

SPIA Small Grants: Call For Proposals

Measuring CGIAR's Policy Influence

1. About this call

The CGIAR Standing Panel on Impact Assessment (SPIA) invites proposals from early-career researchers and PhD students for small grants to conduct research on how CGIAR engages with stakeholders to inform national and regional policies.

This linkage is important because CGIAR's scientific and research inputs do not always have a clear input-to-impact pathway when it comes to policy. In practice, this path is long, non-linear and hard to trace. Evaluating CGIAR's policy-oriented research has been a recognized gap for several decades, and the core difficulties (small numbers of policy cases, the gap between attribution and contribution, long time lags, and the fact that not all policy influence is necessarily good) remain unresolved. At the same time, demand for evidence of CGIAR's policy 'success' continues to grow, while measurement remains thorny: actors often define their level of contribution subjectively, there are no minimum evidence standards, and it is difficult to distinguish meaningful policy influence from the most actively promoted claims.

One way to make this tractable is to recognize that influencing policy is not a single event but a chain of distinct links, each of which can be examined on its own terms: research and evidence are produced; that evidence is taken up (or not) by a policy actor; a policy is formulated, codified and gazetted; and the policy is then implemented and experienced by a range of stakeholders with real effects. Each of these input-to-impact pathway links in policy research can be ground-truthed.

To understand these dynamics better, SPIA has shortlisted a list of 'candidate cases' for small grants. The idea is not simply to generate success stories but to critically examine CGIAR's policy influence pathways within each case. The pathways can cover either (or both):

- a) Pathway from CGIAR input to the policy change / output: Questions surrounding if/whether/how exactly CGIAR contributed to a given local, regional, national or international policy change, what was the exact nature of CGIAR's scientific knowledge and advice, how did the broader political economy contribute to or hinder this evidence uptake etc.
- b) Pathway from the policy output to broader downstream impacts: Questions relating to if/how the policy change has sustained over time, what downstream incentives /spillovers /impacts the policy change has generated, for who etc.

We would like proposals to creatively think through these pathways. We encourage proposals that draw on qualitative and/or quantitative methods, depending on the expertise of the applicant. The methods chosen must be appropriate and well-executed for the research question chosen.

The aim is **not** to design a MEL study within each case, but rather to adopt a political economy approach to carefully study patterns of CGIAR's policy influence.

2. Candidate cases

Six candidate cases are open under this call, directly building on SPIA country studies and spanning themes of fisheries, taxation, social protection, forestry, food safety and long-term institutional engagement. Applicants may submit a proposal against **any one of them**. Below, we describe each case briefly and provide a set of indicative research questions.

Important: Each of these cases has associated academic and grey literature (both within and outside CGIAR) that the applicants are expected to review and engage with before writing the technical proposal. A few documents may be highlighted here within each case to serve as a starting point.

Case A. ECOFISH and Hilsa Conservation Reforms (Bangladesh)

Background and CGIAR role

Between 2015 and 2020, Bangladesh enacted fisheries policy reforms affecting hilsa conservation. Hilsa is the country's national fish and directly supports the livelihoods of roughly 500,000 fishers (and 2-2.5 million indirectly through associated industries¹). [The USAID-funded ECOFISH project](#) (from 2014-2019), which was jointly implemented by WorldFish and Department of Fisheries at the Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock (MOFL) Bangladesh, included several 'policy influencing' activities. Drawing on scientific inputs from WorldFish, the project claims to have contributed to: a) extending of the hilsa brood fishing ban from 11 to 22 days (adopted by GoB in 2016); b) setting a minimum net size of 6.5 cm to let young *jatka* fish escape (recommendation accepted by GoB and gazetted); c) creating a new, sixth hilsa sanctuary in Barishal (in 2018); d) setting up a dedicated Hilsa Conservation and Development Fund (amounting to \$500,000) for conservation activities; e) ECOFISH reviewing the draft bill of the Marine Fisheries (Conservation and Development) Act 2018, f) helping GoB establish the boundaries of the Nijhum Dwip Marine Reserve area in 2019. The project claims to have had highest levels of support within GoB and emphasized long-term partnerships to ensure sustainability.

