

## **J-PAL/EPoD SOCIAL PROTECTION INITIATIVE: OVERVIEW & INSTRUCTIONS**

Round 1 – 2022

*J-PAL and EPoD'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, EPoD faculty affiliates, and SPI invited researchers for 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. **Expressions of interest are due by March 4, 2022. Proposals are due by March 18, 2022.***

### **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 (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) that aim to provide financial assistance to poor families, insure against shocks, and break poverty traps. 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 EPoD 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 three broad themes:

1. *Reaching who we want to reach:* Identifying beneficiaries for targeted programs in low- and middle-income countries
2. *Program design and impacts:* Designing social protection programs for the low- and middle-income country context
3. *Responding to shocks:* Insuring beneficiaries against shocks (e.g., economic, health, climatic) in low- and middle-income countries

For a list of example open questions and evidence gaps related to these themes, as well as a very high-level overview of existing evidence, please refer to [this document](#).

## **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

SPI will also consider projects in Asian countries not listed above, Latin America and the Caribbean, the Middle East and North Africa, and sub-Saharan Africa, though funding for these geographies is more limited.

## **FUNDS**

Two types of proposals will be considered in this round: pilot studies and travel/proposal development grants. Proposals for full-scale studies will be considered in future RFP rounds, once the SPI research agenda has been finalized and published in the initiative's evidence review.

*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.

*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 \$10,000.

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 funding. To be eligible, PhD students must have a J-PAL affiliate, EPoD faculty affiliate, or SPI invited researcher on their thesis committee at their host university. This advisor must provide a letter of support and indicate willingness to remain involved in a supervisory role throughout the lifetime of the project.<sup>1</sup> 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 proposals within a 12-month period to SPI, either as a main PI or co-PI on a proposal.

## APPLICATIONS

***Researchers should submit an expression of interest by March 4, 2022. Proposal applications are due by March 18, 2022.*** To apply, please follow the instructions in the **Pilot Study Application Form** or the **Travel/Proposal Development Grant Application Form** on the [SPI RFP page](#) and submit your proposal via email to [spi@povertyactionlab.org](mailto:spi@povertyactionlab.org).

## REVIEW PROCESS

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

*Pilot Proposals:* Selection of awards follows a three-stage process.

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<sup>1</sup> 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 to SPI. 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.

- 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.<sup>2</sup> 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 funder, the [Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade \(DFAT\)](#).

If you would like to appeal a decision of the SPI Review Board, please email Initiative Manager Emily Romano ([eromano@povertyactionlab.org](mailto:eromano@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.

## TIMELINE

January 31, 2022	RFP is issued
March 4, 2022	Expression of interest deadline
March 18, 2022	Proposal submission deadline
Early May 2022	Results announced

## GRANT CONDITIONS

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

<sup>2</sup> 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.

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. **Annual progress reporting:** Grantees will be requested to provide a brief start-up report, annual narrative and financial reports, and final narrative and financial reports within 60 days of completion of the award period.
4. **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. Please note that the following request only applies to J-PAL internal reports and does not extend to the academic paper or online J-PAL summary.

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. 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.

5. **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 the following request only applies to J-PAL internal reports and does not extend to the academic paper or online J-PAL summary.
6. **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 the SPI's donors.
7. **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/EPoD Social Protection Initiative with the following text and link: "This research is funded by the J-PAL/EPoD Social Protection Initiative with support from the Australian Government

through the [Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade](#). The views expressed in this publication are the author's alone and are not necessarily the views of the Australian Government.”

*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/EPoD Social Protection Initiative with the following text and link: “This research is funded by the J-PAL/EPoD Social Protection Initiative with support from the Australian Government through the [Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade](#). The views expressed in this publication are the author's alone and are not necessarily the views of the Australian Government.”

## ADMINISTRATIVE NOTES

Pilot grants are provided under a subaward contract from MIT to the Institute to Receive Award. Travel/proposal development grants are paid as travel reimbursements. For more information on budget, requirements, and process, please see instructions in the respective application form and instructions document. These and all other materials needed to apply for pilot and travel/proposal development grants are available on the [SPI webpage](#).

## 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), or J-PAL Inclusive Financial Innovation Initiative (IFII). 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](mailto: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.

## **FUNDING**

Support for the Social Protection Initiative is provided by the Australian Government through the [Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade \(DFAT\)](#).