IPA Soft Skills Research Fund: Request for Proposals

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I. Overview

The [Entrepreneurship and Private Sector Development (EPSD) Program at Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA)](#), with support from the Wellspring Philanthropic Fund, is launching a new competitive fund to support rigorous research that **explores how soft skills influence entrepreneurship and employment-related outcomes**. Current soft skills research has demonstrated the mutability of soft skills later in life, the importance of soft skills for economic empowerment, and also a large variation in the effectiveness of different programs. Progress has been constrained by poor identification of which soft skills are being examined, the lack of comparability across projects, and limited focus on implementation details. This initiative aims to generate evidence that partners can use to develop, adapt, and scale effective programming that supports entrepreneurship and workforce development.

We seek proposals that 1. address key evidence gaps, 2. align with a shared framework for measuring soft skills and economic outcomes, and 3. generate actionable insights for implementers and policymakers. For details on research priorities, definitions of soft skills, outcomes of interest, geographic scope, and example research questions, please refer to [our research agenda](#). Interested individuals should submit the [Expression of Interest form](#) by November 14, 2025. Shortlisted candidates will be invited to submit a full proposal by late January, which will be reviewed by a committee comprising economists, psychologists, implementers, and experienced IPA staff. Final decisions will be made in early April, 2026. If you have any questions, please contact epsd@poverty-action.org. For further details and instructions, see below.

We invite submissions from applicants focusing on the following priority research areas (see [research agenda](#)):

- Identifying which soft skills matter, for whom, and under what conditions (e.g., comparing curricula, aspirations, opportunities)

- Leveraging soft skills to enhance the effectiveness of broader labor market and private sector development policies (e.g., access to information and markets, planning, networks, household support)

- Understanding whether soft skills interventions require addressing additional constraints to be effective (e.g., capital, aspirations, norms).

- Improving the implementation quality and scalability of soft skills interventions (e.g., training, take-up, reinforcement.

II. Eligibility

Research Team: At least one researcher per project must be primarily affiliated with an institution or university that conducts research, and either hold a PhD or be currently pursuing a PhD in a relevant discipline. The research team must demonstrate experience conducting field research and applying impact evaluation methods. Projects may include additional researchers who do not meet these requirements.

If you currently implement a soft skills intervention and are interested in finding a research partner, please reach out to epsd@poverty-action.org, as we may be able to facilitate this relationship.

Types of Studies Eligible for Funding: We welcome a range of study designs that contribute to building practical, policy-relevant evidence on soft skills and economic outcomes. Eligible study types (with suggested funding ranges) include:

- **Qualitative/Exploratory work ($5K-$20K)** to investigate program design (if intended to inform future experimental research) or the source of unexpected results.

- **Pilot studies ($10K-$70K)** to test the feasibility or early effects of soft skills interventions.

- **Analysis of existing data ($10K-$70K)** to examine the relationship between soft skills and labor using administrative/employer data

- **Nimble impact evaluations or A/B testing ($40K-$150K)**, especially those comparing alternative implementation approaches.

- **Supplementary/Top-up funding for ongoing or planned RCTs ($40K-$150K)**, to examine impact and/or include additional soft skills-related components (e.g., expanded data collection, new outcome measures, training, or curriculum enhancements)

- **Longitudinal studies ($40K-$150K)**, that track outcomes over time or test measurement tools for soft skills and employment outcomes.

- **Full RCTs ($250K-$400K)** with committed implementing partner(s)that examine the effectiveness of a program or compare program designs.

Fund Participation Requirements: Selected projects will be expected to meet the following requirements:

- Based in a low or middle-income country
- Use a provided short list of common measures of labor market outcomes to allow comparability across projects
- Alignment with a shared skills framework to facilitate cross-study learning

- Open-source measurement tools for soft skills and outcomes
- Sharing implementation details through a mid-project report (e.g., dosage by skill, trainer details)
- Collection of cost data to inform scalability and cost-effectiveness analysis
- Allow IPA to synthesize results across projects (with full credit/citations)
- De-identified data must be made publicly available within 2 years of endline data collection
- Public dissemination of results (e.g., working paper, policy brief, blog post, website summary)

Additional Selection Criteria: Reviewers will consider the research design, policy relevance, project viability, and the value of the research. In addition, priority will be given to studies that meet the following criteria. In your application, please indicate whether any of the following conditions are met.

