

July 2023



Mastering Grant Proposal Writing

Increasing Locally-Grounded and Southern-Led Researchers



Presentation Team



Clare Hofmeyr

**Education & Training
Manager**
J-Pal Africa

Eitan Paul

Research Manager
J-Pal Global- MIT

Nkechi S. Owoo

**Associate Professor of
Economics**
University of Ghana

Bianca-Marie Livio

**Senior Program Development
Associate**
IPA

Rachel Steinacher

**Director of
Program and Business
Development**
IPA



Clare Hofmeyr is an Education & Training Manager at J-PAL Africa. She leads J-PAL Africa's training activities as well as the drive to increase the representation of African researchers within J-PAL's network and experimental economics. Prior to joining the J-PAL team in 2021, Clare worked in the field of monitoring and evaluation for mothers2mothers and Firdale Consulting. Her previous experience includes conducting training, policy writing and communications work at SALDRU, as well as at J-PAL Africa, where she was part of the first team when the office opened in 2010. Clare holds a Master's in Applied Economics from the University of Cape Town, and a Bachelor's in Economics and Finance from the University of KwaZulu-Natal.





Eitan Paul is Research Manager at J-PAL Global at MIT. He manages J-PAL's researcher pipeline activities, research staff trainings, and resources. Eitan also conducts his own research related to political economy and governance in Southeast Asia. Eitan has served as principal investigator and co-investigator for several randomized evaluations and other studies related to social accountability, democratic representation, and the distribution of public goods in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam. He holds a PhD in Public Policy & Political Science from the University of Michigan, an MA in Law & Diplomacy from Tufts University, and a BS in Foreign Service from Georgetown University.





Rachel Steinacher is IPA's Director of Program and Business Development. Rachel has been with IPA since 2013. She most recently served as IPA's Deputy Regional Director for East Africa and Country Director for IPA Tanzania, managing the development of IPA's formal presence, country program, and portfolio of research in that country. Prior to that, she was part of IPA Kenya's Senior Management Team. She has led 60+ research projects in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. Her management experience spans the sectors of water and sanitation, food security, poverty reduction / financial inclusion, mental health, cognitive development, health, and education.



Bianca-Marie Livioco is a Senior Program Development Associate for IPA's Global Business Development team; she covers IPA's East Africa country offices and leads on BD-related Salesforce efforts. Prior to IPA, Bianca worked throughout North America and the Asia Pacific for organizations including Save the Children and the Red Cross and brings wide-ranging experience - from training, to business development, to monitoring and evaluation. Bianca holds a bachelor's degree in Political Science from the University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC) and a master's degree in International Development, with a Specialization in Gender & Development, from the University of Melbourne in Australia.



Nkechi S. Owoo is an Associate Professor of Economics at the University of Ghana. She is also a Research Associate with the Ghana node of the African Centre of Excellence on Inequality Research (ACEIR) and a Senior Research Fellow at the Environment for Development institute. She also functions as a Research Fellow at the Partnership for Economic Policy in Nairobi, Kenya and is currently a Consultant at the World Bank Development Economics Research Group in Washington DC. Although her research specialization is in health and demographic economics, she is also interested in research themes around poverty and inequality, environmental sustainability, and other microeconomic issues in developing countries.



