

Department of State
Public Notice

Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor Request for Statements of Interest:
Applied Research and Evaluation Innovation Fund: Round 1

I. Requested Objectives for Statements of Interest

The Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (DRL) announces a Request for Statements of Interest (RSOI) from organizations interested in submitting Statements of Interest (SOI) for applied research and evaluation projects that support the following goal: Build a portfolio of evidence to further identify democracy and human rights program strategies that are effective in order to improve program relevance and impact.

PLEASE NOTE: DRL strongly encourages applicants to immediately access [SAMS Domestic](#) or www.grants.gov in order to obtain a username and password. For instructions on how to register with SAMS Domestic for the first time, please refer to the Proposal Submission Instructions for Statements of Interest at: <https://www.state.gov/key-topics-bureau-of-democracy-human-rights-and-labor/open-solicitations-and-proposal-submission-instructions/open-solicitations-and-proposal-submission-instructions-proposal-submission-instructions-psi-for-statements-of-interest-updated-september-2018/>.

The submission of a SOI is the first step in a two-part process. Applicants must first submit a SOI, which is a concise, 3-page concept note designed to clearly communicate a program idea and its objectives before the development of a full proposal application. The purpose of the SOI process is to allow applicants the opportunity to submit program ideas for DRL to evaluate prior to requiring the development of full proposal applications. Upon review of eligible SOIs, DRL will invite selected applicants to expand their ideas into full proposal applications.

Please note that this is Round 1 of DRL's Applied Research and Evaluation Innovation Fund. In the new calendar year, additional solicitations will target other lines of inquiry and project ideas related to the aforementioned goal.

Objective

Projects should support the following **objective:** Promoting the use of sound evidence, and generating findings on what works, for whom, and why in democracy and human rights programming abroad.

Below, we have outlined the type of research and evaluation activities we seek to fund in this round. Focal areas, or lines of inquiry, are noted after.

Approaches / Activities

Applicants can propose any one of the following approaches in a concept note:

1. **Documentation of program evidence.** How advocates and local organizations successfully implemented approaches to improve democracy and human rights outcomes in a given situation. Evidence should not be limited to one project, but a synthesis of programmatic findings;

2. **Theories of change.** Outlining theories of change, including relevant literature (e.g., peer-reviewed, academic, practitioner-generated); or,
3. **Applied research.** Conducting applied or evaluative research to explore, understand, or predict outcomes. Evidence should not be limited to one project, but include a synthesis across projects.

As noted, applicants should only include one approach in each concept note in order to respond to the focal areas listed below.

Focal Areas

The aforementioned areas of focus outline lines of inquiry that DRL has prioritized through conversations with practitioners. However, DRL encourages applicants to further refine questions in their concept notes. Applicants who refine or add to the lines of inquiry below will not be penalized nor disqualified from the competitive process. Within concept notes, applicants can focus on one or more lines of inquiry, depending on the scope and budget proposed.

Human Rights Advocacy and Action

- What attributes define or predict effective advocacy and action interventions (e.g., campaigns, dialogue, negotiation)?
 - Are there particular tactics and strategies that are most effective in achieving specific outcomes?
 - What type of external conditions are necessary to support effective interventions? Can these conditions be used as predictors?
 - How do particular conditions (e.g., authoritarianism) affect outcomes? What strategies have been effective in countering these conditions?
- Do targeted interventions (e.g., campaigns, dialogue, negotiation) at the micro- or local level influence macro- or higher-level change?
 - How does grassroots advocacy and action lead to systemic change?
 - What types of interventions best influence system-wide change?
- Do particular tactics and strategies differ when underserved or underrepresented communities lead campaigns, and do results differ?

Consolidating Democratic Change and Movements

- What is the typology of effective political engagement (defined as citizen and community participation in political activity, including electioneering, policy advocacy and political party participation, etc.) in countries experiencing democratic transition and consolidation?
 - In what way do effective methods of political engagement shift based on the governing institutions and norms of the community and/or country?

Countering Democratic Backsliding

- In what ways are democratic actors responding to global and regional trends towards backsliding and increasing authoritarianism?

- What actions (from legal to extra-legal) by authoritarian actors have been most detrimental to democratic movements?
- What do communities need the most support during democratic backsliding and to counter these detrimental efforts?
- What strategies are most effective to counter backsliding? Do these strategies differ by communities?
- In what ways can approaches from democratic actors counter global and regional trends towards backsliding and rising competitive authoritarianism? ¹
- What technologies can help advocates facing new trends in backsliding and closing operating environments?

