

PROPOSAL GUIDELINES: PILOTS

Digital Identification and Finance Initiative (DigiFI Africa)

This document contains an [Overview](#), [Budget Guidelines](#), an [Application Checklist](#), and a [Narrative Template](#) for Pilot studies. Please read this document carefully before submitting your proposal.

OVERVIEW

Submission instructions: To respond to this RFP, all applicants must first **submit the required Letter of Intent on WizeHive, using the relevant application link from the RFP webpage, and following the [Applicant Instructions here](#)**. Successful applicants will receive an invitation to proceed with their full proposal materials.

Pilot grants are for studies with a clear research question, but for which the design and implementation requires further testing and pilot data. It is expected that pilot studies will function to assess the feasibility of a full study by establishing research protocols, informing sample size and detectable effects, and assessing implementation processes. Pilots generally are used to test the logistical viability of the program and/or the take up of the program in order to assess the impacts in a larger study in the future. Pilots grants are appropriate for projects requesting funds to conduct pre-randomization activities.

In contrast to full RCT proposals—which require a strong partnership commitment with implementing organizations, a fully developed method of randomization, clear outcome measures, power calculations, and a scale-up plan—a pilot proposal should be at earlier stages of project development.

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.

The maximum amount awarded for a pilot study is \$75,000.

You should apply as a pilot if the funded work lays the groundwork for a future randomized evaluation because it:

- tests the efficacy of an intervention or an evaluation design, and acquires data that is qualitative or quantitative in nature, e.g., measuring take up, and/or
- facilitates access to administrative data for designing or conducting an RCT. Examples of these activities include, but are not limited to, negotiating data use agreements, conducting exploratory data analysis and cleaning, or setting up technical access

mechanisms.

- develops a monitoring system¹ (i.e., help select African governments track progress and challenges among a representative sample of targeted beneficiaries). The goals of the monitoring systems would include assessing the efficacy of the status quo and/or changes implemented and systematically collecting ongoing dynamic client feedback. Data from these monitoring systems can then inform the design of the RCTs, while also building credibility and trust with the partner government.

In addition, pilot proposals should:

- have a very clear research question that assesses the feasibility of using a randomized evaluation to answer this question.
- **clearly articulate the conceptual and methodological distinction between the pilot study and any future follow-on studies, and what exactly the pilot will enable researchers to learn.** The narrative should include a **solid justification for why a pilot is needed, what will be learned, and what a future RCT informed by this exploratory research could contribute to specific topics addressed in the DigiFP's [Framing Paper](#).**

If your research design includes randomization to assess the impact of an intervention, please apply for full RCT funding.

Funding per Pilot award: limited to \$75,000 or less.

Timeline: Funding requests should not extend beyond 2027 for now due to contracting limitations. Please contact us if your project has an end date beyond 2027.

BUDGET GUIDELINES

It is your responsibility that your budget follows your host institution's policies for costs, and **you must submit a letter from the institution to receive the award that states that they have reviewed your proposal and accepted your budget.**²

Guidelines for completing an RCT proposal budget: Please submit a detailed project budget using the [RCT/Pilot Budget Template](#) provided at the [RFP release page](#). To reduce processing time, please keep the following in mind:

¹ Please see [our J-PAL brief of leveraging administrative data](#) for monitoring systems.

² If the organization allows you to submit your proposal without such a letter (due to time constraints or some other reason), please describe this in the notes section. Please note that this applies to all projects, including those going through J-PAL and IPA offices. You should contact them in advance to make sure you are aware of their policies for proposal review and give them enough time to meet the proposal deadline.