- **Experienced and balanced research team**
    - Demonstrate experience with soft skills research
    - Have a balanced research team, inclusive of economists, psychologists, educators, and local researchers, to strengthen contextual knowledge and implementation relevance
- **Collect key data**
    - Examine Wellbeing and Mental Health as outcomes
    - Examine Long-term Employment data
    - Examine Soft Skills measures at multiple rounds of data collection
    - Collect feedback on the program from beneficiaries, and innovate on short-term indicators of success
    - Commit to examining the psychometric properties of utilized soft skills measures (IPA can provide advisory support for this process)
        - Key psychometrics: reliability, confirmatory factor analysis, concurrent validity, predictive validity
        - Content validity: conduct extensive translation process and cognitive interviews to ensure measures are appropriate and easy to understand
- **Demonstrate commitment to improving soft skills program implementation**
    - Demonstrate interest from implementers and commitments for scale-up
    - For those examining soft skill training, those able to make curricula open source will be prioritized
    - Allow IPA to conduct secondary data analysis of predictive validity of measures across studies (examine the relationship between baseline soft skill measures and follow-up labor outcomes, without examining treatment status), such that these measures can be used to assess program impact in the short term

III. Timeline

- November 14, 2025: Expression of Interest Forms Due (11:59 pm EST)
- December 15, 2025: Accepted teams invited to submit full proposals
- January 30, 2026: Full Proposals Due
- April 1, 2026: Expected Date of Notification

IV. EOI Instructions

Please complete this Expression of Interest form by November 14, 2025. Responses prioritize communicating key ideas rather than formal language and background information.

At the EOI stage, we only require a rough ballpark budget figure and a broad breakdown of what it covers. Full budgets per templates will need to be submitted at the time of the full proposals.

Please note that all projects are required to receive project approval from an Institutional Review Board; however, this approval does not need to be obtained before submitting the EOI.

Those who are successful with their EOI will be invited to submit a full proposal, which will include a request for further details on the research design and implementation, power calculations, a detailed budget, and letters of support. Please see Frequently Asked Questions for more information.

Frequently Asked Questions
If you have any questions not covered below, please contact epsd@poverty-action.org.

- May I submit more than one project?
  - Yes
- What costs can be included in the budget?
  - The fund covers research/evaluation-related costs. Typical costs that are eligible for reimbursement include data collection, research personnel and management, travel related to research, and data analysis.
  - External subrecipients may request an ICR (up to 15%) for which they have supporting documentation (such as a Negotiated Indirect Cost Rate Agreement–NICRA or documentation that the rate claimed is derived from formula consistently applied to all projects of the subrecipient). If the subrecipient does not have proof of an ICR, a de minimis 10% ICR rate may be applied.
- Can I include intervention costs in the budget?
  - The fund is unlikely to cover intervention costs, unless they are limited in amount and closely tied to the research design. Please mention any intervention-related costs included in your proposed budget.

- Can I include costs for researcher time in the budget?
  - We generally expect researchers' time to be covered by their institutions, especially those based in institutions in high-income countries. However, reasonable requests can be considered on a case-by-case basis if the researcher's institution does not cover salaries. Salaries/Time for researchers from institutions based in LMICs are allowable.
- When do funds need to be disbursed?
  - Funded project activities must be completed by June 30, 2027.
- Can a consortium (or group of individuals with different affiliations) apply for funding?
  - Yes, but please note that you will need to designate one organization to be the prime sub-awardee. In general, IPA will only make one external sub-award for each research project.
- Can for-profit organizations apply?
  - Yes, for-profit organisations can apply, but they must work with an academic partner. Additionally, we require that curricula be made open-source.
- Can you tell me more about IRB requirements?
  - Research not implemented by IPA must follow all relevant laws and procedures required by the country(s) in which the research is carried out. For research funds supported by US federal funding, the primary IRB chosen for the research project must be registered with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' OHRP.
- Can I revise my submission?
  - You may resubmit the entire form, but please start the project title with "REVISED"