Partner-Led Locally-Owned Capacity Development

- How is “capacity building/development” defined by:
 - Community-based organizations (or groups that are often deemed the beneficiaries of such capacity building programs)?
 - International NGOs that implement capacity building programs as a pathway to achieving program impact and sustainability?
 - Donors that fund capacity building programs and strategies?
 - What are the commonalities and differences in these definitions? What are the reasons behind the varying perspectives, if any?
 - How can donors ensure they fund programs that are designed to overcome these differences?
- What are promising practices in community-driven “capacity building/development”?
 - Outside of training designed to increase knowledge and skills, what factors effectively lead to the desired changes and goals (as defined by the community)?
 - What approaches facilitate genuine and lasting engagement within a community towards a shared community goal?

Inclusion and Equity

- How can funders bridge socio-economic disparities in democracy and human rights research, evaluation, and learning practices?
 - How can funders and implementing partners in the DRG space address the socio-economic disparities embedded within the norms and practices of evaluation and learning processes?
 - How can the views of communities that are often defined as “underserved”, “marginalized”, and/or “distant from the socio-economic center” lead to better evaluation and learning processes?

All SOI proposals must:

- Identify specific focal areas / lines of inquiry, brief definitions of terms or criteria utilized, and details on how research will be operationalized

¹ Levitsky, Steven, and Lucan Ahmad Way. “The New Competitive Authoritarianism.” *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 1 (2020): 51–65.

- Include a brief feasibility analysis, including assessing operating environment risk and potential mitigation measures
- Describe if/how community-based organizations or researchers engaged in project design
- Describe how deliverables can be used to inform funder program design and approaches
- Include a brief dissemination plan showing how findings will be formatted in a way that is relevant for policymakers and practitioners

DRL's preference is to avoid duplicating past efforts by supporting new and creative approaches. This does not exclude from consideration projects that improve upon or expand existing projects in a new or complementary way. DRL encourages academic-practitioner partnerships, with findings grounded in academic literature and practitioners' data.

Please note that projects under \$250,000 will be administered as fixed amount awards (FAA). An FAA is managed on milestones and reduces the reporting burden on partners. This includes upfront payments to begin work and subsequent payments based on the completion of deliverables. For this round, if opting for an FAA, it is DRL's preference to administer awards that can produce rapid learning products (i.e., within one year).

To maximize the impact and sustainability of the award(s) that result(s) from this SOI/NOFO, DRL reserves the right to execute a non-competitive continuation amendment(s). Any non-competitive continuation is contingent on performance and **availability of funds**. A non-competitive continuation is not guaranteed; the Department of State reserves the right to exercise or not exercise the option to issue non-competitive continuation amendment(s).

Activities that are **not** typically considered competitive include, but are not limited to:

- The provision of large amounts of humanitarian assistance;
- English language instruction;
- Development of high-tech computer or communications software and/or hardware;
- External exchanges or fellowships lasting longer than six months;
- Micro-loans or similar small business development initiatives;
- Initiatives directed towards a diaspora community rather than current residents of targeted countries.

II. Eligibility Information

Organizations submitting SOIs must meet the following criteria:

- Be a U.S.- or foreign-based non-profit/non-governmental organization (NGO), or a public international organization; or
- Be a private, public, or state institution of higher education; or
- Be a for-profit organization or business (noting there are restrictions on payment of fees and/or profits under grants and cooperative agreements, including those outlined in 48 CFR 30, "Cost Accounting Standards Administration", and 48 CFR 31, "Contract Cost Principles and Procedures"); and
- Have existing, or the capacity to develop, active partnerships with thematic or in-country partners, entities, and relevant stakeholders including private sector partner and NGOs;

and

- Have demonstrable experience administering successful and preferably similar programs. DRL reserves the right to request additional background information on organizations that do not have previous experience administering federal awards. These applicants may be subject to limited funding on a pilot basis.

Applicants may **form consortia** and submit a combined SOI. However, one organization should be designated as the lead applicant with the other members as sub-award partners.

