

Call for Proposals

Ecosystem Mapping and Diagnostic Study under the Project

Bridging the Gap: Unlocking Small Business Finance through Fintech Partnerships

Type of Assignment: Short-term consultancy

Duration: Approximately 2.5 months

Application Deadline: April 11, 2026

1. Introduction

The Asia Foundation (TAF) Bangladesh is seeking proposals from qualified consultants, consultancy firms, or research firms to conduct an ecosystem mapping and diagnostic study under the project “Bridging the Gap: Unlocking Small Business Finance through Fintech Partnerships.” The study will generate evidence for practical recommendations to inform pilot design and implementation for small-ticket SME lending in Bangladesh.

2. Background and Problem Statement

Small businesses in Bangladesh continue to face significant barriers to accessing formal finance. Although guarantee schemes, refinance facilities, and digital financial infrastructure are in place, small-ticket lending remains limited. Key constraints include collateral requirements, high perceived risk, complex procedures, ESG and compliance burdens, and weak borrower readiness.

As a result, many small businesses struggle to access financing that matches their needs, while lenders face high costs and practical challenges in serving this segment. There is a need to better understand how SME lending works in practice, where the main bottlenecks lie, and what changes could make small-ticket lending more viable.

This study will examine the Bangladesh ecosystem to identify operational, institutional, and borrower-side barriers affecting small-ticket SME lending. It will also assess how standardized intake processes, effective use of guarantees and other risk mitigants, and a fintech-enabled intake and readiness approach could support pilot implementation and inform future action.

3. Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of the study is to map and diagnose the overall ecosystem of SME access to finance in Bangladesh.

4. Key Questions

Mapping

- a. Who are the main actors, stakeholders, policymakers, and support service providers in the ecosystem, as relevant to the study (the mapping is expected to cover total number of actors with divisional disaggregation)?

Diagnosis

- b. What is the current process of loan disbursement/financing from both supplier-side and borrower-side perspectives?
- c. What are the underlying challenges from both the supplier-side and borrower-side perspectives?
- d. What alternative credit schemes, to traditional schemes, are currently available in Bangladesh? This study will explore schemes such as fintech-enabled services, agent banking, and other relevant mechanisms.
- e. What systemic barriers are preventing existing processes and schemes from effectively addressing the current problems, and why do these challenges persist?
- f. What actionable recommendations can be proposed to address identified issues (both for short-term and long-term)?

5. Methodology

The methodology should be open to approaches that best address the study objectives, while remaining practical and suited to the Bangladesh context. The study requires structured interviews with relevant SMEs, and other stakeholders and an operational diagnostic rooted in actual financing practice.

At a minimum, the proposal should explain:

- A clear explanation of the proposed methods, including justification for their use, along with the plan for data collection (with clear sampling strategies and probable list of stakeholders), transcription and/or data processing as applicable, analysis, and reporting.
- A clear timeline for the assignment.

6. Key Deliverables

The consultant(s)/research firm will submit the following deliverables:

- Inception Report
- Data Collection Tools
- Draft Study Report
- Datasets, transcripts as applicable
- Final Study Report
- One-Pager Research Outcome
- Presentation Deck
- Dissemination event¹

7. Timeline and Duration

The timeline for this study is 2.5 months. A tentative timeline the assignment is expected to follow the

¹ The technical and financial proposal is expected to include a dissemination event plan at the end of the research.

timeline below:

Sl.	Activities	Tentative Timeline
1	Literature Review	April 25, 2026
2	Tool Development	April 28, 2026
3	Data Collection	May 8, 2026
4	Analysis	May 15, 2026
5	Report	May 20, 2026
6	One Pager Research Outcome	June 5, 2026
7	Dissemination Event	June 20, 2026

8. Reporting and Coordination

- The consultant(s) will report directly to the designated Project Manager / focal point at The Asia Foundation.
- The consultant(s) will maintain regular communication with the project team and provide periodic progress updates, including brief written or verbal updates as requested.
- Key deliverables will be submitted to The Asia Foundation for review, comments, and approval prior to finalization.

9. Required Experience and Qualifications

Team Composition

The assignment may be undertaken by an individual consultant or a consulting firm/team. The lead consultant/ team leader must demonstrate the following minimum qualifications and experience:

Academic Qualifications

- An advanced university degree (Master's or higher) in Economics, Finance, Development Studies, Business Administration, Public Policy, Public Administration, Banking, or a closely related discipline.
- Specialized academic training or professional exposure in SME/MSME finance, financial inclusion, digital financial services, fintech, market systems development, or private sector development will be considered an advantage.

Professional and Technical Experience

- Relevant professional experience in conducting applied research, ecosystem diagnostics, market assessments, or policy studies related to SMEs, SME finance, financial inclusion, digital financial services, fintech-enabled lending, or small business credit.
- Demonstrated expertise in market systems analysis, financial sector diagnostics, or ecosystem-wide assessments, preferably within SME finance, banking, non-bank financial institutions, or fintech-enabled credit processes.
- Practical experience in analyzing SME lending processes, credit approval systems, borrower readiness, documentation barriers, guarantee mechanisms, refinance facilities, or other risk

mitigation arrangements.

- Proven experience in analyzing policy and regulatory environments, including identification of systemic gaps, implementation challenges, and opportunities for reform in relation to SME finance, financial inclusion, or digital lending.
- Understanding of fintech-enabled intake systems, alternative credit approaches, and institutional requirements relevant to SME lending is highly desirable.
- Experience in assessing entrepreneurship ecosystems, SME constraints, and enterprise support mechanisms, including access to finance, technology, market linkages, and business readiness.

