Indian Council of Medical Research-Gates Foundation Grand Challenge

Request for Proposals

Development of Aspirational Nutrient-Dense Food Products for Adolescent Girls and Women of Reproductive Age (WRA) to Prevent Anaemia

Background and Rationale

Adolescence and the reproductive years represent critical windows for nutritional investment, marked by substantially increased micronutrient requirements, particularly for iron and folate. Evidence from India indicates that dietary intake remains significantly below recommended levels, especially among women. Consequently, anaemia continues to affect approximately 50% of adolescent girls and women of reproductive age (WRA).

Despite long-standing national programs on iron folate supplementation for anaemia control, anaemia prevalence continues to be high. This persistent burden reflects systemic challenges including:

- Low adherence due to perceived side effects, poor awareness, and low agency among adolescent girls
- Social stigma around 'medicines' and low prioritization of preventive health
- Supply chain inefficiencies and inconsistent access and counselling
- Limited alignment with adolescent aspirations, preferences, and lifestyles

In parallel, traditional supplementation and supplementary feeding programs face challenges such as intra-household sharing, lack of targeting, and poor acceptability, limiting their effectiveness in reaching intended beneficiaries.

Evidence from Behavioural Science and Social and Behaviour Change Communication (SBCC) highlights that food choices among adolescents and women are driven by taste, convenience, and social norms. This creates an opportunity to reimagine nutrition delivery through products that are **aspirational, desirable, and embedded within daily consumption patterns.**

The Challenge

We are soliciting innovative proposals to develop, prototype, and evaluate aspirational, affordable, and nutritionally effective food products tailored for adolescent girls and WRA. Proposals may focus on one or multiple life stages and should address the diverse needs and preferences of the target group(s).

The goal of this Grand Challenge is to catalyse a portfolio of execution-ready food products that combine:

- Nutritional efficacy (particularly iron delivery)
- High consumer acceptability and desirability
- Scalability across diverse Indian contexts
- Daily consumability

Target Population Segments

Segment	Age Group	Key Levers (E.g.)
Adolescent Girls	10–19 years	peer influence, social norms, low agency,
Young Women (WRA)	20–35 years	Reproductive health, convenience, taste-driven choices, guilt free*
Older WRA	35–49 years	Sustained micronutrient support, adherence, accessibility, guilt free*

* Guilt associated with consumption, particularly among women, driven by perceptions of depriving other family members.

Areas of Interest

We are particularly interested in solutions that address the following dimensions:

1. Product Innovation and Design

- Development of nutrient-dense or fortified food products delivering key micronutrient i.e., iron
- Use of bioavailable nutrient forms and synergistic ingredients to enhance absorption
- Formats aligned with consumer preferences, including but not limited to:
  - Snacks (bars, bites, chikkis, savoury crispies)
  - Drinkable formats (RTD beverages, mixes)
  - Novel products or appealing convenience options like gummies, chewables, sprinklers, or hybrid food-supplement formats
- Incorporation of regionally relevant flavours and ingredients (e.g., millets, seeds, plant-based sources, spices)

2. Aspirational Positioning and Consumer-Centric Design

- Products that are modern, trendy, and identity-driven, not 'medicinal'
- Branding that aligns with the aspirations of adolescent girls and women
- Strategies to minimize stigma and enhance emotional ownership
- Segmentation strategies across all target age groups

3. Behavioural and Social Insights Integration

- Leveraging existing consumption habits rather than creating new ones
- Addressing barriers such as peer influence and social norms
- Addressing guilt associated with food consumption
- The tension between immediate versus delayed gratification, where taste and convenience often outweigh long-term health benefits.

4. Nutritional Efficacy and Bioavailability

- Demonstration of effective micronutrient delivery (i.e., ~4–5 mg iron per serving)
- Consideration of dietary patterns (e.g., low bioavailability vegetarian diets)
- Potential to contribute to measurable improvements in haemoglobin levels

5. Delivery, Scalability, and Sustainability

- Integration into public delivery platforms (schools, community programs)
- Integration into commercial retail and e-commerce channels
- Cost-effective production and pricing models in line with current standards
- Shelf stability and nutrient retention
- Local manufacturing and supply chain feasibility

6. Packaging, Branding, and Market Fit

- Attractive, modern, and socially shareable packaging
- Clear and credible communication of benefits
- Avoidance of classification as HFSS or ultra-processed foods
- Alignment with mainstream food categories rather than 'nutrition products'
- Smaller portion sizes integrated into familiar food formats, enabling easier incorporation into daily diets without behavioural disruption.

Funding Level and Timeline

Component	Details
Grant Amount	Up to ₹1 Crore
Duration	1 Year
Purpose	Prototype development

Applications for all Grand Challenge RFPs are due by 3rd July 2026. Full details are available at the application portal. A dedicated webinar will be held to provide additional context and answer questions, with recordings shared afterward.

