



Qualitative evaluation of the impact of self-help groups on women's economic and social empowerment in India

Request for proposals

Issue date: 11 December 2018

Proposal submission deadline: 11 January 2019

1. Introduction

The [International Initiative for Impact Evaluation \(3ie\)](#) invites organisations or consortia to submit proposals to conduct qualitative evaluations under two research themes on women's self-help groups (SHGs) in rural India.

In December 2015, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation commissioned 3ie to assure the quality of and generate evidence on various aspects of the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM). As part of this evidence programme, 3ie is conducting impact evaluations, quality assuring selected evaluations of livelihood interventions, mapping the available evidence on the effectiveness of group-based livelihoods interventions, and synthesising the evidence generated under this programme.

3ie is collaborating with the rural development ministry, the Gates Foundation and World Bank to conduct an impact evaluation of the National Rural Livelihoods Project (NRLP). The NRLP operates within the ambit of the NRLM to build capacities of the national, state and union territory governments, as part of creating an enabling environment to facilitate transition of all state and union territory administration of *Swarnjayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana* to NRLM. The impact evaluation will measure the impact of NRLP interventions on socio-economic outcomes and draw key lessons that will help inform the design and expansion of the programme. The two qualitative evaluations will complement the findings and recommendations of this impact evaluation.

Selected research teams will be expected to design and conduct high-quality and policy-relevant qualitative evaluations to address the key questions discussed in Section 3. 3ie will provide funding of up to USD 45,000 for each evaluation, which will be completed within five months.

2. Background

The Indian government has articulated its commitment to promote inclusive growth through numerous policies, programmes and plans. In line with this vision, the rural development

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ministry launched the NRLM in 2011 to reduce rural poverty by creating and strengthening institutional platforms by and for the rural poor. Targeted primarily at women, NRLM provides a combination of financial resources and technical assistance to Indian states so that programme participants can use a comprehensive livelihoods-based approach. This is done through these mechanisms: (a) mobilising all rural poor households into effective SHGs, their federations and other organisations; (b) enhancing access to financial, technical and marketing services; (c) developing capacities and skills for gainful and sustainable livelihoods and (d) improving the delivery of social and economic support services to the poor.

What makes SHGs under NRLM unique is that they are federated into village organisations (VO) and cluster-level federations (CLF) at the block level. This federated structure provides the necessary capacity development, internal management and technical support SHGs need to sustain themselves.

The NRLM provides support for activities in states with high levels of poverty. The mission's mandate is to cover 70 million poor rural households across 600 districts, 6,000 blocks, 250,000 gram panchayats and 600,000 villages through self-managed SHGs and their federations, and provide support for livelihoods collectives over a period of eight to ten years. The NRLP is a component of NRLM and is supported partly by the World Bank, costing close to USD 500 million.

2.1 3ie impact evaluation

3ie is undertaking a large-scale, rigorous impact evaluation of the NRLM programme to estimate the programme's impact on households and women's socio-economic and human development outcomes. This study employs a difference-in-difference strategy that exploits variations in the starting date of the programme across blocks and villages to generate intention-to-treat estimates of programme impact. Additionally, using a number of village and programme-level implementation variables as instruments to predict SHG age, this impact evaluation will inform how the quality of SHGs influences outcomes. The impact evaluation will examine the role of VOs and CLFs in enhancing the functioning of SHGs. This study will include 27,000 households across nine states, including Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal.

Six tools have been developed for the quantitative evaluation: household questionnaires, women's questionnaire, SHG questionnaire, VO questionnaire, CLF questionnaire and village questionnaire. These have been reviewed and piloted for their validity. 3ie is proposing to commission two qualitative studies that will add value to this ongoing evaluation by closely examining some aspects of the programme that may not be adequately measured with large-scale quantitative tools.

3. Scope of the proposals

3ie will commission two qualitative studies, one for each of the two research themes described below through this open call for proposals. The studies can be conducted in any of the nine states included in the current evaluation. The studies are expected to be completed within five months.

The focus of the qualitative studies will be to understand the role of SHGs and their federations as institutions for promoting women's social and economic inclusion and empowerment.