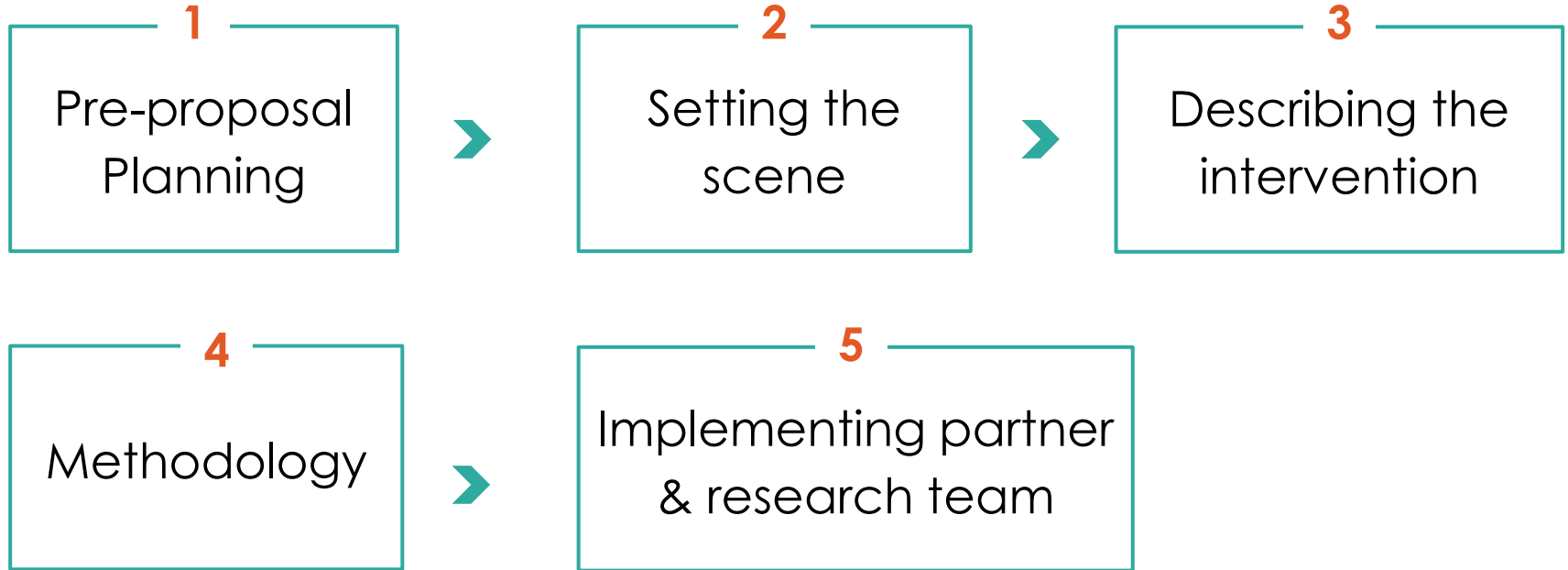
Strategies for structuring a strong proposal

Eitan Paul, Research Manager, J-PAL Global

Clare Hofmeyr, Education & Training Manager, J-PAL Africa



Steps to writing a competitive proposal



All grant proposals should answer...

What

1. What is your research question?
2. What is new?
3. What are your expected findings?

Why

1. Why is the question interesting?
2. Why does the answer matter?
3. Why isn't the answer obvious?

How

1. How will you collect data?
2. How will you proceed with the empirical strategy?
3. *How would this lead to a randomized evaluation (for proposal development grants and pilots)?*



Pre-Proposal Planning

- Check grant requirements
- Identify a clear path to an RCT
- Check necessary approvals
- Get letters of support

Check the grant requirements

Eligibility

- Qualifications
- Institutional affiliation
- Location

Priority match

- Is your topic within their thematic focus?
- Is your project in a priority region/country?
- Is your research question something they are interested in?

Deadlines

- Some grants have multiple stages each with a deadline (e.g. letter of interest and full proposal)

Identify a clear path to an RCT

For J-PAL and other organizations that exclusively fund RCTs, **there needs to be clear pathway to a randomized controlled trial** for the proposed study

For example:

The study should propose to evaluate a program that is either brand new or already exists but is being adapted or expanded in some way

Why? Because this ensures a large enough population to create a control group

Check on necessary approvals

Before committing to writing a proposal, be sure to:

- Contact your university's office for grants to find out the approval process and internal deadlines
- Leave enough time for your institution as well as project partners to review the budget and planned activities

Be conservative during this step - approvals can take longer than you think, especially at the ethics approval/IRB stage

Get letters of support

Letters of support from close partners are required as part of the proposal

Except in the case of proposal development grants!

