Call for Research Proposals for the Structural Transformation of Agriculture and Rural Spaces (STARS) Fellows program

Application deadline: January 17, 2025

Background

The Structural Transformation of Agriculture and Rural Spaces (STARS) fellowship program, a multi-institution collaboration managed by Cornell University in collaboration with the Center for Global Development (CGD), the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA), the World Bank's Development Research Group, and the Partnership for Economic Policy (PEP), announces its annual call for research proposals. Early-career researchers selected as STARS Fellows in 2025 will advance rigorous, policy-oriented research on the causal determinants of productivity and income growth, asset accumulation, rural employment, and risk management in agriculture and rural spaces.

The Fellowship covers travel and training expenses. STARS Fellows will be paired with faculty, senior research staff, or affiliated researcher mentors from Cornell University, CGD, the World Bank, or PEP, with whom they will draft a paper on a topic of mutual interest relating to structural transformation in low and lower-middle income countries. The program aims for publication of resulting research findings in high quality, peer-reviewed journals. In addition, Cornell and its partners will provide Fellows' professional development training, build Fellows' international research networks, and aid in their participation in scientific and policy conferences.

The STARS Fellowship began in 2016 as the Structural Transformation of African Agriculture and Rural Spaces or STAARS Fellowship. To date, STARS has supported 80 Fellows from diverse backgrounds. [Learn about past Fellows here](#).

Scope of Research

Prospective STARS Fellows are invited to develop proposals in the following thematic areas for empirical work on low- and lower-middle income countries:
1. Dynamics of agricultural inputs use, technological change, and productivity growth
2. Rural factor (e.g., credit, labor, land) and product market performance and links to urban markets
3. Agri-food systems and value chains, their performance and evolution

4. Food security, nutrition, health and education linkages
5. Poverty dynamics, risk management and resilience against shocks
6. Sustainable natural resources management
7. Gender and marginalized groups

STARS Fellows' rigorous policy analysis should use existing data, such as the Living Standards Measurement Study – Integrated Surveys on Agriculture (LSMS–ISA), Demographic and Health Surveys or similar high-quality datasets.

Eligibility

The call is open to early career researchers, either Ph.D. students in their final year prior to degree completion or preferably those who completed their Ph.D. no earlier than 2019. Priority is given to researchers who have earned at least one degree from an institution in a low- or lower-middle income country[1,2], plan to work professionally in low- and lower-middle income countries in the future, and have proposals relating to one or more of the research themes indicated above. Qualified female researchers are particularly encouraged to apply. STARS welcomes applications from fresh Ph.D. graduates who can benefit from mentorship and additional training to become internationally respected and recognized researchers. Fellows are expected to complete the proposed project by submitting findings as a draft working paper by December 15, 2025, and proceeding to submit the paper to a peer-reviewed journal and/or conferences by June 30, 2026.

Applicants are expected to be familiar with and have demonstrated access to existing data sets and have a strong working knowledge of appropriate software, typically Stata and/or R, and an interest in econometric analysis of high-quality data sets. Knowledge of geo-referenced data and GIS software to manage them is an asset. Knowledge of Stata and/or R will be assessed at the finalist stage.

Funding

The selected applicants will receive funds to cover travel and participation in a three-week mentorship program at Cornell University and their mentor's home institution. The remainder of the research coordination and professional development training will occur virtually. Fellows are expected to commit significant time to the mandatory research and capacity development activities. A modest honorarium will be provided to each Fellow. No salary support is available; STARS does not cover the scholar's time allocated to this research. A letter of support from the candidate's current advisor/supervisor/manager is

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[1] Based on current World Bank designations.
[2] Applicants ordinarily resident in comprehensively sanctioned countries, including Iran, Cuba, Syria, North Korea and certain regions of Ukraine are ineligible for selection.

required, explicitly indicating that adequate work time will be made available for full participation in the program, if selected. The program cannot support costs for any new data collection.