Specifically, 3ie will fund two qualitative evaluations to examine empowerment and SHG federation roles:

1. The impact of SHGs and their federations on multi-dimensional measures of women's empowerment.
2. The role of SHG federations, such as VOs and CLFs, in determining SHG quality and functioning.

Both research themes are described below in detail.

3.1 Impact of SHGs and federations on women's empowerment

3ie will fund one evaluation that examines the impact SHGs and their federations on multiple-dimensions of women's empowerment. Measuring empowerment in impact evaluations is a challenging task. Diverse indicators that can be interpreted differently across contexts and social-desirability biases are only some of the constraints faced in studying empowerment in large-scale quantitative surveys (Glennester et al. 2017; Huis et al. 2017 and Kabeer 1999)¹.

The funded study will measure empowerment at personal, relational, community and systemic levels. [Appendix A](#) includes examples, without aiming to be exhaustive, of the indicators of empowerment that may be studied under this research theme. The study may be conducted in more than one state to explore the influence of contextual differences. We encourage proposals that include small lab-in-the-field experiments and behavioural games to examine women's empowerment alongside self-reported empowerment indicators.

3.2 Role of VO and CLFs

The second qualitative evaluation will examine the role of VOs and CLFs in determining SHG quality. They have these key functions: (1) mentor and strengthen the capacity of SHG members; (2) review and monitor SHG quality and functioning; (3) facilitate SHG participation in community matters by establishing linkages with local government organisations; (4) initiating community businesses and collectives; and (5) provide financial support to SHG through direct funding or formal credit linkages.²

However, the role of VOs and CLFs has varied across states. While some states have successfully strengthened VOs and CLFs over a course of several years, others have initiated this federated structure more recently. The funded study will compare SHG quality with mature VOs and CLFs to those without or with newer federations. We expect the study will develop a qualitative tool for assessing SHG and VO quality that includes measures of inclusiveness and goes beyond the operational indicators. Proposals may include more than one state.

¹ Glennester, R, Walsh, C and Diaz-Marin, L, 2018. *A Practical Guide to Measuring Women's and Girls' Empowerment in Impact Evaluations*. J-PAL. Huis, M.A., Hansen, N., Otten, S. and Lensink, R., 2017. A three-dimensional model of women's empowerment: Implications in the field of microfinance and future directions. *Frontiers in psychology*, 8, p.1678. Kabeer, N., 1999. Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment. *Development and change*, 30(3), pp.435-464.

² Community Operations Manuals, Ministry of Rural Development.

4. Characteristics of a successful proposal

Each proposal should focus on one of the research themes across any of the nine states that are part of the large-scale impact evaluation. The primary deliverable will be an evaluation report. We seek proposals that clearly demonstrate the attributes described below.

- **In-depth contextual knowledge.** Proposals should clearly explain the context in which the evaluation will be conducted and the relevance of the evaluation design to respond to the key questions. Contextual understanding in the proposals will be assessed by the description of programme, its implementation, the role of existing institutions and linkages to essential services and local government institutions to improve effectiveness of NRLM. The proposals will also include an in-depth understanding of the gendered economic and social status of women and existing unequal social norms that may vary across local contexts. Teams should also explain how the study will measure key empowerment-related indicators across various dimensions including, economic, socio-cultural, legal, political and psycho-social (see [Appendix A](#)).
- **Clearly defined research questions and motivation.** Proposals should explicitly state which of the stated research questions it seeks to address (see [Section 3](#)). Please note that the same team can put in proposals for studying both research questions. Proposals must articulate the main questions and sub-questions that the study will answer and what conceptual and analytical frameworks will be used for the analysis. We expect to see explicit descriptions of the framework(s) that will be used to analyse gender and equity. See also [Appendix A](#).
- **Strong programme theory of change:** All proposals should contain a description of the causal pathways between the programme results framework and the main outcomes of interest. It should clearly lay out the assumptions underlying each link between the results frameworks main elements, validated by explicitly stating the evidence, theory or theories to be tested that underpins them. Teams must pay particular attention to gender and equity determinants, all of which will reflect a thorough socioeconomic and political understanding of the context.
- **Policy relevance and stakeholder participation in the evaluation:** Applicants should explain how the study will be relevant for programme managers and policymakers, particularly in addressing the needs of the implementing agency whose programme will be included in the study. The proposal must indicate how stakeholders will be consulted and will participate in the evaluation, both on the demand and supply side of the programme. The team must elaborate on how they will engage key stakeholders in designing and implementing the studies, including beneficiaries, and demonstrate how they will achieve stakeholder buy-in for the proposed study.
- **Justification of methods used:** In the methodology section, proposals must describe the methods that will be used to address the research questions. This section will include a justification on how the proposed methods are suitable to address the key questions.
- **High technical quality:** Proposals will demonstrate the use of relevant, rigorous qualitative methods that will be participatory and inclusive. At minimum, funded studies must conduct a gender and caste and/or ethnic group-sensitive analyses in which respondents of marginalised castes and/or ethnic groups are included. Suggested approaches include, but are not restricted to (a) in-depth semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with direct and indirect programme participants, implementing agencies at the local and state level, local government organisations that provide