- **Institute to Receive Award (ITRA) Requirements:** RCT grants are provided under an award from the University of Cape Town to the grantee's host institution or the designated ITRA. 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 a non-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.
- **IRB Requirements:** All projects need to get IRB approval or exemption from an IRB board that is IORG certified.³ Applicants should secure approval from the host institution's Institutional Review Board (IRB) as well as a local IRB, where possible. Researchers must also adhere to all local legal requirements, including obtaining local IRB approval and government research permits, where applicable. If the institution does not have its own IRB, the institution must engage the services of a commercial IRB to review and provide oversight for the research activities. [Heartland](#) and [Solutions](#) provide review of international research and satisfy J-PAL's IRB requirements; fees can be found on their respective websites. Further information about this MIT policy can be found [here](#) and [here](#). Please consult with J-PAL regarding including the cost of this commercial entity in the project budget.
 - J-PAL requires that the reviewing IRB have IRB Organization (IORG) status with the US Office of Human Protections. [You can look up the IORG status of an IRB here.](#)
- Only projects with co-funding should complete both Excel sheets in the template, i.e., both "Total Project Budget" AND "Initiative Budget" (i.e., what you're requesting from the Initiative) in the budget template. **If the project has other funders, the proposal should clearly explain the marginal contribution of the requested funds from the Initiative.**
- **Applications must include a brief budget narrative document detailing the major costs within the budget in addition to the Excel template.**
 - **We also strongly encourage applicants to include budget notes in the column provided in the budget template, specifying input costs for line items within the budget.** Travel costs should include a breakdown of how many trips are planned, the estimated cost per trip, number of people on a given trip, etc. Any computer/equipment purchases should include a breakdown of what is being purchased (e.g., how many laptops), as well as the project staff that will be assigned to the equipment.

³ You can check the certification status of your IRB [here](#)

- Applicants should review J-PAL best practices on questionnaire design and data collection/management in the [J-PAL Research Protocol Checklist](#), to ensure they have budgeted for expenses associated with piloting and surveyor training, survey translation, field spot checks, and back checking.
- **Awards are paid on a cost-reimbursable basis.** However, UCT may agree to advance payments via a milestone payment structure to Institutes to Receive Award that are based in low- and middle-income countries on a case-by-case basis if requested by the research team. Please note that preparing an advance payment model requires additional time and additional coordination between UCT and the Institute to Receive Award.

Allowable Direct and Indirect Costs

- **Please note that J-PAL initiatives do not cover PI salaries with the exception of PIs who completed a PhD and are based at an academic institution in a middle- or low- income country.** Full RCTs may cover up to \$8,000 per LMIC researcher PI/co-PI per year, but the total budgeted amount for LMIC researcher PI time in aggregate across all co-PIs should not exceed \$20,000 per year.
- **Project Implementation Costs: For full research projects, implementation costs are expected to be borne by the project partners.** However, under some circumstances⁴, initiatives can fund implementation costs where it is a marginal addition to an existing program to offset costs from an experiment (e.g., adding an additional treatment arm that will help answer an important question or the costs of small incentives to increase take-up in an encouragement design). These types of costs might include travel, small participant incentives, and/or SMS fees.
 - Proposals requesting funds for implementation are **required to explain why the implementer cannot bear the costs in the budget narrative and must also justify the input costs** (e.g., if texting fees are requested as an implementation cost, the budget narrative should include a breakdown of how many texts are planned, the estimated cost per texts, number of people on a given campaign, etc.).
 - For both pilots and RCT, the implementation costs cannot exceed 25% of the total budget (not the maximum amount for that grant category).
- Universities in high-income countries (according to the [World Bank classification](#)) can charge up to 10% in indirect costs, applied to total direct costs.
- Non-university non-profits from any location and universities from mid- or low-income countries may charge up to 15% in indirect costs, applied to total direct costs.

⁴ At the discretion of DigiFI's co-chairs.