DRL's preference is to work with non-profit entities; however, there may be occasions when a for-profit entity is best suited. For-profit entities should be aware that its application may be subject to additional review following the panel selection process, and that the Department of State generally prohibits profit under its assistance awards to for-profit or commercial organizations. Profit is defined as any amount in excess of allowable direct and indirect costs. The allowability of costs incurred by commercial organizations is determined in accordance with the provisions of the Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR) at 48 CFR 30, Cost Accounting Standards Administration, and 48 CFR 31 Contract Cost Principles and Procedures. Program income earned by the recipient must be deducted from the program's total allowable costs in determining the net allowable costs on which the federal share of costs is based.

DRL is committed to an anti-discrimination policy in all of its programs and activities. DRL welcomes SOI submissions irrespective of race, ethnicity, color, creed, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, or other status.

No entity listed on the Excluded Parties List System in the [System for Award Management \(SAM\)](#) is eligible for any assistance or can participate in any activities under an award in accordance with the OMB guidelines at 2 CFR 180 that implement Executive Orders 12549 (3 CFR 1986 Comp., p. 189) and 12689 (3 CFR 1989 Comp., p. 235), "Debarment and Suspension." Additionally, no entity listed on the EPLS can participate in any activities under an award. All applicants are strongly encouraged to review the EPLS in SAM to ensure that no ineligible entity is included.

Organizations are not required to have a valid Unique Entity Identifier (UEI) number—formerly referred to as a DUNS (Data Universal Numbering System) number—and an active SAM.gov registration to apply for this solicitation through SAMS Domestic. **However, if a SOI is approved, these will need to be obtained before an organization is able to submit a full application. Therefore, we recommend starting the process of obtaining a SAM.gov registration as soon as possible.** Please note that there is no cost associated with UEI or SAM.gov registration.

III. Application Requirements, Deadlines, and Technical Eligibility

All SOIs must conform to DRL's posted Proposal Submission Instructions (PSI) for Statements of Interest, as updated in September 2018, available at <https://www.state.gov/key-topics-bureau-of-democracy-human-rights-and-labor/open-solicitations-and-proposal-submission->

[instructions/open-solicitations-and-proposal-submission-instructions/proposal-submission-instructions-psi-for-statements-of-interest-updated-september-2018/](https://www.dhs.gov/instructions/open-solicitations-and-proposal-submission-instructions/proposal-submission-instructions-psi-for-statements-of-interest-updated-september-2018/).

Complete SOI submissions **must** include the following:

1. Completed and signed SF-424 and SF424B, as directed on SAMS Domestic or Grants.gov (please refer to DRL's PSI for SOIs for guidance on completing the SF-424); and,
2. Program Statement (not to exceed three [3] pages in Microsoft Word) that includes:
 - a) A table listing:
 - i. Name of the organization;
 - ii. The target country/countries;
 - iii. The total amount of funding requested from DRL, total amount of cost-share (if any), and total program amount (DRL funds + cost-share); and,
 - iv. Program length;
 - b) A synopsis of the program, including a brief statement on how the program will have a demonstrated impact and engage relevant stakeholders. The SOI should identify local partners as appropriate;
 - c) A concise breakdown explicitly identifying the program's objectives and the activities and expected results that contribute to each objective; and,
 - d) A brief description of the applicant(s) that demonstrates the applicant(s) expertise and capacity to implement the program and manage a U.S. government award.

An organization may submit **no more than four (4) SOIs**. **SOIs that request less than \$75,000 or more than \$450,000 may be deemed technically ineligible.**

Technically eligible SOIs are those which:

- 1) Arrive electronically via SAMS Domestic or Grants.gov by **11:59 p.m. ET on Monday, December 21, 2020 under the announcement titled "Applied Research and Evaluation Innovation Fund: Round 1," funding opportunity number "SFOP0007422"**;
- 2) Are in English;
- 3) Heed all instructions and do not violate any of the guidelines stated in this solicitation and the PSI for Statements of Interest.

For all SOI documents please ensure:

- 1) All pages are numbered;
- 2) All documents are formatted to 8 ½ x 11 paper; and,
- 3) All documents are single-spaced, 12 point Times New Roman font, with 1-inch margins. Captions and footnotes may be 10-point Times New Roman font. Font sizes in charts and tables can be reformatted to fit within one page width.