ECOFISH eventually continued into a [Phase II](#), which started in 2019 and ended in 2024. Phase II's policy achievements include influencing 8 policies, like the revised Hilsa Fisheries Management Action Plan (HFMAP), MPA delineation, Nijhum Dwip management plan, a blue economy guideline, pangas management guidelines and a low-extractive mariculture strategy.

Indicative research questions

These are illustrative, not prescriptive. Applicants may sharpen, recombine or depart from them (and we welcome questions we have not anticipated), provided the work still interrogates CGIAR's policy influence broadly.

¹ Islam, Md Monirul, Essam Yassin Mohammed, and Liaquat Ali. "[Economic incentives for sustainable hilsa fishing in Bangladesh: An analysis of the legal and institutional framework](#)." Marine policy 68 (2016): 8-22.

- In one sanctuary area, are the 22-day ban, the net-size rule and similar measures still enforced and funded post project completion? (*angle: ex-post verification*)
- How, if at all, did credit dynamics such as [dadon system](#) feature in the design of the WorldFish ban recommendations? (*angle: hierarchies of knowledge production*)

About this case

Note that quantitative [impact evaluations](#) of ECOFISH already [exist](#); a competitive proposal must go beyond the question of whether the project succeeded and clearly explain its value-add over existing literature.

Case B. Tax Exemption for Agricultural Technologies (Ethiopia)

Background and CGIAR role

In May 2019, Ethiopia's Ministry of Finance signed a [historic tax reform bill \(Ref No. 30/7/35\)](#) exempting imports of agricultural mechanization, irrigation, and animal feed technologies and equipment from tax. IWMI and the Agricultural Transformation Agency (ATA) of Ethiopia played an important role. IWMI's [AgWater Solutions project](#) found that water lifting technologies, particularly [motorized pumps](#), were too expensive for smallholder farmers to purchase and operate and that these technologies were subject to many national taxes, bringing the total [VAT up to 37%](#) of the pump cost. To encourage adoption, researchers recommended a '[pro-poor](#)' [tax exemption](#) on mechanized irrigation technology citing success in other AgWater Solution sites like Bangladesh.

These points were emphasized at stakeholder meetings as a part of the AgWater Solutions project. ATA carried out an assessment of the shallow groundwater potential of Ethiopia and concluded that increasing smallholder access to the technology could unlock 4 billion cubic meters of groundwater and irrigate an additional 2 million ha of agricultural land. These figures were [reportedly presented to the Ethiopian Transformation Council](#). ATA, in consultation with IWMI, further looked at the potential benefits of an agricultural mechanization tax exemption and mapped various scenarios. The results were approved by the Ministry of Agriculture in 2017. In May 2019, the implementation of the tax exemption was approved by the Ministry of Finance. However, in 2024, the ministry initiated a review of tax-exempt goods via [Directive 1006/2024](#), which excludes previous exemptions and makes select items subject to a standard 15% VAT, [narrowing](#) the scope.

Indicative research questions

These are illustrative, not prescriptive. Applicants may sharpen, recombine or depart from them (and we welcome questions we have not anticipated), provided the work still interrogates CGIAR's policy influence broadly.

- IWMI drew on Bangladesh's experience to advocate the exemption in Ethiopia. What assumptions did IWMI carry across, and how did they fare as the policy was implemented and later narrowed? (*angle: extrapolation of policy recommendations*)
- Process tracing IWMI's contributions to the tax reform bill

About this case

Ethiopia's current operating environment adds practical risk around access to government interviewees that must be carefully considered.

Case C. Productive Safety Net Programme / PSNP (Ethiopia)

Background and CGIAR role

The Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP) is Ethiopia's flagship social protection program, launched in 2005 and [now in its sixth phase](#). The program aims to protect assets (smooth consumption) through transfers in chronically food-insecure communities (targeting). IFPRI has been conducting [bi-annual impact assessments](#) of the PSNP since 2006, making this a long-standing CGIAR engagement with a single government program. IFPRI's evaluation findings have reportedly influenced three design aspects: (i) appropriate transfer levels for public works participants, (ii) criteria for household graduation from the program, and (iii) timeliness of transfer payments.

