

# GIF Innovation & Learning Request for Proposals 2022-23

October 2021

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## 1. Introduction

**The Better Cotton Initiative (BCI, recently being rebranded as Better Cotton)** is a global not-for-profit organisation created to address challenges in cotton production. It is the largest cotton sustainability programme in the world: its aim is to transform cotton production by developing Better Cotton as a sustainable, mainstream commodity.

The Better Cotton Standard System is BCI's holistic approach to sustainable cotton production which covers all three pillars of sustainability: environmental, social and economic. The Better Cotton Standard System is designed to ensure the exchange of good practices, and to encourage the scaling up of collective action to establish Better Cotton as a sustainable mainstream commodity. A critical component of the Better Cotton Standard System is the Better Cotton Principles and Criteria, which lay out the global definition of Better Cotton through seven guiding principles. These comprise seven principles to which Better Cotton Farmers must adhere. This includes minimising the harmful impact of crop protection practices, enhancing biodiversity, promoting water stewardship and Decent Work, and caring for the health of the soil.

The Better Cotton Assurance Programme involves farmers participating in a continuous cycle of learning and improvement. It is the primary mechanism for assessing whether farmers can grow and sell Better Cotton. Within the programme, farms are differentiated into smallholders, medium farms and large farms.

A licence is awarded at producer level (Producer Unit or Large Farm) when Better Cotton Principles and Criteria's core indicators are met. Farmers must first reach a set of Core Indicators that ensure that the cotton grown meets the standards for pesticide use, water management, Decent Work, record keeping, training and other factors. At the same time, farmers are encouraged to develop further through Improvement Indicators. Improvements are measured through a questionnaire and receive a score based on their answers. The high scoring farmers are rewarded through extended Better Cotton licence periods.

For further details, read *The Better Cotton Assurance Programme*, *Better Cotton Theory of Change* and *The Better Cotton Standard System* (refer Annex 2)

Collaboration is essential to delivering the Better Cotton programme across the world. BCI has developed an extended network of on-the-ground partners, Implementation Partners (IPs), to help cotton farming communities to adopt more sustainable practices. Implementation Partners are critical to the success of Better Cotton. They play an important role in leading training and support in the field, reaching ever more farmers to provide opportunities to improve their practices.

**The Better Cotton Growth and Innovation Fund** (Better Cotton GIF or the Fund) is a global programme designed to support BCI in achieving its goals and reaching cotton farming communities who need the most support.

The focus of the Fund is field level. The Fund invests in sustainable farming practices, training and capacity building, data collection and research, to benefit farmers and the environment.

This document serves as the Better Cotton Growth & Innovation Fund *Innovation and Learning Request for Applications* (RFP) for season 2022-23. This call for proposals is open to BCI Implementation Partners (IPs) and external organisations.

## 2. Better Cotton 2030 strategy – An overview

Better Cotton is entering a new strategic phase which will cover the period 2021-2030. The premise for its 2030 strategy is that cotton has a long-term future and can be a force for good.

In Better Cotton's first strategic period of 11 years, it made substantive progress in achieving scale. Over the next ten years it aims to make substantive progress on impact at an individual level<sup>1</sup>, while maintaining, and where possible, continuing to expand, scale.

### What does this mean for partners receiving grants through the Better Cotton GIF?

- Partner activities should move beyond compliance with the Better Cotton Principles & Criteria and bring tangible benefits, social, economic and environmental, to farmers and workers (both male and female). Farmers need enhanced training, whether delivered by better qualified and motivated FFs or through digital platforms, and more access to expertise and services.
- Cotton will remain the focus crop, but BCI recognises that farms produce many more crops, and that best practices should be broadened to the whole farm.
- Climate change is, and will continue to be, the main current threat to farming communities. All activities will need to be designed with climate change mitigation and adaptation in mind.

## 3. Better Cotton 2030 impact areas

In line with intentions to drive 'deeper change', BCI has singled out five main impact areas where it hopes to make measurable change and for which targets will be set by the end of 2021. BCI Implementation partners will play a key role to make progress and drive change on the ground. These impact areas are:

### 1. Soil Health

Good soil health results in improved productivity, sustainability and profitability. Implementation partners will be expected to continue their ongoing capacity building activities, sourcing external expertise where necessary. In regions where there has not been a strong focus to date, implementing partners are required to make a greater investment in capacity building for soil improvement.

