DigiFI Africa Request for Proposals: Overview
The Digital Identification and Finance Initiative in Africa (DigiFI Africa)

DigiFI Africa is calling for proposals from J-PAL affiliates, DigiFI invited researchers[1], African Scholars[2] and PhD students, who have a J-PAL affiliate on their thesis committee, to conduct randomized controlled trials (RCTs) within the DigiFI research agenda. The Digital Identification and Finance Initiative in Africa (DigiFI Africa) aims to generate rigorous evidence 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. To achieve this vision, DigiFI supports researchers, governments and other implementers to monitor and evaluate relevant digital reforms. Details on the DigiFI Africa research agenda, and the specific topical focus areas for this RFP, are provided in this document and supporting materials that make up the overall RFP package available on our webpage.

For this round of grants, DigiFI Africa is accepting the following categories of proposals (see an overview and related guidelines for each):

- Proposal Development grants
- Pilot studies
- Full-Scale RCTs

For all proposal applications the deadlines are **reviewed on a rolling basis**. There is a two-stage approval process for research funding:

Step 1: Please fill out the pre-proposal form. We will respond to that within 3 weeks and let you know if you should submit a proposal.

Step 2: On receiving a positive response to the pre-proposal form from the DigiFI team, please fill out the DigiFI rolling Application, which we will send via email. Please see the application instructions below. We aim to respond to your proposal within 4 weeks after this submission.

To submit a proposal for consideration, see full application instructions for Proposal Development Grants here, and for Pilot or Full-RCTs here.

Please complete the application requirements included in this document and email to digifiafrica@povertyactionlab.org.

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[1] Select non-affiliate faculty who have been nominated, approved, and notified of their eligibility to submit proposals. Note that all applicants are limited to being named on a **maximum of three proposals** to DigiFI Africa per **12-month period.**
[2] Resident African Scholars are based at an academic institution (i.e. a university) based in Sub-Saharan Africa and who have completed their PhD (in economics or a related field), outside of the eligible J-PAL network. Non-resident African scholars are defined as those who (a) have completed high school in Africa, (b) have completed their PhD in economics or a related field, and (c) are based in an academic institution outside of Africa.

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BACKGROUND: LEVERAGING DIGITIZED IDENTIFICATION AND PAYMENTS

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 pursuing the digitization of select Government to Person (G2P) payments, while others are integrating access to and delivery of key services under one unique, biometrically-authenticated ID system. 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.

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 [Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation](#) and Ministre de l'Économie, des Finances et de la Relance (The French Ministry of the Economy and Finance)—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](#). Our aim is that the evidence produced by this initiative to inform implementers (often, governments) on how best to design and implement reforms to maximize benefits to citizens and mitigate risks.

DigiFI is chaired by [Tavneet Suri](#) (MIT) and [Jenny Aker](#) (Tufts University).

TOPICAL FOCUS

Please see our key themes in the [DigiFI Africa framing paper](#).

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 Director and post-doctoral fellow 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.

The Initiative focuses 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.

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

GEOGRAPHIC FOCUS:

The DigiFI Africa initiative spans Africa, with a focus on sub-Saharan Africa. DigiFI Africa network researchers are encouraged to submit proposals for research conducted in the focus region, in partnership with governments and local implementing organizations.

FUNDS

Full Research Projects: 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 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. The total amount awarded to a single project, including any DigiFI Africa funding for proposal development or piloting, will not exceed $400,000[3].

Pilot Studies, including monitoring systems: 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[4]. The maximum amount awarded for a pilot study is $75,000.

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

[4] 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.

<u>Proposal Development Grants</u>: These grants cover exploratory work related to preliminary research ideas, such as conducting background research, developing partnerships, visiting field sites, and collecting preliminary data. A pathway to a randomised evaluation should be briefly discussed in this application. The expectation is that these funds will be used to support costs related to PI travel and/or field scoping to develop a proposal for a pilot or full scale randomized evaluation during a subsequent call for proposals. The maximum amount awarded for proposal development grants is $10,000.

