J-PAL
ABDUL LATIF JAMEEL POVERTY ACTION LAB
AFRICA

THE DIGITAL IDENTIFICATION AND FINANCE INITIATIVE (DIGIFI)

Requests for Proposals: Overview

The Digital Identification and Finance Initiative (DigiFI Africa) calls for proposals from J-PAL affiliates and invited researchers[1], Postdocs, PhD students, and African Scholars to conduct innovative, policy-relevant research on how African governments, private companies, and NGOs can leverage digital payments and identification systems to improve lives through better public service delivery, governance, and financial inclusion.

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OVERVIEW

Background

Across Africa, governments have the potential to use digitization of financial services, payments and identification to improve governance, enhance public service delivery, catalyze private markets, and drive complementary policies with transformative impacts for citizens. While there could be many potential benefits, there is also potential for digital technologies to have negative impacts such as exclusion of individuals or concerns related to privacy. A growing number of African governments have already begun integrating access to and delivery of key services under one unique, biometrically-authenticated ID system AND pursuing the digitization of select Government to Person (G2P) payments. Yet, there remains a glaring lack of rigorous, peer-reviewed evidence on how governments in sub-Saharan Africa can most effectively leverage digital payments and ID systems.

[1]Select non-affiliate faculty who have been nominated, approved, and notified of their eligibility to submit proposals. Note: This request for proposals has been sent directly to researchers eligible to apply for the Initiative's research grants. **Please do not circulate externally, given this restriction**. If you have questions regarding your eligibility to participate, we welcome you to inquire by emailing us at digifiafrica@povertyactionlab.org.

The Digital Identification and Finance Initiative in Africa (DigiFI Africa)—hosted by J-PAL Africa at the University of Cape Town, and funded by the Gates Foundation and the French Ministry of Economics, Finance and Industrial and Digital Sovereignty — aims to fill this evidence gap by funding cutting-edge research projects focused on the study of innovative government payment systems, IDs, and other relevant digital reforms. The landscape of these themes is outlined in the DigiFI Africa framing paper. The evidence produced by this initiative will inform implementers (often, governments) on how best to design and implement reforms to maximize benefits to citizens and mitigate risks.

DigiFI is chaired by Jenny Aker (Cornell University) and Tavneet Suri (MIT).

GEOGRAPHIC FOCUS

This RFP is open to projects in Africa addressing one or more of the Initiative's focus areas.

AWARD TYPES

DigiFI Africa invites proposals under the following award types (see below an overview and related guidelines for each):

- Full randomized evaluation projects (full RCTs)
- Pilot studies

In certain cases, and at the discretion of the DigiFI co-chairs, implementation costs may be allowed. Typically, implantation costs are a small portion of the overall grant and are exclusively used to cover marginal costs of implementation due to the experiment. For example, an additional treatment arm will help answer an important question but imposes costs the implementer would otherwise not incur, or an encouragement design requires small incentives to increase take-up.

For both pilots and RCT, the implementation costs cannot exceed 25% of the total budget (not the maximum amount for that grant category).

Please note that DigiFI Africa was established to fund randomized impact evaluations of programs and policies being implemented in the field. As a general rule, DigiFI Africa does not fund pure lab experiments.

Full Randomized Research Projects (up to $400,000[2])

These grants are for research projects at a mature level of development. Not only must the research question be clear, but applicants must also demonstrate clear first-stage results (either through a pilot or administrative data), commitment from implementing partners, a method of randomization, well-defined instruments, and sample size estimates. Proposals can also be submitted for funding the

[2] Proposals with a compelling reason for requesting more than $400,000 may be considered on a case-by-case basis.

continuation of research projects that have already started without DigiFI Africa funding (including those for which field data collection has been completed). The expectation is that these projects will inform government reforms and result in a high-quality paper published in a top economics or political science journal. De-identified data should be made publicly available within three years of the end of data collection (sooner if required by donors), or within 60 days of a paper's acceptance in a journal.

Pilot Studies & Monitoring Systems (up to $75,000)

These grants are for studies with a clear research question, but for which the design and implementation requires further testing and pilot data. Pilots are not required to include randomized methodology as long as they test for the logistics or first stage results of a treatment/policy intervention using administrative data or surveys or build a monitoring system. The expectation is that these projects will ultimately develop into full-scale randomized evaluations[3]. The maximum amount awarded for a pilot study is $75,000.

However, pilot grants can also fund more foundational work that intends to inform a future full-scale randomization, including the refinement of measurement strategies, operationalizing logistics of implementing a research design, and collecting pilot data to inform the design of future research or hone research questions. Grants may also be used for activities intended to facilitate access to administrative data for designing or conducting an RCT, including but not limited to, negotiating data use agreements, conducting exploratory data analysis and cleaning, or setting up technical access mechanisms. For measurement pilots, grants may be used to tackle a range of data collection challenges, including: deploying a novel measurement technology to test feasibility, assessing the validity and/or reliability a new methodology to measure an outcome, identifying proxy indicators that allow for lower-cost data collection, developing strategies to minimize measurement error, etc. Measurement pilot proposals should lay out a clear path to using the measurement in a future randomized evaluation, and we may prioritize more general data and measurement efforts that will be applicable across studies. Logistic or implementation-focused pilots should have a clear research question, but the design and implementation require further testing and pilot data. Again, for all pilots, the expectation is that these projects will ultimately develop into or inform a full-scale randomized evaluation(s) with the potential to inform policy at-scale.