### 2. Women's empowerment

Addressing gender inequality is essential to achieve sustainability in agriculture. Implementing partners will be expected to increase the number of female Field Facilitators and Producer Unit Managers. Having women in these roles is one of the most effective ways of creating the necessary conditions for an increase in the number of women lead farmers and co-farmers. They will be able to focus on improving women's participation in capacity building activities and encouraging them to take a more active role in decision making on their family farms.

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<sup>1</sup> At the level of farmer/worker rather than at a country level

### 3. Smallholder livelihoods

Building resilient and sustainable livelihoods is vital if farming communities are to withstand the effects of climate disruption, COVID and changes in cotton price and demand. Data around profitability is some of the hardest data to accurately collect, therefore on a first instance, Implementation partners could consider researching smallholder incomes on a small-scale.

### 4. Pesticides and toxicity

A reduction in the use of pesticides overall, and a focus on reducing the toxicity of the remaining pesticides used, will positively impact all farmers globally. Implementation partners must detail plans for improving adoption of IPM practices in addition to eliminating HHPs.

### 5. Climate change mitigation

Tractor use, irrigation pumps, and the use of nitrogen fertilisers are key emissions drivers. Implementation partners will be expected to focus on continuous improvement related to these practices used by Better Cotton farmers, particularly those associated with the management of natural resources and fertiliser and pesticide inputs.

Though no target will be set for climate change *adaptation* in the 2030 strategy, it is an essential component.

The targets for all these impact areas, once finalised, will act as drivers of change for continued improvement in Better Cotton farmer practices and provide focus to deliver the key outcomes set out in the 2030 strategy.

## 4. Themes for Innovation and learning applications

The GIF is opening this Innovation and Learning RFP to seek solutions that will help BCI and its Implementation partners to accelerate positive impact for farmers participating in the Better Cotton programme. We define innovation broadly; we would consider any solution that has the potential to achieve impact more effectively than existing approaches as innovative. We aim to catalyse solutions that include new operational processes, field interventions, behavioural insights or ways of delivering programme activities in such a way that it benefits more farmers. Innovation also includes taking existing approaches and applying them in new ways, in new regions or in new contexts.

Applicants should focus on one of the following themes in their applications:

#### 1. How can Better Cotton make progress towards its 2030 strategy's impact areas?

We seek solutions that will help to strengthen and to make progress towards the 5 impact areas for 2030 listed in section 3:

- Soil health
- Women's empowerment
- Smallholder livelihoods
- Pesticides and toxicity
- Climate change mitigation

We can provide more detail on any of the above impact areas.

## **2. How can we support farmers adapting their lives to a changing climate?**

Climate change poses a fundamental threat to the livelihoods of Better Cotton farmers. All cotton growing regions are likely to face climate hazards including heat stress, water stress, longer dry spells, increased number of wet days, distorted distribution of rain and shorter growing seasons, all will negatively affect yields and livelihoods.

Better Cotton farmers, especially those in developing countries, will be among those most affected by climate change: they are also highly vulnerable and with least adaptive capacity. Supporting farmers to better adapt to climate change by reducing their vulnerability and building adaptive capacities is core to BCI's mission.

We seek solutions that can help us to identify, modify and replicate at scale relevant climate change adaptation practices, particularly among smallholder farmers.

## **3. How can we better learn more about the quality of training delivered to farmers?**

Evaluations are needed to test the theories and assumptions on which capacity development programmes are based, to document results, and to draw lessons for improving future programmes. There are several challenges faced by IPs in establishing a robust Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning system:

- The scale of operation is significant in the case of some IPs.
- The ratio of field facilitator (field agent) to farmer may not always be optimum for the knowledge-intensive trainings required. Feedback loops might be deprioritised.
- BCI Implementation Partners gather a significant amount of data during the season. Data is analysed by BCI's team and shared back with implementation partners. However, there are no clear methods to then share back that data with farmers to help them on their continuous improvement journey.

We seek solutions that can help BCI and its Implementation Partners to set up strong M&E systems, with feedback loops going back to farmers.

## **5. Prerequisites for applicants**

Applicants must comply with the following prerequisites for their application to be considered:

- Applicant's applications are expected to address one of the themes listed in section 4.
- Applicants must be operating in one or more of the countries where BCI is present.
- Applicants must have prior experience in delivering or improving agronomic/social training or extension services.

