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Partnerships for Enhanced Engagement in Research (PEER) 2021/2022 Solicitation: Challenges and Innovations Related to COVID-19

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I. Program Synopsis

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) is the US Government's (USG) preeminent foreign assistance agency. The agency is dedicated to helping foreign nations meet the needs of their citizens by providing healthcare, education, and economic opportunity to reduce poverty and promote democratic, resilient societies.

The Innovation, Technology, and Research (ITR) Hub at USAID brings together a diverse set of partners to discover, test, and scale breakthrough solutions to address critical challenges in international development (<https://www.usaid.gov/innovation-technology-research>). A key element of this strategy is the support of scientific and technological research through the Partnerships for Enhanced Engagement in Research (PEER) program. PEER is a competitive awards program open to researchers in select USAID presence countries to partner with US researchers currently receiving USG funding. PEER funding goes directly to the international researcher and is designed to support research and capacity-building activities on topics of importance to USAID. Since its inception in 2011, PEER has supported research awards from a wide range of academic disciplines including the natural, physical, social, behavioral, and economic sciences, as well as engineering.

Projects funded under this year's call for applications will receive one-year awards of up to US \$70,000. In addition, they will receive personalized training and guidance from USAID's Research Technical Assistance Center on developing evidence-to-action plans and communications products.

II. 2021/2022 Scientific Focus Area

In this call, PEER aims to support research projects that focus on the impacts of COVID-19 and potential solutions that can emerge from this pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to unprecedented global challenges and uncovered weaknesses in the ability of governments, the private sector, and local and international actors to deliver services and resources across many systems. This has been true in food and agriculture, healthcare, and education, among other sectors. However, the pandemic also has inspired innovation in areas such as digital technology and social organization, and there are many examples of countries or communities effectively coordinating to confront this threat. This PEER funding opportunity looks to support locally-led research projects that (1) aid in our understanding of how shocks such as COVID-19 affect key sectors in developing countries and (2) test approaches to help communities and sectors respond to and mitigate the effects of COVID-19 or similar future shocks.

Potential sectors that might be studied include but are not limited to the following:

- Digital innovations (e.g., cashless transfers, geospatial and big data)
- Education (e.g., effects of school closure on learning, digital solutions for remote education)
- Agriculture and food (e.g., resilient value chains, effects of COVID-19 on food systems)
- Women and gender (e.g., disproportionate impact of shocks, COVID-19 and gender-based violence)
- Public health (e.g., novel approaches to contact tracing, mobile health, vaccine distribution)

PEER is interested in projects that unearth insights about the resilience of systems to shocks, supply chain responses to shocks, shocks as a driver of social and economic inequality, and the intersection between challenges within key sectors and digital solutions.

Regional collaborations among multiple countries are allowed, provided that they address research that is within the scope of the focus area and the primary PI is based in an eligible country. Co-PIs may be involved in such regional collaborative projects, provided that the co-PIs are also based in a PEER-eligible country.

Applications that explicitly connect their proposed research in the focus area to the development goals of the country's USAID Mission will generally be more competitive. Applicants are encouraged to explore how their proposed research relates to country-specific development objectives, which are reflected in Country Development and Cooperation Strategy (CDCS) reports that are posted publicly on each USAID Mission's homepage. Each CDCS lays out high-level strategic priorities for each bilateral USAID Mission over a five-year time frame. We encourage PEER applicants to review CDCS reports and other documents specific to USAID Mission priorities and reflect how their proposed research may contribute to these high-level objectives. A link to USAID-approved CDCS reports can be found here: <http://www.usaid.gov/results-and-data/planning/country-strategies-cdcs>. A directory of USAID Missions and links to home pages can be found here: <http://www.usaid.gov/mission-directory>.