Eligibility Criteria

This initiative is open to:

Eligible Applicant Type	Description
Academic & Research Institutions	Universities, research centres with relevant nutritional/food science expertise
Food Industry Partners & Startups	Companies or startups working in FMCG (Fast Moving Consumer Goods), fortification, or product innovation
Non-Profit Organizations	Organizations with a mandate in nutrition, health, or community engagement

Collaborations between nutrition science, food industry, and behavioural experts are strongly encouraged.

What We Look for in Proposals

We are looking for proposals that consider:

Clear Framing of the Problem

- Defined target population (adolescent girls and/or WRA)
- Specific nutritional gaps addressed (i.e., iron deficiency)

Innovative and Testable Solution

- Affordable novel product formats, formulations, or delivery approaches
- Strong integration of consumer insights and behavioural science

Scientific and Nutritional Rationale

- Evidence-based formulation strategies
- Consideration of bioavailability and dietary context

Feasibility and Scalability

- Practical pathway to scale through public or private channels
- Cost considerations suitable for low- and middle-income settings

Measurement and Evaluation Plan

- Defined outcomes (e.g., consumer acceptability, adherence, nutrient delivery)
- Plans for pilot testing and validation

Multidisciplinary Team Capability

- Expertise across nutrition, food technology, behavioural science, and product development

What We Will Not Fund

Proposals that focus solely on:

- Traditional supplementation without product innovation
- Policy advocacy or awareness campaigns alone
- Products lacking a clear pathway to scalability or adoption
- Evaluation with no clear product formulation in sight
- Products high in fat, salt, sugar

Expected Outcomes

This Grand Challenge aims to deliver:

- A **portfolio of aspirational, nutrient-dense/fortified food prototypes** that can be consumed daily
- Evidence on sensory quality, **consumer acceptability, stability, and shelf life**
- Scalable models for integration into **public health programs and commercial markets**
- Contributions toward reducing anaemia and micronutrient deficiencies, in alignment with national priorities such as **Anaemia Mukt Bharat**

Successful solutions may also have **global applicability** in settings facing similar nutritional challenges.

Review Process

Step	Stage	Details
1	Initial Screening by ICMR	EoI documents evaluated for completeness and accuracy. Each application reviewed independently.
2	Shortlisting of Applicants	Applications meeting eligibility criteria reviewed by independent experts and shortlisted for the Competent Authority.
3	Further Steps	Selected investigators informed about their selection and next steps.

Schedule

Milestone	Date
Date of Publication	3rd June 2026
Last Date of Submission	3rd July 2026
Webinar Date	To be Communicated
Application Portal	https://forms.gle/egd92XzphwgEc3ya8

Contact Details

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Please see Application Instructions below

Applications for this Grand Challenge RFP are due by 3rd July 2026 at 11:30 PM IST. Late submissions will not be considered.

Application Instructions

Development of Aspirational Nutrient-Dense Food Products for Adolescent Girls and Women of Reproductive Age to Prevent Anaemia

ICMR–Gates Foundation Grand Challenge

Overview

These instructions guide applicants in preparing and submitting proposals to the ICMR–Gates Foundation Grand Challenge on development of aspirational, nutrient-dense food products to prevent anaemia in adolescent girls and women of reproductive age (WRA). Please read this document carefully alongside the Request for Proposals (RFP) and ensure your submission fully complies with all requirements before the deadline.

What to Submit

Your complete application package consists of three components:

Component	Format	Length
Applicant Profile & Information	Google form Link	NA
Proposal Document	Microsoft Word® or Adobe PDF	Maximum length: 3–4 pages, with up to 2 additional pages allocated for the budget table and budget narrative (refer to the budget template provided at the end of this document).

Applicant Profile

To begin your application, click on https://forms.gle/egd92XzphwgEc3ya8

1. Lead applicant institution and principal investigator
2. Co-applicants and collaborating organizations (if applicable)
3. Organizational type (Academic/Research Institution, Food Industry/Startup, or Non-Profit Organization)
4. Contact information and correspondence details

Proposal Format

Your proposal must be formatted as follows:

Formatting Requirement	Specification
Maximum Length	Maximum length: 3–4 pages (including figures and references), with up to 2 additional pages permitted for the budget table and budget narrative, as per the template provided at the end of this document.
Font	Arial or Times New Roman
Font Size	11-point or larger
Margins	At least 0.5 inches on all sides
Line Spacing	Single
Character Spacing	Standard (neither expanded nor condensed)

Formatting Requirement	Specification
File Type	Microsoft Word® (.docx) or Adobe PDF (.pdf)
Maximum File Size	3 MB or less

Applications that do not adhere to these restrictions may be blocked from submission and review.

Proposal Content

Please structure your proposal using the five sections below. Suggested lengths are indicated in parentheses. All sections must appear within the 3–4-page limit.