## **6. Selection process**

In the first round, applicants must submit a completed application form and budget summary. Applicants are also welcomed to submit additional materials, such as photos and videos. Only applications received before the deadline will be accepted.

The GIF Secretariat will assess applications received in the first round and shortlist best fitting ideas according to the following criteria:

- **Alignment with Better Cotton and the Fund’s objective:** the proposal is aligned with outcomes that the Fund is seeking and in the countries that have been prioritised.
- **Impact/Relevance to Better Cotton:** The solution is relevant for BCI and its Implementing Partners.
- **Adoption:** The solution is easily adopted by users and/or beneficiaries.
- **Scalability:** The solution has the potential to be scaled up and to be replicated across regions and countries.
- **Feasibility:** the proposal presents measurable outcomes which are achievable within the project timeframe and budget.
- **Sustainability:** The solution is financially sustainable and has a business model.
- **Capacity of the partner:** The applicant has proven capacity to implement, manage, communicate and report on the activities proposed

Shortlisted applicants will move to a second round and will be requested to submit a more detailed description of their application, detailed budget information and their approach for potential scale up.

Final applications will be evaluated by the GIF Field Innovation and Impact Committee (FIIC). There will be a total of €500,000-600,000<sup>2</sup> available for innovation and learning grants for the season 2022-23. We anticipate this amount to be shared between multiple grantees.

## 7. RFP launch and key dates

What	When
Launch GIF Innovation & learning RFP 2022-23	October 1st 2021
Applicants submit their application via online portal at <a href="https://rfpidh.smapply.io/prog/innovation/">https://rfpidh.smapply.io/prog/innovation/</a>	October 29th 2021
Shortlist applications	November 19th 2021
Shortlisted applicants submit detailed applications	December 10th 2021
FIIC meeting to approve project applications	End January 2022/early February 2022
Decision communicated to applicants	February 2022

<sup>2</sup> Based on current estimates of BCI income

If there is any query regarding the RFP, please reach out to Cristina Martin Cuadrado at [cristina.martin@bettercotton.org](mailto:cristina.martin@bettercotton.org) or Ferry Mulder at [mulder@idhtrade.org](mailto:mulder@idhtrade.org) before 15th October 2021.

## Annex

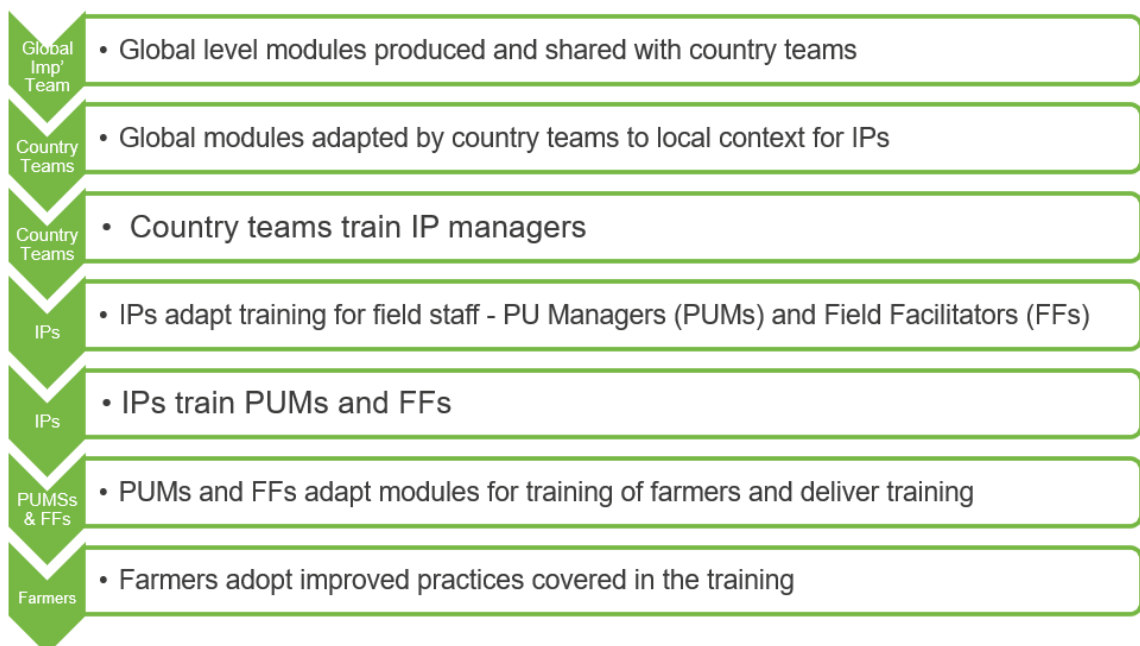
### 1) Our approach to Capacity Building M&E