Initiative pilot and travel grants may be used for activities intended to facilitate access to administrative data for designing or conducting an RCT. Examples of these activities include, but are not limited to, negotiating data use agreements, or conducting exploratory data analysis and cleaning.

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. DigiFI Africa also does not fund implementation costs of a policy intervention. We only fund evaluation/research costs.

ELIGIBILITY

J-PAL affiliates, J-PAL postdocs, and DigiFI Africa invited researchers are eligible to apply for any type of DigiFI Africa funding. Please note that DigiFI Africa invited researchers are nominated and reviewed on a quarterly basis, with the review based on a nominee's previous research with a particular emphasis on randomized evaluations related to identification systems, digital payments and governance. All proposals may include collaborators outside of this network.

Resident African Scholars who are based at an academic institution (i.e. a university) based in Sub-Saharan Africa and who have completed their PhD (in economics or a related field), outside of the eligible J-PAL network stated above, are eligible to apply for Proposal Development and Pilot Grants.

Non-resident African Scholars are also eligible to apply for Proposal Development and Pilot Grants. Non-resident African scholars are defined as those who (a) have completed high school in Africa, (b) have completed their PhD in economics or a related field, and (c) are based in an academic institution outside of Africa.

Resident African Scholars and **non-resident African Scholars who have successfully completed a pilot funded by J-PAL** are also eligible to apply for full-scale RCT grants through DigiFI Africa.

The publication and research track record of these scholars may be considered during the grant-making process. Targeted mentorship will be provided to African Scholars who receive funds from the Initiative. Mentors can include any J-PAL affiliate. African Scholars who do not currently have a mentor can apply to be matched with one after their projects are selected by the DigiFI Board. **African Scholars are <u>strongly encouraged</u> to reach out to DigiFI staff prior to the application due date to talk through their research ideas.**

Resident African scholars are required to submit an agreement in coordination with their mentor. Agreement letters are not required for the application, but will need to be submitted prior to the disbursement of funds. The agreement will outline the plans and expectations during the course of the project. An existing relationship with a J-PAL mentor is not a requirement for selection of African Scholar

projects. However, if you do have an existing relationship with a J-PAL Affiliate/Invited Researcher, who you would like to have as a mentor, we will take this preference into consideration. It will be useful to understand how well the mentor and mentee know each other (i.e. past research experience and length of existing relationship), as well as the amount of time the mentee/mentor has committed to the project.

PhD students may be eligible to apply for proposal development grants or up to $75,000 in pilot or full-scale funding. **To be eligible, PhD students must have a J-PAL affiliate or DigiFI Africa invited researcher on their thesis committee**. This adviser must provide a letter of support and indicate willingness to remain involved in a supervisory role throughout the lifetime of the project[5]. In addition, in order to apply for up to $75,000 for pilot or full-scale funding.

PROPOSAL EVALUATION PROCESS

The proposal review process has been designed to ensure that all funded studies are policy relevant and, methodologically sound and capable of identifying the causal impact of an intervention that can be isolated from other confounding factors. A two-level, peer review process is used by DigiFI Africa to assess the quality and appropriateness of all pilots and full RCTs proposals. The first level of review is carried out by a panel of peer researchers in the J-PAL network who do not have a conflict of interest[6]. The second level of review is carried out by the DigiFI Africa Board Members. Reviewers will keep the following criteria in mind when it comes to assessing the proposal: Logistical viability, technical merit and innovation, appropriateness, and Policy Relevance "pathways to impact".

During the review process, applicants may be contacted by the DigiFI Africa staff, on behalf of referees, for more detailed information on the proposal. Requests for more information can relate to any part of the proposal.

Following the two independent reviews, select members of the DigiFI Africa Board review referee comments, and make final funding decisions. Board Members with a conflict of interest must recuse themselves from this process.

All proposals will be categorized as either: (1) unconditionally approved; (2) conditionally approved with minor revisions or clarifications required; (3) request for revise and resubmit; or (4) not approved.