1. Introductory Information (½ page)

- Provide a brief description of the specific problem your proposal addresses
- Clearly state, in one or two sentences in bold, the core idea and innovation of your proposed solution
- Identify the target population segment(s): adolescent girls (10–19 years), young WRA (20–35 years), and/or older WRA (35–49 years)

2. Proposal Information (1 page)

- State the hypothesis and overall vision for the proposed work
- Define the project objectives and key aims
- Describe the proposed food product(s) or format(s), including targeted micronutrient i.e. iron, proposed delivery formats (snacks, beverages, gummies, traditional formats etc).
- Explain how the product addresses consumer desirability, aspirational positioning, and behavioural barriers
- Describe integration of bioavailability-enhancing strategies and suitability for vegetarian dietary contexts
- Outline alignment with the Areas of Interest in the RFP, including product innovation, consumer-centric design, and scalability

3. Development Plan and Path to Impact (½-1 page)

Please address the following:

- Define the feasibility objectives, key development milestones, explicit go/no-go criteria, and prototype outputs
- Provide a concise Gantt chart or milestone table within the 3–4-page limit
- Describe plans for pilot testing, sensory evaluation, consumer acceptability, and adherence measurement
- Describe how the proposal will build longer-term anaemia reduction in adolescents and WRA in India.
- Identify key risks and proposed mitigations
- Where available, cite relevant supporting evidence on product performance, regulatory status, or prior consumer research

5. Cost and Manufacturing Plan (½ -1 page)

- State the target price per serving or unit, and outline the pathway to affordable, cost-effective production
- Describe the supply chain and manufacturability plan, including local production feasibility
- Explain potential for integration into public delivery platforms (e.g., schools, Anganwadis, community health programs) and/or commercial retail and e-commerce channels
- Address shelf stability, nutrient retention, and packaging considerations

5. Team and Capacity (½ page)

- Summarize the team's relevant expertise across nutrition science, food technology, behavioural science, and product development
- List co-applicants and collaborators with their roles, affiliations, and relevant experience
- Highlight any existing partnerships with food industry, public health programs, or community organizations

Budget Table and Narrative

Use the budget template available at the end of this document to submit a budget of up to 2 pages covering a grant period (up to ₹1 Crore over 1 year). The budget should include a breakdown of allowable direct costs under the following categories:

Budget Category	Examples
Personnel	Salaries, wages, and fringe benefits for project staff
Subcontracts	Contracts with external organizations for services
Subgrants	Grants to partner organizations
Capital Assets / Equipment	Major equipment or infrastructure required for the project
Travel	Domestic travel for field work, testing, or dissemination
Supplies	Consumables, ingredients, and laboratory materials
Other Expenses	Publication, communication, or other allowable costs

In addition to the table, provide a one-paragraph budget narrative explaining the major cost drivers and how costs relate to planned activities and target outcomes.

Submission Instructions

All applications must be submitted through the online application portal by the deadline (3rd July 2026).

Milestone	Details
Date of Publication	3rd June, 2026
Last Date of Submission	3rd July 2026, 11:30 PM IST
Webinar Date	To be announced — recording will be shared
Application Portal	https://forms.gle/egd92XzphwgEc3ya8

Late submissions will not be considered under any circumstances.

Frequently Asked Questions

Answers to many application questions can be found within the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document on the application webpage (will be uploaded shortly)

Budget Template and Narrative

Development of Aspirational Nutrient-Dense Food Products for Adolescent Girls and Women of Reproductive Age to Prevent Anaemia

ICMR–Gates Foundation Grand Challenge

Instructions

Please complete this budget template for your proposal (up to ₹1 Crore over 1 year. Provide sufficient detail in the Description/Justification column to allow reviewers to assess the reasonableness of your budget.

Submit the proposal and completed budget template, including the one-paragraph Budget Narrative, as a single Microsoft Word® or PDF document.

Component	Description
Grant Amount	Up to ₹1 Crore
Duration	1 Year
Purpose	Prototype development

Budget Template

Budget Category	Description / Justification	Amount (₹)
Personnel	Salaries, wages, fringe benefits, tuition, or other direct compensation for project staff (list roles)	
Sub-contracts	Contracts with external organisations for specific services. Please list separately if more than one.	
Sub-grants	Grants to partner organisations. Please list separately if more than one.	
Capital Assets / Equipment	Major equipment or infrastructure items required for prototype development and testing	
Travel	Domestic travel costs for field work, consumer testing, pilot studies, or dissemination activities	
Supplies	Consumables, food ingredients, fortification premixes, laboratory materials, and packaging supplies	
Other Expenses	Publication, communication, regulatory consultations, sensory evaluation panels, or other allowable costs	
TOTAL	Maximum: ₹1 Crore	₹

** All amounts in Indian Rupees (₹). Maximum: ₹1,00,00,000 (₹1 Crore).*

Budget Narrative

Please provide one (1) paragraph to explain the major cost drivers in your budget and how costs relate to planned activities and target outcomes. Your narrative should:

- Describe the rationale for the largest budget line items
- Explain how personnel effort is allocated across project activities (e.g., product formulation, consumer testing, sensory evaluation)
- Justify any capital equipment purchases as essential and non-duplicative
- Note any cost-sharing, in-kind contributions, or co-funding from partners

Budget Narrative (complete here — maximum 150 words):