



INTER-AMERICAN INSTITUTE FOR GLOBAL CHANGE RESEARCH

The Inter-American Institute for Global Change Research (IAI) Merit Review Process

Background/Objective

In 1992, the Inter-American Institute for Global Change Research (IAI) was established by 19 countries in the Americas. Since then, the IAI has supported and sponsored over 50 research projects comprised of over 700 investigators.

Article II of the *Agreement establishing the IAI* states that the “Institute shall pursue the principles of scientific excellence, international cooperation, and the full and open exchange of scientific information, relevant to global change.” Objective b of Article II reads that the IAI will “conduct or select for sponsorship scientific programs and projects on the basis of their regional relevance and scientific merit as determined by scientific review.”

In order to better meet these objectives, the IAI created a 25-year strategic plan, wherein the IAI Directorate agreed to improve the transparency of the internal and external peer review process for proposals by developing a white paper that will be publicly available on the IAI website.

Why is Merit Review Important?

Merit review is considered the highest standard of expert adjudication and is integral to the granting process at the IAI. IAI grants are awarded through an independent merit review process designed to ensure the highest standards of excellence and impartiality. Merit review is a transparent, in-depth and effective way to allocate funds (https://www.sshrc-crsh.gc.ca/funding-financement/merit_review-evaluation_du_merite/index-eng.aspx).

The merit review process is designed to ensure that, as far as possible, sound scientific judgment guides funding decisions; that deliberations are open minded and thoughtful ; that biases and conflicts are excluded; and that proposers receive constructive and useful feedback from reviews, panels, and staff (<https://www.nsf.gov/nsb/publications/2018/nsb201915.pdf>).

What follows is an overview of the general components of the merit review process that the IAI will implement when issuing a call for research proposals. This is not intended to be all inclusive of the types of reviews the IAI may employ in its programs, but it lays out the *minimum* requirements of the IAI’s merit review process. Additional steps, reviews, criteria, selection processes, etc. may be utilized by the IAI as it sees fit.

Proposal Review Criteria

The main criteria to be used in evaluating the proposals are:

- (1) Scientific excellence including interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity (TD)

(2) Impact including integration across disciplines for addressing complex problems, co-design with policy makers/stakeholders, expected policy outcomes, and inclusivity of underrepresented groups

The Directorate shall ensure that all IAI peer-review committees use interdisciplinarity and TD as merit criteria, ensuring that projects strive to include the needs of underrepresented groups from the beginning of the development process (*Strategic Plan Goal 1, Objective ii, Action c*).

Proposal selection will look for deliverables and milestones associated with possible societal impacts of research results, while noting that science-policy causal relationships and attributions may be difficult to establish, depending on the timeframe of the specific program. The IAI expects innovative yet realistic proposals with feasible expected outcomes resulting from scientists and non-academic partners jointly discussing and understanding their different motivations. Work plans, activities, budget, possible co-funding should be jointly decided and societal impact should be realistically identified.

Types of Reviews

- Panel of experts (in-person and/or virtual)
- External reviews (written, ad-hoc)
- Internal review (IAI Directorate, Scientific Advisory Committee (SAC) and the Science-Policy Advisory Committee (SPAC))

Reviewer Selection

The scientific merit and the societal relevance of proposals will be assessed by members of the IAI's SAC/SPAC, with the participation of outside expert reviewers selected on the basis of their expertise.

In every call for proposals, the SAC/SPAC and the IAI Directorate will ensure that projects engage with groups that have been historically underrepresented in the sciences (e.g., Indigenous Peoples, women) to identify needs and develop and co-design capacity building [and research] programs where appropriate (*Strategic Plan Goal 1, Objective iv, Action c*).

For every call for proposals, the Directorate shall ensure that the peer-review committee is representative in terms of disciplines, regions, and gender balance, and that it includes underrepresented groups in science (*Strategic Plan Goal 1, Objective ii, Action b*).

Managing Conflicts of Interest

See <http://www.iai.int/pdf/en/IAI-conflict-of-interest-2019-eng.pdf>

Funding Decisions

During the merit review process, proposals will not be ranked, but rather they will be binned into the following categories: “fund”, “fund if possible”, “do not fund/decline.” Those proposals deemed not meeting the call requirements will be “returned as inappropriate” or “withdrawn”.

Approval of projects, in alignment with the recommendations of the reviewers, will be the responsibility of the IAI Directorate. Funding decisions will be based upon, but not limited to, merit review, available funds, portfolio, and geographic balance.

Reasons for declining proposals include: improper submission format/missed deadline; lack of new or original ideas; diffuse, superficial, or unfocused research plan; lack of knowledge or citation of relevant work; lack of experience in essential methodology; questionable reasoning in experimental approach; absence of acceptable scientific rationale; unrealistic goals; lack of sufficient detail; lack of funds; etc.

Notification to the Proposers

Proposers will be notified of the merit review decisions in a timely fashion. There may be an informal notification, but always a formal notification will be issued to the proposers. Investigators will receive merit review summaries to provide feedback to both the awarded and declined proposals.