If you would like to appeal a decision of the DigiFI Africa Review Board, please email DigiFI staff (digifiafrica@povertyactionlab.org) within one week of the announcement, detailing the reasons for the request for reconsideration (maximum two pages in length). This request will then be communicated to the reviewers.

Please Note: Researchers who have previously received funding from J-PAL and are more than one month late on any reports to any J-PAL Initiative will not be eligible for funding, and may be ineligible for funding

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[5] Please note that PhD students are eligible to submit a maximum of two proposal development grant applications and two pilot/full study proposals during their time as graduate students. All else equal, priority will be given to graduate students who have not applied before. Applicants who received proposal development funding as graduate students but have since moved to another institution may only apply for funding to continue that same project, and may not apply for funding for unrelated projects unless they have since become a J-PAL affiliate or DigiFI Africa invited researcher through the DigiFI Africa special invitee nomination and review process.

[6] Please see DigiFI Africa Conflict of Interest Policy, Appendix 2

across J-PAL initiatives. In such cases, researchers are still able to submit proposals to DigiFI Africa, but note that the proposal will not be submitted for review until all reporting requirements on previous J-PAL Initiative awards are up-to-date.

AWARD PROCESS

Please review these in detail as part of preparing your submission. **We expect applicants to budget sufficient time and money to meet these grant conditions and processes.**

If your proposal is accepted for award, the funding will be provided under an award from UCT to your host institution for the larger grants and to the lead PI directly for the proposal development grants. Applicants secure approval from the host institution's Institutional Review Board (IRB) as well as a local IRB, where possible, for any human subjects protocol required to implement your project. UCT requires proof of IRB approval prior to processing any DigiFI Africa award that involves Human Subjects. Affiliates are asked to adhere to all local legal requirements, including obtaining local IRB approval and government research permits, where applicable.

The process UCT follows for processing DigiFI Africa awards is as follows:

1. The DigiFI Africa Board sends an official award notification letter.
2. If not already submitted, you will need to provide formal institutional approval of the proposal and your institutional IRB approval.
3. In certain cases, approval from UCT's IRB will also be required; UCT reserves the right to review if required. At a minimum, IRB is required from the host institution.
4. J-PAL informs the UCT contracts office of the award.
5. UCT establishes a subaward with your institution.

We can backdate the award to cover expenses from the Award Date or the date of IRB approval, whichever is later. If a project includes non-Human Subjects work prior to the IRB approval, please let us know following award and we may in some cases be able to cover those costs (post-award, but pre-IRB) under the award.

GRANT CONDITIONS AND REPORTING

(a) Proposal Development Grants

1. **Submit reports**: Grantees are required to submit the following reports
   a. Start up report within 30 of the agreed starting date of the project
   b. A brief report within 30 days of completing the project. If the project development work results in non-initiative-funded follow-on projects, grantees should inform DigiFI Africa as part of their final report or upon receipt of additional funding.
   c. A project expenditure report with supporting documents (receipts) along with the final invoice for the project

2. **Participate in DigiFI Africa activity**: Grantees agree to participate in one DigiFI Africa activity or event. The DigiFI Africa will cover associated costs.

(b) For Full and Pilot grants:

1. **Trial Registration** *(Full studies only)*

   Before starting field work, 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. **Annual Progress Reporting, Final Narrative and Financial Reports**

   Grantees should provide a start-up report of the project within 90 days of the contract completion or project start date whichever comes first; 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.

3. **Implementation Cost Collection (see "Project Costing Exercise" section)** *(Full studies only)*

   For full-scale studies, researchers are required to collect data on program costs associated with this evaluation, which may be used as an input to J-PAL cost-effectiveness analyses (we will, of course, contact you before undertaking such an analysis). This costing exercise is expected as much as possible within digital systems. However, even if you are unable to collect detailed cost data, we require initiative-funded projects to provide estimates of total program cost, average cost per beneficiary, and marginal cost to add another beneficiary, as even this limited information can be very valuable to policymakers. We will ask for costs on an annual basis, but only expect fully complete information at the end of the project. Your award includes $1,000 to defray expenses associated with collecting these data. DigiFI Africa will provide a costing template to collect this information. If implementing partners' program budgets (i.e. the organizations' costs to implement the program or intervention, exclusive of research costs) are already available, please share those with us. As part of the first annual reporting cycle, we do require submission of the above costing template.