V. General Terms and Conditions

- This Call for Proposals is not and shall not be construed to be a contract, offer, or request for an offer. Those responding to this call receive no rights whatsoever as a result of their submissions. Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) will not have any express or implied obligations or responsibilities to those who respond and will not otherwise be bound by any terms or conditions, except to the extent set forth in a definitive, final, written grant agreement duly executed by the recipient(s) and IPA. There is no commitment by IPA that such a final grant agreement will be executed, even if IPA enters into negotiations with the applicants, proposed recipient(s), or his or her institution.
- IPA, in its sole and exclusive discretion, may reject any or all proposals with or without notice or reasons, withdraw this call at any time before or after delivery of proposals, or if no proposal is accepted, abandon the call.
- IPA further reserves the right in its sole and exclusive discretion to waive irregularities or defects in any proposal, but in no event will IPA have any obligation to do so. Moreover, IPA will not be responsible for errors or omissions by anyone submitting a proposal, and

IPA shall be the sole judge of the responsiveness, appropriateness, and completeness of any and all proposals.

- IPA reserves the sole and exclusive right in its discretion to modify the timeline for decision-making or otherwise modify or amend this call as it deems appropriate.
- All responses to this call become the property of IPA. Regardless of any markings identifying the proposal or its content as proprietary or confidential, IPA reserves the right to disclose or use any information contained in the proposals and other presentations responsive to this call. The review board making funding decisions includes external academics and policymakers, who will receive a copy of the proposals.
- IPA is not responsible for and will not reimburse any costs incurred in submitting materials or information pursuant to this call or in otherwise responding to this call, including but not limited to evaluating, responding, providing follow-up, negotiating, and otherwise complying with it.
- Applicants agree to be bound by the terms of their proposal for at least sixty days from the date such proposals are due, and otherwise agree to negotiate in good faith any other terms for a definitive arrangement if selected by IPA to do so.
- Applicants certify that the work product they propose to create or use if they are a grant recipient will not infringe on or violate the intellectual property rights (including but not limited to trademarks, copyrights, patents, trade secrets, moral rights) or privacy rights of any person or entity. Applicants submitting proposals, materials, or information further certify that they have or will have such ownership or use rights in such work product sufficient to allow IPA to achieve its purposes as generally provided for in this call.
- Grant recipients agree that, if requested by IPA, they will provide additional information about any subcontractors, graduate students, research assistants, and other third parties engaged by the grant recipient to provide services. IPA reserves the right in good faith to approve any such persons in order to ensure consistency with IPA's expectations of quality and character.
- Applicants are required to disclose to IPA all funders of their project. Depending on the co-funders, an applicant may be ineligible for funding from IPA under this call. Further information may be requested from the Entrepreneurship and Private Sector Development Program at IPA.
- IPA reserves the right to request additional information from applicants. Applicants agree to make themselves available for follow-up as reasonably requested by IPA.
- The Grant Recipient shall respect human rights and shall abide by applicable local laws, environmental legislation, including multilateral environmental agreements, as well as internationally agreed core labor standards.
- The latest subgrant end date will be June 30, 2027.
- All projects will be required to collect cost-effectiveness data. Projects demonstrating positive impacts on the outcomes of interest will be required to make cost-effectiveness data publicly available, and all evaluations will be required to publish the per-unit cost of programs.
- The Grant Recipient shall at all times comply with, and ensure that its employees, officers, contractors, subcontractors, and other persons or entities involved with Partner

or with the Project at all times comply with all requirements and obligations that apply pursuant to national and international laws and regulations. This shall specifically include, but not be limited to: (i) applicable data privacy law(s); (ii) any anti-bribery and anti-corruption laws and regulations that may apply; (iii) any applicable laws and regulations that prevent fraud, money laundering and financing of terrorism; and (iv) any Trade Sanctions imposed by the UN, EU or US, or any similar sanctions or restrictions.

- In order to be eligible to receive funding, subgrantees must have the following:
    - Financial and accounting policies and procedures
    - Procurement policies and procedures
    - Conflict of interest policies and procedures
    - Errors and omissions insurance
- Specific FCRA-related stipulations:
    - The Grant Recipient shall comply with, and ensure that its implementing partners involved in the Project (if any) comply with, FCRA and its relevant requirements.
    - The Grant Recipient shall keep IPA informed of the validity, as well as any changes in the status, of its FCRA registration and that of any key implementing partners. No payments shall be made by the Grant Recipient to any India-based entity that is subject to the FCRA, in relation to any period in which the entity's FCRA registration is not valid or not active.
    - The Grant Recipient shall be fully responsible for (non-)compliance with FCRA and other applicable laws, and is liable for any damages, losses, expenses and claims arising out of non-compliance by Partner or its implementing partner(s).