- They demonstrate the feasibility of the project. **This is a key criterion for reviewers!**

Ways of demonstrating feasibility include:

Letter of support / agreement / MoU with implementing partner, data collection company and other organisations playing an important role in the program delivery or evaluation activities



Setting the scene

- Motivation for your study
- Research question
- Contribution to the literature

Motivation for your study

Begin your proposal with a **clear problem statement that motivates the research**

- It sets the scene by describing the challenges that the intervention is seeking to address

For example:

Women's interests remain underrepresented in local policy-making despite the implementation of community-based and participatory planning and budgeting programs in much of the developing world. Male dominance in neighborhood institutions may make it difficult for women's voices to be heard even if female attendance quotas in village planning and budgeting meetings are met.

–Paul

Research question

State your question directly and show how it fits into the literature and field

- Make sure it is:
 - Narrow and specific enough to answer with your proposed project
 - Clearly a fit for the research agenda of the funder

For example:

Can trainings on women's empowerment and gender inclusion for 1) neighborhood-level women's groups and 2) neighborhood association leaders increase women's participation and representation in Indonesian neighborhoods?

–Paul

Contribution to the literature

- The role of the literature review in a proposal is to:
 - Contextualize your research question
 - Demonstrate how your study fills a gap
- **Avoid disparaging prior research!**
 - Rather emphasize how your research builds on existing work
- Keep the literature review concise and only cite studies that are directly relevant to your project
 - A common mistake is spending too long on the motivation and literature review and too little on the intervention and research design



Describe the intervention

- Intervention details
- Theory of Change

Intervention details

- It is important to provide sufficient detail about the intervention in your proposal to convince the funder that:
 - Your study is feasible
 - Your findings will be reliable
 - Your evaluation will answer the question you are asking
- Include details of how you will ensure that the program is delivered with fidelity
 - **For example:** by conducting a process evaluation

- For earlier stage grants, the proposal should describe the preliminary research activities and how they will inform the design of a full RCT that will come afterwards.

Theory of Change

The description of the intervention should include a discussion of the theory of change (TOC).

- This is an important component to include because it lays out the causal chain of the intervention:
 - **How will program X affect outcome Y?**
- Make sure to identify the assumptions behind your TOC and the risks to the causal chain being realised
- The TOC can be 'rougher' for early stage grants because the grant might be used to identify the exact causal chain

A TOC is relevant to any kind of impact evaluation, not just RCTs!



Methodology

- Experimental Design
- Outcomes, Hypotheses, and Mechanisms
- Power Calculations

Experimental design

Explaining your research design is the most important part of your proposal.

- While brevity overall is encouraged, do not skimp on details in this section!
- In this section, you should include:
 - The number of treatment arms & the number of units in each treatment arm (sample size)
 - What each treatment arm will receive
 - The unit of randomization (clustering)
 - Individual? Household? School? Village?

For early stage, exploratory work, you may not yet know these details. Provide what you can!

- For non-RCT impact evaluations, explain how you will create a comparison group and what assumptions you are making to justify this comparison

Experimental design

You should also include:

- The unit of analysis
 - Individual? Household? School? Village?

The unit of analysis does not have to be the same as the unit of randomization!

- How the randomization will be carried out
 - Lottery? Phase-in? Encouragement? In the bubble/at the margin?
- Whether you will use stratification in your randomization
 - Random assignment within sub-groups to ensure sufficient representation of each in treatment and control
- The likelihood of spillovers and how they will be mitigated/accounted for

Outcomes, Hypotheses, and Mechanisms

State your key hypotheses and the outcomes you expect to be impacted

- Describe the data you will use to measure the outcomes listed in each hypothesis
 - Administrative data
 - How will you access the data? Do you already have access?
 - What specific measures will you use?
 - How reliable is the data?
 - Survey data
 - How and when will the survey be conducted?
 - Who will conduct it?
- Timeline
 - Specify the timeline for data collection and explain why collecting data at those intervals makes sense given the intervention duration and expected impacts

Power calculations

When are these required?