Applicants are also encouraged to highlight how their proposal aligns with or could inform responses under one or more of the lines of effort outlined in the US COVID-19 Global Response and Recovery Framework. A link to this framework can be found here: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/US-COVID-19-Global-Response-and-Recovery-Framework.pdf>

III. Solicitation Process

The PEER proposal submission process has two phases:

- **Phase 1:** A brief pre-proposal is required for all applicants. The deadline for submission of pre-proposals is **October 29, 2021**. Details for pre-proposal submission are provided in Section IX. If invited to submit a full proposal, applicants will be notified by the National Academies around **November 29, 2021**.
- **Phase 2:** The deadline for submission of full proposals is **January 28, 2022**.

IV. Role of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine

PEER is implemented by the National Academies, which will manage the proposal review process, disburse funding, and monitor awards. For further information, please contact the program staff at peer@nas.edu.

V. Partnering Agencies

The PEER program aims to leverage USG's broader scientific investment in research and development to support USAID's development goals in priority countries. For this reason, developing country researchers are required to partner with a researcher who currently receives USG funding to apply for a PEER award. Both the PEER applicant and the USG-supported researcher must benefit from one another's expertise and establish truly collaborative research that is not driven solely by the US partner. USG funded partners in PEER applications must have the capacity to contribute to the scientific merit and impact of PEER projects through expertise, skills, methodologies, laboratory access, and synergies with their ongoing USG-funded projects. Prior to submitting a pre-proposal, collaborative arrangements between the developing country researcher and an eligible USG-supported partner must already be established.

The following agencies have entered into an agreement with USAID and are participating in the PEER program. With some exceptions, researchers currently funded by these agencies are considered eligible partners. Additional eligibility requirements apply for each agency; please see Section VI for additional information and for resources on identifying potential partners. Further information on agencies participating in the PEER program can also be found on each agency's homepage.

- **Agricultural Research Service:** The USDA Agricultural Research Service conducts research to develop and transfer solutions to agricultural problems of high national priority and provide information access and dissemination to: ensure high-quality, safe food and other agricultural products; assess the nutritional needs of Americans; sustain a competitive agricultural economy; enhance the natural resource base and the environment; and provide economic opportunities for rural citizens, communities, and society as a whole. <http://www.ars.usda.gov/main/main.htm>
- **National Aeronautics and Space Administration:** NASA's vision is "to reach for new heights and reveal the unknown so that what we do and learn will benefit all humankind." Within the Earth Science Division, NASA aims to "advance knowledge of Earth as a system to meet the challenges of environmental change and to improve life on our planet". <http://www.nasa.gov/>
- **National Institute of Food and Agriculture:** The USDA NIFA strategy for global engagement centers on developing carefully considered partnerships that can advance US research in agriculturally related fields. The agency administers federal funding to address agricultural issues. <http://nifa.usda.gov/>

- **National Institutes of Health:** NIH's mission is to seek fundamental knowledge about the nature and behavior of living systems and the application of that knowledge to enhance health, lengthen life, and reduce illness and disability. <http://www.nih.gov/>
- **National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration:** NOAA is a scientific agency within the U.S Department of Commerce focused on conditions of Earth's oceans and atmosphere. Through its six line offices and more than a dozen staff offices, NOAA serves as a leader in environmental intelligence and applied scientific research. Using a global network of observations, models, forecasts, and assessments, NOAA puts environmental information in the hands of people who need it. <http://www.noaa.gov/>
- **National Science Foundation:** NSF is an independent federal agency created by Congress in 1950 "to promote the progress of science; to advance the national health, prosperity, and welfare; to secure the national defense." NSF is the only federal agency whose mission includes support for all fields of fundamental science and engineering. <http://www.nsf.gov/>
- **Smithsonian Institution:** The Smithsonian's mission is to increase the diffusion of knowledge through a focus on discovery, creativity, excellence, diversity, integrity, and service. Smithsonian science examines some of the world's most complex—and time-sensitive—problems. Whether they are protecting imperiled natural resources, assessing the consequences of climate change or keeping aircraft safe from bird strikes, Smithsonian scientists apply what they learn to improve the quality—and quantity—of life on Earth. More than 500 Smithsonian staff scientists, augmented by an equal number of fellows and hundreds of international collaborators, conduct research in field stations and laboratories on all seven continents and serve as national and international experts in a wide scope of disciplines including anthropology, astronomy, biology, geology, and paleontology. As a trust instrumentality of the United States, the Smithsonian Institution is pleased to participate in this program with USG agency partners. <http://www.si.edu/>
- **United States Forest Service:** The Forest Service is a multi-faceted agency that protects and manages 154 national forests and grasslands in 44 US states and Puerto Rico and is the world's largest forestry research organization. Forest Service experts provide technical and financial help to US state and local government agencies, businesses, and private landowners to help protect and manage non-federal forest and associated range and watershed lands. The Forest Service also has a dedicated International Programs office, which promotes sustainable forest management and biodiversity conservation internationally. By linking the skills of the field-based staff of the USDA Forest Service with partners overseas, the agency can address the most critical forestry issues and concerns. <http://www.fs.fed.us/>
- **United States Geological Survey:** The USGS serves the Nation by providing reliable scientific information to describe and understand the Earth; minimize loss of life and property from natural disasters; manage water, biological, energy, and mineral resources; and enhance and protect our quality of life. <http://www.usgs.gov/>

