



Request for evaluation proposals

Qualitative study on self-help groups in India

Issue date: 27 June 2019

Proposal submission deadline: 15 July 2019

1. Introduction

The [International Initiative for Impact Evaluation \(3ie\)](#) invites organisations or consortia to submit proposals to conduct one qualitative evaluation 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 Indian National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM). As part of this evidence programme, 3ie is conducting impact evaluations, assuring the quality of 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 Ministry of Rural Development, 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 qualitative evaluation will complement the findings and recommendations of this impact evaluation.

The selected research team will be expected to carry out a high-quality and policy-relevant qualitative evaluation to address the key questions discussed in Section 3¹. 3ie will provide funding of up to USD 90,000 for one evaluation, which will be completed within three months.

¹ A call for proposals for a qualitative study was issued in December 2018. However, 3ie did not give out a grant at that time. We have revised the scope of the qualitative study and encourage research teams who had previously applied to submit proposals for this new study.

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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 ministry launched NRLM in 2011 to reduce rural poverty by creating and strengthening institutional platforms by and for poor people in rural areas. Targeted primarily at women, NRLM provides a combination of financial resources and technical assistance to Indian states for comprehensive livelihoods-based approaches to work with programme participants. It works through these mechanisms: (a) mobilising all rural poor households into operational 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 that SHGs need to become sustainable.

NRLM provides support in thirteen states: Assam, Chhattisgarh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh Gujarat, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. These 13 states account for 85 per cent of the rural poor in the country. 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.

3. Problem description

3ie is undertaking a large-scale, rigorous impact evaluation of NRLM 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.

This study includes 27,000 households across nine states, including Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. Six questionnaires have been developed for the quantitative evaluation: household, women's, SHG, VO, CLF and village. They have been reviewed and piloted for their validity. The commissioned qualitative study 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.

Preliminary analysis of the quantitative data has revealed two findings:

1. The number of defunct SHGs is more than what was expected in some of the states. The underlying causes for SHGs failing to survive are not fully understood through the quantitative study and will require a more in-depth qualitative study.
2. Significant differences exist in the roles that SHG federations play across all nine states. While in some states VOs and CLFs are developing the capacity of SHGs, in others they

are playing a more substantial role as financial intermediaries and promoters of group-based livelihood activities.

3ie will fund a qualitative study to answer two questions related to these findings:

1. What factors are responsible for SHGs that are not sustained?
2. At the institutional level, what role do SHG federations, i.e. VOs and CLFs, play in determining SHG quality, functioning and sustainability?

4. Scope of the proposals

The study will be conducted in the states of Madhya Pradesh and Jharkhand, which are among the nine states included in the ongoing impact evaluation. The study should be completed within three months. The detailed scope of the proposals is described below.

A key objective of NRLM is to build strong, self-managed, women's institutions, including SHGs and their federations. Accordingly, the project has invested heavily in the capacity of communities and the professionals working with them. Training modules customised for various community institutions (i.e. SHGs and their federations at the village and cluster or block level) were developed and a cadre of over 500,000 community-based professionals and community resource persons were identified and trained to deliver this training. So far, the project has mobilised more than 8.8 million women from poor rural households into 749,000 SHGs.

However, the growth and expansion of the programme has not been without challenges. Preliminary data from the survey conducted during 3ie's impact evaluation has revealed that close to 15 per cent of SHGs have closed down after a few years of operation. The commissioned qualitative evaluation is expected to examine the factors responsible for these closures.

SHGs have been facing numerous challenges, such as variations in the quality of groups, unequal growth levels, policy contradictions, and shortage of resource material and resource persons to support the Self Help Promoting Institutions. Further, there may be community and household constraints to participating in SHGs, such as regressive gendered social norms and lack of trust, which may lead to their failure. The commissioned qualitative evaluation will also examine the role of SHG federations, i.e. VOs and CLFs, in determining SHG quality, functioning and sustainability.

Under NRLM, VOs and CLFs are expected to: (1) provide mentorship and strengthen SHG capacity; (2) review and monitor SHG quality and functioning; (3) facilitate SHG participation in community matters by establishing linkages with local government organisations; (4) initiate community businesses and collectives; and (5) give financial support to SHGs by providing funds directly or by establishing formal credit linkages.²

However, the actual role of VOs and CLFs has varied across states. Some states have successfully strengthened VOs and CLFs over a course of several years, thereby improving quality and sustainability of SHGs. Others have initiated this federated structure more recently. The qualitative study will compare the quality of SHGs within mature VOs and CLFs to those that may or may not be incorporated into newly formed federations. The study team will develop a qualitative tool for assessing SHG, VO and CLF quality that includes measures of inclusiveness and goes beyond the operational indicators of NRLM.

² [NRLM community operation manual, 2016.](#)

The study will address both questions (see Section 3) and will be conducted in the states of Madhya Pradesh and Jharkhand. The choice of states is driven by the observed differences in SHG failure rates. To answer the second research question, teams will select mature and newly formed SHG federations in both states. 3ie will work with the selected team to identify the SHGs (failed and existing) and federations.