Implementation Partners (IPs) conduct annual or biennial assessment needs studies with farmers ahead of the crop cycle. These studies are conducted across multiple Producer Units (PUs), based on geographical proximity.

*How is the training content created and method determined?*

The content is usually centrally determined at the IP level for constituent PUs, sourced from the training sessions the BCI country team organises for the partners with the support of Knowledge Partners such as local agriculture universities, central government research institutes, CSOs etc. In some cases, BCI country teams also prepare training content internally. Trainings are organised on soil management and land preparation, IPM, elimination of Highly Hazardous Pesticides, on-farm demand management of water, water budgeting, monitoring of groundwater levels, interventions to strengthen water sources in the community, protection of on-farm biodiversity and general ecological restoration with the support of the community, fibre quality, decent work and general record keeping of agricultural operations. In some country programmes, field staff are also trained on sustainable management of other crops grown by farmers during the cotton season.

### Standard BCI Training Cascade



*How is content delivered?*

Content is primarily delivered through Field Facilitators (FFs) via in-person trainings conducted 5-6 times a year. There are two types of trainings that are conducted – (i) for farmers, training is conducted throughout the season, some refresher, some new courses. Field demonstrations and exposure visits are a major component in almost all farmer training curricula. (ii) for workers, trainings are conducted during spraying and harvest seasons.

Farmer trainings are conducted at a Learning Group (~40 farmers) level. Through various means, FFs also promote peer learning among farmers, usually led by progressive farmers or “lead farmers” in the LG. There is also some digital training, for example, we have some mobile applications which help with identifying pest and beneficial insects, or with increasing knowledge on improving soil health. Technology is also used to share content among farmers via social media platforms. Since April 2020, social media has been used widely by IPs to share content due to Covid-induced restricted travel. Wall paintings are extensively used to deliver messages directly to farmers and communities too.

*How is feedback collected?*

FFs usually conduct follow-up meetings with farmers, to allow farmers to provide feedback, clarify any doubts or request for more information on a certain topic. In some cases, PU managers make ‘random’ visits to selected farmers of FFs to ask their feedback on the quality of trainings.

*How is this data collected?*

BCI Implementation partners gather a significant amount of data through the season. Each smallholder farmer is expected to maintain a farmer field book (FFB) and collect information about the following indicators:

- ✓ Water use
- ✓ Fertilizer use
- ✓ Yield
- ✓ Profitability
- ✓ Eliminating child labour through partnerships
- ✓ Improving understanding and awareness of child labour issues
- ✓ Inclusion of women farmer and workers in training

Farmers are required to capture the data in an on-going basis – some are able to self-report the data while others save receipts (fuel, pesticides, motor / electricity bills, labour costs, etc.) that Field Facilitators use to fill the FFBs on their behalf. This data capture process spans a period of 9-10 months and includes multiple touchpoints between FFs and farmers – averaging 2/3 times a month. Once collected, the data goes to the Producer Unit where it is verified for quality, standardized for units / formulae, and converted from the physical format to a digital template. Field Facilitators often assist the PU manager in verification.

A representative sampling-based approach at the PU level is taken at the smallholder farmer level, as opposed to 100% data collection from all farms in the medium farm level.



## 2) Further reading

### **BCI Theory of change**

<https://bettercotton.org/resources/bcis-theory-of-change/>

### **Better Cotton Standard System**

[Better Cotton Standard System - Better Cotton Initiative](#)

### **BCI Farmer results**

[BCI Farmer Results - Better Cotton Initiative](#)

### **BCI Annual reports**

[BCI Reports - Better Cotton Initiative](#)

### **BCI Gender strategy**

[BCI Gender Strategy - Better Cotton Initiative](#)