Policy Outreach (up to $10,000)

Policy outreach grants are intended to co-fund conferences, workshops, events, or other policy outreach activities to disseminate evidence from DigiFI-funded evaluations or other randomized evaluation research conducted by J-PAL affiliates, DigiFI invited researchers and African scholars that address the initiative's research priorities. While priority will be given to activities featuring randomized evaluations that have received DigiFI funding, DigiFI will consider support for activities featuring randomized

[3] Please note that full evaluations requesting less than $75,000 are considered full research projects and evaluated accordingly. The criteria for pilot funding apply only to proposals requesting funds to conduct piloting, or pre-randomization, activities.

evaluations by J-PAL affiliates, J-PAL invited researchers, and PhD students with J-PAL affiliates or Invited Researchers as advisers, that clearly address the research themes identified in DigiFI's RFP overview and demonstrate strong potential for policy impact. For African scholars, the evaluation must have been funded by J-PAL.

ELIGIBILITY

J-PAL affiliates, postdocs, Invited Researchers, PhD students of J-PAL affiliates and invited researchers, and resident and non-resident African Scholars are eligible to apply for this Initiative's funding. Please note that Invited Researchers are nominated and reviewed on a trimester basis, with the review based on a nominee's previous research with a particular emphasis on the ability to perform randomized evaluations. All proposals may include collaborators outside of this network.

PhD students who have a J-PAL affiliate or Invited Researcher on their thesis committee are eligible to apply for up to $75,000 in pilot or full-scale RCT funding.

African scholars are eligible to initially apply for pilot grants. Non-resident African Scholars are also eligible to apply for the same categories of funding. Full RCT funding eligibility is extended to African Scholars who have successfully completed a pilot funded by J-PAL. Targeted mentorship will be provided to African scholars who receive funds from the initiative. To learn more about this opportunity, please visit our DigiFi Regional Scholars webpage.

Notes for All Award Types

- To prevent concentration of awards to any specific researchers, and to reduce the burden on initiative review boards, applicants are limited to submitting three proposals, inclusive of all proposal types, per 12-month period per initiative (either as PI or co-PI).
- In order to be considered for new initiative grants, applicants must be current on reporting for all their other grants, across all J-PAL initiatives. **Researchers whose projects are more than 2 months late on any reports to any J-PAL Initiative despite reminders from J-PAL and who have not received an approved extension will not be eligible to have new projects funded by J-PAL.** You may submit applications to the Initiative, but your application will not be considered for funding until your deliverables become current.

SUBMISSION INSTRUCTIONS

To respond to this RFP, please follow the directions listed below.

1) WizeHive, the new grant management system (GMS) J-PAL is using for our proposals, is more user-friendly. It will, however, require a new login. Please use the **Application Instructions** and follow

the prompts in the links on the Initiative RFP webpage to create a new login. Or, if you have already successfully submitted an LOI or proposal to a J-PAL competition, simply log into WizeHive with your credentials.

2) Submit **a required Letter of Intent (LOI)**

3) **If you receive an invitation to apply to the main application,** please follow the next steps outlined in the relevant proposal guidelines documents linked below.

> **Please read both the relevant Proposal Guidelines document and the FAQ documents on the RFP release page in detail *before answering the proposal questions in WizeHive.* Each of the following documents includes a checklist and guidance on what to address within each narrative prompt – guiding your completion of all required submission materials based on the appropriate proposal type.**
>
> - **Proposal Guidelines: RCTs**
> - **Proposal Guidelines: Pilot studies**

4) Upon completing your proposal and uploading proposal attachments (budget, letters, etc.), submit the proposal by the deadline above.

RESEARCH AGENDA

SPECIFIC THEMATIC AREAS

Your proposal must address one or more priorities in the Initiative's Framing Paper *"Digital Identification & Finance Initiative Africa: An Overview of Research Opportunities,"* which discusses entry points for policy-relevant randomized evaluations.

The Initiative prioritizes funding to projects focused on working with governments due to the large-scale impact of government reforms. However, projects that link government issued biometric IDs to private sector services (for example banks) to expand access and opportunity, and projects with telecom or other private sector companies that explore the role of digital payments private sector companies working, fit the focus of the initiative.

The Initiative requests projects to carefully embed a gender component in their design. Full RCTs and pilot proposals must include an explicit design to measure differential outcomes/impacts by gender, and/or test whether and through which channels identification, payment, and governance reforms in Africa systematically impact men and women differently. In addition, measuring women's economic empowerment in the surveys is strongly encouraged.