IFPRI's role is primarily knowledge supply through evaluation. It provides panel survey data and impact analysis that feeds directly into program redesign across PSNP phases. Evidence of influence cited includes: the GoE describing IFPRI's evaluation as "extensive and comprehensive"; the World Bank citing IFPRI assessments when renewing PSNP support; Ethiopia's Ministry of Agriculture using IFPRI's findings in broader poverty reduction approaches; and many references to IFPRI's evaluation work in the program reviews.

Indicative research questions

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- To what extent has evaluative evidence informed PSNP's design over twenty years?
- How has IFPRI's dual role as an independent evaluator and embedded co-designer shaped the evidence take-up process?

About this case

Novelty must come from the meta-questions (how the evidence was used, by whom, and with what credibility) rather than investigating whether PSNP works, which is heavily studied. Attribution is genuinely diffuse, with World Bank, donors and implementing NGOs all shaping the programme; isolating the CGIAR contribution is a definitional and empirical challenge.

Case D. Bamboo Strategy and Action Plan (Uganda)

Background and CGIAR role

Uganda's forest cover fell from roughly a quarter of national land area in 1990 to around 9–12% by 2015, with deforestation running well ahead of replanting. Against this backdrop, bamboo was promoted as a restoration and green-economy crop. The International Bamboo and Rattan

Organisation (INBAR) and the CGIAR Research Program on Forests, Trees and Agroforestry (FTA), led for CGIAR by CIFOR, claimed to have [informed Ugandan authorities](#) of the significance of bamboo for sustainable development. With INBAR's technical and financial support, this enabled the commissioning, drafting and adoption of the Ten-Year National Bamboo Strategy and Action Plan (2019–2029). The strategy itself was [commissioned, developed and written by the Ministry of Water and Environment \(MoWE\)](#), in partnership with the National Forestry Authority (NFA) and the Forest Sector Support Department (FSSD).

The substantive CGIAR/INBAR research input was concrete and identifiable. NaFORRI (NARO's forestry research institute) was contracted by INBAR to conduct a [bamboo site–species matching study](#) and a companion [assessment of exotic bamboo species](#), identifying agro-ecological zones suitable for cultivation. This work was funded through INBAR's Dutch-Sino East Africa Bamboo Development Programme (financed by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs and China's National Forestry and Grassland Administration), and ran until 2019. The strategy was [approved and released by Uganda's Minister of State for Environment on 24 September 2019](#) in Kampala, after two national stakeholder consultation workshops and internal task-force review. [Its headline targets](#) are ambitious and quantified: an additional ~230,000 ha of planted bamboo and 60,000 ha of regenerated natural bamboo, ~140 million poles per year, an estimated 150,000 (rising to 700,000) jobs created, and a contribution of roughly 15% toward Uganda's goal of restoring 2.5 million ha of forest landscape by 2030. INBAR [reports the government allocated USD 76 million](#) to the ten-year plan (2019-2029).

Indicative research questions

These are illustrative, not prescriptive. Applicants may sharpen, recombine or depart from them (and we welcome questions we have not anticipated), provided the work still interrogates CGIAR's policy influence broadly.

- How did bamboo move from a marginal, mostly protected-area resource to a national strategy in a few years? How was technical evidence translated, used (or set aside) during drafting and validation?
- What explains the large gap between the strategy's targets and what was realised on the ground? Reconstructing what broke down between an approved strategy and the area actually planted would test the theory of change.

About this case

A small grant could establish what documentary record exists across MoWE, NFA, FSSD, INBAR and NaFORRI, and reconstruct how technical evidence was used during drafting.

Case E. Aflatoxin Policy and Control (Uganda / EAC Regional)

Background and CGIAR role

Aflatoxins, carcinogenic toxins produced by *Aspergillus* moulds that [contaminate maize, groundnut](#) and sorghum in the field and in storage, are a major food-safety, public-health and trade problem in the region. Uganda [loses an estimated USD 38 million a year in export opportunities](#) to contamination. Regionally, IFPRI estimates aflatoxin exposure is attributable to roughly 3,200 liver-cancer cases per year, and a [2023 NaCRRRI survey](#) found maize, sorghum and groundnut across all growing areas of Uganda contaminated above WHO thresholds.