1. Always for full RCT proposals
2. Not typically for earlier stage grants, but you should include an indication of sample size

Power calculations should indicate:

1. Minimum detectable effects for the intended sample size
2. Assumptions about take up and compliance
3. Variance of the outcome variable
4. Intra-cluster correlation coefficient
5. Expected rates of attrition and survey response

Evidence can come from similar studies and/or piloting work you have conducted on this topic

Consider depicting the results of power calculations in a graph or table.

Pre-proposal planning > Setting the scene > Describe intervention > **Methodology** > Implementing Partner & Research team



**Implementing partner &
research team**

Implementing partner(s)

Describe the role and experience of implementing partners

- Implementing partners include the organisations running the program/intervention → a government agency or NGO
- They also include a partner you may be working with to implement the evaluation → a survey firm
- The more experience your partners have with this kind of research, the more feasible your project

Research team

- Describe the role and experience of members of the research team.
- This is especially important if:
 - Researcher CVs are not submitted as part of the application
 - Researchers are not already known to/invited by the funder

For example:

A researcher who has not previously implemented an RCT but has worked with the implementing partner before should discuss this experience and how it helped prepare them for this project

Junior researchers should mention any relevant experience as a research associate on an RCT or relevant coursework they have completed

.....

Mastering Grant Proposal Writing

Common Mistakes and How to Fix Them!

Rachel Steinacher

Director of Program and Business Development,
IPA

Today's Themes



**Donor and RFP
Alignment**



**Intellectual
Leadership**



Proposal Content



**Financial /
Administrative /
Coordination**

Donor and RFP Alignment

Not paying close enough attention to what the RFP is actually looking for

or what the donors end goals are. You may have a great project idea but you're unlikely to get funded if it's not well aligned with what the donor wants to fund.

TIP: If you're working with IPA, our BD team and Country Directors can help provide this information.



Language

Pay attention to specific language they use and try to understand what they're actually interested in.



Academic or Applied Focus

Try to gauge whether they're more interested in academically focused studies, policy-oriented studies, program design activities, etc.



Past Funded Projects

Look at studies they've funded previously to see what has been successfully funded in the past.

Trying to contort your project idea to be eligible for an RFP

It's unlikely you'll win and even if you do, both you and the donor will end up unhappy as neither are actually doing what they hoped / intended



Alternative Funding

Look for other funding sources for your project idea. IPA sends out regular emails to PIs with pre-vetted funding calls you can apply for.



New Project Idea

If you're really interested in the call, consider a new, more RFP aligned project idea for the RFP



Broaden your Network (and Access to Funding)

Feel free to reach out to IPA's Country Directors to discuss your ideas and potential opportunities to collaborate / pursue funding together.

Intellectual Leadership

Not showing LMIC PI significant contribution

Donors are looking for clear indicators of a LMIC PIs unique contributions and that they will be substantively involved in the project (not a tick box)



Demonstrate Unique Knowledge / Connections

Clearly explain the unique contributions of LMIC PIs, e.g. understanding of the local context, relationships with policy makers, etc.



Demonstrate Expertise

Perhaps the team's LMIC PI has extensive experience in conducting RCTs and they will be leading the design, analysis, and interpretation. Be sure to highlight this!



Demonstrate Contributions

State where the LMIC will be contributing, eg. working closely with the Ministry of Education through frequent in-person meetings, active participation in field observations, etc.

Not including a Principal Investigator who is focused on the study design

This PI must also have experience with the methodological approach being proposed.



Demonstrate Experience

Again, perhaps the team's LMIC PI has extensive experience in conducting RCTs and they will be leading the design, analysis, and interpretation. They should lead the writing of this section of the proposal!



