



CALL FOR EXPRESSION OF INTEREST

The impacts of digital support tools in agriculture

Please submit proposals to SPIA (spia@cgiar.org) by May 17, 2021.

Overview

The CGIAR Standing Panel on Impact Assessment (SPIA) is calling for Expressions of Interest (EoIs) for rigorous impact evaluations of digital support tools for smallholder farmers. SPIA invites researchers to submit EoIs for projects that carefully measure the impacts of tools such as mobile applications, tools for climate information, push message services, ICT-based agricultural extension, or hotlines for agriculture advice.

Completed EoI templates should be emailed to: spia@cgiar.org no later than May 17, 2021. The subject line of the email should read “EoI for digital support tools call”

Any questions about this call can be directed to Ricardo Labarta (r.labarta@cgiar.org)

Background and scope of the call

A lack of adequate information offers one explanation for the low uptake of agricultural innovations. The traditional approach to spreading information involves government extension workers providing trainings, demonstrations, and visits to farmers. These model farmers are encouraged to disseminate information to their social contacts. Despite its popularity, this approach is limited in the number of farmers that can be reached. Digital tools that either push information, or customize advice based on inputs from users provide one alternative to deliver high-quality information to more farmers.

Emerging evidence shows that digital support tools can improve certain outcomes for smallholders.¹ But, there is still room to strengthen the evidence base, particularly for the CGIAR-developed tools and for some of the outcomes where the current evidence is limited. SPIA is especially interested in projects that can measure impacts on a broader set of outcomes beyond just technology adoption. Successful studies will answer questions about impact in addition to other issues such as complementary interventions, heterogeneity, etc. Research that sheds light on some of the following questions is of particular interest.²

- Given the heterogeneous returns of many technologies and practices, the optimal recommendation to farmers may vary depending on circumstances. How can digital tools be adapted to be more effective in heterogeneous environments? What complementary interventions increase efficacy in these areas?
- Can sharing agricultural information widely have unintended consequences? For instance, does it change the structure of information sharing networks in rural villages? Does the widespread provision of information from digital tools lead to responses on the supply side by input sellers?
- Who benefits from digital support tools? Are there certain types of farmers that don't gain access? If so, how can the information be delivered in a way that ensures broader access and behavioural changes for a larger number of farmers?
- Do decision tools lead to persistent change over time? Or do some farmers revert to their original practices? Are there complementary interventions that can lead to more persistent behavioral change?

¹ For examples, see Fabregas, Kremer, and Schilbach (2019), Cole and Fernando (2020), or Ponticeli, Tesei, and Gupta (2020).

² This is a non-exhaustive list of questions. It is meant only to demonstrate the types of questions that SPIA considers to be important, but for which the evidence base is limited.

SPIA will not fund tool development with this call. Tools must be ready for use by farmers to be considered for this call.

Requirements

Studies will only be considered if they have a compelling method for causally identifying the impacts of interest. While RCTs will often be feasible, quasi-experimental designs that credibly identify impacts are also encouraged. SPIA will not consider funding for methods that lack rigor.

Each study should carefully document the impact pathways from uptake of the tool to final outcomes. The expected outcomes must be clearly documented. It is also important to measure baseline knowledge and beliefs to assess for whom the tools modify beliefs.

Each research team will need to have demonstrated experience in conducting the types of evaluations that are being proposed. SPIA welcomes collaborations between researchers inside and outside of the CGIAR. SPIA is willing to help find external collaborators for researchers from CGIAR centers. These requests should be directed to Ricardo Labarta (r.labarta@cgiar.org), who will then work Kyle Emerick to help identify potential collaborations with external researchers.

EOIs should be prepared using the below template and sent to spia@cgiar.org . The deadline for submissions is May 17, 2021.

In addition to the EoI narrative, the CV's of all principal investigators should be included in the application.

Selection Procedure

SPIA will review all of the EoIs submitted and invite the most promising projects for submission of a full proposal. In some cases, SPIA may suggest modifications to the project to increase its chances of receiving funding, including collaborations with impact assessment specialists. Notifications of decisions will be sent out by June 12. Receiving an invitation to submit a full proposal does not guarantee funding. Full proposals will be evaluated through a rigorous peer review process.