Grants.gov and SAMS Domestic automatically log the date and time a submission is made, and the Department of State will use this information to determine whether it has been submitted on time. Late submissions are neither reviewed nor considered unless the DRL point of contact listed in section VI is contacted prior to the deadline and is provided with evidence of a system error caused by www.grants.gov or [SAMS Domestic \(https://mygrants.servicenowservices.com\)](https://mygrants.servicenowservices.com) that is outside of the applicant's control and is the sole reason for a late submission. Applicants should not expect a notification upon DRL receiving their SOI. It is the sole responsibility of the applicant to ensure that all material submitted in the SOI package is complete, accurate, and current. DRL will **not** accept SOIs submitted via email, fax, the postal system, delivery companies, or couriers. DRL strongly encourages all applicants to submit SOIs before December 21, 2020 to ensure that the SOI has been received and is complete.

IV. Review and Selection Process

The Department's Office of Acquisitions Management (AQM) will determine technical eligibility for all SOI submissions. All technically eligible SOIs will then be reviewed against the same four criteria by a DRL Review Panel: quality of program idea, inclusivity of marginalized populations, program planning, and ability to achieve objectives/institutional capacity. Additionally, the Panel will evaluate how the SOI meets the solicitation request, U.S. foreign policy goals, and DRL's overall priority needs. Panelists review each SOI individually against the evaluation criteria, not against competing SOIs. To ensure all SOIs receive a balanced evaluation, the DRL Review Panel will review the first page of the SOI up to the page limit and no further. All Panelists must sign non-disclosure agreements and conflict of interest agreements.

In most cases, the DRL Review Panel includes representatives from DRL policy and program offices. Once a SOI is approved, selected applicants will be invited to submit full proposal applications based on their SOIs. Unless directed otherwise by the organization, DRL may also refer SOIs for possible consideration in other U.S. government related funding opportunities.

The Panel may provide conditions and/or recommendations on SOIs to enhance the proposed program, which must be addressed by the organization in the full proposal application. To ensure effective use of limited DRL funds, conditions and recommendations may include requests to increase, decrease, clarify, and/or justify costs and program activities.

DRL's Front Office reserves the right to make a final determination regarding all funding matters, pending funding availability.

Review Criteria

Quality of Program Idea

SOIs should be responsive to the program framework and policy objectives identified in the country/regional context, and should exhibit originality, substance, precision, and relevance to DRL's mission of promoting human rights and democracy. Projects should have the potential to

have an immediate impact leading to long-term sustainable reforms. DRL prefers new approaches that do not duplicate efforts by other entities. This does not exclude from consideration projects that improve upon or expand existing successful projects in a new and complementary way. In countries where similar activities are already taking place, an explanation should be provided as to how new activities will not duplicate or merely add to existing activities and how these efforts will be coordinated. Proposals that promote creative approaches to recognized ongoing challenges are highly encouraged. DRL prioritizes project proposals with inclusive approaches for advancing these rights.

Addressing Barriers to Equal Participation

DRL strives to ensure its projects advance the rights and uphold the dignity of all persons. As the USG's lead bureau dedicated to promoting democratic governance, DRL requests a programming approach dedicated to strengthening inclusive societies as a necessary pillar of strong democracies. Violence targeting any members of society undermines collective security and threatens democracy. DRL supports program models that assess and address the barriers to access created by violence and discrimination targeting individuals and groups based on their religion, gender, ethnicity or sexual orientation. Applicants should describe how programming affects all of its beneficiaries, including support that specifically targets communities under threat of violence and discrimination. This approach should be an integral part of both the concept and explicit design of all proposed project activities and objectives. Strong proposals will provide specific analysis, measures, and corresponding targets as appropriate. Stakeholders shall identify the difference between opportunities and barriers to access and design programs that do not perpetuate these inequalities but rather enhance programmatic impact by including all people in society. The goal of this approach is to bring communities and those in power together in support of stable and secure societies.

Program Planning

A strong SOI will include a clear articulation of how the proposed program activities and expected results (both outputs and outcomes) contribute to specific program objectives and the overall program goal. Objectives should be ambitious, yet measurable, results-focused, and achievable in a reasonable time frame.

Ability to Achieve Objectives/Institutional Capacity

SOIs should address how the program will engage relevant stakeholders and should identify local partners as appropriate. If local partners are identified, applicants should describe the division of labor among the applicant and any local partners. SOIs should demonstrate the organization's expertise and previous experience in administering programs, preferably similar programs targeting the requested program area or similarly challenging environments.

