

DigiFI Africa Request for Proposals: Pilot and Full RCT Application Guide

The Digital Identification and Finance Initiative in Africa (DigiFI Africa)

OVERVIEW

All J-PAL research affiliates, J-PAL invited researchers, J-PAL postdocs, African Scholars, and PhD students with a J-PAL affiliate or invited researcher adviser are eligible to apply for a pilot grant¹. All J-PAL research affiliates, J-PAL invited researchers, J-PAL postdocs, and PhD students with a J-PAL affiliate or invited researcher adviser are eligible to apply for a full randomized evaluation grant. The funding cap for PhD students is \$75,000 per grant. 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.

African Scholars: Resident African Scholars (Researchers who have completed their PhD (in economics or a related field) and who are based at an academic institution based in sub-Saharan Africa) AND non-resident African Scholars (researchers 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) are eligible to apply for grants. Targeted mentorship will be provided to African Scholars who receive funds from DigiFI. Mentors can include any J-PAL affiliate or Invited Researcher. African Scholars who do not currently have a mentor can apply to be matched with one after their projects are selected by DigiFI Africa.

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

1) Pilot Study: Proposal Guidelines

DigiFI Africa will accept pilot proposals that have a very clear research question and lay the groundwork for a full project by assessing the feasibility of using a randomized evaluation to test a program's impact.

In contrast to full 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. Pilot proposals must 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. 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

¹ J-PAL affiliates, J-PAL postdocs, invited researchers, African scholars and eligible PhD students are limited to being named on a maximum of three proposals to DigiFI Africa per 12-month period (either as PI or co-PI).

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. Pilot grants are appropriate for projects requesting funds to conduct pre-randomization activities.

Pilot studies can:

- Acquire data that is qualitative and quantitative in nature;
- Test the efficacy of an intervention or an evaluation design; and/or
- Develop a monitoring system (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 government².

Please note, pilot grants may also 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, conducting exploratory data analysis and cleaning, or setting up technical access mechanisms.

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

Timeline: There is no specific timeline requirement for pilots, although in the past these studies have usually taken place within one calendar year. Ultimately this will depend on the project design and related outcomes of interest. Projects that have shorter timelines will be looked on favorably by the review committee.

2) Full-scale RCT: Proposal Guidelines

These grants are for studies at a more mature stage of development that use randomized evaluations to understand the impact of innovations in identification, digital payments and governance. Applicants must demonstrate:

- A clear research question that is related to the DigiFI framing paper themes;
- A robust research design, well-defined research instruments and sample size estimates;
- A feasible implementation plan;
- A strong partnership commitment from implementing organizations, including indications of the potential for significant scale-up of research findings by partners or scaling organizations; and
- A letter from the partner government ministry outlining their commitment to the research process.

Funding per Full-scale RCT: The total awarded to a single project, including any DigiFI Africa funding for proposal development or piloting, will not exceed \$400,000³. These grants are for

² If you are interested, please see our [J-PAL brief of leveraging administrative data](#) for monitoring systems.

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

research projects at a mature level of development. Not only must the research question be clear, but applicants must also demonstrate a 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 funding (including those for which field data collection has been completed).

Timeline: Funding requests should not extend beyond 2025 for now due to contracting limitations. Please contact us if your project has an end date beyond 2025.

APPLICATION INSTRUCTIONS

Many J-PAL initiatives, including DigiFI Africa, use an online portal for all proposal submissions, proposal reviews, invoice submissions, and grantee reporting. All proposal applications to DigiFI Africa are **reviewed on a rolling basis**.

Please note the following before beginning your application:

- Our portal works best in the latest version Google Chrome.
- If you already have an account but do not remember the password, please contact fc_help@povertyactionlab.org for help retrieving or resetting your password.
- If you do not have a J-PAL portal account and need one created, please complete [this form](#) and specify that you want an applicant account. Account creation normally takes no more than two business days; you will be asked to verify your email address and set a password. For further information and troubleshooting, please get in touch with fc_help@povertyactionlab.org. Your J-PAL portal account credentials will allow you to apply to or review for any J-PAL initiative. Please verify your eligibility by thoroughly reading the RFP overview. Ineligible applicants will be notified during LOI reviews and will not be invited to submit proposals.
- As this portal is new, you might experience some glitches. We apologize for any inconvenience. Please reach out to digifiafrica@povertyactionlab.org and fc_help@povertyactionlab.org if you face any issues.

To apply to DigiFI Africa's rolling RFP, you will first need to log in via our [online portal](#). Please navigate to the portal and follow the instructions to complete your login. Once you are logged into the portal, please [click here](#) to access DigiFI's letter of interest (LOI) form.

The DigiFI Africa team will notify you via the portal once we have reviewed your LOI and you are clear to begin your proposal. In the interim, to facilitate your proposal development, please refer to this document. It outlines all the information you will be asked to provide when submitting a full proposal. **However, please do not complete or submit this to DigiFI Africa for consideration until your LOI has been accepted.** All submissions will be made through the online platform.

The deadline for submissions is rolling until further notice.

