**STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS FOR
ADVANCING RESEARCH AND KNOWLEDGE**

## SPARK Open Call for Concept Notes

## Research Grants: Global Solicitation #1 (January 2025)

The Strategic Partnerships for Advancing Research and Knowledge (SPARK) award is a five-year initiative (2024-2029) funded by USAID through the Higher Education Solutions Network (HESN) in a partnership between USAID's Bureau for Inclusive Growth, Partnerships, and Innovation (IPI) and the Institute of International Education (IIE). SPARK supports high-quality, locally grounded research, which is critical to driving economic growth, solving local and global challenges, and producing sustainable development outcomes that improve lives. SPARK funds locally led research that promotes the understanding of development challenges and supports the development and dissemination of solutions that advance progress toward development goals. The advancement of research goals is realized by supporting research discovery and uptake in priority development areas through grants and capacity-strengthening support, and by cultivating equitable, sustainable partnerships between researchers and higher education institutions (HEIs) in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) and the U.S.

For the inaugural call for Concept Notes under the **Research Grants: Global Solicitation #1**, SPARK will fund university-based partnerships that conduct later-stage research focused on development and innovation activities that can lead to actionable programmatic, policy, or commercial impacts in topical areas critical to USAID.

Through this call for Concept Notes, SPARK aims to support research that can make a more immediate impact on the communities, sectors, and countries in which USAID works. While there is no one definition, standard, or approach to achieving this goal, illustrative examples of encompassing research definitions include:

- **Later-Stage Research.** Research meant to bring known solutions, innovations, technologies, or policy-relevant data to concrete development impact.
- **Translational Research.** Research that bridges the gap between basic science and real-world applications, often by translating laboratory or field-based discoveries into practice.
- **Use-Inspired Research**. Research driven by potential applications to create outcomes that are useful and usable for society.

Research could focus on:

- **Conducting research relevant to policymakers, businesses, NGOs, or communities** and sharing results in ways that are easily understood and used.

- **Piloting discoveries and innovations** supported by previous research, like testing new technologies to assess effectiveness and feasibility before wider dissemination and implementation.
- **Commercializing research** through developing market-ready products based on a research-informed prototype.

**Key Information for SPARK Research Grants: Global Solicitation #1**

- **Eligibility**: Full-time faculty at a higher education institution in eligible countries. Please see this link for the list of countries in which USAID works that are available for potential consideration under Research Grants: Global Solicitation #1. Of note, USAID Mission review and Concurrence will still be required before an award can be made.

- **Funding:** Grants of up to **$100,000** for applicants who *propose a partnership* with a U.S.-based researcher for up to **12 months**.

- **Deadline for Submission:** March 4, 2025, at 11:59 PM GMT

- **Application Process:** The initial step involves submitting a Concept Note. After review, select applicants will be invited to submit a Full Application.

Concept Note Guidelines can be found below. For additional questions, please contact SPARK@iie.org.

Please note that this Solicitation does not guarantee future funding commitments nor reimburse expenses incurred in submission preparation. Any updates or addendums will also be posted at www.iie.org/SPARK.

**SPARK Concept Note Requirements for Research Grants: Global Solicitation #1**

Applicants should review these Concept Note Requirements before starting their Concept Note in the IIE SLATE portal. The details outlined below provide important information about eligibility and submission requirements.

When accessing the SLATE system, the Concept Note is divided into the following sections: Eligibility, Principal Investigator Information, Research Partner Information, Concept Details, Timeline, Environmental and Social Screening, and Certification. Each section of the SLATE Concept Note is detailed further below. The Concept Note and accompanying materials must be submitted in English.

1. **Basic Eligibility**
   To be eligible to submit a Concept Note to SPARK, a Principal Investigator (PI) must:

   ● Agree to IIE's Data and Privacy Consent guidelines.

   ● Confirm that the proposed SPARK activity will take place in an eligible country for Global Solicitation #1. Please see this link for the list of countries in which USAID works and are available for potential consideration under the Research Grants: Global Solicitation Call #1. USAID Mission review and Concurrence is required before an award can be made.
   ● Confirm country of residency and citizenship.
   Notes:
   ● Principal Investigators can only submit one Concept Note per solicitation cycle.
   ● There is no restriction on the number of Concept Notes from a single Higher Education Institution.

2. **Principal Investigator (PI) Information**
   The Principal Investigator (PI) must submit the following information:

   ● **Biographical Information.** Name, contact details, country of citizenship, institutional affiliation, and gender.

