PEP CALLS FOR PROPOSALS

Guidelines for Designing a Research Proposal

Your presentation should address the following questions. Note that these guidelines do not follow the same format required in the formal submission of the proposal (as presented in the template, to be respected in your proposal document). The following rather aims to provide insights and advice on the substance of your proposal, focusing how to address the main research questions.

1. What is the main question of interest?

The study might have several objectives. However, in the presentation limit yourself to explaining what the key question in your research will be. If you cannot find a key question then you will wish to define your study from scratch again. You might also wish to explain (very briefly) why you think this is an interesting question to pose.

2. Has this question been addressed in a similar context (same country or region) before? If so, what were the results and what do you hope to achieve in addition?

The question has likely been addressed in the context you wish to study at least once. It would be useful to summarize the state of knowledge about the issues you will study - and explain clearly why you wish to study this again. This might include reasons such as:

- There are new data available which are of better quality or which offer a more accurate assessment of the issues and might change our perception of the problem.
- The previous study examined these issues until 19XX - and not merely do we have data until the present but there has been a change in regime or policy in the meantime that we can usefully analyse using the more recent data.
- The previous studies are methodologically unsound or otherwise wanting in some critical way. You can improve on them substantially.
- If the question has never been addressed before, you are obviously an innovator and must only establish that the question is of interest.

3. What is the value added in terms of research?

You will probably be attempting one of the following:

- Testing a particular theory or hypothesis which has not been tested in that context before
- Describing a particular phenomenon of interest, with a view to assessing its impact.
- Measuring an outcome (e.g. measuring poverty/ inequality):

  This cannot be an activity for its own sake of course but must be driven by an underlying question of interest. For instance, a simple proposal might be to provide new information about the evolution of welfare in the country because it is likely that recent events (policy changes or shocks) might have changed the underlying trend.

A paper must either offer evidence on something we know little about or try to settle a disputed question. A proposal to confirm something which we think we know (e.g. "rural consumption poverty is higher than urban poverty" or "female-headed households are poorer on average") should only be entertained only if for some reason we cannot be sure this is true anymore.

4. What is the method you will use in your study?

You should offer a summary of the methods you intend to use and should be clear about exactly how you will use them.

If, for instance, you wish to measure vulnerability you should explain how this is to be done – and explain precisely the advantages (and disadvantages) of your method. It would be best if you can explain this in your own words rather than relying on criticisms or support in the literature. The fact that others have used this method is not always sufficient: you ought to check whether the method is used in peer-reviewed journal articles and whether it has been strongly and persuasively criticized elsewhere.

Furthermore, it is likely that the methods will be familiar to the audience. Unless you are using an esoteric technique (or something particularly new which has never been used in this context before), a concise summary is sufficient - with an acknowledgement of no more than 2 main references.

As a development researcher, you are likely to be presenting a proposal for measuring an outcome or testing a hypothesis about behavior, therefore:

(i) If your presentation centers around measurement (poverty, mobility etc.), start by explaining why your data are reliable (and see point 5 below). Discuss the potential role of errors in measurement (not in theory but in these data).

(ii) If you are relying on a regression, begin with a clear (theoretical) justification for the specification of the model and the variables you plan to use.

- Explain the role of the variables you have included on the right-hand side. Do you have the support of economic theory in including them? What things other than your right hand side variables might cause variation in the left hand variable? (What are the variables you are likely to be unable to include?)
- Describe your identification strategy clearly. Much empirical work boils down to a claim that "A causes B" usually supported by some sort of regression. Explain how the causal effect you wish to pin down might be identified.
- If you plan to use an instrumental variable explain the economic rationale for why the variable can be excluded from the regression and why it is relevant.
- If you are using panel data and have a fixed effect regression, explain carefully the kind of variation you can potentially explain. For instance, with household fixed effects, the regression coefficients are driven by the variation over time within each household. Without household fixed effects, the coefficient is (mostly) driven by variation across households at a point in time.

5. **What are the data you propose to use - and why are they particularly suitable to the question you wish to answer?**

This is a critical part of the proposal. The key issue is to explain the reason for the use of the particular data. You must establish that they are ideal for the question you wish to address. It might be because:

- It has specific information on the variables that are vital for the analysis. (For instance, a study of intra-household allocation will require information on the separate categories of expenditures by husbands and wives and information on non-wage incomes for each).
- It covers an exciting period in the context you wish to study. For instance, you have data over 10 years, during which there was a major change in policy or a major shock to the economy that you think will affect the outcomes you wish to measure.
- The quality of the data (on consumption or other dimensions of wellbeing) is excellent and can be established. This will offer more accurate measurement of the outcomes of interest - and perhaps even change what we know thus far. Or the data cover a period not studied thus far (the present).

Finally, offer some stylized facts drawn from the data you plan to use. The aim is to persuade the reader that the data are both interesting and relevant.

<u>Warning</u>: It is common for questions to be addressed using any available data set simply because the data are there. But there might be data better able to address the question, even in the context you are interested in and it is important to explore such possibilities and not confine yourself to the readily available data. Trying to answer a good question using data that are not fit for that purpose is not a good strategy.

6. **Finally, explain why a policymaker (or other type of stakeholders, including the general public) might want to read your paper.**

Note that this is not about policy “implications” - at this stage there are none, by definition. But what might we hope to learn from this study? Why should we care about your results? How may this evidence be used in policymaking?