Donor-Funded Project Experience

- Proven experience working with donor-funded or internationally financed projects.
- Demonstrated ability to deliver high-quality analytical reports, policy briefs, and presentations within tight timelines and in accordance with donor reporting standards.

Gender Equality, Social Inclusion, and Ethics

- Proven experience integrating Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) considerations into research design, data collection, and analysis.
- Demonstrated ability to assess barriers and opportunities for women-led, youth-led, or inclusive entrepreneurship, particularly in traditionally male-dominated industrial sectors.
- Strong commitment to research ethics, including data confidentiality, informed consent, and responsible data management.
- Ability to comply fully with The Asia Foundation's safeguarding, Do No Harm, data protection, and ethical research guidelines.

Communication Skills

- Excellent analytical, writing, and presentation skills in English.
- Working knowledge of Bangla is highly desirable to support field research, stakeholder engagement, and contextual analysis.
- Demonstrated ability to translate complex technical findings into clear, actionable, and policy-relevant recommendations.

10. Budget and Payment

The budget for this assignment should be all-inclusive and cover all costs necessary to successfully complete the study. This includes, but is not limited to:

- Professional fees and human resource costs
- Fieldwork and data collection expenses
- Travel, accommodation, and daily allowances (if applicable)
- Data processing, analysis, and reporting costs
- Costs related to stakeholder consultations, validation meetings, and presentations
- Any other incidental costs required for completion of the assignment

The proposed budget must be submitted as part of a separate Financial Proposal, clearly itemized and quoted in BDT, inclusive of all applicable VAT and TAX in accordance with the Government of Bangladesh's National Board of Revenue (NBR) regulations.

Payments will be made by bank transfer to the Consultant's/Consultancy Firm's designated bank account upon submission of invoices and satisfactory completion of agreed deliverables, subject to approval by The Asia Foundation Bangladesh.

An indicative payment schedule is outlined below:

- First Payment – 40% of the total contract value upon signing of the contract
- Second Payment – 30% of the total contract value upon submission and acceptance of the Draft Study Report
- Final Payment – 30% of the total contract value upon submission and acceptance of the Final Study Report and associated deliverables

The Asia Foundation reserves the right to withhold or adjust payments if deliverables are not completed in accordance with the agreed scope, quality standards, and timeline.

11. Required Documents for Application

Interested Consultants/Consultancy Firms must submit:

- Technical Proposal
- Financial Proposal
- Organizational profile (where applicable) and CVs of key personnel
- Relevant experience summaries
- Legal and financial documents (Trade License/ TIN, VAT, bank account details)

Intellectual Property Rights: The Work, as well as other items prepared or created in performance of the Work or otherwise under these Terms of Reference, shall be the property of TAF. TAF hereby warrants that Work Product or other item, or intellectual property produced by TAF shall be the original work of TAF and shall not infringe the copyright or other intellectual property rights of any third party.

Data Responsibility: TAF is committed to ethically collecting, managing, use, and protecting data in order to minimize the risk of harm to the people, communities, and partners with whom we work as well as to TAF and our staff. The consultant will be responsible for ensuring proper data privacy, data use, data quality, and data protection, especially sensitive data.

Data Privacy and Protection: TAF is committed to safeguarding, as it relates not only to activity design and implementation, but also to the collection, storage, and use of sensitive data. To this end, the consultant will ensure that the respondents and participants' identities and personal information are kept confidential. Access to project and research data will be controlled by the consultant and will be stored on a secured file management system. The consultant will serve as the data controller and all data collection conducted through this activity will adhere to TAF's data protection requirements and the legal requirements for data privacy in Bangladesh. Data will be deidentified to protect the identity of individual respondents before sharing or publication of research findings.

Data Use: TAF prioritizes data collection and analysis to inform immediate and ongoing project decision-making and to apply findings to further improve programs and approaches. This is to understand where progress has been made and why, identify gaps, and gain insights to improve implementation approaches. TAF will review and use all collected data, both through ongoing monitoring as well as periodic efforts, to inform reflection and Strategy Testing discussions.

Data Quality: To ensure data quality, particularly in terms of validity and reliability, TAF will validate project and partner data through regular site visits and activity observation. TAF will ensure high quality data collection methods. The continuous oversight, guidance, and collaboration will ensure project data meets quality standards.

12. Selection Criteria

Proposals will be assessed based on:

- Technical quality and methodology (40%)
- Relevant experience and expertise (15%)
- Team composition and capacity (15%)
- Financial competitiveness and value for money (30%)

13. Application Guidelines

Interested Consultants/Consultancy/Research Firms are requested to submit their complete Applications, including the Technical Proposal and Financial Proposal, no later than **April 11, 2026**.

Applications must be submitted electronically to country.bangladesh.jobs@asiafoundation.org, with the subject line:

Proposal – Ecosystem Mapping and Diagnostic Study on SME Access to Finance in Bangladesh

Applications received after the deadline will not be considered. The Asia Foundation reserves the right to extend the deadline or cancel the call at its discretion.

Please be cautious of fraudulent activities. The Asia Foundation does not charge any fees at any stage of its recruitment or procurement processes. Do not make any payments or engage in financial transactions related to recruitment with The Asia Foundation.