5. Characteristics of a successful proposal

The primary deliverable will be an evaluation report that should follow the guidelines provided by 3ie. We seek proposals that clearly demonstrate the attributes described below.

- **In-depth contextual knowledge.** Proposals should clearly demonstrate an in-depth knowledge and understanding of the programme context in Jharkhand and Madhya Pradesh. Contextual understanding in the proposals will be assessed by the extent the applicants use any framework and tools to describe the context within which the programme is operating, including political, social, structural and power-related factors facilitating or threatening the sustainability of SHGs. It will include identifying and analysing the role of existing institutions and linkages to essential services and local government institutions that improve the effectiveness of NRLM SHGs.
- **A clear and in-depth understanding of the NRLM SHG programme.** Proposals must include a theoretical reasoning of the causes of SHG failure, drawing from existing literature. Please refer to some such hypotheses in section 4 where we have identified a few reasons for SHG failure. The proposals will include, but not be limited to an in-depth understanding of the political, economic and social status of women and existing unequal social norms that drive, reinforce and reproduce barriers to SHG participation or SHG sustainability, which may vary across local contexts.
- **Clearly defined, policy-relevant, gender-responsive and equity-focused research questions and motivation.** Proposals must articulate the main questions and sub-questions that the study will answer and what conceptual and analytical frameworks, of which a published gender analytical framework will be one, will be used for the analysis. We expect to see explicit descriptions of the framework(s) that will be used for the analysis to answer the questions identified in Section 3.
- **Sample description.** Proposals must clearly state their proposed sampling strategy stating the number of SHGs and federations that will be included. Teams must specify how the sample selection will help answer the research questions.
- **Plan for substantive ongoing stakeholder participation.** Applicants should explain how they will ensure buy-in from key actors from design onwards to the end of the study. The proposal must indicate how programme, participant, and policy stakeholders locally, at state and national levels will be consulted on evaluation design, implementation and feedback on findings. Teams are required to interview (former) SHG members and their families in order to understand social and family support needed for SHG participation. Interviews with VOs and CLFs where SHGs have been federated is also a requirement.
- **Justification of methods used.** In the methodology section, proposals must describe the methods that will be used to test study hypothesis. This section will include a justification on how proposed methods are suitable to address the key questions.
- **High quality.** Proposals will use rigorous qualitative methods that will be gender-responsive, participatory and inclusive (i.e. take caste, ethnicity and other factors perpetuating inequality explicitly into account in data collection and analysis). We expect the team to review secondary literature and programme documentation, in addition to

collecting primary data through interviews, observations, games or other tools. All findings must be validated using recognised methods, including participant and other stakeholder triangulation.

- **Team composition.** The research team must comprise a lead principal investigator (PI), who will have demonstrated experience leading high-quality research on 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, and have 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, a mid-term progress report, study instruments and a final evaluation report in the 3ie template (to be provided by contract signing) and all of the data collected for the study. All quantitative data and code books will be submitted to 3ie for replication, according to [3ie’s research transparency policy](#). 3ie will make these de-identified datasets publicly available.

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, including study design, data analysis, report writing, ongoing stakeholder engagement and promoting evidence uptake.
- 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, and are restricted to the same indirect cost limits as non-profit organisations. They may not charge a fee.
- The applicant organisation must be able to sign the [3ie grant agreement](#).

7. Timeline

The deadline for submitting proposals is 23:59 GMT, 15 July 2019. 3ie will invite selected applicants for a pre-award meeting on 22 July 2019. Final award of the grant is conditional on the key members of the research team attending this meeting. 3ie expects to announce the award on 26 July 2019.

Table 1: Key dates for activities or deliverables

Activity or deliverable	Key dates (all deadlines: 23:59 GMT)
Request for proposals published	27 June 2019
Deadline for questions	2 July 2019
Q&A document posted online	3 July 2019
Deadline for proposal submission	15 July 2019

Pre-award meeting	22 July 2019
Signing the grant agreement	26 July 2019
Inception report	7 August 2019
Submission of draft final evaluation report in the required template and study data for replication	30 October 2019
Submission of the final evaluation report in 3ie template and all study data	9 December 2019

8. Selection criteria

Proposals will be reviewed and scored by at least two 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 available for each criterion.

Table 2: Evaluation criteria

Criteria	Per cent (%)
Design, methodology and relevance* of the study for the context as well as its feasibility	50
Qualifications of the research team	30
Cost effectiveness	20

*Note: Relevance includes attention to context, demand, inclusiveness and likelihood that the results will be useful and used.

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 communication, and costs of report production, including professional copy-editing and proofing to 3ie requirements.
- Curriculum vitae (CV), not exceeding three pages for each proposed PI. It is a requirement that these PIs will participate directly and substantively in the proposed evaluation. Applicants will 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. 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 have proposed PIs as named authors.

10. Submission guidelines

- Please send the complete package of application documents to nrlm_qualeval@3ieimpact.org with 'NRLM qualitative evaluation proposal 2019' in the subject line.
- The sample evaluation studies relevant to the grant may be submitted as separate PDF file attachments.
- 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, **2 July 2019**.