complementary and support services; and (b) direct observation of individual and group behaviour, SHG and VO functioning, among others. The studies may use existing programme documents and other secondary data to complement the analysis. All findings must be validated using recognised methods, including the participation of beneficiaries

- **Team composition:** The research team must comprise a lead PI who should have demonstrated experience of high-quality research on empowerment and women's SHGs in India. The team will be assessed as a whole and not on individuals alone. A strong team will be multidisciplinary and should include members with relevant sectoral and methodological experience along with adequate support staff. One of the PIs must be an Indian resident with relevant research experience in India.

Project deliverables will include a detailed pre-analysis plan, progress reports, study instruments, and a final evaluation report in the 3ie template. All data and research material will be submitted to 3ie for review and replication, according to [3ie's research transparency policy](#). The primary deliverable at the end of the grant will be a final evaluation report in a template that 3ie will provide. All other quality aspects remaining equal, preference will be for proposals that will conduct the study in Bihar.

6. Eligibility

- Only legally registered organisations and consortia of registered organisations, not individuals, may apply.
- The grant-holding organisation and the lead PI may be located anywhere in the world.
- The research team should include at least one researcher who is an Indian resident. The national researcher must be engaged in substantive tasks like study design, data analysis, report writing and stakeholder engagement for uptake of findings into policy and practice.
- Each proposal must be submitted by a single organisation that may include others as sub-grantees or sub-contractors (subject to 3ie's [direct](#) and [indirect](#) cost policies).
- For-profit organisations are eligible to apply, but are restricted to the same indirect cost limits as non-profit organisations and may not charge a fee.
- The applicant organisation must be able to sign the [3ie grant agreement](#), a sample of which is available on the 3ie website.
- Organisations may submit more than one proposal and may be included on more than one proposal. They should, however, have the capacity to implement any and all grants awarded to them.
- All proposals should have sufficient resources for undertaking high-quality evaluations. If the proposal is dependent on other resources, this should be clearly indicated. If selected, the applicant will need to ensure that these additional resources are available at the time of signing the agreement with 3ie. In the absence of this, the offer of 3ie grant support will be withdrawn.

7. Timeline

The deadline for submitting proposals is 23:59 GMT, 11 January 2019. 3ie expects to announce the awards for successful proposals on 8 February 2019. 3ie will invite selected

applicants for a pre-award meeting within two weeks of announcement of results. Final award of the grant is conditional on the key members of the research team attending this meeting.

Table 1: Key dates for activities or deliverables

Activity or deliverable	Key dates (all deadlines: 23:59 GMT)
Request for proposals is posted	11 December 2018
Deadline for questions	17 December 2018
Q&A document posted	20 December 2018
Deadline for submission of proposals	11 January 2019
Announcement of final award of grants	8 February 2019
Submission of evaluation reports	30 July 2019
Submission of the revised evaluation reports	30 August 2019

8. Selection criteria

Proposals will be reviewed and scored by at least one 3ie internal reviewer and two external reviewers. 3ie may provide comments and request applicants to make changes to their proposal. 3ie reserves the right to not award any grant in case no applicant meets the requirements. Table 2 provides the evaluation criteria and percentage of the total score for the assessment of proposals.