Expand the Team

If you're proposing to run an RCT in your project but this is your first time running an RCT, consider bringing an additional PI who has experience. Also great professional development opportunity!

Proposal Content

Waiting until the end of the introduction to say what you're actually going to do

We see this a lot - people rarely state what they're planning to do before the end of the first paragraph, page, or sometimes section!!



Start with a Purpose Statement!

Your very first 1-2 sentences must state what you're intending to do.



Don't Start with Background / Intro!

Do not leap directly into providing background information and contextual analysis first (most proposals make this mistake).



“

“Researchers at the University of Nairobi aim to support the Kenyan government to promote the growth of female-owned businesses (FOBs) by conducting a large scale randomized controlled trial (RCT) exploring the role of intra-household bargaining on the take-up, usage and effects of business loans on FOBs.”

Then proceed to give more information about the gravity and relevance of the issue, etc.

Not including clear explanations of how the research findings will be used

And not including a clear next steps on the path to scale (if relevant).



Be Clear About Planned Use!

Outline how the results could be used, e.g.

- filling an evidence gap in the academic literature
- providing information and informing the actions of local policy makers
- providing proof of concept for a new implementation approach which can be used by implementing partners, etc.



State at Beginning and End of Proposal

Include this in both in your purpose statement, more detailed outline of concrete steps to be taken later in the proposal (typically in a 'dissemination / up-take' section).

Writing a great background but a less developed study design

We see this a lot - beautifully written, very long introductions, background sections, and contextual analysis with much less attention being paid to the design of the study



Detailed Methodological Section Required!!

including the reasoning behind the selected methodology.

For example, for an RCT you must include essential details such as:

- power calculations
- unit of randomization
- the number and timing of all data collection rounds
- surveying techniques and tools to be used, etc.
- explain why an RCT is the most appropriate methodology to answer the study questions (e.g. you're attempting to measure the impact of a program and RCTs are the most robust tools to do this)

Financial / Administrative / Coordination

Not leaving enough time to get the budget put together

Or increasing the scope of work in the proposal without having partners rebudget; or trying to rebudget costs on behalf of partners



Agree on Scope of Work

Develop and agree on the planned scope of work very early on (this should really be the first thing you figure out).



Agree on Team Allocations

agree upon the maximum cost of the project and what the allocation will be made for each team



Prepare Draft Budgets

prepare draft budgets to ensure the SOW can be conducted within the funding envelope. If not possible, you will need to work together to narrow the SOW

Not leaving enough time to get the entire submission package put together

You may have a great project idea but if the application is incomplete your proposal may be rejected without being read.



Start Early!!!

Best solution is to leave enough time to prepare your complete submission package



Compliance Matrix

If working with IPA, we will provide you with a compliance matrix which outlines all of the required elements of the submission, with due dates, and assignments (e.g. who will do what) which will all be due a minimum of 48 hours before submission.



Map Out Your Gameplan

If not working with IPA, go through the RFP in detail and map out every document required and try to have everything collected and complete by no later than 48 hours before the submission deadline.



Contact Us

www.poverty-action.org

pd@poverty-action.org



.....

Mastering Grant Proposal Writing

J-PAL ASP, 'Pro-LMIC' Donors, Potential
Funding Opportunities, and other BD Guidance

Bianca Livico

Senior Program Development Associate, IPA

J-PAL's African Scholars Program ([ASP](#))



Funding

African Scholars are eligible to apply for research funding from one of the initiatives.

- Formative research (\$10k / \$75k)
- Monitoring systems (\$75k)
- Full randomized evaluations (\$400k)



Training and capability building

African Scholars are eligible to apply for MITx MicroMasters. Initiatives also offer various webinars and online trainings tailored to the needs of African Scholars.



Application Support and Mentorship

Funded resident African Scholars are provided mentorship by a J-PAL Affiliate or invited researcher.