NARRATIVE

In the narrative section of the online application you will be asked to provide:

1. A 100-word abstract of the study, which will be added to the [DigiFI Africa funded projects webpage](#) if the project receives funding.
2. A summary of the policy problem that motivates this research and how it fits with the research topics outlined in [DigiFI Africa's framing paper](#).
3. A concise statement of the policy relevance of the research. This should clearly outline the hypothesized pathway and scope for impact of the digital identification and/or payment system and describe how decision-makers intend to use the evidence generated by the proposed research.
4. A comment on whether the project has scale-up potential and whether the program costs and impacts may be suitable for a cost effectiveness analysis.
5. A brief description of the intervention or treatment to be evaluated.
6. A description of the evaluation design, project timeline, target population, and implementing partners.
7. Power calculations. (Full studies only)
8. A description of the potential risks (technical, logistical, political or COVID-related) and mitigation strategies.
9. A comment on whether and how the project involves researchers local to the project context. [optional]
10. A comment on whether the research proposal addresses gender issues in any way, including analysis disaggregated by gender.
11. A comment on whether the program costs and impacts may be suitable for a cost effectiveness analysis.
12. A comment on whether you plan to publish data collected in an open-access, online database at the end of the evaluation. Note that data publication is required for any project funded by a J-PAL initiative. (Full studies only).
13. A description of the knowledge gap and/or ambiguity among existing evidence the project is addressing, and how this research will advance the field.

BUDGET

Please submit a detailed project budget using the Excel templates available on our [Request for Proposals webpage](#). To reduce the processing time, please keep the following in mind when developing your budget:

1. If the project has other funders, the proposal should clearly explain the marginal contribution of the requested funds from DigiFI Africa.
2. If there is co-funding for the project, you must complete both the "Total Project Budget" and the "Initiative Budget" sheets in the budget template.
3. Awards are normally paid on a cost-reimbursable basis.

4. Applications must include budget notes in the column provided in the budget template, detailing the major costs within the budget. For example, “Travel Costs” should include a breakdown of how many trips are planned, the estimated cost per trip, etc. “Field Costs” should include a breakdown of the number of respondents, cost per respondent, etc.
5. Universities in high-income countries, generally defined as OECD member countries, can charge up to 10% in indirect costs, applied to total direct costs. Independent 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.
6. 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.
7. Unallowable costs include those labeled as “incidental,” “miscellaneous,” or “contingency.” Any costs for rent should be explained in the budget notes.
8. 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).
9. African Scholars, who apply for pilot grants either as the lead PI or a co-PI, may include a salary to cover their own time in their budget. Any costs toward the salary of an African Scholar should be explained in the budget narrative.
10. Applicants should review J-PAL best practices on questionnaire design and data collection/management in the [J-PAL Research Protocol Checklist](#) and Data code availability policy to ensure they have budgeted for expenses associated with piloting and surveyor training, survey translation, and back checking.
11. 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.
12. It is your responsibility that your budget follows your host institution’s policies for costs. As part of your proposal, you must submit a letter from the institution to receive the award that states that they have reviewed your proposal and accepted your budget. If the organization allows you to submit your proposal without such a letter (due to time constraints or some other reason). Please note that this applies to all projects, including those going through J-PAL and IPA offices. You should contact J-PAL and IPA offices in advance to make sure you are aware of their policies for proposal review.
13. If required, please refer to our [budget guide](#).

LETTERS OF SUPPORT

Please provide the following letters of support along with your online application. Letters of support are not a mere formality but rather should indicate a well thought-out partnership between the affiliate, the J-PAL office, and the government.

1. Full RCT and Pilot projects are required to provide a letter of support from the government and any other implementing partners. Such letters should state:
 - a. The government's support for the activities proposed,
 - b. How the government plans to use the results of the research or other activities to strengthen its policymaking,
 - c. How it sees a long-term partnership with J-PAL (or our other partner organizations like IPA where appropriate) to be valuable,
 - d. What costs will be shared by the government and an initial total budget amount (if exact costs are not available, then a broad commitment to pay for implementation or other costs is sufficient), and
 - e. Willingness to share program implementation cost data for the purpose of conducting program cost analysis.

Note: We understand that in some cases it may not be feasible or appropriate to have the government partners include all of the items above in their letter. In such cases, please secure a more general letter of support from the government and address the remaining points in your proposal narrative.

2. A letter from the receiving institution of the award is required to show that they have reviewed your proposal and accept your budget. If the organization allows you to submit your proposal without such a letter (due to time constraints or some other reason), please note this on the Proposal Cover Sheet (under the box for Receiving Institution).
3. To be eligible, PhD students must have a J-PAL affiliate or J-PAL 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.
4. Resident African scholars are required to submit an agreement with their mentor. Agreements are not required for the application but will need to be submitted prior to the disbursement of funds.

Applicants are welcome to engage with the Initiative staff prior to the application deadline to discuss the general direction and feasibility of the proposed idea. DigiFI Africa is also committed to building partnerships and researchers are strongly encouraged to speak with Initiative staff.