VI. General Eligibility Information

PEER Applicants

Eligible applicants must

- Hold a research or teaching position at a higher educational institution (university) in a PEER-eligible country (see list below);
- Be citizens or permanent residents of a PEER-eligible country; and
- Be living and working in the country from which they are applying.

PEER-Eligible Countries for 2021/2022

Asia

Bangladesh
Bhutan
India
Indonesia
Kazakhstan
Kyrgyz Republic
Laos
Maldives
Mongolia
Nepal
Tajikistan
Thailand
Timor-Leste
Turkmenistan
Vietnam

Europe & Eurasia

Armenia
Azerbaijan
Belarus
Bosnia and Herzegovina
Georgia
Kosovo
Moldova Albania
North Macedonia
Serbia
Ukraine

Sub-Saharan Africa

Angola
Benin
Botswana
Burkina Faso
Cameroon
Democratic Republic of Congo
Djibouti
Eswatini
Gabon
Ghana
Guinea
Kenya
Lesotho
Liberia
Madagascar
Malawi
Mauritania
Mozambique
Namibia
Niger
Republic of the Congo
Rwanda
Senegal
Sierra Leone
South Africa
Tanzania
Uganda
Zambia

Latin America & Caribbean

Antigua and Barbuda
Brazil
Dominica
Dominican Republic
El Salvador
Grenada
Guatemala
Jamaica
Nicaragua
Paraguay
Peru
Saint Kitts and Nevis
Saint Lucia
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines

Middle East & North Africa

Jordan
Morocco
Tunisia

Women and behavioral and social scientists are strongly encouraged to apply.

Applicants based at non-profit organizations (NGOs) or government-managed research laboratories, centers, or institutes are not eligible to serve as principal investigators on PEER projects but can serve as co-PIs. Applicants with questions are encouraged to consult program staff at peer@nas.edu prior to submitting their pre-proposal.

Researchers from non-eligible countries and for-profit companies in PEER-eligible countries may participate in projects as partners using their own resources but are not permitted to receive PEER funding. PEER awards are issued only to institutions or organizations, not to individuals. Institutions selected to receive an award will be required to answer basic questions about their financial and administrative systems to determine whether they are able and willing to comply with USAID policies

for receipt and proper management of funds. In addition, the names of recipient institutions and key project staff will be vetted against the [System for Award Management \(SAM.gov\)](#) debarment list, the [US Department of Treasury List of Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons](#), and the [United Nations Security Council Consolidated List](#) to confirm they are not prohibited from receiving or using US Government funds.

PIs of currently active PEER awards are not eligible to apply to serve as PIs or co-PIs in this application cycle unless their currently active project will be completed successfully prior to **January 1, 2022**.

