



CEDIL Call for Proposals

Programme of Work 2: Generalising evidence through middle range theory

March 2019



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Preface

This document sets out the requirements for projects submitted to Programme of Work 2. It should be read in conjunction with the **Call Overview** and the **Application Guidance Note**.

1. Objective of the Programme of Work

A key challenge for evaluations is to determine whether evidence can be applied to the development of interventions in other contexts. Without such insights, evidence from a single study can only be used to make decisions about continuing that intervention. While systematic reviews and other forms of evidence synthesis can draw together results from multiple evaluations, variations in implementation and context mean that it may not be clear if study findings transfer to a different context.

To improve transferability of findings, CEDIL will support a programme of work to use middle range theories and to provide clearer guidance to policy makers on how interventions should be designed and adapted in different contexts.

A well-established concept in sociology, middle-range theory is under-utilised in development evaluation. Middle-range theories are more specific than 'grand' social science theories, yet more generalised than project-level theories of change. They explain processes, mechanisms and behaviours in sufficiently general terms to find application in multiple contexts and circumstances.

This programme of work seeks to strengthen and promote the use of middle-range theory in international development. It will achieve this by supporting three types of project: large impact evaluations which build and employ middle range theories, secondary data projects and evidence synthesis which use existing data resources, and exploratory projects which develop theories in one of the CEDIL priority thematic areas that could be used to inform future evaluations. Interdisciplinary approaches to develop middle-range theories are particularly encouraged.

2. Large projects

2.1 Evaluations

Large projects will develop middle range theories which explain the outcomes of a category of intervention and use them in a specific impact evaluation. We will support evaluations which are primarily designed to test a theory, rather than an intervention effect, but nevertheless address questions of value to policy makers and can lead to better interventions, both within the context studied and elsewhere.

In some cases, comparative research may be appropriate to test middle range theories. In such cases, the balance of primary research must focus on priority countries listed in the CEDIL overview document.

The linked questions below illustrate the types of questions which should be addressed by middle range theory evaluation projects.

1. What generalisable principles of human social, political or economic behaviour explain why people's response to an intervention should generate the desired outcomes? What are the causal mechanisms, and can these mechanisms be specified and tested.
2. Is there evidence of that behavioural response actually occurring?
3. What testable hypotheses are generated by the middle-range theory of the identified mechanism?

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4. Does it appear to be leading to the desired outcomes? If not, what other factors may be contributing to the observed outcomes? Can these supporting factors be investigated empirically?
5. What lessons emerge for policy makers and development implementers from this evidence?

2.2 Secondary data analysis

Secondary data analysis projects will also develop middle range theory to explain outcomes from a category of intervention. However, rather than testing these through primary data collection, they will assess them using existing secondary data sources. We encourage innovation in the types of data that are used, which could include administrative data, longitudinal studies, social media data, GIS information and satellite data.

3. Small projects

3.1 Evidence synthesis

As well as primary research projects, we will also support projects which develop middle range theories through systematic reviews or other forms of evidence synthesis. Such projects should propose innovative methods for evidence synthesis that can rigorously review causal propositions about the relationship between intervention activities and outcomes, intended or otherwise. Reviews should assess the strength of evidence related to causal chains of how activities produce outcomes in specific intervention categories, and identify gaps. They should produce recommendations on both future priorities for research and how the evidence reviewed can be most effectively used by policy makers.

3.2 Exploratory projects

In many priority areas, however, existing evaluation methods may not be sufficient to conduct a systematic review. In these cases, we encourage projects that will take a more exploratory approach to developing middle range theories, by drawing on evidence from across a range of disciplines. Case studies and some empirical pilot work would be appropriate within these projects as well. Exploratory projects should lay the groundwork for further research that can more rigorously test hypotheses generated by these middle-range theories. Priority will be given to those CEDIL thematic areas whose conceptualisation and theoretical framework are currently understudied and underdeveloped.

4. Budget and timelines

Large projects will be provided with up to £1 million for up to three years of work. We expect projects to commence no later than 31 January 2020. We recognise that within this time period, projects may not be able to conduct traditional baseline and endline data collection prior to an intervention's start and following its completion, respectively. However, as the emphasis of these projects is to understand the processes through which interventions generate outcomes, rather than their effects,

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we expect projects to be able to propose research activities that will generate useful evidence and insights within this timeframe. We encourage projects which propose methods to incorporate existing data from interventions already underway.

Systematic and other evidence review projects will be provided with funding up to £200,000 and should be completed in 18 months. Exploratory projects can receive up to £100,000 and will be funded for no more than 12 months.

5. Further information

Applicants to the Programme of Work are advised particularly to review the following inception papers produced by CEDIL. Proposals are not required to build on or follow approaches set out in these papers, but applicants are likely to find them a useful reference point to characterise their work in relation to previous activity.

- O. Attanasio and Cavatorta, E. Compliments and alternatives to RCTs in evaluation in development
- C. Davey, et al. Designing evaluations to provide evidence to inform action in new settings
- M. Vigneri, et al. Economics and epidemiology: two sides of the same coin or different currencies for evaluating impact?

Questions on this call specification should be directed to: cedil.commissioning@opml.co.uk