Moving projects to the next level

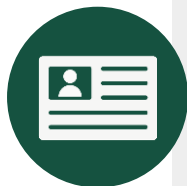
Staff provide ongoing support to African Scholars after they have completed their project with the hope of taking it to the next level.

Research Areas Covered by J-PAL'S ASP



Digital Agricultural Innovations and Services ([DAISI](#))

Jointly managed by J-PAL and CEGA, DAISI funds research to rigorously evaluate programs that increase the availability, quality, and reach of bundled digital agricultural solutions and services for small-scale agricultural producers.



Digital Identification and Finance Initiative ([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.



Jobs and Opportunity Initiative ([JOI](#))

JOI aims to generate a body of policy-relevant rigorous research that addresses pressing labor market challenges. Knowledge gaps include questions about supply and matching, job creation, preparing workers for the future of jobs and identifying and supporting high growth entrepreneurs.



Learning for All Initiative ([LAI](#))

LAI seeks to improve global learning outcomes for children in low- and middle-income countries by conducting research on how to increase foundational literacy, numeracy, and holistic skills for early childhood, primary, and lower-secondary students, with a focus on inclusion and marginalized children.

Eligibility Criteria



Resident African Scholars are those who:

- Have **completed a PhD** in Economics or a related field; and
- Are based in an **academic institution in Africa**.



Non-resident African Scholars are those who:

- Completed **high school in Africa**,
- **Completed their PhD** in Economics or a related field; and
- Are based in an **academic institution outside of Africa**.



Keep in mind, only one member of the team needs to fulfill this definition.

Other 'Pro-LMIC' Donors



Current Open Calls

Organization: International Development Research Centre (IDRC)

Call: [KIX - Knowledge and innovation for strengthened education data systems and data use](#)

Deadline: July 17, 2023

Funding Cap: CA\$300k-500k for single-country grants; \$800k-1.5mil for multi-country grants; and up to \$2.5mil for regional/global grants

Details: IDRC and GPE are pleased to invite proposals for applied research projects that will generate and mobilize evidence about the best ways to scale the impact of innovative approaches for strengthening education data systems and data use. This call addresses three interrelated challenges, each of which requires research that addresses technical issues, multiple aspects of capacity strengthening, and effective governance and sustainability.

Current Open Calls

Organization: Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA)

Call: [Displaced Livelihoods Initiative](#)

Deadline: July 21, 2023

Funding Cap: US\$500,000

Details: DLI accepts proposals for rigorous impact evaluations, pilots, exploratory studies, infrastructure and public goods projects, and scaling work to inform policies and programs on sustainable livelihoods for displaced populations and host communities. The target group for this initiative is displacement-affected populations, including refugees, asylum seekers, stateless populations, others in refugee-like situations, internally displaced populations (IDPs), and host communities.

LMIC PI Requirement?: IPA highly encourage proposals from teams with researchers or other research team members (research associates, managers, enumerators, etc.) with lived experiences related to the topic. We also encourage prospective applicants to consider working both across disciplines and with researchers from the countries where the project will take place.

Current Open Calls

Organization: UK Research and Innovation (UKRI)'s Medical Research Council (MRC)

Call: [Applied Global Health Research](#)

Deadline: August 1, 2023

Funding Cap: £2,000,000

Details: The UKRI Medical Research Council is looking to fund research projects that will develop practical solutions to global health challenges and inequities. The aim is to fund a portfolio of high-quality global research, which will be diverse, promote multidisciplinary and strengthen global health research capacity. This includes: late-stage intervention development and testing, which can include global health trials from phase 2b (efficacy) onwards; implementation and scale-up research; health systems, health policy and health economics research.

LMIC PI Requirement?: MRC particularly encourages applications from overseas researchers based in LMICs; and researchers who are eligible to apply for MRC funding and work in equitable partnership with LMIC researchers.