4. **Preliminary Results**

   Report Researchers are required to publish a publicly available "Preliminary Results Report" within twelve (12) months of receiving cleaned end-line data from the field. We will provide a specific template to submit this deliverable, asking for no more than 10 pages and including the following information/sections: policy issue, intervention description, research design, and preliminary results (noting that the information reported is subject to change if analysis is ongoing). Upon submission, the report must be made publicly available, and will therefore be posted to the DigiFI

Africa website. Once a working or published paper is available, we will replace this "Project Results Report" posted on the J-PAL website with the working/published paper.

5. **Data Publication** *(Full studies only)*

Researchers funded through this grant will be required to publish de-identified data in accordance with J-PAL's Data and Code Availability Policy. J-PAL's research team can work with you to clean, label, de-identify, document and replicate datasets collected as part of a randomized trial before publishing them in the J-PAL Dataverse or another data repository of your choice. Requests for data publication services can be made by sending an email to data@povertyactionlab.org.

6. **Working Paper "Publication"** *(Full studies only)*

Researchers are required to publish a publicly available working paper or other publication from their DigiFI Africa funded projects within twenty-four (24) months of completing field work. This should be coordinated with the above data publication timeline and requirements, and DigiFI Africa will similarly request a link to the posted working paper on this timeline. DigiFI Africa staff will then access the working paper and post it on the DigiFI Africa website. For more information on the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's Open Access Policy for peer-reviewed publications and underlying data.

J-PAL, through its Gender sector, is making an effort to study heterogeneity in program impacts by beneficiary/participant gender more systematically. Please note that the following request only applies to J-PAL internal reports and does not extend to the academic paper or online J-PAL summary.

Many studies funded by J-PAL initiatives already collect study participants' gender. In such cases, and when outcome data are individual-specific, we request that grantees conduct heterogeneity analyses by beneficiary gender for the study's main results for internal reporting to J-PAL (to be shared in the final grant report). A single study might be underpowered to detect heterogeneous treatment effects, or null results might not seem interesting in one study, but these findings may be meaningful when included in an analysis across studies. J-PAL will use the reported results for (a) determining potential pooled statistical analyses to conduct across studies and (b) generating gender-related policy lessons in digital identification and payments. Our reporting template will include a question on this, which researchers are encouraged to fill it in when applicable. We recognize that there will be cases where this reporting is not applicable, for various reasons. In these cases, the PIs can just provide a brief explanation to be shared with the Gender sector.

Expected Deliverables Submission Timeline

The deliverables and reports described above will be due based on the following timeline unless otherwise stated in the notification letter and/or contract:

Before starting fieldwork: Grantees should register their trial with the AEA RCT Registry (see details above)

Three months after the contract completion or project start date whichever comes first: a brief start-up report describing the initial stage(s) of the funded project and whether there are any delays in the implementation of the project activities

Annually, with respect to the project's start date: (1) a financial update on spending relative to the project budget, and (2) a brief annual program report on project implementation

Within 30 days of fieldwork concluding: (1) a final financial report and (2) for full-scale RCTs only, completed implementation costing information (see "Implementation Cost Collection" section, above)

Within 12 months of receiving cleaned end-line data from the field: a final substantive narrative report with preliminary results, i.e. a submitted Preliminary Results Report template that will be posted publicly (see "Preliminary Results Report" section, above)

Within 18 months of fieldwork concluding: Cleaned and anonymized data submitted to DigiFI Africa for public dissemination (or held under embargo per the Data publication policy outlined above). Note that DigiFI Africa invites PIs to submit data earlier where possible to do so (for example where data is cleaned and treatment identifiers have been removed).

