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

Application deadline: March 15, 2022

Background

The Structural Transformation of African Agriculture and Rural Spaces (STAARS) fellowship program, a multi-institution collaboration managed by Cornell University in collaboration with the University of Sussex and the African Economic Research Consortium (AERC), announces its annual call for research proposals. Early-career African researchers selected as STAARS Fellows in 2022 advance rigorous, policy-oriented research on the causal determinants of productivity and income growth, asset accumulation, rural employment and risk management in African agriculture and rural spaces.

The Fellowship covers travel and training expenses. STAARS Fellows will be paired with faculty or senior research staff mentors at Cornell University or the University of Sussex with whom they will jointly author a paper on a topic of mutual interest relating to structural transformation in Africa south of the Sahara. The program aims for publication of resulting research findings in high quality, peer-reviewed journals and as working papers. In addition, AERC, Cornell, and Sussex will facilitate Fellows' participation in scientific and policy conferences, provide professional development training, and build Fellows' international research networks.

The STAARS Fellowship began in 2016 and to date has supported 50 Fellows from diverse backgrounds. Learn about past Fellows here.

Scope of Research and Geographic Focus

Prospective STAARS Fellows are invited to develop proposals in the following thematic areas for empirical work on Africa south of the Sahara:

1. Dynamics of agricultural inputs use, technological change, and productivity growth
2. Rural factor market performance, labor exits and productivity
3. Agri-food systems and value chains, their performance and evolution
4. Food security, nutrition and health linkages
5. Poverty dynamics and resilience against shocks

6. Sustainable natural resources management

STAARS 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 from Africa south of the Sahara.

Eligibility

The call is open for early career African researchers, either Ph.D. students in their final year prior to degree completion or preferably those who completed their Ph.D. no earlier than 2017. Priority is given to researchers who are African nationals based and working in – or soon returning to – Africa, with proposals relating to the research themes indicated above. Qualified female researchers are particularly encouraged to apply. STAARS 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, 2022, and proceeding to submit the paper to a peer-reviewed journal and/or conferences by June 30, 2023.

Researchers 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 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 or the University of Sussex. Due to the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic, travel may not be possible in 2022. The 2022 program of research coordination and professional development training will begin online and we will evaluate the feasibility of travel in mid-2022.

Fellows are expected to commit significant time to the proposed research and capacity development activities. No salary support is available; STAARS will not cover the scholar's time allocated to this research. A letter of support from the candidate's supervisor is 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 STAARS program spans 17 months from the release of the RFP to the delivery of final outputs by the STAARS fellow. Selected STAARS fellows are matched with at least a main mentor who is a Cornell or Sussex faculty member or senior research staff 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 STAARS leadership occurring during the first six weeks of the fellowship period. 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 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. Approximately 8 months from the release of the RFP, the STAARS teams spend 3-weeks visiting either Cornell's campus in Ithaca, New York, USA, or Sussex's campus in Brighton, UK, at which the STAARS fellows work intensively on the research project, participate in feedback workshops, hold a public seminar, and participate in network-building activities. The Cornell and Sussex teams will coordinate closely, including joint virtual workshops and seminars.

Example Schedule

Virtual Launch: Fellows and Mentors Orientation	May 16 – 30, 2022
Virtual Launch: Presentations	June 7, 2022
Virtual Launch: Team Work Planning	June 14, 2022
Virtual Launch: Panel of Past Fellows	June 16, 2022
★Milestone: Final Work Plan Due	June 24, 2022
★Milestone: Individual Meetings with STAARS Faculty Director	June 13 – 24, 2022
Training: Research Ethics	June 21, 2022
Training: Time Management	June 28, 2022
Training: Transparent and Reproducible Research	July 5, 2022
Training: Data Management	July 7, 12, 2022
Training: Writing Structure	July 28, 2022
Training: Effective Presentations	August 22, 2022
★Milestone: Paper Draft 1	August 29, 2022
Travel to Cornell (Ithaca, NY, USA) or University of Sussex (Brighton, UK)	September 3 – 24, 2022
Seminar: Intensive Feedback Workshop(s)	September 6 – 7, 2022
Seminar: Cornell or Sussex Invited Seminars	September 13 – 15, 2022

Training: Grantsmanship	October 4, 2022
Training: Navigating Peer Review	October 18, 2022
Seminar: Paper Presentations	November 15, 2022
★Milestone: Paper Draft 2	December 15, 2022
★Milestone: Paper Submission to Academic Journal	June 30, 2023

Application Process

STAARS will hold an informational webinar on **Friday, February 18th from 8:00 – 9:00am Eastern Time** (in conjunction with STAARS' sister program STAAARS+). Please register for the webinar here. For those unable to attend, the materials will be available here after the webinar has taken place.

The STAARS Fellowship application process is managed by Cornell University, in collaboration with AERC and Sussex. 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, 2023. Projects that propose to use data that are not publicly available must provide documentation that they have access to those data. All proposals shall be prepared in English. All proposals will be peer-reviewed by experts from Cornell, Sussex, and/or AERC. Shortlisted applicants will be asked to complete a Stata/R assessment to assess their qualifications in using a statistical software necessary to carry out their work. More details will be provided to shortlisted candidates at the time of notification.

The deadline to submit a research proposal is March 15, 2022 at 11:59 PM New York time**.** Applicants should submit their completed proposals via the STAARS online application link. Accepted applicants will be notified by early May 2022 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 staars@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, 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
- Bibliographic references (not included in the 2500 words)

2. 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 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 or UK visa