Prior PEER awardees who re-apply for PEER funding must justify how their proposal is distinct from their prior PEER award and/or how the proposed work builds on previous PEER work to address new research questions.

PEER proposals are not accepted from US organizations.

US Government-Supported Partners

PEER applicants are required to partner with a USG-supported researcher who currently receives funding from or is employed by one of the following agencies: Agricultural Research Service (ARS), National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA), National Institutes of Health (NIH), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), National Science Foundation (NSF), Smithsonian Institution, United States Forest Service (USFS), or United States Geological Survey (USGS). The role of the USG-funded partner is to provide expertise and skills to the PEER project that are complementary or provide access to specific methodologies or instrumentation otherwise unavailable to the PEER applicant.

Pre-proposal applications require a brief letter of support from the USG-funded partner, and proposals should outline how participation in the PEER project benefits both the foreign country and the US partner.

Eligible USG-supported partners are intramural researchers from one of the partnering agencies listed above or researchers who currently serve as a principal investigator or co-principal investigator of an active research award from one of those agencies. Active awards may include grants, cooperative agreements, or contracts. **In order to be eligible, the USG-supported partner's award or agency employment status must be active at the time of the pre-proposal submission deadline, October 29, 2021.**

For more information on USG co-PIs see the Partner Eligibility section of the [Frequently Asked Questions](#), as well as the section on ["Find a USG-Supported Partner"](#) on the PEER website.

Although PEER funds may not be used to cover salary for the USG-supported partner and members of his or her project team (colleagues, students, technicians, etc.), applicants are allowed and encouraged to request limited support for travel expenses for the partner and team members. This requested support cannot exceed 10% of the total budget for the PEER project. These funds generally will be managed by the PEER PI's institution and not awarded directly to the US institution. For anticipated costs incurred by the USG-supported partner that are in excess of what the PEER budget could cover, partners are encouraged to seek additional supplemental funds from their own funding agencies outside of the PEER program.

VII. Types of Research Activities Supported by PEER

PEER supports research awards from a wide range of academic disciplines including the natural, physical, social, behavioral, and economic sciences, as well as engineering, provided that the proposed work fits within the scope of this year's call. Applicants should clearly articulate how their proposed research project will impact their local, regional, or national communities.

PEER supports primary and secondary data analysis, and research questions may be explored utilizing quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods research design. Applications proposing secondary data analyses may use data from readily available datasets resulting in publication-quality research papers and dissemination activities that can inform and influence policies and programs.

Projects may cover diverse types of research activities, including but not limited to the following:

- Design and conduct of baseline surveys, modelling and simulation, implementation/operational research
- Primary data collection by researchers and undergraduate and graduate students working under the supervision of a principal investigator
- Primary and secondary data analysis, and research questions utilizing quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods research design.
- Development of new technologies or instruments
- Proof-of concept studies and formative investigations
- Social science and behavior change research
- Systems research and policy studies
- Primary research or data collection for understanding underlying social, political, and economic context of development challenges
- Secondary data analysis of publicly available or other readily available datasets
- Working visits to share and analyze data and write papers with USG-supported partners
- Dissemination events and stakeholder meetings to translate research results to policy-makers and the community
- Collaboration with local NGOs to train communities, perform outreach, or engage residents around science research education and science literacy.
- Identification of social barriers to the uptake of interventions or policy changes, etc. discovered by societal outreach and education

In addition to research, PEER projects may also be used to support capacity building activities that contribute to research objectives, including education and training support for students, postdoctoral associates, and researchers; international travel; conference and workshop attendance; communications; and equipment, materials, and supplies for developing country institutions and research networks.