Current Open Calls

Organization: International Development Research Centre (IDRC)

Call: [KIX - Knowledge and innovation for achieving gender equality and social inclusion at school](#)

Deadline: August 28, 2023

Funding Cap: Single country grants up to CAD 500,000; multi-country grants up to CAD 1,500,000; regional/global grants up to CAD 2,500,000

Details: IDRC and the Global Partnership for Education are pleased to invite proposals for applied research projects that will generate and mobilize evidence to contextualize and scale the impact of innovative approaches to strengthen gender-responsive and socially inclusive education and safe schooling experiences for all children, especially those facing multiple forms of gender inequalities and marginalization.

When to Go or Not Go for a PFO: An Essentials Checklist



Alignment

Does the applicant meet all eligibility requirements? Is the proposed project strongly aligned with the PFO?



Funding Size

Is the project sufficiently large in size and budget to justify the investment of administrative costs, both in terms of financial resources and effort?



Within Budget?

Will the budget cover costs while maintaining research quality requirements?



Implementation

Is the implementing partner capable of participating to the required extent in the study?



Evaluation

Do involved partners understand the evaluation design and what will be required of them while conducting the evaluation?



Partners

Are partners' incentives aligned with IPA/PI's research interests and have all necessary parties been confirmed?



Guidelines

Do the researchers understand and agree to IPA guidelines, as well as the researcher guidelines?



Contact Us

www.poverty-action.org

pd@poverty-action.org

Proposal writing
seminar
jpal-nigeria

*Nkechi S.
Owoo
University of
Ghana
7th July 2023*

Outline of submission

- How to find open calls and select the most suitable ones to respond to
- Strategies for structuring a strong proposal
- Identifying common mistakes and recommended actions

How to find open calls and select the most suitable ones to respond to

- Different ways to find open calls
 - Joining mailing lists so that information about research grant opportunities are easily obtained.
 - Go to websites and opt for the “add me to mailing list” option/ subscribe
 - Join professional associations (e.g., IUSSP, AAAWE, IAFFE, etc)
 - Be a JPAL Affiliate or Invited Researcher
 - Less control with this since have to be invited.
 - Dialogue with people in research network or at conferences
 - Social media (e.g., LinkedIn, Twitter, etc)
 - Follow JPAL on Twitter

How to find open calls and select the most suitable ones to respond to

- How to select the most suitable ones
 - What is your interest in subject matter?
 - Agriculture, Gender, climate change, jobs and employment, education, etc.
 - What is your availability to put together the proposal and carry out the work?
 - Teaching and other responsibilities?
 - Ability to buy-out teaching time?
 - What are yours and your team strengths?
 - Access to implementing partners for RCT, if required
 - Do you meet other requirements of the call?
 - Have collaborator from Global North, reporting requirements, stakeholder meetings, mentoring, # publications and other reports, etc.

Strategies for structuring a strong proposal

- Do your research and have a research question/agenda that has the potential to contribute to existing knowledge
- Clear theory of change
 - How is a given intervention expected to lead to a specific development change
- Implementing partner already active in the space
 - Interventions can be expensive
- Show the cost effectiveness of the interventions (impact vs. cost)
 - Becoming increasingly important, even for some pilots
 - Don't need so much resources to accomplish the outcomes
- Choose a strong team, with clear contributions of members
- Allow sufficient time for iterations following feedback from team members
- Follow instructions on word count, format, team composition, geography of members, # ECRs, etc.

Identifying common mistakes and recommended actions

- Level of cooperation between you and implementing partner
 - MOU stating clearly expectations on both sides
- Mistakes with budgeting- over and underbudgeting
 - Things can change in the field that can affect costs so if allowed, have some contingency
- Delays with processing of ethics approval
 - Begin weeks in advance- questionnaire preparation, etc
- Delays from University
 - Cultivate good relationship with personnel in research offices
 - Begin process well in advance, submit all requested documentation, etc

Thank you for your attention!
Questions and Comments welcome
Nkechi S. Owoo
Nkechi.owoo@gmail.com