- We understand that the cap on overhead or indirect costs is low and that grantees may have reasonable project support costs included in budgets as direct costs. Such costs should be reasonable and explained in the budget narrative.
- Unallowable costs include those labeled as “incidental,” “miscellaneous,” or “contingency.” Any costs for rent should be explained in the budget narrative.
- J-PAL will only reimburse the lowest available economy/cabin/coach flights. Please review [J-PAL’s travel reimbursement policies](#) before completing your budget.
- Please denote the costs by calendar year in which the expenditures are taking place and not by fiscal year or year from project start date.
- If required, please refer to our [budget guide](#).

APPLICATION CHECKLIST

Please complete all sections in the online application by the full proposal deadline. You must upload several documents to complete your full proposal. All templates for these documents are provided at the [RFP release webpage](#) (under **Budget Templates**) and listed below.

1. **Proposal Narrative:** Guidance pertaining to the narrative prompts is included in the [Narrative template](#) below. Please note that this section requires detailed power calculations.
2. **Proposal Budget:** Carefully review the Budget Guidelines in this document, then use the RCT Budget Template (section of our , which must be completed in its entirety and saved as a single Excel file with the title: [PI Last Name, First Name][Budget].xls(x) for upload to the application.
3. **Budget Narrative:** Detail the major costs within the budget, referring to the Budget Guidelines above, in a Word document with the title [PI Last Name, First Name][Budget Narrative].doc(x) for upload to the application. This document is required in addition to the Proposal Budget -- i.e., notes included in the Excel sheet do not suffice.
4. **Research Timeline:** Please upload a simple table, chart, or bulleted list with a timeline that outlines key project activities.
5. **Letter(s) of Support:** Please obtain a letter of support from the following, each saved as a single PDF file with the title [PI Last Name, First Name] [Name of Organization Letter of Support].pdf for upload to the application:
 - a. letters from each implementing partner, indicating the details of their commitment to partner on the research, and (for RCTs,) their willingness to share relevant program cost data. Consider including letter(s) from any potential scale-up partner(s).
 - b. a letter/document stating the proposed grant host institution’s approval of the

proposal materials.

- c. **PhD students applying as the primary PI are required to include a letter of support from a researcher adviser eligible for this call.** The letter should indicate the adviser's willingness to remain involved in a supervisory role throughout the lifetime of the project.

- 6. **Validation and Test Accuracy data:** Proposals that include **Artificial Intelligence (AI) or any new specialized technology should include validation and test accuracy data in the proposal**, showing that the technology successfully does what it intends.

NARRATIVE TEMPLATE

The online application will require you to address the below prompts. The text provided below each bolded subsection helps provide guidance on what the Initiative Board is looking for to effectively evaluate your proposal.

Given aspects of RFP review are blinded, **please refrain from using identifying language in your proposal narrative, e.g., we encourage you to use the grammatical third person when citing (co-)PIs' work.**

Primary Eligible Researcher

Please identify one researcher who is eligible for J-PAL Initiative funding. This may be the principal PI and/or any eligible co-PI. Details for only one primary eligible researcher are required in cases where there's more than one eligible researcher. Other PIs who are eligible can be added as co-PIs.

PI Eligibility Category

Indicate how the researcher is eligible for J-PAL Initiative funding.

PhD Student Applicants

If you are a PhD student, please indicate the J-PAL-affiliated researcher who serves or will serve as an advisor on your dissertation committee.

Organization Name of Eligible Researcher

Please tell us the name of the organization the eligible researcher (i.e., the professor or PhD student) is affiliated with.

Organization Type of Eligible Researcher

Organization Website of Eligible Researcher

Country Where Organization of Eligible Researcher is Based or Headquartered

Team Members & Roles

Please add all your project team members and indicate their role(s) on the project/application below.

Role options are: Applicant; Primary PI; Co-PI; PI at Institute to Receive Award; Reporting Contact; Secondary Reporting Contact; IRB Contact; Finance Contact; Collaborator; Contact for Contracting (e.g., grant manager or research administrator); Other (please specify role or title). If you are the applicant and a PI (or another role), indicate so by adding yourself as an applicant and then again as a PI. As the applicant, you will be receiving all notifications related to this application.