   ● **Abridged Curriculum Vitae (CV).** *Maximum four (4) pages.* The abridged CV highlights the PI's educational background, current and previous professional affiliations, and contributions to their field related to the proposed research.

   ● **Letter of Support (LOS).** *Maximum one (1) page*. The Letter of Support (LOS) outlines institutional support for the PI's proposed research project. A LOS:
   o Must be written by someone other than the PI at the PI's home institution.
   o Should be on official letterhead and include the writer's title, name, and affiliation.
   o It is recommended, but not required, that the LOS be written by an administrator at the PI's affiliated institution at the level of Dean or higher (or local equivalent).
   o Though not required, indicate any institutional or organizational in-kind contributions to the research project.

o   Be written in English. If written in a language other than English, please include a translation.

PIs are only allowed to submit one LOS in the SLATE portal. LOS are due by March 4, 2025, at 11:59pm GMT, and no extensions will be granted.

**3.  Research Partner Information**

U.S.-Based Research Partners under Research Grants: Global Solicitation #1 must be affiliated with a higher education institution in the United States. Affiliation with a higher education institution can include any form of post-graduate (i.e., non-student) employment at a college or university. Affiliation can also include employment at a university-based research consortia or other organization that is affiliated with a higher education institution. The envisioned role of the U.S.-based partner could include providing expertise, skills, resources and/or access to networks that will meaningfully augment the proposed SPARK project.

For Research Grants: Global Solicitation #1, partnerships can take the following forms:
1.  The PI and the Research Partner have been working together on the proposed project and are applying for funding to continue their work at a later stage.
2.  The PI has been working on the project and would like to include a Research Partner with whom they have previously collaborated.
3.  The PI has been working on the project and would like to include a new Research Partner who has committed to engaging in the proposed project as outlined in this Concept Note.

The PI must submit the following information about the proposed research partner.
●  **Biographical Information:** Name, contact details, country of citizenship, institutional affiliation, and gender.

●  **Rationale for Partnership**. *Up to 250 words*. A description of how the expertise of the U.S.-based partner will complement the proposed project.

●  **Research Partner Abridged Curriculum Vitae (CV)**. *Maximum four (4) pages*. The abridged CV highlights the relevant research partner's educational background, current and previous affiliations, and contributions to their field related to the proposed research.

●  **Letter of Affiliation (LOA)**. *Maximum one (1) page*. A Letter of Affiliation is written by the PI's proposed Research Partner and outlines planned contributions to the research project activities outlined in the concept note. The LOA:
   o   Should be on official letterhead and include the research partner's title, name, and affiliation.
   o   Cannot be written by the PI.
   o   Be written in English or include a translation.
   o   Though not required, in-kind contributions from the Research Partner's institution or organization to the research project should be noted.

Only one LOA is accepted at the Concept Note stage. LOAs are submitted by the PI through the SLATE portal.

If your project includes more than one research partner, PIs may be asked to provide detailed information if invited to submit a Full Application (see Concept Note Submission and Review Process and Timeline below). LOAs are due by March 4, 2025, at 11:59pm GMT and no extensions will be granted.

### 4. Concept Details
The Concept Details section outlines the activities of the proposed research project and allowable character and word counts. The PI must provide the following information about the research project:

- **Research Project Title.** *Up to 50 characters*.

- **Field of Study and Subfield.** Please use the application system's dropdown list to select the research project field of study and subfield. The options are based on the technical areas and subfields supported by USAID globally and available for consideration under the SPARK Research Grants: Global Solicitation #1. For more information about which technical areas are emphasized in specific countries and/or regions, please see the CDCS for that respective country/region.

- **Project Description**. *Up to 1400 words*.
  Please write the project description with reference to the review criteria and guidance throughout this solicitation. Please address each section of the project description clearly and include citations in the text as needed.
  A. **Background.** *up to 250 words*. Summarize the scope of the development challenge your research will address including issues relevant to both the international and local context. You can include a brief summary of past work done on the proposed topic as well as any evidence gaps that your SPARK research will help fill.
  B. **Project Objectives.** *up to 250 words.* Provide a clear statement of the research project objectives and/or research questions the SPARK project will address. It is important that the project objectives are reasonable for the proposed timeline.
  C. **Research Plan.** *up to 400 words.* Describe the project design, procedures, and analyses to be used to accomplish the specific objectives of the project. If applicable, describe study populations, locations, and interventions.
  D. **Innovation.** *up to 250 words.* Explain how proposed concepts, approaches, methods, tools, or technologies used in your research may represent an innovative or novel approach to a specific development challenge.