Applicants are encouraged to consult the PEER website for a [comprehensive list](#) of projects funded in past cycles. *Proposals focused on basic science topics and those without clear relevance to the scope of this call will not be considered for PEER funding.*

There are some categories of research that PEER will **NOT** support:

- Implementation projects that lack a strong research component
- Dissertation or master's work of the PEER principal investigator (however, justified costs for students supported under the award are allowable)
- Training programs, workshops, or conferences that are not tied to the proposed research project
- Randomized control trials (RCTs) for biomedical interventions such as vaccines, drugs, etc.
- Research conducted principally in the United States
- Research led by the USG-supported partner
- Projects that are not likely to yield any impact in low- and middle-income countries
- Basic research not directly linked to potential development impact
- Approaches that present unacceptable ethical or safety risks as determined by the technical reviewers and USAID

In designing their studies and analyses, applicants must thoughtfully consider inclusion of and impacts on marginalized and vulnerable populations, such as women, youth, certain ethnic groups, gender and

sexual minorities (e.g., LGBTI persons), people with disabilities, indigenous communities, low-income or low-status groups, the elderly, and other socially relevant categories. Project proposals should take into account questions like the following: Are these groups of people affected differently by the research question or by how the research is being conducted? Are there any potential harmful and/or unintended consequences or risks of this research or its subsequent findings and recommendations on participants or impacted communities? Negative consequences can include, for example, increased risk of gender-based violence or increased unpaid work or time poverty for women and girls. Are there any potential benefits of participating in the research that would favor one group over another?

Please review the [Frequently Asked Questions](#) section of the program website for additional details or e-mail peer@nas.edu with other eligibility questions.

VIII. Timeline

August 23, 2021	PEER solicitation posted on National Academies website
October 29, 2021	Pre-proposals due to National Academies
November 29, 2021	Selected applicants are invited by National Academies to submit a full proposal, all others are notified of declination
January 28, 2022	Full proposals due to National Academies
April 29, 2022	PEER awardees announced

IX. Budget Information

Projects should be planned to be completed in one year. If circumstances require and the project is otherwise in good standing, principal investigators may request and receive a no-cost extension of up to six months at the discretion of their PEER grant managers.

Applicants may request up to US \$70,000. Only a total estimated budget figure is required at the pre-proposal stage. Total estimated budget numbers should be developed commensurate with the support needed to achieve the project goals. A [budget template](#) is available on the PEER website to help applicants better estimate anticipated total budget costs. Detailed budgets and further justification will be requested from applicants invited to submit a full proposal.

For questions regarding budget estimates for pre-proposals, applicants may contact PEER staff (peer@nas.edu).

X. Review Criteria and Pre-Proposal Preparation and Submission Instructions

Pre-proposal applications are required for the PEER program. Pre-proposals will be reviewed to select projects that are suitable for full applications, specifically those that meet the eligibility criteria and fit within the scope of the call. The deadline for submission of pre-proposals is **October 29, 2021**.

When drafting a pre-proposal, applicants should convey the development impact of their proposed research as it relates to the topic of this year's call for proposals and explain if the research connects to USAID country-specific development goals. Successful pre-proposals will include a clear statement of the project goals and explanations of how these goals will be achieved. Successful pre-proposals will also highlight the collaborative relationship with the USG-funded partner and how it will contribute to successful completion of the project.

Please note that applications that explicitly connect their proposed research in this year's focus area to the development goals of the country's USAID Mission will generally be more competitive <http://www.usaid.gov/>. Country-specific development objectives are reflected in Country Development and Cooperation Strategy (CDCS) reports that are posted publicly on each USAID Mission's homepage. Each CDCS lays out high-level strategic priorities for each bilateral USAID Mission over a five-year time frame. We encourage PEER applicants to review CDCS reports and other documents specific to USAID Mission priorities and reflect how their proposed research may contribute to these high-level objectives, while also responding to COVID-related issues. A link to USAID-approved CDCS reports can be found here: <http://www.usaid.gov/results-and-data/planning/country-strategies-cdcs>. A directory of USAID Missions and links to home pages can be found here: <http://www.usaid.gov/mission-directory>.