IITA has played a dual role here: IITA scientists have worked to develop Aflasafe products, and actively engaged policymakers for advocacy. On the advocacy side, IITA partnered with the East African Community (EAC), and began the Aflatoxin Policy and Program for East Africa (APPEAR) project in 2013. IITA prepared [11 evidence-based technical papers, from which the EAC Secretariat developed policy briefs](#). The [36th EAC Council of Ministers in 2018 endorsed the briefs and approved the EAC Aflatoxin Prevention and Control Strategy and Action Plan](#), directing partner states (Uganda among them) to mainstream the Strategy's priorities into national budgets and agriculture investment plans.

IITA is described by the EAC itself as the [technical partner "since inception,"](#) authored the underlying technical papers, [trained EAC partner-state policymakers directly](#), and even hosted a 2017 benchmarking visit to its headquarters. The influence operates through two reinforcing channels: a knowledge-supply / convening channel (the papers, briefs and policymaker training that fed the regional Strategy) and a technology channel (Aflasafe, IITA's biocontrol product that displaces toxic moulds and cuts contamination by 80–99%). For Uganda, [development of a Uganda-specific Aflasafe began in 2013 under APPEAR](#) and continued through a 2020 IITA–NARO project; Aflasafe has since obtained [provisional registration in Uganda](#). In parallel, Uganda [launched its own National Action Plan and Strategy for Aflatoxin Control in 2019](#), a national counterpart to the regional Strategy.

Indicative research questions

These are illustrative, not prescriptive. Applicants may sharpen, recombine or depart from them (and we welcome questions we have not anticipated), provided the work still interrogates CGIAR's policy influence broadly.

- How far along the pathway from regional endorsement to farmer access did the intervention progress, and where did it stall?
- How was the problem framed, and for whom?

About this case

A small grant could confirm the registration-to-availability status at the outset and, if the pathway breaks early, concentrate on the documentary checkpoints (endorsement → national development → registration → farmer access).

Case F. CGIAR's Longitudinal Engagement with MARD (Vietnam)

Background and CGIAR role

Vietnam's Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development is the single most frequently cited government partner in the Vietnam stocktake, with claims spanning 25 years, six CGIAR centres and policy domains from rice restructuring and climate-smart agriculture to food safety, cassava disease response, coffee replanting and forestry. This density of engagement with one ministry is unusual, and it opens a different question from the other cases: not how CGIAR influenced one policy, but how an institutional relationship with a ministry evolves over time.

Indicative research questions

These are illustrative, not prescriptive. Applicants may sharpen, recombine or depart from them (and we welcome questions we have not anticipated), provided the work still interrogates CGIAR's policy influence broadly.

- How does CGIAR's federated structure (each centre engaging MARD in parallel) consolidate or fragment its influence within the ministry? How are these relationships built and sustained?
- What does the longitudinal pattern of CGIAR engagement reveal that a single-policy lens would miss?

About this case

Several MARD-linked claims reference technologies tracked in SPIA's Vietnam report (e.g. AWD and 1M5R, off-field straw management, sustainable water use for coffee, CMD-resistant cassava). This means a policy research exercise could, in principle, be paired with actual adoption estimates, connecting the research-to-policy and policy-to-adoption links of the chain. However, the March 2025 merger of MARD with MONRE into the Ministry of Agriculture and Environment could make it harder to track down and interview bureaucrats who previously engaged with CGIAR.

3. What we are looking for

A strong proposal will:

- Select one case only (multiple cases and/or submissions from the same applicant will **not** be considered)
- Propose research questions that have a sharp policy focus
- Keep the scope manageable, given the grant's budgets and timelines (see below). A proposal that is pilot/exploratory, open-ended, and potentially interview-heavy could allow for the scope and exact questions to be refined
- Be honest about anticipated null results. A finding that a particular influence claim does not hold up, or that a reform stalled between endorsement and implementation, is a valuable learning and not a failure
- Distinguish policy on paper from policy as lived experience. Proposals should go beyond simply reporting what happened to explore, among others: a) mechanisms through which CGIAR influenced policy, b) how CGIAR dynamically interacted with other policy actors, c) the broader political-economy conditions that shaped the specific case, d) how a policy on paper translates into practice at the level of the farmer, fisher, trader or front-line official, e) who bears the implementation cost, and f) under what conditions the policy changes are sustained. Other relevant questions may be actively explored
- Lean mixed-methods. Designs that combine documentary and qualitative work with even modest quantitative evidence (administrative records, the strategy's own physical targets, or linkage to existing SPIA adoption data) are especially welcome, as the case permits
- For applicants considering KIIs and FGDs, SPIA is able to assist with making relevant connections with CGIAR stakeholders for each of the cases. That said, beyond the initial

point of contact, we would want the applicant to drive the process and establish relevant connections as the research progresses

4. Should I apply?

Please consider submitting an application if you:

- Are currently a PhD student / Postdoc / early-career researcher specializing in political science, sociology, development studies, public policy and public administration
- Are interested in the political economy of agricultural development and/or public policy
- Can work independently to design and implement a small-scale research study from scratch with minimal supervision
- Have prior experience conducting sensitive KII with government officials (at the local and national levels), scientists, farmers, agro-dealers, and a range of development stakeholders
- Have a methodological niche (quantitative or qualitative) and love taking on a complex problem
- Understand what it takes to do high-quality, rigorous policy research with qualitative, quantitative and/or mixed methods
- Are able to write for both academic and policy audiences (publishing the findings in academic journals and/or as policy reports is possible but contingent on the sensitivities of each case, and will be determined on a case-by-case basis)

5. Funding guidance

- Applicants may request up to **USD 5000** per grant. A flexibility of 5-10% above this may be permitted in well-justified cases.
- Eligible costs include researcher time, travel, flights and accommodation in case of fieldwork, transcription/translation, any coding/AI software (for the duration of the grant only) and modest data-collection costs. Itemise clearly. See Section 6 for more guidance
- Proposals should be delivered within the timeline provided. See Section 7 for more guidance
- Any access or permission requirements must be flagged early

6. How to apply

Expressions of Interest have two parts: (1) a short technical proposal and (2) a light-touch budget proposal. We suggest the technical proposal run to **no more than three pages**² (excluding CV), and the budget to a **single page or simple table**.

Every technical proposal should cover all the items in the checklist below.

² Single-spaced, 11pt minimum, excluding any references

6.1 Technical proposal

Item	What to include
1. Selected case	Which of the six cases the proposal addresses.
2. Research question(s)	The question(s) the applicant proposes
3. Rationale and value-add	Why the question matters and what new evidence it brings, given what literature already exists for the case
4. Proposed design and methods	Provide the tentative research design, and methods proposed
5. Sources and access	Key documents and informants envisaged, and assessment of access (flag whether SPIA matchmaking assistance would be helpful)
6. Feasibility and risks	Assessment of any risks (conceptual and practical)
7. Workplan and timeline	Activities and deliverables mapped to the grant period (see Section 7)
8. CV	a) CV (2 pages max.) b) Copy of enrollment at university or proof of employment (whichever is applicable)

6.2 Light-touch budget proposal

Separately from the technical proposal, please submit a short budget. We are not looking for a full financial template: a one-pager or table will suffice. It should give us a realistic sense of how the grant would be spent, broken down across:

- **Fieldwork and travel (if any):** site visits, local transport, accommodation, scoped to the single site or area the grant can realistically cover
- **Interviews and data collection:** key-informant interviews, transcription, translation, and any modest data costs
- **Researcher time:** an indication of days/months of effort

Budgets should reflect the layered design: desk work first, escalating to interviews and/or fieldwork where warranted. Stay within the indicative per-grant range in Section 5.

7. Timelines

Call opens	06 July 2026
Informational webinar (optional – for prospective grant applicants)	16 July 2026 Registration link: HERE
Submission deadline	07 August 2026
Review and decisions	Mid-late August 2026
Contracts signed	Early September 2026
Research	September – December 2026
Final deliverable / report due	End of January 2027

Both the technical proposal and budget should be sent to spia@cgiar.org by 07 August 2026 (23:59 CEST)