For additional guidance, please see DRL's posted Proposal Submission Instructions (PSI) for Statements of Interest, as updated in September 2018, available at <https://www.state.gov/key-topics-bureau-of-democracy-human-rights-and-labor/open-solicitations-and-proposal-submission-instructions/open-solicitations-and-proposal-submission->

[instructions/proposal-submission-instructions-psi-for-statements-of-interest-updated-september-2018/](https://www.state.gov/j/drl/p/c72333.htm).

V. Additional Information

DRL will not consider SOIs that reflect any type of support for any member, affiliate, or representative of a designated terrorist organization.

DRL may ask successful applicant(s) to incorporate coordination of an implementer and stakeholder meeting into the Scope of Work of the final project. DRL will discuss this possibility with particular applicant(s) during the proposal negotiation phase.

Project activities that directly benefit foreign militaries or paramilitary groups or individuals will not be considered for DRL funding given purpose limitations on funding.

Restrictions may apply to any proposed assistance to police or other law enforcement. Among these, pursuant to section 620M of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, as amended (FAA), no assistance may be furnished to any unit of the security forces of a foreign country when there is credible information that such unit has committed a gross violation of human rights. In accordance with the requirements of section 620M of the FAA, also known as the Leahy law, program beneficiaries or participants from a foreign government's security forces may need to be vetted by the Department before the provision of any assistance.

Organizations should be aware that DRL understands that some information contained in SOIs may be considered sensitive or proprietary and will make appropriate efforts to protect such information. However, organizations are advised that DRL cannot guarantee that such information will not be disclosed, including pursuant to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) or other similar statutes.

Organizations should also be aware that if ultimately selected for an award, the Uniform Administrative Requirements, Cost Principles and Audit Requirements for Federal Awards set forth in 2 CFR Chapter 200 (Sub-Chapters A through F) shall apply to all non-Federal entities, except for assistance awards to Individuals and Foreign Public Entities. Please note that as of December 26, 2014, 2 CFR 200 (Sub-Chapters A through E) now applies to foreign organizations, and Sub-Chapters A through D shall apply to all for-profit entities. The applicant/recipient of the award and any sub-recipient under the award must comply with all applicable terms and conditions, in addition to the assurance and certifications made part of the Notice of Award. The Department's Standard Terms and Conditions can be viewed on DRL's Resources page at: <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/p/c72333.htm>.

The information in this solicitation and DRL's PSI for SOIs, as updated in September 2018, is binding and may not be modified by any DRL representative. **Explanatory information provided by DRL that contradicts this language will not be binding.** Issuance of the solicitation and negotiation of SOIs or applications does not constitute an award commitment on

the part of the U.S. government. DRL reserves the right to reduce, revise, or increase proposal budgets in accordance with the needs of the program evaluation requirements.

This solicitation will appear on www.grants.gov, [SAMS Domestic \(https://mygrants.servicenowservices.com\)](https://mygrants.servicenowservices.com) and DRL's website <https://www.state.gov/statements-of-interest-requests-for-proposals-and-notices-of-funding-opportunity/>.

Background Information on DRL and DRL Funding

DRL has the mission of promoting democracy and protecting human rights globally. DRL supports programs that uphold democratic principles, support and strengthen democratic institutions, promote human rights, prevent atrocities, combat and prevent violent extremism, and build civil society around the world. DRL typically focuses its work in countries with egregious human rights violations, where democracy and human rights advocates are under pressure, and where governments are undemocratic or in transition.

Additional background information on DRL and the human rights report can be found on <https://www.state.gov/reports-bureau-of-democracy-human-rights-and-labor/>.

VI. Contact Information

SAMS Domestic Help Desk:

For assistance with SAMS Domestic accounts and technical issues related to the system, please contact the ILMS help desk by phone at 1-888-313-4567 (toll charges for international callers) or through the Self Service online portal that can be accessed from <https://afsitsm.servicenowservices.com/ilms/>. Customer Support is available 24/7/365.

Grants.gov Helpdesk:

For assistance with Grants.gov accounts and technical issues related to using the system, please call the Contact Center at 1-800-518-4726 or email support@grants.gov. The Contact Center is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, except federal holidays.

See <https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/snow-dismissal-procedures/federal-holidays/> for a list of federal holidays.

For technical questions related to this solicitation, please contact DRL-GP-ME@state.gov.

With the exception of technical submission questions, during the solicitation period U.S. Department of State staff in Washington and overseas shall not discuss this competition until the entire review process has been completed and rejection and approval letters have been transmitted.