Further, the Initiative requests that, where relevant, projects track and share high-frequency process monitoring data on outcomes of interest. We believe that such systems are useful for government decision-making in the shorter term. Sharing the data with the Initiative will additionally allow us to learn from this data across different projects. Researchers are welcome to submit requests to recuse themselves of sharing this data if it is infeasible due to project logistics or confidentiality agreements with the government.

The Initiative staff can help research teams think through how to collect and share this data, if helpful. If you are interested, please see our J-PAL brief and blog on leveraging administrative data for monitoring systems.

Finally, the Initiative will look favorably upon projects with an African scholar(s) as a lead PI or as a co-author.

ADMINISTRATIVE NOTES

PAYMENTS AND SUBAWARDS

DigiFI requires that there is a sub-awardee PI at the Institute to Receive Award (ITRA) who will be responsible for overseeing the work on the ground. This may be one of the academic co-PI's or it may be anon-academic PI, such as the Executive Director or Director of Research of the ITRA. This person must be formally affiliated with the ITRA. Affiliation could be as a professor, associate professor, staff, fellow, or some other type of relationship that is recognized by the university or organization. A J-PAL Affiliation or J-PAL Invited Researcher status does not constitute an official affiliation with J-PAL regional office host universities.

RCTs and pilot grants are provided under an award from UCT to the grantee's host institution.

For more information on budget, requirements, and process, please see instructions in the relevant application forms, for which reference documents exist on the RFP page.

GRANT CONDITIONS AND REPORTING

Pilots/Monitoring Systems & Full RCTs

Grantees are required to submit the following:

1. **Trial Registration (Full RCTs only):** Before starting fieldwork, researchers must register their RCT with the AEA RCT Registry(http://www.socialscienceregistry.org). Registration includes 18 required fields (such as your name and a small subset of your IRB requirements), and the entire process should take less than 20 minutes if all documentation is in order. There is also the

opportunity to include more information, including power calculations and an optional pre-analysis plan. Grantees are required to submit proof of AEA registration with their three-month Start-up Report. Please note that registration is only required for full-scale studies. For questions and support with the registry, please contact Keesler Welch (Keesler@mit.edu).

2. **Start-up report:** Grantees should provide a start-up report of the project within 90 days of the contract completion of project start date whichever comes first.

3. **Annual Progress Reports, Final Narrative and Financial Reports:** As well as brief annual progress narrative reports and biannual financial reports using templates provided to them by DigiFI Africa for this funded project(refrain from recycling old templates to prevent having to re-submit deliverables). Financial reports are due every six months from the date the award letter was issued, which is considered the date of approval, or as committed during the contracting process for projects with a duration of less than 12 months. These reports are required whether or not project activities have been delayed. We will send you reminders and instructions about these reports. Upon completion of the project, you are also required to submit any survey instruments used.

Grantees agree to participate in one DigiFI Africa activity or event. DigiFI Africa will cover associated costs.

CODE OF CONDUCT

Since J-PAL is part of MIT, everyone who is associated with J-PAL, including all researchers worldwide affiliated with J-PAL (affiliates and invited researchers), as well as all co-authors on J-PAL funded or implemented studies are considered part of the broader MIT community. It is therefore our hope and expectation that they will adhere to the MIT code of conduct, as well as the J-PAL code of conduct. MIT's section titled "Relations and Responsibilities Within the MIT Community" contains specific provisions regarding personal conduct, harassment, discrimination and retaliation, violence against community members, and substance use. Please take some time to review these.

Because almost all researchers we work with are also part of other university communities, they may also be subject to their host universities' policies and procedures. Many of these policies may be very similar to the MIT policies above. Finally, many researchers are separately affiliated with other academic associations and organizations, including the American Economic Association, and they should continue to abide by the codes of conduct established by the associations and organizations to which they belong. The AEA's code of conduct is available here.

We continue to encourage all staff and researchers to have a direct and open dialogue with each other if they have concerns about interactions between researchers, staff, or partners on any of the above issues, or about any aspect of a research project (e.g., adherence to minimum must dos, IRB protocols, or finance/operation rules). But if staff do not feel comfortable holding such discussions, or if the concern

cannot be resolved at this level, they can reach out to the individuals and offices identified in the relevant policies linked above.

Violations of MIT community guidelines or of J-PAL research/operations rules can also be directly reported to any of the J-PAL contacts for further action: (i) Global Executive Director; (ii) any of the regional Executive Directors; (iii) Cindy Smith (Global Director of Finance and Operations); or (iv) Anna Omura (Global Associate Director of Finance and Operations).

LINKS TO ALL RFP MATERIALS

Details on the overall Initiative research agenda, as well as all submission templates and reference documents that make up the overall RFP package, are all available at: https://www.povertyactionlab.org/initiative/digifi-request-proposals.

OTHER FAQS

For questions on RFP priorities, application and review processes, eligibility, award set-up and administration, and general inquiries, please reach out to: digifiafrica@povertyactionlab.org, or visit the DigiFI Africa website.