PI Certification

1. I certify that any listed eligible researchers have agreed to be active, engaged, and responsive PIs or advisors on this project. Eligible researchers who are involved have confirmed they will be dedicated to guaranteeing quality control on all aspects of this research and that their participation is not merely to provide access to resources and funding to other project team members who would otherwise be ineligible.
2. I certify that all eligible researchers are up to date on reporting for all existing grants, across all J-PAL initiatives.

Demographic Information

J-PAL is collecting information about all project teams, including demographic information, to better understand and support our research network. As the applicant, we kindly ask that you send the language and [link](#) included below to all PIs/Co-PIs on your proposal research team.

Provide your proposal name and each member's role (as you listed them on the application) when you send out the blurb. Please complete the “Team Member and Roles” section first before sending out the email(s) so that your team members are already in the system.

Completion of this step is required for all primary investigators on your research team. If you have any technical problems with completing this step please email help@povertyactionlab.org or the initiative team directly (digiafrica@povertyactionlab.org).

Feel free to cut and paste this suggested language in an email to send to the PIs and Co-PIs on your team:

J-PAL is collecting information about all project teams, including demographic information, to better understand and support our research network. J-PAL is requiring all PIs and Co-PIs on our research team to complete this [short form](#). This data will only be accessible in disaggregated, identifiable form to select J-PAL staff. Aggregate, anonymized data will be used to report to key partners such as donors and may be included on our website.

Demographic Information Confirmation

Please confirm that every PI/co-PI has completed the questions in the above-linked survey. Your submission will not be considered until this has been completed. Check here to indicate that all PIs/co-PIs have completed this survey.

Full Title of Proposal

Past and Future Submissions

Have you submitted or do you plan to submit this LOI and proposal to any other J-PAL Initiative RFP?

Details about Past and Future Submissions

If you answered yes above, please state which initiative(s), year/season of RFP, and the name of the LOI/proposal you submitted or plan to submit. Example: GI Spring 2019 Using Mobile Phones to Improve Service Delivery. Are the PI team, context, and research question the same as in the previously submitted proposal? Please explain whether the project received funding and what type of funding it received (Travel/Proposal Development, Pilot, RCT, Scale). Additionally, please explain how the project has progressed since it was last submitted to [blank initiative], and explain how you addressed the feedback that was provided with your last submission. *[350 words max]*

Funding Amount

Amount of requested funding in USD

Proposed Period of Performance Project Start Date

What is the proposed start date for this J-PAL grant's subaward activities?

Proposed Period of Performance Project End Date

What is the proposed end date for this J-PAL grant's subaward activities?

Abstract

Write a study abstract, including the project description, research question, and intervention or treatment to be evaluated. Discuss the project's technical design, what is going to happen during the project, the practical value of your project, the conceptual value of your research, and the

distributional implications of your work. Provide context about proposed partners and a timeline. Please note that this abstract will be added to the Initiative's webpage if the project receives funding. *[250 words max]*

Research Focus Areas and/or Cross-Cutting Themes

Please indicate which Initiative focus areas or themes your proposal relates to; these are described in detail in the RFP materials.

Explanation of Focus Areas and/or Cross-Cutting Themes

If your proposal does not cleanly fit into any of the options listed, select “other” and describe why your proposal is a fit for the initiative. *[250 words max]*

Initiative Alignment

Please briefly describe how the project aligns with the initiative’s research focus areas and/or cross-cutting themes. *[250 words max]*

Existing Research Project

Are you applying to fund additional research as part of an existing research project previously funded by J-PAL (e.g., a second proposal development grant continuing from a prior proposal development grant, a pilot grant building on a travel/proposal development, a full RCT building on a pilot, etc.)?

Existing Research Project Details

If yes, please provide the title and/or J-PAL grant number of your previously funded project.

National Location

In which country or countries will your research take place?