- **Country Development Cooperation Strategy (CDCS)**. *Up to 250 words*. SPARK research projects should relate to the current USAID CDCS of a SPARK-eligible country. In this section, please outline the relevance of the proposed activity to the CDCS. Please

reference the SPARK Country List and corresponding CDCS. For the SPARK Research Grants: Global Solicitation #1, activities can only focus on one SPARK-eligible country.

- **Research Outputs**. *Up to 250 words*. Outline anticipated research outputs and their beneficiaries. Depending on project activity, this includes, but is not limited to knowledge products, innovations, or commercialized products.

- **Timeline.** SPARK Research Grants timelines cannot exceed one calendar year. Projects can begin as early as August 1, 2025 and must be completed by September 30, 2026. Use the SLATE dropdown function to indicate the duration of the project.

5. **Environmental and Social Screening**. In SLATE, please read the Environmental and Social Screening guidance and confirm that you have reviewed the guidance.

6. **Certification Page**
   To submit the Concept Note, PIs must certify the following:
   - I certify that the information provided in the submitted materials is accurate, correct, and complete to the best of my knowledge. I understand it is unacceptable to misrepresent accomplishments and to borrow from the works of others without proper acknowledgment. This includes submitting materials as my own that have been written, re-written, or heavily edited by others. I am responsible for the accuracy and authenticity of the work contained in the materials submitted, including content developed with the assistance of generative AI. Breaches of these protocols may result in the rejection of the submitted materials.
   - I understand that the submitted materials will be shared with persons reviewing materials at USAID, IIE, and external technical experts.
   - I acknowledge that the decisions of IIE are final**.**

**SPARK Evaluation Criteria and Concept Note Submission and Review Timeline**
The sections below outline the Concept Note Evaluation Criteria and the Concept Note Submission and Review Process Timeline.

**Concept Note Evaluation Criteria**
IIE and USAID will evaluate each Concept Note based on the following criteria:

**Quality of the Proposed Project**
- Project addresses a specific problem(s) with clear objectives
- Detailed and specific project activities are outlined
- Outline of the work accomplished on the project to date

**Significance of Project**
- Significance of the project to the field of study
- Relevance of project to USAID and Mission or Region CDCS
- Clear outline of project outputs and intended beneficiaries

**Potential for Impact**
- Proposed project has the potential for broad and long-term impact through applications for use, concepts, approaches, methods, tools, or technologies
- Project demonstrates an innovative or novel approach to a development challenge

**PI and Research Partner Qualifications and Suitability**
- The PI and Research Partner's discipline, subfields, areas of expertise, professional experience, and motivation for applying are well-suited to the success and impact of the project
- Suitability of the Research Partner to provide assistance and complement the proposed project

**Concept Note Submission and Review Process and Timeline**

***Open Call for Concept Notes: January 21, 2025 to March 4, 2025***
Interested parties can submit a Concept Note through the IIE's SLATE System. Applicants must submit all Concept Note materials by the deadline of March 4, 2025 at 11:59pm GMT, including letters of support and affiliation. Incomplete Concept Notes will not be reviewed, and extensions will not be granted.

***Anticipated Concept Note Review Period: March 5-26, 2025***
IIE and USAID team members will review all eligible, responsive, and complete Concept Notes. Concept Notes will be reviewed for their alignment with SPARK objectives and USAID priorities along with the criteria stated above. Additional criteria and considerations may be applied when making final determinations regarding which Concept Notes proceed to the Full Application stage.

***Anticipated Concept Note Decisions: March 27, 2025***
Applicants will be notified of their Concept Note status if recommended or not recommended based on the IIE/USAID review. Recommended applicants will be invited to submit a Full Application with greater detail about their research project, which will include, but is not limited to, a detailed research application and budget. Recommended applicants will receive additional guidance once notified, and it is anticipated that they will have four weeks to submit all requested materials through the IIE SLATE system. Only recommended applicants will be invited to submit a Full Application. Concept Note applicants who are not recommended to proceed to the Full Application stage will receive feedback and are encouraged to reapply in a future cycle.

**Additional Guidance**
**IIE SLATE Concept Note Portal**. Concept Notes under this SPARK Research Grants: Global Solicitation #1 must be submitted to SPARK via the secure platform at IIE SLATE link. All applicants must register to create an account, which allows the applicant to save their progress before submitting for SPARK review. For more information on registering and creating an account in SLATE and frequently asked questions, please visit www.iie.org/SPARK. For other questions, please contact SPARK at SPARK@iie.org.

**Contact.** For questions regarding this Solicitation and Concept Note Submission, please contact us via email at SPARK@iie.org or on WhatsApp at +1.202.826.6303.