Table 2: Proposal scoring criteria

Criteria	Per cent (%)
Qualifications of the research team	20
Relevance of the study for the context	30
Design and methodology	30
Policy relevance and potential for uptake and use	10
Cost effectiveness	10

9. Instructions for applicants

Proposals must include the following information:

- Completed proposal form using the [3ie proposal template](#) that will be available on the website.

- The proposed budget must follow 3ie's [direct](#) cost and [indirect](#) cost policies and include the cost of evaluation, costs of engagement with key stakeholders and dissemination, and costs of report production.
- Curriculum vitae (CV, not exceeding three pages each) of all proposed PIs. It is expected that these PIs will participate in the proposed evaluation. Applicants are required to provide only information relevant to the grant in their CV.
- If applicable, include CVs (not to exceed three pages each) of additional researchers who will be involved in conducting the evaluation, if approved. Applicants need to provide only information relevant to the grant in their CV.
- Copies of up to three evaluation reports or publications relevant for this call which has proposed PIs as named authors.

10. Submission guidelines

- Please send the complete proposal package of documents to nrlm_qualeval@3ieimpact.org with 'NRLM qualitative evaluation proposal' as subject line. Please submit separate application packages if you are submitting proposals for each research theme.
- The sample evaluation studies relevant to the grant may be submitted as separate PDF file uploads.
- The budget should be presented in [3ie budget format](#) and follow 3ie budget guidelines. Budget notes may be submitted as a separate document in Microsoft® Word or .rtf file in font size equal to or larger than 11
- **Please direct any questions related to this RFP to nrlm_qualeval@3ieimpact.org with 'NRLM qualitative proposal query' in the subject line by 23:59 GMT, 17 December 2018.**

Appendix A: Empowerment indicators

This table describes some dimensions of empowerment that can be considered for examination. These indicators have been developed in consultation with key stakeholders including representatives from NRLM and are only indicative.

	Personal or relational	Community	Systemic
Economic	<p>Multi-dimensional poverty at individual level</p> <p>Access to household resources</p>	<p>Involvement and/or representation in local market associations; <i>Mahila Mandalis</i>, School Development Monitoring Committees, Village Water and Sanitation Committees</p> <p>Access to markets</p> <p>Entrepreneur skills and awareness on market prices,</p> <p>Participation in local trade and business</p> <p>Skill training at all levels</p> <p>Access to modern transportation, drudgery reducing gadgets and technology</p>	<p>Representation of women's economic interests in macro-economic policies, state and federal budgets (gender budgeting),</p> <p>Role of community-based organisations (CBO) in addressing gender and social issues</p> <p>Role of CBOs in pro-poor policy making and implementation of poverty alleviation programmes</p>
Socio-cultural		<p>Women's participation in social events</p> <p>Extra-familial groups and social networks</p> <p>Shift in patriarchal norms (such as son preference)</p>	<p>Women's literacy and access to a broad range of educational options</p> <p>Active participation in local governance and politics</p> <p>Role of CBOs in addressing social and gender issues</p> <p>Advocating for social change (gender norms, patriarchal values, various forms of discrimination etc.)</p>

Legal	Legal literacy and Knowledge of legal rights Access to legal services;	Community mobilization for rights Campaigns for rights awareness Advocating for effective local enforcement of legislations Evolving as Para legal volunteers	Laws supporting women's rights Access to resources and options Advocacy for rights and legislation Using judicial system to redress violation of rights Alternative dispute resolution mechanism such as <i>Naari Adalat</i> , <i>Nyaya Samithis</i> , Social Action Committees
Political		Women's involvement or mobilisation in the local political system or campaigns Making informed support for specific candidates Representation in local bodies of government Women's active participation in <i>gram sabhas</i> Leadership development, Participation in Village Level Micro Planning Knowledge on and accessing resources available with different political authorities (MLA funds, MPLADs).	Women's representation in regional and national bodies of government and support in exercising their power at all levels Strength as a vote constituency Advocacy and lobby for representation of women's interests in key policy intervention initiatives through effective lobbies and interest groups
Psycho-social	Women's stress and mental health	Collective awareness against injustice	