Applicants are also encouraged to highlight how their proposal aligns with or could inform responses under one or more of the lines of effort outlined in the US COVID-19 Global Response and Recovery Framework. A link to this framework can be found here: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/US-COVID-19-Global-Response-and-Recovery-Framework.pdf>

Pre-Proposal Review Criteria

The pre-proposal review process is managed by the National Academies. Pre-proposals will be evaluated by USAID and National Academies staff based on the following criteria:

- PEER applicant compliance with eligibility requirements;
- Participation of USG-supported partner, including verification of active research award or eligibility status, and degree of alignment with his or her expertise with the proposed project goals;
- Alignment with research priorities outlined in Section II of this request for applications and USAID country-specific development objectives;
- Development impact of proposed research; and
- (If a prior PEER awardee) Demonstration by the applicant of how the proposed work is distinct from their prior PEER award, and/or how the proposed work significantly builds off the previous PEER award to achieve broader development impact.

Applicants are required to submit a pre-proposal form through the PEER [online system](#), completed in English. Paper and e-mail submissions are not accepted. Applicants are encouraged to check the [Frequently Asked Questions \(FAQs\)](#) section of the program website for additional details.

After the pre-proposals are reviewed, applicants will receive notification from National Academies program staff that indicates one of the following:

- Pre-proposal has been deemed eligible and relevant, with an invitation to submit a full proposal
- Minor issues with eligibility and relevance, with an invitation to submit with issues addressed

- Pre-proposal deemed ineligible or insufficiently relevant to USAID objectives—not invited to submit full proposal

Policy on Fraudulent or Plagiarized Data and Documents in Award Submissions

Applicants to PEER are advised that the program has a zero-tolerance policy regarding the submission of fraudulent or plagiarized data and documents as part of award pre-proposals and full proposals. Any such cases discovered by PEER staff or brought to their attention by program sponsors, review panelists, partners, or members of the public will be investigated immediately. If the presence of fraudulent or plagiarized materials in a submission is verified, the following actions will be taken:

- The pre-proposal or proposal will be removed from further consideration for funding.
- The applicant will be notified of the findings of the investigation and will be placed on a debarment list prohibiting him or her from submitting any future pre-proposals or proposals to PEER.
- An appropriate official at the applicant's institution will be advised of the case and provided with copies of the fraudulent or plagiarized materials for use in any further investigations or actions in accordance with that institution's policies.
- The USAID Agreement Officer's Representative assigned to PEER will be notified so that information may be forwarded to the USAID Office of Inspector General to assist them in determining the applicant's eligibility for any future support from USAID directly or through other implementing partners.

Pre-Proposal Template

The pre-proposal submission template, which may be accessed by clicking the "Ready to Apply" button on the [PEER website](#), includes the following sections:

- a. PEER applicant information
- b. USG-supported partner information, including the partner's USG-funded award title, number, funding agency, program officer and contact information
- c. Project description (approximately 2 pages of text total), in which the following must be addressed:
 - Project aims and objectives
 - Significance of the research as it relates to this year's focus area and development impact to local, regional or national community
 - A description of how the expertise of the USG-supported partner will complement the proposed project and how the partner will utilize travel funds requested in the estimated PEER budget
 - Other potential partners with whom the applicant will collaborate on the project (for example, government agencies, USAID Missions, co-PIs, research networks, laboratories, and other implementing partners) and the nature of the planned collaborations
- d. Estimated total budget figure, not to exceed a maximum of US \$70,000. The budget for PEER projects varies depending on the proposed research scope, but the proposed duration should be one year.
- e. Appendices:
 - A brief CV of no more than two pages for the PEER applicant (principal investigator). Please use the attached [standard format for CVs](#). The CV should provide citations for no more than 5-10 recent and relevant publications.
 - A brief letter of support written by the USG-supported partner explaining his or her intention to collaborate on the proposed PEER project and how the PEER partnership will contribute to the partner's USG-supported research. The letter should also include the partner's USG-funded award title, number, funding agency, program officer and contact information for his or her active USG award.