review Board (IRB) Requirements

Please be mindful that MIT requires that either:

1. The IRB is held by the institution that enters into the subaward agreement with MIT.
The IRB must have IORG status and FWA (as described below), or
2. If the institution does not have its own IRB, the institution must engage the services of a commercial IRB or third party IRB to review and provide oversight for the research activities.

For the IRB to be considered allowable, it must meet the following criteria as determined by MIT and J-PAL:

1. [IORG status](#) with the US Office for Human Protections. An IRB's status can be checked by consulting the database of IORGs [here](#).
2. [Federalwide Assurance \(FWA\)](#) with the US Office for Human Protections. Status can be checked by consulting the same database as above ([link here](#)).
3. If the IRB is not at the ITRA, then a proof of payment or proof of affiliation is required. Affiliation can be proven with documentation outlining the contractual relationship between the two entities (ITRA and IRB). This proof is most commonly a proof of payment from the ITRA to the IRB. MIT will not accept an Interagency Agreement (IAA) as this documentation.

Approved commercial IRB solutions are [Heartland](#) and [Solutions](#). These IRBs provide review of international research and satisfy J-PAL's IRB requirements; fees can be found on their respective websites. Please ensure that you include the cost of the IRB in your project budget.

IRB of Record

Please provide the name of the IRB of Record below. *[15 words/ 70 characters max]*

Is this IRB of Record IORG certified?

[Yes, No]

Local Legal Requirements Certification

All PIs and Co-PIs certify that they understand they must adhere to all local legal requirements, including obtaining local IRB approval and government research permits, where applicable. Do you agree? *[Yes, No]*

Institute to Receive Award (ITRA) and Principal Investigator (PI) Alignment

The ITRA must employ the PI formally named in the award. This formally-named PI will be the researcher responsible for the subaward agreement, as authorized by the Letter of Transmission that is submitted at the Proposal and Award stages. The formally-named PI must be:

1. An employee of the ITRA, and
2. PI named in the Letter of Transmission, and
3. The main PI named in the IRB approval and IRB application

Institute to Receive Award (ITRA)

Please indicate the institution that will receive the grant funds. *[15 words/70 characters max]*

Contact at Institute to Receive Award (ITRA)

Please provide contact information for the person who will be in charge of the contract at the ITRA. *[First Name; Last Name; Role or Title; Email Address; up to 1 contact]*

Unique Entity ID

Does your ITRA have a Unique Entity ID (UEI) from the website SAM.gov? Please note that, if your proposal is awarded funding, all subawardees of MIT require a UEI from SAM.gov.

1. Yes, my ITRA has a UEI
2. No, my ITRA does not have a UEI
3. I am not sure

Budget

Budget Template

From the [JQI](#) or [SPI](#) RFP webpages, download and complete the Pilot Budget Template. There are two tabs: one for the initiative-specific budget and one for the project budget (i.e., the initiative-specific budget plus any other sources of funding you may have). When done, please upload your completed budget in the field below. Please note that the budget template is formatted specifically for this application. Do not remove the formatting, change any of the formatting, or create new columns. *[File upload]*

Budget Upload

Please upload a single Excel file with the title: [PI Last Name, First Name][Budget].xls(x) *[File upload]*

Budget Narrative

Please justify the expenses outlined in your budget in a Word document with the title [PI Last Name, First Name][Budget Narrative].doc(x), and upload it here. This document is required in addition to the Proposal Budget. Notes included in the Excel sheet of the budget do not suffice. [\[File upload\]](#)

Letters of Support & Additional Materials

Letter of Support from Implementing Partner

Pilot projects are recommended to provide a letter of support from their implementing partner. This letter should indicate a willingness to work with the research team. [\[File upload\]](#)

Letter of Support from ITRA

Applicants are required to provide a letter or document stating approval of the proposal materials and budget from each proposed institute to receive award (ITRA). Please note that MIT policy states that the project PI needs to be at the ITRA and that the ITRA should provide the IRB (either using the Institute's IRB or a third party IRB). The Project PI must be the PI on the IRB. [\[File upload\]](#)

Are you applying as a PhD student?

[\[Yes, No\]](#)

J-PAL Affiliate or Invited Researcher Letter of Support

If yes, include the **J-PAL Affiliate or Invited Researcher Letter of Support**. PhD student applicants are required to submit a letter of support from a J-PAL Affiliate or Invited Researcher who serves as an advisor on the applicant's dissertation committee. This letter should indicate the advisor's willingness to advise the student throughout the project's lifetime. Please note that in some cases, the advisor may be asked to add their name to the financial award and IRB documents. If your advisor would rather submit this letter confidentially, ask them to email it to joi_grant_admin@povertyactionlab.org and spi_grant_admin@povertyactionlab.org. If the advisor submits the letter by email, the PhD student will need to bypass this upload field by uploading a blank document. [\[File upload\]](#)

Additional Attachments

Please attach any relevant materials discussed in your answers to the previous questions or required by the initiative. *[File upload]*