Program Overview

The STARS program spans 15 months from the date of selection to the delivery of final outputs. Selected STARS fellows are matched with at least one main mentor who is faculty, senior research staff, or an affiliate researcher at Cornell, the CGD, the World Bank, or PEP and who shares an interest in the proposed topic, as well as with a (more junior) peer mentor. Upon selection, mentorship and collaboration begin immediately with a series of launch workshops involving the fellows, mentors and STARS leadership. A period of regular remote collaboration follows, with weekly or biweekly virtual meetings. During this period, training workshops are held at relevant points in the teams' research process. Training workshops are designed to assist in fellows' professional development and supplement their technical skills. Topics may include but are not limited to: coding and data management skills; reproducible research processes; technical writing; presentation skills; time management; grant writing; navigating peer review; research ethics; and policy engagement planning. In September 2025, the STARS fellows spend 3 weeks visiting with the rest of the cohort and their mentors at Cornell and then at their mentor's institution, during which the STARS fellows work intensively on the research project, participate in feedback workshops, hold a public seminar, and participate in network-building activities.

Fellowship Schedule

Dates are subject to change, but general timing should be consistent. Items in *italics* denote in-person events during the fellows' visit to the U.S. All other events are virtual.

Virtual Launch: Fellows and Mentors Orientation	April 8, 2025
Virtual Launch: Work Planning	April 10, 2025
Virtual Launch: Panel of Past Fellows	April 15, 2025
Virtual Launch: Presentations	April 22, 2025
★Milestone: Individual Meetings with STARS Faculty Director	April 28 – May 2, 2025
Training: Research Ethics	April 29, 2025
Training: Time Management	May 1, 2025
★Milestone: Final Work Plan Due	May 5, 2025
Training: Writing Structure	May 20, 2025
Training: Data Management for Economists Series	TBD
★Milestone: Paper Draft 1 Due	August 26, 2025
Travel to Cornell (Ithaca, NY) and Mentor Institution	September 2025

Intensive Feedback Workshop	*September 8, 2025*
Training: Grantsmanship	*September 9, 2025*
Training: Navigating Peer Review	*September 10, 2025*
Training: Effective Presentations	*September 12, 2025*
Invited seminars at mentor's institution	*September 22, 2025*
★Milestone: Paper Draft 2 Due	December 15, 2025
Progress Presentations (internal)	March 26, 2026
★Milestone: Paper Submission to Academic Journal	June 30, 2026

Application Process

STARS will hold an informational webinar on **Thursday, December 12th, 2024 from 9:00 – 10:00am Eastern Time** for interested applicants. Please register for the webinar here. For those unable to attend, the materials (including a recording) will be available on the STARS website once the webinar has taken place.

The STARS Fellowship application process is managed by Cornell University, in collaboration with CGD, IICA, the World Bank and PEP. Applicants must prepare a maximum 2500-word research proposal, which motivates the selected research issues and objectives, outlines data sources and proposed methodology, and contains a convincing plan for completing the project by June 30, 2026. Projects that propose to use data that are not publicly available must provide documentation that they already have access to those data. All proposals should be prepared in English. All proposals will be peer-reviewed by experts from Cornell, CGD, IICA, the World Bank, and/or PEP. Shortlisted applicants will be required to attend a short, virtual interview with the STARS leadership team and potential mentors and complete a Stata/R assessment to assess their qualifications in using statistical software necessary to carry out their proposed work. More details will be provided to shortlisted candidates at the time of notification.

The deadline to submit a research proposal is January 17, 2025 at 11:59 PM New York time**.** Applicants should submit their completed proposals via the STARS online application link. Accepted applicants will be notified by April 1, 2025, and are expected to begin remote collaboration with their mentor and be prepared to join launch activities immediately upon acceptance. Any questions about the application process or program should be directed to stars-fellowship@cornell.edu.

Research Proposal Template

Within the online application, please complete the applicant information and research sections. At the end of the application form please attach, as a ZIP folder or merged PDF file, the following materials:

1. Research Proposal (2500 words max.):
    *   Title of the proposed research

- Targeted country(-ies)
- Introduction and motivation that includes clear statement of research objectives and hypotheses
- Description of data source(s) and any prior experience working with the proposed data
- Proposed methodology
- If applicable, summary of any preliminary results
- Proposed timeline for the research (not included in the 2500 words)
- Bibliographic references (not included in the 2500 words)

2. Current curriculum vita (CV) of the applicant
3. If proposing to use data that are not publicly available, a letter or other documentation from the data steward(s) indicating that the applicant will have access to the data to use in the proposed project
4. Letter of support from applicant's current supervisor, clearly indicating that the applicant will be granted time to work on this project, if selected
5. Photocopy of the passport biodata page and, if applicable, any current US visa