[Full-scale RCTs only] Within 24 months of fieldwork concluding: Working paper publicly available (see "Working Paper Publication" section, above)

As the need arises, we may ask you to:

- Peer-review proposals in future DigiFI Africa RFP rounds in which you are not applying for funding.
- Participate in the harmonization process to ensure consistency and comparability across studies. This also could include research staff gatherings, where implementation lessons are drawn across studies.
- Share data collection instruments and methodologies with other grantees.
- Participate in one of DigiFI Africa's policy outreach activities on a mutually agreed date and place. This activity could be an evidence workshop, a matchmaking conference, or a presentation to one of the DigiFI Africa's donors.

Timely submission of reports is very important. Please note that researchers whose projects are more than 30 days late on any reports or other deliverables to any J-PAL Initiative, including DigiFI Africa, and who have not received an approved extension, will not be eligible to have new projects funded by J-PAL, including DigiFI Africa.

Any presentations and publications, including academic papers, policy briefs, press releases, blogs, and organizational newsletters that emerge from this project should credit the J-PAL Africa Initiative with the following text and link: "This research is funded by J-PAL Africa's DigiFI Africa Initiative supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and the Ministre de l'Économie, des Finances et de la Relance (The French Ministry of the Economy and Finance)".

Please keep in mind, all projects will be included on the DigiFI webpage. Pilots and full RCTs will include the abstract that is part of the proposal submission. Proposal development grants will only include the title of the research.

ADMINISTRATIVE NOTE

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.

Full and pilot grants are provided under an award from UCT to the grantee's host institution. Proposal development grants are paid as on a reimbursement basis. African Scholars may be contracted on a milestone rather than a reimbursement basis, upon request. For more information on budget, requirements, and process, please see instructions in the [Full/Pilot Proposal Application Form](#), and the [Proposal Development Grant Application Form](#). All materials needed to apply for full research, pilot, or proposal development grants are also available on our [webpage](#).

APPENDIX 1: DigiFI Africa framing paper

Please find the framing paper [here](#).

APPENDIX 2: Conflict of Interest Policy

A two-level, peer review process is used by DigiFI Africa to assess the quality and appropriateness of all proposals. The first level of review is carried out by a panel of peer researchers in the J-PAL and DigiFI Africa networks. The second level of review is carried out by the DigiFI Africa Board Members. The DigiFI Africa Board comprises a number of individuals from the J-PAL networks with additional representation from external institutions. Board members have responsibility for the overall strategic direction of DigiFI Africa, to monitor projects' progress, and to select proposals for funding.

Peer Referees and Non-Officer Board Members

1. No individual named on a proposal application may serve as a peer or Board referee in the round in which his or her proposal is being reviewed.
2. No spouse, partner, or immediate family member of any individual named on a proposal application may serve as a peer or Board referee in the round in which the applicant's proposal is being reviewed.
3. Board members with a disqualifying conflict of interest may attend only the portion of the Board meeting that does not concern the DigiFI Africa grant-making process.
4. To replace Board members who have a conflict of interest, the DigiFI Africa Secretariat will recruit a number of auxiliary Board members, equivalent to the number of Board members with a conflict of interest, from the network of eligible DigiFI Africa applicants to score, discuss, and vote on proposals.

Current and Former Board Officers In 2019, there are five Board Officers. All of the above policies apply to this group, except when fewer than two of these five individuals are eligible to participate as referees (due to a conflict of interest under the policies stated above). In this case only, the following policy applies to individuals in this group:

1. When all current or former Board Officers are conflicted out, the two least-conflicted or alternate referees will be recruited to score, discuss, and vote on proposals.

2. If a conflicted current or former Board Officer is selected as a referee, the individual in question must recuse him/herself from review, discussion, and voting of the conflicted proposal(s).

General

1. Non-donor, non-partner academics must comprise a simple majority of the Board referees.
2. For the purpose of managing conflict of interest, DigiFI Africa proposals for projects of different funding categorizations (e.g. pilot vs. full RCTs) may be considered under a separate, parallel review process. The Conflict of Interest Policy will then apply separately to each of the distinct review processes.